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# The power of vision, leadership and consensus: Downtown Des Moines transformation 1980–2019

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**Abstract** By the 1980s, downtown Des Moines had developed as a successful office centre, with major insurance companies headquartered there. Nevertheless, it lacked many of the attributes and qualitative elements that create a dynamic social and cultural place that would attract the talent companies needed, or have the makings of a great place dear to the community. There was little downtown housing, no pedestrian activity, few retail outlets and quality restaurants were few. Supportive public transport, walkability and bikeability had not been successfully addressed. In short, downtown vitality was sorely missing; however, local civic and business leadership engaged in extensive and intensive planning and strategic initiatives. The process lasted a number of years, guided by a desire to bring together all the elements of vibrancy to make Des Moines more competitive with its larger neighbours. This paper outlines the planning and implementation that literally transformed a quiet but un compelling downtown into one of the most celebrated and award-winning downtowns in America. The engagement and support of the broader community was critical in achieving this vision. The assistance provided by local talent and outside consultants was essential in guiding the revitalisation process. The result has been a multi-billion-dollar transformation that occurred over a period of three decades.

**Keywords:** *transformation, leadership, vision, planning, vibrancy, commitment, design*

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## INTRODUCTION

This is about a city and its downtown and how that downtown became an internationally acclaimed success. It is about extraordinary vision, imagination, courage, leadership, cooperation, planning and design. It is a story about how ordinary people participated in

determining the future of their downtown and their city, and how outside expertise was used strategically to expand horizons, build consensus and prove concepts — avoiding what one leader called ‘dumb things’. This paper presents an opportunity to learn from the lessons of Des Moines, and to understand not just what happened,

but why and how downtown Des Moines was put on the successful trajectory that it is enjoying today. *Forbes* ranked Des Moines as the 'Best Place for Business' in both 2010 and 2013.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, NBC ranked Des Moines as the 'Wealthiest City in America' according to its criteria.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, downtown enhancement efforts were often driven by trial and error, incremental project by incremental project. More recently, a body of knowledge has evolved regarding how to successfully address the issues facing ailing downtowns; the lessons learned constitute a wealth of information. These lessons have become a kind of 'formula' that cities throughout the world, but especially in the US, have followed as they seek to revive blighted downtowns.

When David Feehan (one of this paper's authors) was president of the International Downtown Association, he described this formula as envisioning downtown as 'the stage on which we celebrate our community'.<sup>3</sup> The formula, according to Feehan, required thinking of downtown not only as a physical 'bricks and mortar' place, but as a set of experiences. And he emphasised the importance of the six 'Ms': management, maintenance, marketing, moments, memories and magic. The first three Ms are often the responsibility of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) — in Iowa called Self Supported Municipal Improvement Districts (SSMIDs) — while the second set of Ms are often the result of collaboration between BIDs and various arts and civic organisations.

According to Palma and Hyatt, in America's Downtown Renaissance,<sup>4</sup> attention has been given to the revitalisation, rebirth or reinvention of North America's downtowns and town centres, but much of the focus has been on larger cities such as Portland, OR and Denver, CO — and rightly so. These downtowns have seen success in attracting new businesses, new residents and new

visitors, along with investments in both new and historic structures and transport and communications infrastructure.

But less attention has been paid to smaller and mid-sized cities, cities lacking really hot markets, that have nonetheless revitalised and reinvented their downtowns. This paper describes the transformation of one such downtown — Des Moines, IA, located nearly midway between the east and west coasts and situated between the larger cities of Minneapolis to the north and Kansas City to the south, part of a great agricultural region.

Today Des Moines is a major centre of the US insurance industry with a sizable financial services and publishing business base and very strong job growth. It is a cultural, entertainment and conference centre and features a strong design community incubated and sustained by various organisations: the Des Moines Art Center, Hoyt Sherman Place, Meredith Publishing, Iowa State, the University of Iowa and other universities. In addition to organisations involved in regional planning and historic preservation, it supports the Iowa Chapter of the American Institute of Architects — all engaged in improving its urbanity, imageability and liveability. As the state capital and the seat of Polk County, Des Moines has always benefited from being Iowa's urban place,<sup>5</sup> the place where the community comes together to celebrate. Additionally, it is the home of the World Food Prize, an international award conceived by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Norman Borlaug, which recognises the achievements of individuals who have advanced human development by improving the quality, quantity or availability of food in the world (see Figure 1).

Over an extended period of time, the authors — one working in the non-profit and private sectors and one in the public sector — have had the privilege to be a



**Figure 1:** The World Food Prize, based in downtown Des Moines

Source: Tim Leach

part of the evolution of the downtown of this midwestern American city that in many ways exemplifies the heartland of the nation. Coordination and interplay between the business community, citizen leaders and city government helped craft the building blocks of a remarkable downtown, combined with the high level of energy, generous contributions and ongoing commitment, sustained over many, many years.

Over the next several sections, the authors will describe in detail the essential elements that made downtown Des Moines what it is today. A number of pivotal projects laid the building blocks for what was to come; the authors, in conversation with many individuals involved, have identified 12 principles that were critical and that they recommend communities apply in their efforts. There were a number of projects, plans and approaches that set direction and kept

the transformational process on track, but there were two broad planning processes that fundamentally shaped how downtown Des Moines would proceed: the Des Moines Vision Plan, starting in 1988, and the Major Projects Task Force in 1997.

### **THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A SUCCESSFUL DOWNTOWN**

A search of the literature reveals a wealth of books and articles devoted to the subject of downtowns and cities throughout the past several decades. As writers examined the evolution of downtowns in the post-Second World War era, the decade of the 1950s is often regarded as the ‘golden age’ of downtowns.<sup>6</sup> Office buildings dominated the skyline, major department stores flourished and movie theatres featured the latest that Hollywood had to offer.

But even in the 1950s, downtowns were not all that golden. On the edges of central business districts 'skid rows' were frequently found. Older hotels and apartment buildings fell into disrepair. Older warehouses and manufacturing plants were being abandoned for more efficient suburban facilities. Close-in residential neighbourhoods were marked by larger older homes cut up into kitchenette apartments.

