2 quintessential

DOWNTOWN

Glass and steel rise above Romanesque brick and brownstone. Walkable streets preserve architectural links to the past.
Downtown grew from planks and cottonwood shanties along the ten original blocks of Main Street, platted in 1863. Pictured: Hopffgarten Sign Company at 1007 W. Idaho, about 1899. Previous: Freak Alley off Eighth Street between Idaho and Bannock.
Boise’s compact commercial center is a case study of the interplay between architecture and civic identity, between the physical form of buildings and the way a city has come to perceive its own sense of place. Boise planners define “downtown” as 641 acres. From the greenbelt to State Street, the city’s center spreads sixteen blocks from Broadway to Americana. Downtown includes the Old Boise and South Eighth Street historic districts; also the Grove Plaza, Capitol Mall, North Eighth Street, the “Near East” St. Luke’s Hospital complex, the Boise Cascade headquarters at One Jefferson Plaza and the mixed-use River-Myrtle urban renewal corridor. Planners estimate a downtown population of 4,285 residents in 2,366 housing units. Shopping and employment draw, on an average weekday, more than 40,000 commuters. St. Luke’s is the largest employer. Downtown also supports 105 retailers, 65 restaurants, 15 night-time bars, 14 public statues, 5 city parks and 4 museums.
Historians have debated the origins of downtown as a commercial hub. Some maintain that it prospered despite isolation. Others say downtown’s strategic location fated commercial success. Founded in 1863, Boise commanded the gold road to Idaho City, branching north from the Oregon Trail. An 1867 census found 1,134 permanent residents. In 1890, the year of Idaho statehood, more than 2,000 people lived and worked downtown. City directories listed three gunsmiths, four jewelers, four drugstores, eight blacksmiths and fourteen saloons. Rail service via Nampa brought the Oregon Short Line to Boise’s Tenth Street Station. Stone from Table Rock’s quarry inspired a heavy-arched castle-like style of commercial architecture called Romanesque Revival. Downtown examples included the Boise City National Bank (1890), Falk-Bloch Mercantile (1891), Boise City Hall (1893), Old Boise’s Telephone Building (1899) and the Union Block (1901). Chinese from Canton crowded the downtown alley behind old City Hall. Mexican packers ran freight from a circle of cabins near Pioneer Cemetery. African Americans mixed with Eastern Europeans and Basques near Lovers Lane and Lee Streets (now along River). Entertainment venues included the Columbia and Pinney theaters. Off the 600 block of Main was Davis Levy’s backstreet of brothels and bawdy houses with names like The Bucket of Blood.

Big city news reporters first took notice of Boise in the summer of 1907 during a sensational murder conspiracy trial. Labor boss William “Big Bill” Haywood stood accused of conspiracy in the brutal dynamite murder of former Idaho Governor Frank Steunenberg. Trial reporters described a handsome city with screeching electric streetcars. Automobiles raced past horses at ten miles per hour. At Tenth and Main the six-story Idanha Hotel had the city’s first Otis elevator. Attorney Clarence Darrow rented an opulent room under the Idanha’s turret. Boise, said Darrow, was an “Athens of the sage-
brush.” Its public buildings were neat and modern; its houses resplendent with trees and flowering shrubs.

The Idanha was the last of Main Street’s fantasy turrets. By 1912 the geometry of the skyline had changed with flat-roofed cage-framed buildings in the commercial style pioneered by Chicago architect Daniel Burnham. The Empire Building on Tenth and the Idaho Building on Eighth both echoed the Chicago style. Downtown, meanwhile, boomed with lumberyards, brick making, retail stores and banking. In 1913 the Boise Commercial Club called the city an “Eldorado” with 100 miles of cement sidewalks and 15 miles of hard surface pavement.

Downtown sidewalks had underground storage vaults with delivery elevators. Telephone and power lines joined water mains under the pavement. Coal chutes fed heating plants.

The 1927 opening of the Egyptian Theater was a turning point for downtown
and its architecture. Romanesque and Classical Revival gave way to sober expressions of the coming Art Deco style. Deco in Boise's downtown meant clean and austere with stylized geometric motifs and zigzagged ornamentation: the Hotel Boise (1930), the Idaho Power Building (1932), Boise Gallery of Art (1936), the John Regan Hall (1929) and Ada County Courthouse (1939). Main Street at midcentury was lined with movie houses. Falks, the Golden Rule, the Cash Bazaar, the Mode and Alexander's dominated the shopping district. Eighth at Grove was a cluster of garages and service stations. Underground tanks leaked gas. Architect Hummel, who worked with Capital City Development Corporation on The Grove's new fountain and plaza, vividly remembers the fumes.

