The downtown intersection of 8th and Idaho streets—just a stone’s throw from City Hall, the Boise Convention Center, several of the state’s largest banks and dozens of retail stores and restaurants—is the urbane hub of Boise. Its street scene reflects Boise at its citified best—an eclectic mingle of counterculture teen-agers, button-down bankers/lawyers and North End vegans, all going their separate ways, yet brought together on this busy patch of downtown real estate. But as contemporary as the 8th and Idaho scene is, three of its four corners are occupied by historic buildings whose rich heritage and classic aesthetics date back to the dirt-street days before the automobile.

The Mode Building and Fidelity Building, both former department stores, sit on two of the corners. The Simplot Building, once the home of Boise City National Bank, occupies the third. Until 1953, the fourth corner featured a Romanesque-style City Hall where the Capitol Terrace parking garage and retail complex now sit. In addition to a variety of shops and
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The intersection hasn’t always been the lively, people-centered place it is today. In fact, it witnessed one of the most regretful eras in Boise’s city planning, a time when a large segment of the historic downtown fell to the wrecking ball in the name of “urban renewal.” But, unlike many to the south, the intersection survived intact and eventually benefitted from the subsequent emphasis on the redevelopment of existing downtown buildings. The urban renewal saga began in the mid-1960s when Boise’s central downtown suffered from disinvestment and suburbs began to sprawl at the edges of Boise. A civic task group developed a central business district plan in 1964 that called for a process of urban renewal, including the clearance and redevelopment of downtown’s blighted areas. The City Council adopted the plan and created the Boise Redevelopment Agency (B.R.A.) in 1965 after passage of Idaho’s Urban Renewal Law. Between 1965 and 1969, the B.R.A. (now called the Capital City Development Corporation) surveyed the area and then acquired and cleared buildings deemed to be beyond rehabilitation or in the way of the large, multiblock regional shopping center planned for the central business district. Using federal urban renewal funding, the B.R.A. acquired 12 blocks and cleared six between 1965 and 1974. Four city blocks cleared for the shopping center became parking lots. As the B.R.A. began to demolish historic downtown buildings, ordinary citizens and prominent Boise residents alike condemned the activity. Senator Frank Church urged the agency to “…save what remains of downtown Boise before the bulldozers run completely amuck.” While the B.R.A. succeeded in completing some projects during this time—most notably the new Boise City Hall and the tall U.S. Bank building—the downtown shopping center never advanced beyond the planning stages. The B.R.A. worked with five major shopping center developers over the years, none of which worked out due to the unresponsiveness and unwillingness of major retailers to commit to the project. When the last of the five developers resigned in May 1985, the B.R.A. asked the Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) at the American Institute of Architects to study Boise’s downtown area and develop a new concept plan. Following the advice of the R/UDAT, the B.R.A. abandoned the proposed shopping mall and took the plans for the central business district in a new direction that called for mixed-use development and the reintroduction of regulated private development. The R/UDAT stated that the development of downtown Boise “must pull together people and factions fragmented by two decades of the redevelopment struggle,” and that “it must succeed in blueprinting a redeveloped city core with business, entertainment and recreational opportunities that will provide the sense of identity Boiseans have missed.” In the plan, the R/UDAT suggested that the “Eighth Street Mall,” or 8th Street between Front Street and Bannock, should be the focus of new development in downtown Boise’s core.

Photographer R. Harold Sigler captured the commercial vitality of Eighth Street, looking north from Main Street, about 1930.
restaurants, these buildings include professional and office space. Adjacent blocks feature residential space, and a proposed apartment complex above the Capitol Terrace could eventually come to fruition. Through mixed use—a combination of retail, office and residential space—the corner of 8th and Idaho serves as a perfect example of “smart growth” in Boise. The preservation and mixed-use development of classic buildings is at the heart of the block’s success, and can serve as a template for others across the city.