Des Moines was no different. It experienced a similar slide, during which time it was often referred to as 'Dead Moines', with older warehouses and factory buildings just to the south of the office core increasingly left empty and deteriorating residential neighbourhoods to the east and north considered less than desirable. The eastern and western portions of downtown were marked by aging commercial buildings, mostly one and two-storey structures, tenanted by auto-related businesses. As the 1970s approached, business and civic leaders began planning for a downtown that they hoped would retain the vibrancy of earlier decades and keep Des Moines economically competitive with its larger neighbours.

During the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st, while cities in north America and elsewhere were struggling, like Des Moines, to revive fading or dysfunctional downtowns and town centres, Des Moines zeroed in on the following 12 essentials that made the difference. These critical components, as well as several pivotal projects and processes, were identified repeatedly, in one form or another, during the authors' interviews with individuals who were involved over several decades:

#### **Individuals and organisations**

1. Extraordinary individuals in business and community, who provide sustained

and inspired leadership, philanthropic support, and who successfully marshal a range of corporate, state, local and federal funding sources to accomplish priority goals;

2. Public sector vision, initiative, and regulatory, economic and planning support;
3. A forum for public/private/community partnerships and strong intermediary organisations to identify priorities and build community consensus.

#### **Land use**

4. A downtown land use mix that includes high numbers of jobs and significant amounts of residential, retail, creative start-ups, arts and cultural attractions, a vibrant night scene, in addition to institutions such as schools;
5. A dynamic waterfront and other significant public places and recreation amenities; plazas, parks, sculpture, performance venues, trails, skating rinks;
6. Multi-modal transport and connectivity — pedestrian, bicyclist, transit and auto;
7. Great architecture and the resources to commission top architects;
8. Historic preservation, and creative reuse of buildings and community landmarks.

#### **Planning and programming**

9. Forward-looking urban planning, and a desire to engage local universities and organisations; and national as well as local expertise. 'The key is deciding through planning what needs to go where. It's the dovetailing of urban planning and urban design, culminating in architecture, without which it all falls far short';<sup>7</sup>

10. Advanced preservation planning for areas of distinct character; such as south of Court Avenue, Gateway East (Market District), Gateway West (Western Gateway District);
11. Great events and programming; the number one arts festival and farmers' market and an effective BID;
12. The attention to detail and along with the good fortune, as one business leader said, to avoid doing 'dumb things'.

had leaders chosen a different path, the ripple effect may have produced different outcomes, much as a single change in a Gantt chart can affect everything that follows.

It is important to note that the authors avoided crediting specific individuals in most cases, because of the teamwork that was involved in so many pivotal projects, and because midwesterners generally seem to avoid the spotlight, and this is particularly true of Des Moines.

### PIVOT POINTS AND PIVOTAL PROCESSES

According to Richard Clark, former City Manager of Des Moines:

'Understanding the evolution of downtown Des Moines requires an understanding of many factors over a long period of time. Certainly, there have been key strategic decisions along the way, but it would be a mistake ... to put too much reliance on a narrow set of variables. So ... in the big picture ... urban rejuvenation [is] an incremental process composed of building blocks that form the foundation of each successive step. For example, downtown Des Moines has always been a major employment center even in the "dark days" pre 1970 — thanks to state government and some major insurance companies (for example, Principal Financial Group). Without that employment base it would have been very difficult to realize the wave of public and private investments that continue to this day.'<sup>8</sup>

In the life of every city, pivotal decisions are made. An historic building is saved and repurposed or demolished, a park or plaza is built or removed, a riverfront is restored or ignored. In the following section, the authors identify and describe ten pivotal projects or approaches, culminating in the Major Projects Task Force in 1997–8. Each of these represented a turning or inflection point, a fork in the road, and

### A PIVOTAL PROJECT: THE CIVIC CENTER AND NOLLEN PLAZA 1979

The Des Moines Performing Arts' mission is to 'engage the Midwest in world-class entertainment, education, and cultural activities', and that is the dynamic role the Civic Center and Nollen Plaza (renamed Cowles Commons) have played since opening in 1979.

This seminal project is a powerful illustration of the importance of a bold cultural venue and urban centrepiece and of the role of local leadership and private funding in Des Moines' success. This project, and its sustained programming excellence, is often cited as critical to reversing the decline and uncertainty plaguing downtown Des Moines' future. 'The cornerstone for downtown was the Civic Center. This was the business community's signal that we are going to save downtown.'<sup>9</sup>

The president, publisher and chairman of the *Des Moines Register* and a leader in local philanthropy and the art scene saw something critical missing from downtown Des Moines. He organised local business leaders to raise US\$9m, following the failure of a public bond option a few years earlier, and made it happen. This stunningly modern building, still contemporary and striking today, was designed by Des Moines-based Charles Herbert and Associates, and the associated

plaza graced with a monumentally scaled sculpture designed by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.

### **A PIVOTAL PROJECT: DES MOINES SKYWALK SYSTEM 1982**

Des Moines' establishment of a Skywalk District and its investment in a skywalk system had a great impact on the trajectory of downtown Des Moines between opening in 1982 and today.<sup>10</sup> The defined district within which city government committed to constructing bridges, using tax increment financing, constituted a firm commitment by the city for continuous and concentrated investment in this 12-block area that has today grown to 60 blocks. City investment was cemented to ongoing private investment in an entirely public system, operated by the City of Des Moines between 6.00 am to 2.00 am, seven days a week.

By limiting the area within which skywalk bridges would be built, new development occurred in a relatively compact area, concentrating pedestrian activity along the walkways. This prevented the sprawled-out downtowns that many smaller cities experience.<sup>11</sup> One could argue that without this sustained and long-term commitment from city government, private developers and corporations would not have had the confidence in the future of the downtown and a defined geographic area within which to invest. The arrangement of bridges being publicly built and corridors being privately built (with public easement) created a long-term partnership between the public and the private that would bode well for ongoing coordination, complementary initiatives, and additional investments.

