

Contemporary Design in LoDo? Architecture & Design Speaker Series to promote discussion.

By Jim Theye, LoDo District, Inc.

The concepts of new, contemporary buildings in historic districts are tricky - especially in an urban historic district like LoDo. But, LoDo is poised to experience another wave of infill buildings, and we have to do it right! This is how great neighborhoods and great cities are made.

Not everyone will agree on the appropriate design for such infill projects. To help guide the process, the City has assigned the Lower Downtown Design/Demolition Review Board (LDDR) to monitor design submittals for upcoming projects within the district, but it is a daunting task. This is why the LoDo District has aligned with LDDR and why we are sponsoring the upcoming Architecture & Design Speaker Series on this important topic.

The series is the brainchild of Ron Straka, head of LoDo District's Urban Design Committee, Development Consultant Marilee Utter, and Architect and LDDR member Wendy Kohn. They are calling in favors from their careers in urban design, architecture, and consulting to recruit a select group of architects to share their ideas with the LoDo community. The slate is filling with architects of significant renown, each with specific expertise and a broad perspective in the challenges of designing and building in an urban historic district. Most of the speakers have worked in Denver, but are largely speaking on their experiences and issues, good and bad, in other cities.

The series opens on January 11, 2006 in the Theater Room at the Oxford Hotel with Jim Olson of Seattle, the lead architect for the Red House residence of Fred and Jan Mayer on Wazee Street. Jim is a principal with Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen in Seattle and designed award-winning projects at the Pike Place Market in Seattle. You can learn more about his work at www.olsonkundig.com. The event opens at 5:30 with a cash bar; Jim is expected to speak from 6:00 to 7:30 pm.

Dates for the other speakers are still taking shape, but stay tuned for details on speakers coming in February and March. The LoDo District is offering an honorarium to each speaker, and sponsorships are encouraged to help create a quality, professional program. LoDoNA and Historic Denver are both on board, and we hope to extend the series to the extent possible.

Future speakers include Bruce Kuwabara of Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects in Toronto (www.kpmb.com), designer of the Sugar Building addition, and Marilyn Taylor of Skidmore, Owens & Merrill (www.som.com) in New York. Stan Eckstut of Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn Architects in New York will join us in early summer, and we have received a commitment from Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Partnership in Portland, designer of the new Denver EPA building and Children's Hospital, Fitzsimmons Campus. Collectively, these architects have been responsible for a wide range of award-winning projects around the world. Several are involved in the World Trade Center redevelopment, and Taylor is the current Chairman of the Urban Land Institute. She is also working with East West Partners on a project at Riverfront Park.

The importance of the series cannot be overstated. The LoDo area is entering a critical stage in its development, with major projects like the Denver Union Station and the Opus project at 1400 Wewatta on the drawing boards. There are infill projects looming within and adjacent to the District, including small, potential gems as well as larger assemblages. Then there is the Bell Park site along Speer, itself a controversy. It is time to ask the bigger questions and resolve how buildings of today can be good neighbors within a historic district. If not, we could be looking at

the most beautifully designed building in the world, but if it doesn't fit into the context and composition of the neighborhood, it doesn't work.

“Many historic districts are facing issues of contemporary design and construction, and LoDo is the living laboratory – it's the case study, not just for Denver but for historic communities around the country. This is why we are bringing in speakers of national prominence” says Marilee Utter, series co-founder. “This is about moving our thinking forward.”

The goals of the Speaker Series are to set the stage for open dialog, and educate the community. As Ron Straka puts it, “We're trying to build on the past and look to the future, in hopes that the quality of our new projects will match the craftsmanship of our historic buildings.” It's an education and exposure exercise, and we hope to learn how Design Review Boards in other cities and historic districts have overcome similar issues. It is remarkable what has happened in other urban areas – look to great cities like Berlin, Budapest, Vienna, and Prague! Contemporary design does happen in historic settings! Ron states: “Working in the District, it's not property-line architecture, it needs to be district-architecture!”

The Speakers Series is intended to be a community-focused event. We hope the Landmark Commission and the LDDRB members will attend, but it is also meant for neighborhood participants to identify and understand all sides of the important issues. The spotlight will be on the physical environment – how do we take the remaining infill and edge parcels and transform them to contribute to the neighborhood? Let's be objective, listen and learn, and discuss the issues openly. This is an opportunity for positive dialog.

LoDo is no longer on the edge of downtown; with expansion of the city into the Central Platte Valley, LoDo is now one of the centerpieces of the Denver's Master Plan. We need to recognize this change and capitalize on the opportunity! The time is now: redevelopment of DUS alone will have a HUGE impact on our community and our City, and we have to get it right! It's time we become more proactive at protecting and enhancing our neighborhood.

The Urban Design Committee at the LoDo District is active and carrying its weight. It is comprised of community volunteers of various disciplines and professions assembled by Dave Moore, LoDo District President, and organized by Ron Straka, Committee Chair. The local office of EDAW, an international planning firm, is active on the committee and is contributing time and resources toward the completion of the “State of LoDo” study to evaluate LoDo's current context. This baseline study will help assess upcoming issues and amenities needed for a successful mixed-use urban historic neighborhood. Look for results of this landmark study this summer.

Please get involved in your community and participate in the Speaker Series! Click [here](#) or phone us at 303-628-5428 to get more information on upcoming events. Let's put the issues on the table and have an open discussion – your input is important!