Urban renewal profoundly transformed the look of the downtown core. Known for its corporate headquarters—for Morrison-Knudsen, Albertsons, J.R. Simplot and Boise Cascade—Boise also was famed for razing historical landmarks. "Boise," said L.J. Davis, a critic writing for Harpers, "stands an excellent chance of becoming the first American city to have deliberately eradicated itself."

Boise's redevelopment agency
IDANHA

Luxury Rooms

Daily Rates

IDAN HA HOTEL

BOISE IDAHO

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Not until the shopping mall proposal went west did downtown strongly rebound. In 1986, after a board of architects demanded a new direction, Boise City Council signaled a change:

The future of the
city center would be benches and public art on tree-shaded walkable sidewalks; a brick plaza on Eighth Street would provide a community gathering place. Boom years followed. The "Renaissance," as Boiseans called it, featured the restoration of 44 historic buildings. New construction brought the Wells Fargo Building (1988), the Grove Hotel (1989), the Centre on the Grove convention center (1990), the Washington Mutual Building (1995) and five tax-financed downtown parking garages. Twenty-first century additions included Front Street's Ada County Courthouse and the implausibly skinny Aspen above the BoDo retail complex. In 2006 the Banner Bank on Bannock won national recognition for energy-efficient design.

Downtown is rich and too tightly packed for an essay on every landmark. Our sampling features authentic places that give downtown feeling and form.

**Idaho State Capitol**

700 W. Jefferson St.

*Identity ★ Scale ★ Utility ★ Consistency ★ Impact*

The Idaho State Capitol (also known as the Idaho Statehouse) is downtown's most iconic building. Designed in 1905 by Tourtellotte and Company, it was patterned after the Neoclassical U.S. Capitol Building. The style also has been called Federal, Renaissance Revival and Beaux Arts. It rose on massive blocks of sandstone that were quarried at Table Rock and slid down the southern face of the butte. Corinthian columns used a hard-white stucco called scagliola that was polished to resemble marble. Real marble

Tourtellotte and Hummel perched a five-foot statue of a golden eagle on Idaho's capitol dome. Opposite: The Capitol's first floor under construction with framing for the marble-faced sandstone rotunda, about 1907.
from Georgia, Alaska, Vermont and Italy faced the interior. Five layers of sandstone were rounded to resemble the logs of a pioneer's cabin. The dome—topped with an eagle and completed in 1912—rose to a height of 208 feet. The wings were completed in 1920. Skylights and reflective marble bathed the rotunda in sun.

In 1905 the Classical Revival style was an obvious choice for a capitol building. Architects Tourtellotte and Hummel had previously experimented with classical patterns at the Timothy Regan House and the Carnegie Library. At the Capitol, senior partner Tourtellotte argued for the added expense of a skylit sandstone crown—a cupola—that would minimize the need for electric interior lights. The Capitol, he insisted, “[was] not a cave with ornamental colonnades on the interior standing in superstitious darkness and gloom.” Sunlight and classical symmetry would inspire enlightened and balanced ideas. “The great white light of conscience must be allowed to shine,” said Tourtellotte. “Interior illumination [would] make clear the path of duty.”

Tourtellotte's junior partner attended to the precision of the engineering details. Born in Baden, Germany and technically schooled in Stuttgart, Charles F. Hummel had worked as a draftsman before immigrating to Chicago in 1885. Five years later he joined J.E. Tourtellotte Company. Hummel made sure
the Capitol rested on a solid foundation of granite bedrock, that weight-bearing columns were precisely calculated and that the steel beams adequately supported the dome.

Restoration began in 2001 with construction bonds and a $35 million state appropriation. In 2005 the legislature financed construction by extending Idaho’s cigarette tax. Completed in 2010, the 30-month $120 million restoration added two 25,000 square-foot underground wings. Restored scagliola and replica light fixtures disguise modern computer cables. Historical treasures include Charles Ostner’s 1869 equestrian statue of George Washington and a marble French replica of the Greek “Winged Victory of Samothrace.” The restored Statehouse remains the nation’s only capitol building with geothermal heat.
The Egyptian Theater
700 W. Main St.

★ Identity ★ Scale ★ Utility ★ Consistency ★ Impact

Designed in 1926 by Frederick "Fritz" Hummel, the theater crested an Egyptomania craze that inspired more than 100 ornate movie houses. The craze began in Hollywood with Grauman’s Egyptian Theater, opened in 1922. Fueled later that year by international fascination with the discovery of King "Tut" Tutankhamun’s 3,000-year old tomb, the Egyptian Revival brought gold-leaf columns, plaster sphinxes and faux hieroglyphics. In Boise the Egyptian Revival anticipated the stylized motif of Depression-era Art Deco.