The design of the individual bridges became a format for highly visible architectural and structural expression and

imageable places in the downtown, and the architects rose to the occasion. As an element of public space, each bridge is reviewed by an urban design panel.

This apparent success is not to disregard the urban challenges of an elevated walkway system that concentrates pedestrian activity above the streets and sidewalks and takes some of the retail with it, nor to ignore the ongoing costs of bridge and corridor maintenance.<sup>12</sup> One could make the case that another type of highly visible and sustained project, contingent on both public and private investment, would have had a similar impact. Given the bitterness of Midwest winters, however, and the practicality of connecting employees to parking garages and even a downtown school, the skywalk system had the support of the decision makers. This design challenges — connecting street level to skywalk level — is being met by far greater attention to and frequency of dramatic vertical connections that seamlessly tie the two levels of the downtown together.

### **A PIVOTAL PROJECT: DES MOINES' WATER FRONTAGE**

The frontage along downtown Des Moines' rivers had been in long decline from the glory days of the City Beautiful Movement, a turn-of-the-century plan for a civic centre on both sides of the river that, between 1900 and 1938, resulted in six public buildings, eight bridges, 11,716 linear feet of river wall and ornamental balustrade, two small dams and West Riverfront Park and East Riverfront Park. This late 19th-century planning is early evidence of Des Moines' focus on design and architecture and on a visionary idea for the 38 years it took to implement it.

During the 1980s, as other cities across the US such as Portland provided examples of active and transformed waterfronts, Des Moines recognised that

its river was critical to the larger vision for downtown. Changing it from an area that was isolated and viewed as a barrier between east and west was particularly important if the area on the east side of the river (now Historic East Village) was ever to be thought of as part of *downtown*. It became clear that downtown Des Moines' water frontage represented an important opportunity, and that changing it would be essential to creating a great downtown, a living downtown and to tying 'downtown east and downtown west together'.

This effort gained traction with the stunning restoration of the Court Avenue Bridge, City Council's adoption of the Court Avenue Design Guidelines in 1987, and the listing of the Downtown Riverfront in the National Register of Historic Places, also in 1987, recognising that the buildings and structures were 'distinguished by their riverfront location, and by their harmonious design, style,

scale, civic use, siting, and materials'. The city took the lead, and in 1990 the Des Moines City Council adopted 'Des Moines at the River': Downtown Riverfront Concept Plan and the Des Moines Plan and Zoning Commission presented 'The River Book' in 1992, incorporating the Downtown Riverfront Lighting Plan (1992), which had been adopted by the City Council earlier that year. Sec Taylor Stadium, a new home for the highly regarded AAA Iowa Cubs baseball team affiliated with the Chicago Cubs, opened in 1992 on the banks of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, pictured in the foreground in Figure 2. The perspective of time shows that the riverfront concept worked then and is still working today.

Congressman Neil Smith authored a critical piece of federal legislation — the Des Moines Recreational River and Greenbelt Master Plan (Public Law 99-88)— that made Des Moines'



**Figure 2:** Des Moines' downtown core, viewed from the juncture of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, as it appears today

Source: Tim Leach

riverfronts eligible for federal funding on a cost-sharing basis, 'Natural resources and recreation are for everyone. I thought it was important to create a "National Park" of sorts between Boone and Pella and downtown Des Moines is the centerpiece.'<sup>13</sup>

Des Moines was successful in getting several of its downtown waterfront projects incorporated into that master plan. One of those, the Downtown Riverfront Plaza/ Amphitheater, a popular venue for formal and impromptu events and the outdoor summer concert series Nitefall on the River, was built in 1996 with city funding and federal funding from the Corps of Engineers. It was designed by Herbert Lewis Kruse Blunck to accommodate the inevitable high water, and named Simon Estes Theater, after Simon Estes, a noted opera singer from nearby Centerville, IA. Given its location on the east side of the Des Moines River, it ultimately helped open the doorway to the revitalisation of the area between the river and the state capitol, now Historic East Village.

When Principal Financial came to City of Des Moines Planning Director James Grant looking for project ideas to give a gift to the community, he said: 'There is value in having a plan and we do.' He pulled out the adopted plan for the river. The section labelled 'Downtown Des Moines at the River' read: 'Create a lighted, landscaped esplanade or walkway along each side of the River linking the major anchors and emphasizing pedestrian connections between street level and esplanade level.' In 2013 the ribbon was cut on the 1.2 mile Principal Riverwalk, a recreational trail on both sides of the river and connecting to Gray's Lake Park and 300 miles of trails across the state, over a renovated railroad bridge and a new pedestrian bridge linking the new Iowa Events Center with the Botanical Center, gardens and ice skating rink and summertime fountain plaza.

## **A PIVOTAL PROCESS: THE DES MOINES VISION PLAN AND PROCESS I AND II 1988-2007**

Several key developments in downtown Des Moines, including its world-class sculpture park, downtown housing, a river walk and the Market District, gained momentum during what became known as the Des Moines Vision Plan, an intellectual exercise and community process that began in 1988. This cooperative effort between the Skidmore Owings and Merrill Foundation and the Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism, the Yale University School of Architecture, City of Des Moines and Des Moines business community helped Des Moines look toward the 21st century.

New York architect Mario Gandelsonas, who with his partner Diana Agrest was developing a methodology specific to urban centres and the American grid, was teaching at Yale University. He received a funding grant from the Skidmore Foundation (SOM) to apply his theoretical studies to a still-developing midwestern city. Melva Bucksbaum, a community leader active with the Des Moines Art Center and Urban Land Institute Foundation, convinced SOM president Bruce Graham that Des Moines was the ideal place for this experiment. Gandelsonas brought teams of Yale University students to Des Moines to study the downtown. In 1991 Mayor John Pat Dorrian was quoted in a *Planning* magazine article on the Vision Plan: 'Mario makes people think. He's educating us on what is possible for our community.'<sup>14</sup>

The Des Moines Vision Plan, with its powerful and compelling visual analysis (see Figure 3 for one example), transformed the geographic definition of downtown and expanded possibilities. The new 'maps' of downtown stretched it across the Des Moines River, east to the state capitol complex and west to



the Meredith Corporation and sculpture complex, south across the Raccoon River to the airport and north to the I-235 freeway, pulling in areas that later became dynamic downtown neighbourhoods.

