Boise Depot towers above a postwar shopping center. A freeway theater complex is like a city unto itself.
The City of Boise defines West as 13 neighborhoods on tablelands known as the Bench. Geologically, there are three "benches" formed by the bluffs of ancient rivers flooded with snowmelt, each rising about 60 feet. Historically, Boiseans have referred to the Bench as one single housing district. It begins at the lip of the bluffs that rise above Garden City. Its southern end is the Boise airport. Its western edge may be Curtis or Orchard. Beyond Towne Square Mall, where large lots have sprawling houses, Boiseans mostly call their neighborhoods West.

More than 5,000 people settled in Ada County before farmers, tapping the Boise River, developed the arid Bench. In 1877 an act of Congress offered a chance to patent arid land for as little as $1.25 an acre. A Wells Fargo freight agent named William Morris immediately claimed more than 7,000 acres and filed on water rights for the future Morris-Ridenbaugh Canal. In 1878, shanty Morristown on Morris Hill housed about 70 canal builders. News of Morris's success reached New York
investors in 1884. Engineer Arthur De Wint Foote told the investors that only “slight modification” would be needed to shape the Bench into valuable crop land. Meanwhile, Boise Mayor John Lemp developed the Settlers Canal Company. The 1900 census found 19,056 people in the Boise Valley. About 1,650 farms divided 113,205 acres.

Irrigators west of Vista grew dozens of school districts. Most were sparsely settled with only elementary schools. Aggressive annexation began with the Whitney subdivision on Vista. In 1947, Vista Theater (now Bruneel Tire) anchored the city’s first postwar shopping center. South Bench residents successfully petitioned for a Whitney Fire District. An oil tank farm sprouted on Curtis. In 1956, Boiseans endorsed a $1.7 million school bond for a second high school. Named after Senator William Borah, the school opened on West Cassia in 1958. Voters also approved bonds to extend curbs, gutters and sewers to 6,000 county homes rising near Ustick and Cole.

In 1961, with a strong endorsement from the Idaho State Legislature, the City of Boise repealed its no-growth anti-annexation charter. Over the next four years the city doubled in size. Zoning discouraged corner neighborhood stores and high-density apartment houses. At Overland and Orchard, developer Harry Dram cleared 22 acres for the Hillcrest Shopping Plaza. Saint Alphonsus Hospital moved to Curtis Road. KTVB television relocated from downtown to Fairview Avenue. Garden City lured a convention hotel.
As late as 1975, city fathers still hoped to preserve a buffer of agriculture between Meridian and Boise. City planners worried that leapfrog growth and sprawl would sap commercial downtown. Nevertheless, growth leaped west with Boise Towne Square Mall, the Spectrum theater complex, Hewlett-Packard on Chinden and the LDS Temple on Cole. Big-box retailers followed: Wal-Mart, Costco and Lowe’s. By the mid-1980s, Boise reached
Meridian Road. “Boise faced geographic realities,” wrote J.M. Neil in his history of postwar Boise. “The only realistic direction was west, regardless of the city’s intention.”

Architecturally the West has no single theme or style. Cottages mix with Western style half-acre ramblers. Motels front shopping centers. Grand houses on Crescent Rim shadow modest streets with crowded apartment houses. Boise’s depot remains the West’s most iconic landmark. The West is elsewhere defined by strip malls, cul-de-sacs, the interstate, an ornate theater complex and the Western Idaho Fair.

Boise Depot
2603 W. Eastover Terrace at Capitol Boulevard


Carrere, Hastings, Shreve & Lamb of New York City designed the Union Pacific depot with red tiles and stucco in the California Mission Revival Style. Its bell tower rose 96 feet. Boiseans immediately passed a bond issue to rebuild Seventh Street as Capitol Boulevard. Completed in 1931, the mile-long boulevard crossed the river on an innovative concrete-arch bridge. It climbed to seven acres of formal gardens that were named for railroad man Howard V. Platt.

Six passenger trains served the depot each day in the 1940s. Regular Union Pacific passenger service continued until 1971. From 1990 to 1993, the Morrison-Knudsen Company completed a $3 million meticulous restoration. The city purchased the building in 1996.

The depot marks Boise’s gateway. With Capitol Boulevard, it realizes a turn-of-the-century dream for a landscaped and welcoming street with statues, parks and museums. The dream gave way to billboards in the 1940s and 1950s. Encroachments and bad architecture have further muddied the gateway. But Capitol Boulevard and its depot are five-star
quintessential. Both recall a prosperous time when Boiseans taxed themselves to finance public improvements, when public transit was taken for granted and when soaring architecture was an engine of community pride.