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street parking is limited. The improvements allow for optimal mixed use. Several restaurants take advantage of the upgraded sidewalks that line both sides of 8th Street. According to CCDC Executive Director Phil Kushlan, all new plans for development in downtown Boise call for the sidewalks to be designed to encourage people to walk and spend more time. Kushlan says that the goal is to “extend activity downtown beyond 8 to 5, rather than rolling up the sidewalks at 5 o’clock.” Special events, such as the Capital City Public Market, with its blend of local art, food and agricultural products, draw thousands of people to 8th Street each weekend from early spring to late fall.

The three historic buildings that anchor the 8th and Idaho intersection came through Boise’s “urban renewal” era of the 1960s and 1970s unscathed as visible reminders of Boise’s past, yet they are vitally immersed in the present. The stories of their early years are testaments to the city’s rich heritage of entrepreneurship and civic pride. Developers used sandstone from Table Rock Quarry to construct the Boise City National Bank, founded by Henry Wadsworth and Alfred Eoff, in 1891-92 on the southwest corner of the intersection. The team of John Tourtellotte and Charles Frederick Hummel, along with James King, designed the building. Tourtellotte and Hummel designed almost 200 Boise buildings. In 1905, Boise approved the addition of a new story and an annex to the building, costing $80,000. The bank ceased operation during the Great Depression on Aug. 1, 1932. After the bank closed, over the years the building has been home to many tenants, including offices for Idaho Power, J.R. Simplot Co., lawyers, accountants, architects, real estate companies and the CCDC. In 1978, the building was named to the National Park Service’s Register of Historic Places. Developer Rick Peterson completed a $4 million renovation in 1993, attracting a variety of tenants that includes restaurants, retail outlets and offices.

Service alleys contribute to the walkability of the urban renewal district. Pictured: alleyway ghost sign behind the Fidelity Building, 2009.
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The Mode Building stands at the northwest corner of 8th and Idaho. Completed in 1895, the building housed the Mode, Ltd., a department store for almost 100 years until it closed in 1991. Before the Mode’s construction, a small store called the Palace Meat Market stood at the corner. In its early days, the Mode block brought high-end and specialty shopping to downtown Boise. Harry Falk, a member of the family that established Falk’s Department Store, hired Boise-based developer John Broadbent to build the Mode’s three-story building, which featured picture windows on each floor. Several other locally-owned department stores made their homes in downtown Boise.
In 1972, the National Park Service added the Union Block and Fidelity Building as one piece of architecture to the National Register of Historic Places. In 1986, consultants advised the B.R.A. that a restoration of the Fidelity-Union Block would be economically practical. Planners expressed immediate interest in the project, even though reports anticipated the restoration would cost $3.6 million and it would take an estimated four years to fill all vacancies with tenants. Investors Gary Christensen and James Tomlinson purchased the Fidelity Building, refurbishing it during their first year (1993) and operating it for only five years. They sold it to David Almquist, president and CEO of California-based marketing firm The Designory, Inc. Today the building is home to several restaurants that credit outdoor patio dining combined with the revitalized downtown for their success. Re-use of the historic Fidelity Building brought a new energy and
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Continued preservation efforts and imaginative re-use of the buildings at 8th and Idaho have fostered a sense of community and history and created a comfortable atmosphere on the block. Karen Sander, executive director for the Downtown Boise Association, says that historic preservation is an important part of the city development and planning process “so that the fabric of the city is maintained … our history gives us a sense of place.” The CCDC’s Sheldon adds that through the preservation of these buildings, memories and personal connections to downtown Boise are being saved. Sheldon says that while not all of Boise’s historic downtown buildings are unique, the combination of buildings certainly is, and the variety should be preserved. Through historic preservation and mixed use, the corner of 8th and Idaho has become one of Boise’s most prominent and popular spots. The block’s streetscapes encourage pedestrian activity and promote outdoor enjoyment. Local historian J.M. Neill may have put it best when he said that people can sit at a table on 8th Street and feel like they are in San Francisco. “Not that we really want to imitate San Francisco, but having an occasional touch of San Francisco ain’t too bad.”

Jacey Brain graduated in December 2009 with a degree in history. A 2005 Capital High graduate, he will pursue a master’s degree in U.S. history.

What are the most important aspects of a livable city?

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