‘Mario has been successful in bringing everyone into the process; a diverse group, a cross-section of people from all around the city; bringing them into the process so that everyone understands this isn’t just an outsider coming in and telling us what to do.’<sup>15</sup>

Here is how David Elbert, writer for the *Business Times* and former *Des Moines Register* reporter, described the evolution of this planning process:

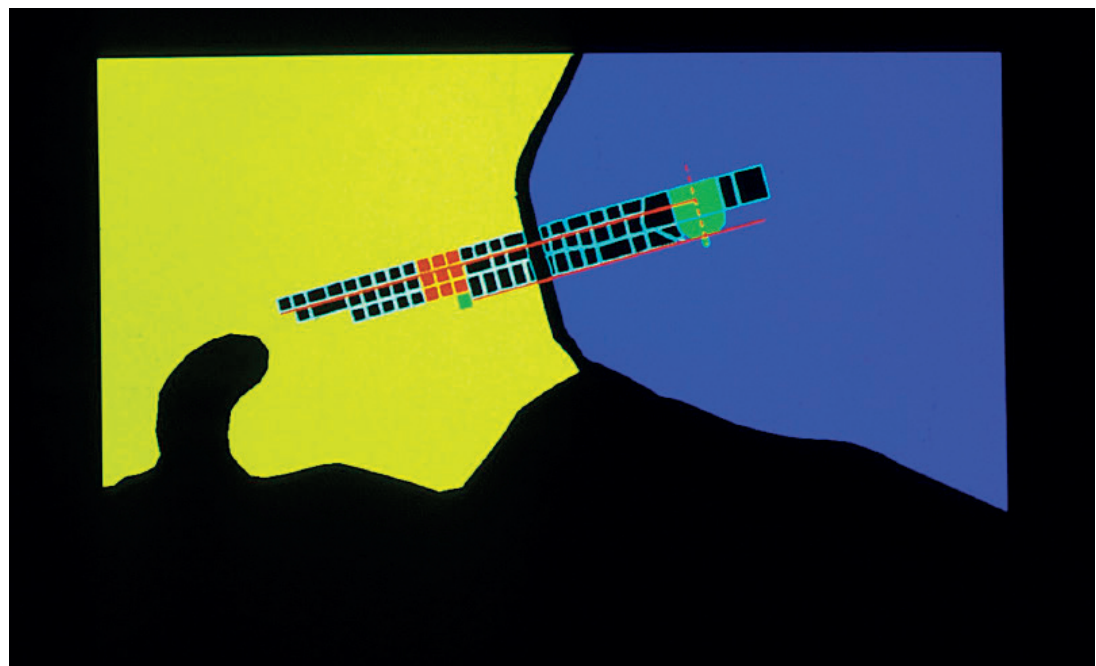
‘As local understanding of what Gandelsonas was doing began to grow, members of the city’s power structure became intrigued and asked him to take the process a step further. They raised \$250,000 and asked Gandelsonas, along with the city’s

former planning director, Robert Mickle, to guide a wide cross-section of the city’s social, cultural and business populations through a planning process that would build on what the architect had learned about Des Moines.

A wide-reaching, 90-member steering committee was formed ... The city’s architectural community was drawn into the process and, to the surprise of many, became active, unpaid participants at the public sessions.’<sup>16</sup>

Mario Gandelsonas summarises the Des Moines Vision Plan thus:

‘I consider the Des Moines Vision Plan one of the most significant projects in our practice. Not just because we have been engaged in Des Moines for the last thirty years but because it became a reality that radically changed the city. People ask how did this happen? Because of a very different approach to urbanism that stressed the need for a private–public partnership in the process of planning, based on a



**Figure 3:** One of the powerful Des Moines Vision Plan diagrams that communicated very effectively with the public sector, business leaders and the larger community

Source: Agrest and Gandelsonas

strong connection to the community at large; Because a forward-looking business community was receptive to new ways of viewing urban and economic renewal, in particular the acceptance of tying the Pragmatic to Vision and Beauty, which was reflected in the use of the term Vision to name the plan.<sup>17</sup>

### **A PIVOTAL PROJECT: WESTERN GATEWAY PARK, THE JOHN AND MARY PAPPAJOHN SCULPTURE PARK AND THE CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS OF KUM AND GO 2006–PRESENT**

The concept of a Western Gateway Park — at the strategic hinge-point where one enters the downtown from the south and the west — was being discussed in planning and design circles in the mid-1980s, and gained momentum in the drawings of Agrest and Gandelsonas in the late 1980s, ultimately becoming one of the most popular proposals in the Des Moines Vision Plan I and II. The 13-acre urban park opened in 2006, following acquisition, clearance and construction by the city. It became a popular location for sport, music, art and political events and ultimately the home of Des Moines Central Library, a US\$37.3m green roof project designed by British architect David Chipperfield. The neighbourhood includes the headquarters of Allied/Nationwide, Meredith Corporation, Federal Home Loan Bank, Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield, ING, Nationwide Insurance, Pappajohn Higher Education Center, the new Temple for the Performing Arts and the Krause Gateway Center, a five-storey, Renzo Piano-designed corporate headquarters of the Kum & Go, opened in 2018.