Vista Avenue
Vista from the Boise Airport to Federal Way

Subdivisions off Vista began in the 1890s. Rose Hill was platted in 1912. When the municipal airport relocated in 1938, the avenue's southern end was still unpaved. The depot brought stucco homes in the 1930s. Postwar suburban housing promoted annexation. In 1947 at Cassia, Vista Theater opened, soon followed by a delicatessen, pastry shop and the Whitehead drug store. Developer Ernest Day subdivided a farm for the Vista Village Shopping Center. By 1953 there were groceries and three drive-thru hamburger restaurants, including a neon A&W franchise.

"The area abounds with historic significance," writes Bench historian Ann Felton, a former carhop on Vista. But neglect and the loss of landmarks has severed historical connections. Now Vista is largely divorced from its rich history. Little but
the Cottage on the Bench
parking remains of the postwar suburban identity. Sparse and generic, with dangerous side-walks and four-lanes of traffic, it stumbles on visual impact.

Edwards Boise Stadium 22 and IMAX Complex

7709 Overland Road

| Identity | Scale | Utility | Consistency | Impact |

Journalist Joel Garreau popularized the term “edge city” to characterize places that could not exist without freeways and automobiles. Edge cities were auto-dependent cultural attractions with theaters, restaurants, big-box retailers and acres of surface parking. They were “cities” with more jobs than bedrooms. Instant places, they boomed near freeways on open land where no communities had before existed.

Edwards Theater in the Boise Spectrum complex realizes the edge city idea. Developed in 1987, it paved 30 acres where freeways had reconfigured Overland and Cole. The complex is pure entertainment. Edwards 22 and IMAX are its major tenants. Its chief entertainment attractions are 4,500 sloping stadium-style seats. Jam-packed on weekends, the complex also has eateries and a video game arcade. “Spectrum was a planned development that has become a city-like metro-wide regional attraction,” said historian J.M. Neil.

With glitz and extravagance, Spectrum-Edwards features fantasy throw-away architecture—appropriate for movie houses and a nod to the Hollywood neon Main
Cold grey freeway concrete reflects the mood of the sky in Karen Woods’s landscape study of Interstate 84. Previous: Elizabeth Wolf’s 42-foot “Terra Firma” in the Boise airport, 2003; Edwards fantasy neon.
Street marquee. Yet the complex stands like a city unto itself. There is no obvious link to the history of Boise. It also fails the utility test because the citizens of Spectrum City have no choice but to burn gas in their cars.

**Garden City’s Chinden Boulevard**
Chinden from the I-84 Connector to Glenwood Street

★ Identity ★ Scale ★ Utility ★ Consistency ★ Impact

Chinden is Boise’s quintessential service center. With RV sales, body shops, diners, motels and light industry, it embodies the “Boise” in Boise almost as much as any street in town.

The boulevard takes its name from Cantonese farmers who once gardened in the river’s floodplain. Chinese and garden collapsed into “Chinden.” In 1949 the boulevard bisected a “village” that incorporated so that tourists could play slot machines. Four years later, when the state outlawed slot machine gambling, the Village of Garden City attempted, but failed, to annex the rim of the Bench. Friction over annexation fueled a rivalry with Boise City. Decades of dispute over jurisdictions—over schools, sewers, growth boundaries and the Curtis Road extension—have so far derailed the dream of an unbroken river greenbelt. Demand for upscale river housing has strengthened the village tax base. Still, Garden City gets no respect. Its boulevard is too chaotic for weighty architectural impact and yet Chinden earns four stars. Chinden remains key to the Boise experience even if that blue-collar contribution is one that Boiseans prefer to forget.

All-night karaoke has replaced Chinden Boulevard’s Hi-Ho dance club. Opposite: The Western Idaho Fair.
Western Idaho Fairgrounds
5610 Glenwood Avenue

★ Identity ★ Scale ★ Utility ★ Consistency ★ Impact

The Western Idaho Fairgrounds sporadically come to life for horse racing, baseball and carnival entertainment. Crowded with tents in Augusts—with livestock and quilts and cherry pie competitions—the fair draws more than 245,000 visitors. Competitions include egg painting, elk calling, arm wrestling and scarecrow making. It is the closest thing Idaho has to an old-time state fair.

Annual fairs in Boise City date back to the decade of statehood. In 1902, when the Idaho Intermountain Fair Association developed 80 acres on Fairview at Orchard, Buffalo “Wild Bill” Cody
performed at the event. Promoters later added a rodeo called the Boise Stampede. In 1967 the fair moved to its current Glenwood location. In 1989, leasing agreements with Ada County brought in Hawks Memorial Stadium and Les Bois racetrack.

Architecturally, the fairground buildings are practical but generic. Parking can be a confusion. For identity, scale, and consistency, it rates three quintessential stars.

Horses have raced at the annual fair in Boise since 1897. Disputes over off-track betting and purse-splitting threaten to suspend the season in 2010.