Merchant Leo J. Falk and two partners financed construction. Joining a gaudy string of downtown movie houses—the Majestic, Pinney, Rialto, Grand and Strand—the Egyptian featured black floral presentation drawing for the Egyptian, 1926. Inspired by the 1922 discovery of King Tut’s tomb, the theater is one of the best surviving examples of the Egyptomania craze. Picture: Golden paint and exterior details returned with the theater’s renovation in 1978.

and the Ada after WWII. In its heyday the theater premiered Robert Redford’s “Jeremiah Johnson” and a Mae West movie about a gold-hearted madam from Boise. On April 19, 1927, the theater opened with John Barrymore in Warner Brothers’ Don Juan.

The Egyptian was known as the Fox in the 1930s and the Ada after WWII. In its heyday the theater premiered Robert Redford’s “Jeremiah Johnson” and a Mae West movie about a gold-hearted madam from Boise.
named Diamond-tooth Lil. Jimmy Stewart practiced on the pipe organ while the actor-turned-bomber pilot was stationed at Gowen Field. In 1977, philanthropist Earl Hardy saved the building from urban renewal. Appropriately the son of the building’s architect directed its restoration. Charles Hummel recalls the laborious task of removing the theater’s thickly coated white enamel paint. Artists approximated the original ceiling colors in a rebuilt theater lobby. One imaginative painter embellished the faux hieroglyphics with an image of his cat.

**South 14th Street**

14th from Grand Avenue to River

- Identity
- Scale
- Utility
- Consistency
- Impact

This row of houses preserves a working-class industrial district. After 1893, when the Oregon Short Line built storage tanks and rail yards along Front Street, the street catered to Eastern Europeans. About 65 African Americans lived nearby in the 1930s. Figuratively and literally, 14th Street was south of the tracks.
Old Boise Historic District

Idaho, Main and Grove Streets from Capitol Boulevard to Fifth

★ Identity ★ Scale ★ Utility
★ Consistency ★ Impact

In 1980 the City of Boise established the ten-block Old Boise Historic District, bounded by Capitol and Fifth, Idaho and Grove. Although the 1976 construction of the new City Hall had razed the heart of the district, Old Boise preserves more than 20 turn-of-the-century structures. Heavy arches of Table Rock sandstone give a brooding medieval look to the Telephone Building at 690 Main Street. Rocky Mountain Bell Telephone sold service for six-cents-a-day a year after the building opened in 1899. The Telephone Building butted against the third home of the Idaho Statesman, a pro-abolition, anti-Confederate tri-weekly newspaper at its founding in 1864.

Irish-made red brick still dominates the Old Boise district. Landmarks include the 1910 Pioneer Tent Building where immigrant fingers stitched canvas into awnings and wagon covers. Another red brick Main Street

Bernie Jestrabek-Hart used two miles of reclaimed barbed wire for her 700-pound Idaho First Plaza tribute to a Boise Basin miner, erected in 1984. Opposite: Old Boise jewelers, about 1890s.
Old Boise is quintessential because its architecture helps to preserve the city's thriving nightlife. Where miners once crowded saloons, hookah bars compete with mechanical bulls and beer pong. Black leather straps attached to the walls steady the table dancers. Push-carts sell sauerkraut hot dogs. Young bar patrons in denim flash IDs and line up for drafts.

Landmark is the Turnverein Building, completed in 1906. Once a German athletic club for gymnastics and polka dancing, the Turnverein shared Sixth and Main with an Irish saloon, a Bohemian madam, a brewery and the Statesman. A block north on Idaho Street was the tall brick Central Fire Station. In 1913 the station's tower overlooked a Basque handball court. Pickpockets worked the red-lit alley. Jacob's Canal supplied a laundry district where immigrants from Canton pressed collars and cuffs for whites.

Detail from Holly Gilchrist's "Main Street" (Veltex), woodblock prints on paper, 2003.
Opposite: The Gem-Noble Building and Hotel Manitou dominate the 1000 block of Main Street.
Officially, the Basque Block is part of the Old Boise Historic District, but it retains an identity all its own. It has become the cultural center for the largest concentration of Basques outside France and Spain. Boise’s Basques mostly hail from small farms and fishing villages within 30 miles of Gernika in the Spanish Basque province of Bizkaia. Early immigrants, mostly male, spent winters in boarding houses. The Jacobs-Uberuaga House boarded Basque shepherders from 1910 to 1969. Its Grove Street lawn is shaded by a cutting from the “freedom oak” of Gernika. Cherished as a symbol of freedom, the original tree survived a 1937 Nazi bombing raid during the Spanish Civil War.