As Eric Anderson, former City Manager, explained:

‘If you want to know what really got things going, it would be the decision to

go forward with the Western Gateway Park idea, a great example of successful mixed-use development. A key collective action that bridged the private and public and lead to a great amount of redevelopment, it created an underlying trust between public and private partners at the highest level.’<sup>18</sup>

Without a doubt, it had taken the 2009 design transformation of 4.4 acres of the park into the John and Mary Pappajohn Sculpture Park — designed by Agrest and Gandelsonas, who had stayed involved with the downtown community as adviser on many projects — for the Gateway District to become an outrageously popular destination and a loved public space for residents, workers and visitors. This project was cited by everyone the authors interviewed for this paper as not only a great public place that is always in use, but also as the impetus for several other investments and historic rehabilitations and the hub of a growing residential, café, culture and employment district.

The sculpture park, managed by the Des Moines Art Center, created a magnetic location within the urban and historic context of the larger Western Gateway area for the Krause Gateway Center, corporate headquarters for Kum and Go, to relocate from their suburban location. Designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop (RPBW) in collaboration with OPN (Des Moines), this building joins its corporate neighbours and transforms this area into a dynamic place to live and work.

‘The adoption of the sculpture park, study of the elevation change between Ingersoll St. and Grand Ave., and the value of civic engagement shared by both Kyle Krause (Founder and CEO of Krause Group) and Renzo Piano Building Workshop all lead to the concept of transparency and openness at the street level. The effect is that the building is not a barrier but instead fosters a literal two-way dialogue between the

associates who work within the building, the public, and the city.<sup>19</sup>

Early reach-out to the community during a visioning session resulted in an understanding of just how important this permeability was to the residential neighbourhoods to the north and west, including Sherman Hill and the hospital complex, and how much they wanted the building to avoid taking away the flow from block to block or duplicating what the Pappajohn Sculpture Park was already doing.

Danielle Hermann AIA, Associate Principal at OPN and Project Manager for the Krause Gateway Center project, shared the following about the design (see Figure 4). The site has four major roads surrounding it and includes the challenge of a 17.5 ft grade difference between Ingersoll Avenue on the north side and Grand Avenue — the primary entrance

route into downtown Des Moines — on the south side. This challenge was resolved in a two-level lobby space that is open to the public and encourages movement through the site — an enriching gift of urbanity and an ennobling civic move on the part of the Kum and Go Corporation. A café that will provide the building with another public amenity and additional permeability is currently being designed.

Renzo Piano describes the significance of the Krause Gateway Center thus:

‘Lightness, simplicity and openness. The four vast planes flying over the site will emphasize the lightness and the transparency of the building, and they will be in dialogue with the sculpture park nearby. The building is a real gateway between the different parts of the city, and it is designed not only to host the company but also to become, with its exterior public spaces, a real “place to be”. A new destination for the people in downtown Des Moines.’<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 4:** The Krause Gateway Center — night view

Source: Renzo Piano (Renzo Piano Building Workshop)

### **A PIVOTAL PROJECT: BROWN CAMP LOFTS AND DOWNTOWN HOUSING 2002**

Des Moines has experienced a great increase in the number of people living downtown. A growing resident population is widely accepted as proof of a successful downtown and as an essential milestone in any recovery. Without it the streets, plazas and public places are empty after the workday ends and retail, culinary and service sectors fail to thrive.

Recognising this, in the mid-1980s the public sector undertook various initiatives to achieve this. In 1985 there were five existing projects, all completed in the early 1980s, comprising a total of 783 rental and condo units. In an effort to increase that number, the Des Moines Plan and Zoning Commission produced 'A Developer's Guide to Downtown Housing Sites in 1985'. This document showed where the potential was — Downtown Central, Downtown East, South of Court Avenue and others, and it included a brief market profile, a demand statement, and noted that '42.5% of downtown workers polled in 1982 indicated that they would consider living downtown'.

Nevertheless, downtown Des Moines was still regarded as somewhat lifeless after business hours until the residential population expanded and the governor of Minnesota, Arnie Carlson, called downtown Des Moines 'Dead Moines', when he was pushing the Minnesota legislature to fund a new baseball stadium for the Twins, who were threatening to move to Charlotte.<sup>21</sup>

Today there are over 10,000 people (some estimates run as high as 20,000) living downtown, according to the Greater Des Moines Partnership, and 3,300 apartments and town homes on the drawing board, the majority in the proposed Market District, an expansion of East Village. The project that is often cited as having a great impact on the market

and getting the ball rolling on downtown as a living downtown was the renovation of the 100+ year-old abandoned warehouse into the Brown Camp Lofts. It has 105 to 109 condo units in a restored six-storey 95,000 sq. ft warehouse on the downtown waterfront, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and opened in 2002. 'If you're looking for something that encouraged other people to develop downtown housing, Brown Camp Lofts was it. As a loft style renovation, right on the river, it was new and different.'<sup>22</sup> Since then, there has been an explosion in historic building conversions and new infill construction, much of it rental.

Historic Court District, Historic East Village, Western Gateway Park — some of the hottest downtown neighbourhoods — are propelled by a changing residential market that appreciates an urban location, the architect-as-developer trend and the civic community's leadership in identifying and listing historic properties and providing supplemental funding in an effort to see them preserved. The widely successful Court Avenue Historic District attracts a night-time crowd and Saturday mornings produce heavy crowds attending the popular downtown farmers' market.

### **A PIVOTAL EFFORT: TRANSIT AND WALKABILITY**

As with most midwestern cities, Des Moines is necessarily an auto-oriented community. Nonetheless, several transport initiatives have been undertaken over the past 30 years to encourage walking, biking and transit use, including Des Moines Area Regional Transit (DART), the Principal Riverwalk, Court Avenue Streetscape, connections to regional biking/walking trails, the skywalk system, and the Walnut Street Transit Mall. Today the downtown is a far more walkable place and there are many more people on the streets

than there were in the late 1980s, when there was little downtown residential, a second-level skywalk system had moved pedestrians and retail one level up and retail was shuttering on Walnut Street, the traditional downtown retail street.

