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Artist Ward Hooper recalls the architecture of the 1920s in his tribute to the Boise Bench.

7 Revitalizing **THE BENCH**

by Sarah M. Cunningham

Boise's Central Bench neighborhood surrounding the Orchard Street corridor has been an area in decline, but under the right circumstances it has enormous potential to once again become a successful social space. What are the issues that face this long-established Boise neighborhood, one of the early suburbs that developed during the city's streetcar era? How can it be improved to restore its sense of community and rebuild its identity? There are no easy answers, but through a renewed sense of citizen involvement, the Central Bench can again stake its claim as one of Boise's thriving neighborhoods.

Historical relevance makes a profound contribution to the success of a social space—one that maintains a sense of its history while also serving the current needs and desires of the community. While there is little left to physically document the rich history of the Central Bench, the area can trace its roots back to the Oregon Trail and Boise's early settlement. The Bench was on the route of pioneering settlers who traveled the Oregon Trail as it

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followed the rim along Federal Way and westward on Overland to the lower valley near Emmett. Early in the 20th century, fueled by the new streetcar lines and canal system, the sagebrush-covered plateau quickly evolved into one of Boise's first suburbs. The construction of the canal system in the 1890s transformed the landscape from desert to fertile farms and orchards over much of the area between Boise and Meridian. The Boise River fed the main canals, which in turn supplied water to many smaller canals. People first began to settle the Central Bench area when the New York Canal was built in 1890. The local farmers favored the land southwest of the Boise River, believing the soil to be richer and more productive than that found in the lowlands. The arrival of the streetcar created an important and convenient connection to downtown industry and schools. After the streetcar ceased operating in 1928, the Bench lost a vital connection to the downtown. The automobile took over as the main mode of transportation and major traffic arterials began to cut through the neighborhood.

Until the early 1960s, the Bench area functioned as a community independent of the City of Boise. The sprawling neighborhoods were a strain to Boise officials, who made efforts to gradually incorporate them into the city. Robert Day, Boise's acting mayor in 1960, cited several reasons why he believed annexation would be beneficial to Boise, saying, "A growing demand for central government, and a growing demand for utilities has brought people to rely on the urban government ... the population is winning from two ends: they are able to use the city's resources without taxes and profit from the county's resources, which to a large extent are also paid by the people of Boise." The Bench was annexed into Boise shortly after these discussions in the early 1960s. Initially, Bench residents were vehemently opposed to annexation, arguing it would result in increased taxes. Later, residents recognized that enlarging the city limits would be beneficial to them because it would stabilize residential and commercial property values and encourage economic growth for an expanding population. In 1964, not long after annexation, the area became a focus in Boise's Comprehensive Plan. Under the plan, the Bench was to be "primarily residential" with "commercial uses along arterial streets" and "a system of neighborhood parks." The plan was updated in 1973 to allow higher-density residential areas and more commercial development.

As the area grew, traffic arterials overwhelmed and divided neighborhoods. Roadway and parking considerations took precedence over the quality of the social space and commercial development focused on the major streets, further increasing traffic and making the area less inviting to pedestrians. The success or failure of a street as a social space directly impacts the

form, structure and comfort of the surrounding urban community. While the Orchard artery provides a thoroughfare for commuting traffic, it has created a sense of social isolation among commuters, neighborhood residents and



Residents have cited the 2009 demolition of Franklin School as a blow to neighborhood cohesiveness.

businesses.

Rather than continue as a dividing element in the community, Orchard has tremendous potential to become a "great street," one which urban designer Allan Jacobs describes as a social space that creates a sense of comfort and encourages participation in a community. "The interplay of human activity with the physical place has an enormous amount to do with the greatness of a street," he says.

Successful streets and public spaces provide people with opportunities

to gather, to be greeted and welcomed, and to be part of something larger than oneself, Jacobs explains.