Today the block is a model for smart-growth urban renewal. The boarding house abuts the Basque Museum and Cultural Center. Next door is the brick Anduiza Building where Basques still play a punishing kind of handball called pelota in a court they call a fronton. Other landmarks include the Basque Market and authentic Bar Gernika. Engraved spirals in the sidewalks display Basque surnames. A metal sculpture and flags wave the colors of Basque independence. Paella, chorizos, roasted meats and stews recall the taste of the Basque county at restaurant Leku Ona, formerly a telephone company warehouse, lovingly rebuilt to resemble a sheepherder’s boarding house.

The Basque Block is four-star quintessential. It has historical identity and pedestrian scale. It is functional and memorable. The block falls short on consistency, however, because of surface parking for a glassy furniture store.
Greater Eighth Street
Boise River to Bannock, including BoDo, the Grove Plaza and the walkable café-style restaurant district

★ Identity ★ Scale ★ Utility ★ Consistency ★ Impact

Eighth Street with its 1863 ferry crossing approximates the route of the wagon road to gold mines near Idaho City. In 1864, at the northwest corner of Eighth and Main, the Overland House became a stage stop and livery stable. Hosea Eastman of Silver City rebuilt the house with piped water and an innovative sprinkler system. Razed in 1903, the corner became a brick-and-stone commercial building called the Eastman Block. Fire destroyed the Eastman in 1987. Builders and financiers have since gone bust in failed attempts to build on the empty lot. One ill-fated scheme was a 34-story mixed-use condo project called the Boise Tower. Some say the corner with its rusted rebar is cursed by the sins of urban renewal. Boiseans now derisively call it “the hole.”

The fate of the Eastman Block is a reminder that authentic streets are more than buildings and utility lines. Great streets are highly symbolic. To thrive, they need to project a positive image and cope with historical change.

Eighth from the river to Bannock has been continually reinvented, yet the street remains authentic. Historically, the street
Downtown rises above the forested canopy of Julia Davis Park. By 1950, "City of Trees" had replaced "Boise the Beautiful" as the city's most common nickname. In 2007 the National Arbor Day Foundation honored Boise with a "Tree City USA" conservation award.
has showcased some of the city's best architecture. Falk's Mercantile on Main became the state's premier retailer. Romanesque Boise City National Bank once shared one of Idaho's busiest corners with the Mode, the Fidelity Building and old City Hall.

In the late 1980s, after the death of ambitious plans to redevelop downtown with a mall, Eighth and Grove became ground zero for a new kind of urban renewal. Today the corner is a circle of brick with art and a central fountain. Called Grove Plaza, it fronts the convention center. Like greater plazas in many more famous places—like Union Square in San Francisco or Piazza San Marco in Venice—Grove Plaza draws pedestrian traffic by making intelligent use of open space. On weekends it thrives with stalls for local artists. Children splash through the open fountain. Concerts draw thousands for a summertime evening event called Alive After Five.

Yet the Grove Plaza has jarring features. On the southeast corner is the jutting balcony of the Bank of America Center. On the northeast is a barren parking lot. The Grove—like Greater Eighth Street and like much of downtown Boise—prospers from neighborly interaction but fails the consistency test.

**Boise Cascade Building**

1111 W. Jefferson St.

★ Identity ★ Scale ★ Utility ★ Consistency ★ Impact

Boise Cascade’s corporate headquarters at One Jefferson Place is a structurally expressive example of a building that reveals its framing, showing Boise its bone. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) designed the building in 1971. As one of the world’s great sky-
scraper innovators, SOM worked on Jefferson Street while its Chicago office was shattering construction records with the 108-story Sears Tower.

Today the corporate headquarters is called the Boise Plaza. Steel pillars open views by lifting the massive cage above its pedestrian plaza. The building also features a six-story sky-lit interior atrium with Silver Linden trees. Functional and memorable, the building is appropriately scaled, but it floats on a sea of asphalt, a setting inconsistent with Boise's compact downtown. Surface parking consumes more than two full city blocks.

The Linen District
1400 block of Grove Street

★ Identity ★ Scale ★ Utility ★ Consistency ★ Impact

The Linen District takes its name from the white-brick American Linen Building. Built as a school in 1910, the building later housed a linen service in a neighborhood of automotive repair shops and service stations. Today there are plans to add about 30 condos. With restaurants, a coffee house and a restored hotel, the district may have the makings of a future Hyde Park. In 2010, however, the project is a good idea waiting for tenants and patrons. The district is functional and it is civic-minded but falls short on visual impact.

Saturday's Capital City Market at the Grove Plaza. Completed in 1988, the brick plaza with its pulsating fountain was a tax-financed urban renewal project.