Federal funding was captured in the mid-1980s to create a transit mall, closing Walnut Street to vehicular traffic during daytime hours to facilitate the bus service. Although there was ample evidence at the time that few transit malls were successful and that making transit a convenient choice involved many complex and highly specific circumstances, transit malls were one of those trendy things that cities were doing. There were many detractors in Des Moines who considered this project ill conceived and predicted its failure, yet it proceeded. The Walnut Mall functioned as a transit stop, but never attracted the retail activity that was envisioned. Unlike the iconic Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis, the Walnut Mall never became an addition to the public realm, a gathering place for local residents and tourists.

In 2012, ending decades of using Walnut Street as a transit mall, the US\$21m DART Central Station bus transfer station was opened just south of the Polk County Courthouse, creating a hub for the entire regional transit system with all routes coming into downtown Des Moines, supporting the growing numbers of employers and jobs, residents and entertainment and recreation attractions. Des Moines, like other cities across the world, realises that economically strong and healthy futures will increasingly need to support more sustainable modes of transport and Des Moines and its regional partners are building that infrastructure.

### **A PIVOTAL APPROACH: INVESTMENT IN DESIGN**

Des Moines is a city with a history of exceptional architecture, planning and

urban design. Starting as a cavalry post strategically and beautifully situated at the juncture of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, Des Moines has long had its sights on national and international architecture and architects and has also grown exceptional award-winning firms. This has been one of the keys to an enjoyable, dynamic and distinctive downtown that exists today. International luminaries that have buildings in Des Moines include Renzo Piano, Claes Oldenburg, I.M. Pei, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Richard Meier, HOK, SOM, Sasaki Associates, Eleil Saarinen, Eero Saarinen, Helmut Jahn, and Agrest and Gandelsonas. Recognising that, the American Institute of Architects has bestowed an extraordinary number of National Honor Awards, Central States Region Design Awards, Iowa Design Awards and even Firm of the Year award — recognising the merits of work by Des Moines-based firms. This level of excellence has greatly benefited downtown Des Moines, helping it attract a talented work force and contributing to the creative and entrepreneurial energy that inspires new businesses and draws investment.

‘Des Moines has a long history of hiring international-caliber architects and getting superb work out of them — there’s a standard tour of outstanding buildings by both Saarinen’s, I.M. Pei, Gordon Bunshaft, Mies van der Rohe, and David Chipperfield that never fails to impress. And that’s alongside great work by homegrown talent, too.’<sup>23</sup>

Figure 5 illustrates the new pedestrian bridge connecting the east and west downtown districts across the Des Moines River — a powerful illustration of the importance of landmark design. Linking the east and west sides of Des Moines at the northern edge of the Principal Riverwalk loop, the bridge honours notable women from Iowa’s history,



**Figure 5:** Pedestrian bridge over the Des Moines River

Source: Tim Leach

including an individual active in women's suffrage movement, the first African American woman to serve in the Iowa Legislature, a commander of a classified Second World War operation, and an individual who became Iowa's first female Secretary of State.

### **A PIVOTAL PROJECT: THE REDESIGN OF MLK PARKWAY<sup>24</sup>**

The local architects have also been very engaged in the greater good of the community, focusing far beyond their individual buildings and projects. One dramatic example of this is the role local architects and planners played in avoiding the construction of an elevated highway that would have severed what is now a growth area for the expanding downtown and the development of downtown housing.

When quiet efforts failed to get this 'flyover' project redesigned to an at-grade roadway that would connect rather than divide, business leaders and the Downtown Partnership turned to local architects. Their solution was to build a very large-scale model of that area of downtown with the elevated highway in place. Once the community saw this physical model of what was proposed, the project was quickly redesigned as an at-grade roadway that reconnected to the road grid and created access for the new projects that have subsequently flourished, benefiting from access, visibility and connectivity.

"The decision to push the MLM Parkway "to the ground" might have been the most profound decision we ever made in terms of what's going on today, and in terms of how that part of downtown has developed."<sup>25</sup>

### **PIVOTAL REVITALISATION DISTRICTS: HISTORIC EAST VILLAGE AND WESTERN GATEWAY**

The Historic East Village, fronting the east side of the Des Moines River and extending to the Iowa Capitol building and grounds, is one of downtown Des Moines' interesting and walkable areas — a vital commerce area of early Des Moines with eight buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, independent entrepreneurial ventures in cafés, eateries, retro entertainment spots, music venues, housing and a six-block streetscape along East Locust Street.

Several long-term vision and planning documents pertaining to the East Village were published over the past decades: 'Destination Downtown — An Action Plan for Iowa's Urban Place' (1995), 'The Des Moines Vision Plan' (1991), 'Des Moines: Capitol Gateway East — Urban Design Plan' (1997), 'The Major Projects Task Force' (1997). These plans were undertaken by the city and the larger community. In addition, an active community and the city undertook the necessary studies to get properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places in order to prevent them from demolition and secure their reuse.

Historic East Village, Inc. was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in June 2003, shepherding the future growth of this area.

Western Gateway, described above, is a tapestry of green spaces and public and private buildings, old and new, with a 13-acre city park from 10th to 15th streets between Grand and Locust as its centrepiece. This mixed-use district is the focus for new housing, employment, retail and culture — and at the opposite end of downtown from Historic East Village. Figure 6 shows the business core and historic areas that have been part of its formula for residential conversions and new retail ventures.