In keeping with the "great street" concept, redevelopment will need to focus on making the area more pedestrian and bicycle friendly. Infrastructure improvements, such as continuous sidewalks, more functional crosswalks and

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bike lanes and improved street lighting, should be priorities. Elaine Clegg, Boise City Councilwoman and special projects manager for Idaho Smart Growth, suggests one remedy might be to put the street on a “diet,” an urban planning tactic used to slow traffic on busy thoroughfares by reducing



Ethnic markets suggest the growing immigrant and refugee population of the Central Bench. Pictured: the 600 block of North Orchard Street.

the number of lanes, thereby opening up space for safe and user-friendly sidewalks and bike lanes while making the social space of the community along the street much more inviting and interactive. Boise City Councilman David Eberle says years of disinvestment—a consequence of urban sprawl promoted by the false promise of lower costs of building outward rather than reinvesting in existing infrastructure and buildings—has contributed to decline on the Central Bench. This disinvestment manifests itself in the deterioration of some residential and commercial areas, and is evident in the poor

maintenance of numerous strip malls along Orchard, a number of which are owned by absentee landlords. The 1960s-era mall at Emerald and Orchard provides an example. Beyond a vast desert of cracked asphalt and weeds, with a leaning light post and drooping electrical lines, the mall's exterior is seen by neighbors as an eyesore. The condition of the parking lot is the main cause of disappointment for business owners and neighboring homeowners alike. Recently, a few business owners attempted to reverse the appearance of neglect by paving a major portion of the parking lot. This, however, is more a band-aid than a successful remedy because the partial paving only adds to the mall's lack of cohesion. Despite their misgivings about the exterior appearance, residents are fond of the businesses within the mall, which offer great diversity to the community. Some tenants, including the Bosnian and Orient markets and the bowling alley, have made extensive interior renovations at their own expense to improve the ambiance of their businesses. If the owners could unite to collectively improve the entire exterior mall space as they have done with their individual interiors, the mall would increase its magnetism and become a successful social space.

The recent demolition of the historic Franklin Elementary School—closed permanently in June of 2008—has further degraded the community's cohesiveness. With the loss of the only Central Bench elementary school, students are bussed to schools outside their neighborhoods, compounding the loss of one of the oldest historical buildings on the Bench with a loss of neighborhood identity and involvement as children are spread to disparate locations outside their own neighborhood. Many residents mourn the demolition and loss of local history. While fearing the potential development of yet another strip mall or condensed housing units, the neighborhood remains hopeful that the property will be utilized for a park or some other purpose that contributes to the community. The school board has cleared the land and put it up for sale to pay for improvements made to other schools. If the board is sincere in preserving the health of the neighborhood where Franklin Elementary once existed, it will strive to find a conscientious buyer who will respect the interests of the residents. The Central Bench Neighborhood Association is working to rezone the property—now zoned as mixed-use—to exert more control over future uses. Whether it is a park or a venture with living units, social space and small businesses, the new development could be a positive addition to the Central Bench. If built for the neighborhood rather than as a destination for commuters, an appropriate use of the old school site could invigorate the neighborhood and bring new investment.

There is general agreement that the area is in decline and needs reinvestment. Councilman Eberle says the intersection of Orchard and Emerald is one of his favorite candidates for rehabilitation. Councilwoman Clegg has expressed a desire to see the Central Bench area redeveloped as well, saying that the City Council has had many projects on the list for the Bench but they have continued to fall down on the list of priorities. Councilman Alan Shealy acknowledges the city's focus in the downtown area and expressed the need to expand influence into other areas such as the Central Bench. Eberle says the new library at the Hillcrest Shopping Center has added an important service to the area, along with after-school programs at the elementary schools. But he feels commercial disinvestment along the Orchard corridor has to be resolved by the community. Clegg adds a similar sentiment, saying that she looks forward to seeing the community take action on its own behalf. Clegg and Eberle agree on the importance of a neighborhood association to voice concerns, access improvement funds and create cohesion. Both council members suggest the implementation of an Urban Renewal District to take advantage of tax-increment financing to fund reinvestment in the area. Small businesses along Orchard could unite to form an association and work together to create a cohesive commercial corridor. Eberle delights in the idea that Orchard could become an eclectic arts and culture hub of Boise similar to Portland's Hawthorne Street, with an identity created by the residents of the Bench community. Sustainable communities have been and can be redeveloped through these programs, and city officials agree that the endeavor will be more effective if the community participates in the redevelopment planning process.