### **A PIVOTAL PROCESS: THE MAJOR PROJECTS TASK FORCE**

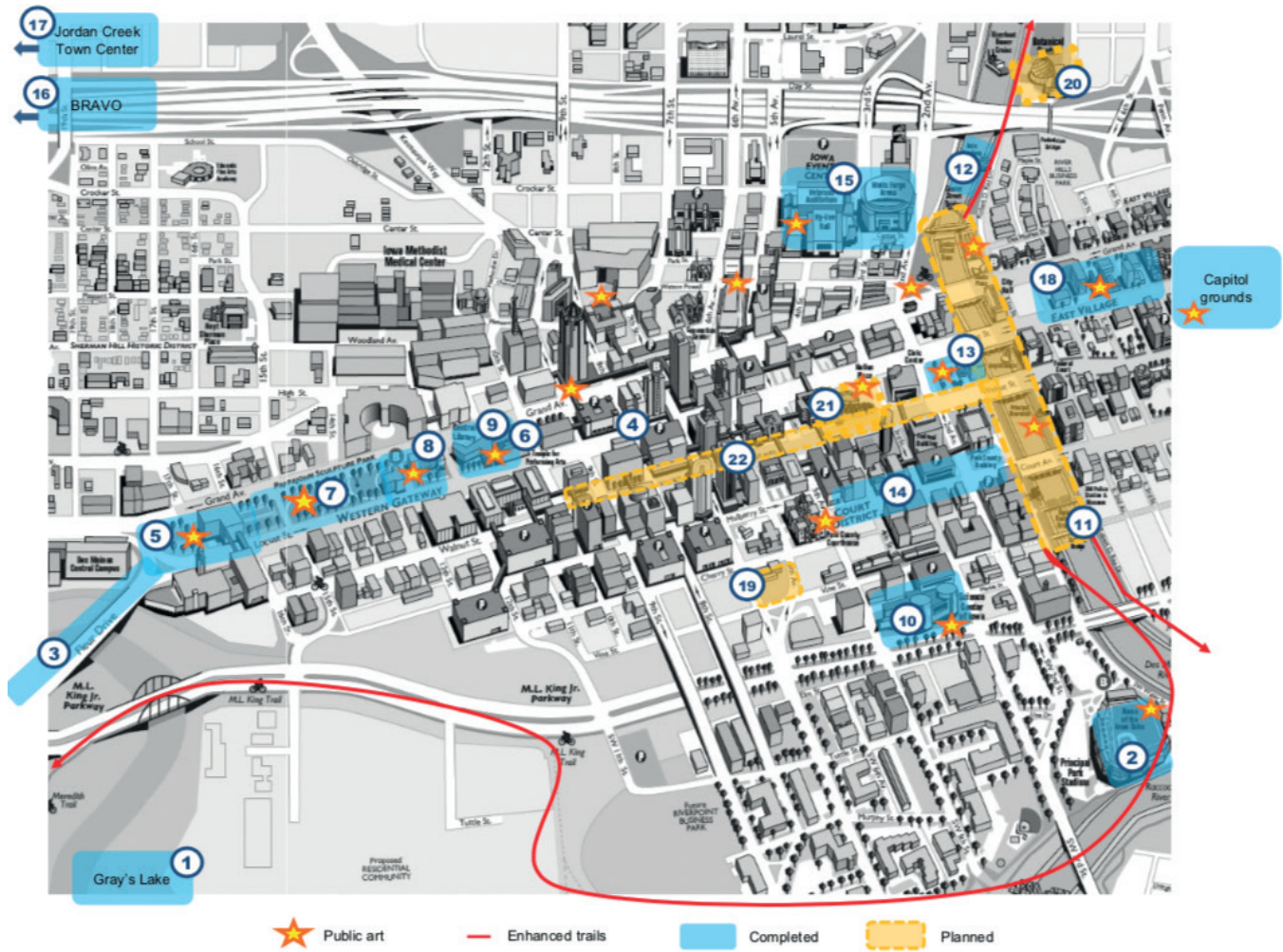
By the autumn of 1997, a couple of unrealistic projects with outsized cost estimates failed to gain support. For example, an unpopular gambling venue generated this reaction: 'When there was talk about a gambling boat on Gray's Lake, I said, "No way." If the decision was to approve the boat, Meredith Corporation might move. Otherwise, we are staying.'<sup>26</sup>

This challenged community leaders to think about large-scale community priorities and identify those that could gain support based on a comprehensive evaluation of the current assets and proposals. In 1995 the city had undertaken a major planning effort, called 'Destination Downtown — An Action Plan for Iowa's Urban Place'. While the phrase, 'Iowa's Urban Place' never really caught on as a brand, the elements of the plan provided a summary of initiatives for the 1998 Major Projects Task Force.

The mayor asked the CEO of Meredith Corporation to chair a new group, called the Major Projects Task Force, and asked the president of the Downtown Community Partnership to staff the task force. It was composed of representatives of business, government and neighbourhood organisations, and it 'set in motion a process that became much more complicated as time passed. Task Force members must have felt like they were peeling back the layers of an onion — with each successive layer, new information was learned, and yet more information was needed.'

Discussion shifted to the list of projects the task force was charged with evaluating, including:

- A new downtown arena;
- A new convention centre;
- A children's museum;
- The Chinese Cultural Center of America;



- 1. Gray's Lake
- 2. Principal Park
- 3. Fleur Drive Beautification
- 4. Operation Downtown
- 5. western Gateway
- 6. Temple For Performing Arts
- 7. Pappajohn sculpture Garden
- 8. Pappajohn Education Center
- 9. Des Moines Public Library
- 10. Science Center of Iowa
- 11. The Principal Riverwalk
- 12. Robert D. Ray Asian Garden
- 13. World Food Prize
- 14. Court Avenue Entertainment District and the Farmer' Market
- 15. Wells Fargo Arena, Hy-Vee Hall, Veterans Auditorium, Iowa Hall of Pride
- 16. Bravo Greater Des Moines
- 17. Jordan Creek Town Center
- 18. East Village
- 19. DART Central Station
- 20. Botanical Center
- 21. Nollen Plaza
- 22. Walnut Street Renovation

**Figure 6:** Downtown districts including the Historic East Village, Western Gateway and Court Avenue Historic District, in addition to others, have been essential to realising the 'living downtown'

Source:



- A downtown learning centre, encompassing several institutions;
- A new mixed-use project on Gray's Lake;
- An Iowa High School Hall of Pride;
- A new downtown library;
- A relocated and expanded science centre;
- A world agricultural/food centre;
- A 30-acre rainforest, aquarium, science centre and elementary school complex;
- Downtown housing;
- Riverfront improvements;
- Hoyt Sherman Place improvements;
- Gateway East and Gateway West.