One of the Central Bench's most important, yet understated, attributes is its cultural diversity. The neighborhood has a sizeable refugee and immigrant population, making it one of the more diverse areas in the city. Several businesses along the Orchard corridor reflect that diversity. For example, Oriental and Bosnian markets, along with Thai and Chinese restaurants, are all tenants at the mall on Orchard and Emerald. With its rich ethnic diversity, the neighborhood has the potential to become Boise's first International District, anchored by a Cultural Arts and Community Center that can celebrate the diversity that exists in the businesses already thriving in the area and give a social face to the diversity of the residents. Representatives from the refugee and immigrant population, as well as in the surrounding neighborhoods, say the center is something that Boise needs. Abu Mohammed, a new American from Somalia who lives on the Bench, says a cultural center could be a place where new Americans can feel welcome and receive assis-

tance in finding jobs, in navigating the city and in understanding the cultural expectations of their new home.

Change, whether it means putting streets on a “diet,” enhancing a strip mall, ensuring positive development at the Franklin School site or insti-



Immigrants from four continents—and from Somalia, Bosnia, Vietnam, Thailand, Mexico and many other places—are quietly remaking the Central Bench into an international district. Pictured: Campos Market on Orchard.

tuting an International District, will not come without citizen participation. The demolition of Franklin Elementary along with the distressed quality of the commercial thoroughfare, the lack of a satisfactory infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians and rising crime rates inspired local residents last fall



A branch library in a vacant storefront contributes to the revitalization of the Hillcrest Plaza Shopping Center.

to reactivate the Central Bench Neighborhood Association to prevent the further disenfranchisement of their community. The CBNA is currently working to develop a comprehensive neighborhood plan to get the Central Bench community's input and expectations adopted in Boise City's Comprehensive Plan—Blueprint Boise. In recent meetings the CBNA emphasized neighborhood safety, community events and neighborliness as goals. The association has applied to the city for a neighborhood investment grant to assist in the development of a comprehensive neighborhood plan. The CBNA will sponsor several events this year, including its first Spring Celebration in Cassia Park to celebrate community, a neighborhood cleanup in June and a summer event

organized in partnership with a neighborhood retirement center, aimed at bringing the community together. The association is also discussing preliminary steps to install Oregon Trail historic markers on Overland.

The current efforts to redevelop the disinvested areas of the Central Bench area seem to be driven by a quiet undercurrent of the City Beautiful movement of the early 20th century. History proves that if redevelopment of the area is motivated by civic pride, beauty and community, then the process of urban rebuilding will transform streets that are currently in decline into successful social spaces and "great streets." One important step is to acknowledge the disinvested social spaces in Central Bench area. "Civil courage in an ecological age means not only demanding social justice, but also aesthetic justice and the will to make judgments of taste, to stand for beauty in the public arena and speak out about it," wrote authors James Hillman and Michael Ventura. The decline of the commercial area is directly impacting the form, structure and comfort of the surrounding urban community. This can be overcome by grounding redevelopment endeavors in history, by building a sustainable community and by celebrating the diversity in the community. With the right public policies and neighborhood action, the Central Bench can again become a vibrant area with a sense of healthy community.

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Sarah Cunningham graduated from Capital High School in 1991. She will earn a BA in general studies and a minor in leadership at the end of the fall 2010 semester. After graduation she plans to start two small businesses in the Bench area and later open an interdisciplinary design company.

What are most important aspects of a "livable" city?

"A livable city works to improve the overall quality and health of the environment to improve the quality of life for its citizens—streets, homes, waterways, air, soil and public buildings. It creates welcoming civic spaces for people to be social and interact with one another, experiencing being part of something larger than oneself"