In 1997 there was no consulting firm that had expertise in every area Des Moines was considering, so a novel approach was employed — one that sceptics thought would not work. Given that no single consulting firm had the subject-matter expertise to advise the task force regarding a rainforest, an aquarium, an elementary school, an events centre, a new library and commercial office structure, Feehan recruited what the task force called its 'brain trust'. The 'brain trust' included Harold Skramstad, former president of the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in Detroit; Frank Scicchitano, an architect with Ellerbe Becket and an expert in sports arenas; Richard Battaglia, a former Disney executive and an expert in theme parks and aquariums; Michael Mitchell, also a former Disney executive and an expert in market analysis of attractions; Robert Barron, a Baltimore-based real estate expert and president of Enterprise Real Estate Services Inc., who developed Harbor Place in Baltimore; Susan Skramstad, former Vice Chancellor, University of Michigan; and Alex Krieger, Principal, Chan Krieger and Associates and a professor in the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University.

## THE PLANNING PROCESS

The Major Projects Task Force was charged by the mayor with 'defining the

scope of a major project or projects that will serve as a significant amenity for the residents of central Iowa, attract people to downtown, and enhance the image of greater Des Moines'.

The task force established four guiding principles:

- *Quality of life* for central Iowans would take precedence over becoming a tourist destination;
- Most, if not all of the projects should *produce economic value*, either directly or indirectly;
- An understanding that the plan being prepared by the task force would be *subject to change*;
- The final guiding principle was *unanimity*. The task force agreed to *make its recommendations with a unanimous voice*. There would be no minority report.

These guiding principles were crucial to the ability of the community to undertake such an enormous and game-changing endeavour, as was compiling information and analysis regarding cost, location, timing and feasibility.

The task force then outlined seven questions that it must answer:

- What projects should be built?;
- Where should projects be built?;
- When should projects be built?;
- How much will each project cost to build?;
- How much will each project cost to operate?;
- How can the projects achieve maximum synergy?;
- How can projects be designed with 'sizzle'?

The task force met with business, civic, government and neighbourhood leaders and listened as more than 200 community residents expressed their opinions in an open forum. Once the input and

analysis phase were complete and various initiatives were evaluated against the guiding principles of 'Quality of life, economic value, adaptability to change and unanimity', infeasible and unsupported projects dropped off the list and the following projects were recommended.

### The task force recommendations

- *A downtown neighbourhood*: Build a downtown neighbourhood by developing at least 2,000 residential units over the next 10 years;
- *Court Avenue entertainment district*: Create and expand the district, locate a multiplex cinema and related retail and restaurant uses in the district;
- *Public events centre*: Both components, an arena and convention centre, are vital to the region;
- *Crown jewel project*: A world-class food and fibre policy and research centre, the first component of a crown jewel project, including a downtown learning centre;
- *Gateway East and West and Gray's Lake*: Revitalise the downtown's east side and develop a sculpture park between the office core and the Meredith headquarters;
- *The riverfront*: Clean up, brighten up and programme both sides of the river, adding walkways, bikeways, picnic areas and other enhancements.

The task force then placed all recommendations in the following tiers:

- *Tier 1 (highest priority)*: The food and fibre policy and research centre, the public events centre and the Court Avenue entertainment district;
- *Tier 2 (contributing significantly to quality of life)*: The downtown public library, the science centre, the Iowa High School Hall of Pride, the downtown learning centre and Gray's Lake recreation area;

- *Tier 3 (recognised merit, but without sufficient information to decide)*: The Iowa Child Project, the Chinese Cultural Center of America, the Children's Museum and Hoyt Sherman Place.

### Implementation of the Major Project Task Force recommendations

Virtually all of the other recommendations of the task force have become a reality, with the exception of the rainforest, which has evolved into a project called the Great Ape Trust.

- The downtown neighbourhood has become a reality. Twenty years after the report, an estimated 20,000 residents now live in downtown, far beyond the projected goal;
- The Court Avenue entertainment district is thriving and other parts of downtown have attracted new restaurants and entertainment venues;
- The public events centre has become a focal point for major sports, entertainment and convention activity;
- The World Food Prize has occupied the old public library and has become a magnet for experts from around the world;
- Gateway East and Gateway West have become, in the eyes of several community leaders, among the most significant victories of the planning efforts. The renamed East Village is a lively retail and entertainment district with a unique character; the West Gateway's sculpture park not only attracts people at all times of the day and evening but has become the location of choice for new corporate headquarters operations;
- Gray's Lake is an astounding success. It is a very busy community gathering spot and development is occurring in close proximity;
- The city and the Principal Financial

Group have invested millions in turning the Des Moines River into a sparkling community asset, and in so doing have made the Riverpoint area an even more attractive place to live and work.

### IGNITING THE FIRE FOR MAJOR PROJECTS

The Des Moines Vision Plan, starting in 1988, occurred at about the time that Des Moines began to realise that it was only part-way there, and there were both great opportunities to build on assets and accomplishments but also serious deficiencies. The period between 1988, when Gandelsonas first visited, and when the Major Projects Task Force made its final recommendations in 1998 marked an inflection point in the history of the city. Up until this time, Des Moines had approached changes in downtown on a project-by-project basis. Building on previous planning, a new shared vision and consensus was about to emerge. Community leaders at all levels began to see both need and potential, as well as the benefit of being strategic in their coordinated approach. They realised that a vibrant and successful downtown would set a course for the entire community for many decades to come.

Vibrant downtowns are economic generators and incubators of job growth. Even in the early 1990s before many of the current successes, Dr David Lawrence, a noted economist, found that downtown Des Moines contributed US\$19 in tax revenues to the city for every US\$1 in tax-supported services it consumed. Downtown was the 'cash cow' that supported good services such as police and fire protection, quality schools and parks, for Des Moines neighbourhoods.<sup>27</sup>

As the turn of the century approached, and following the completion of the work of the Major Projects Task Force, the city was credited as the 'number one spot for

US insurance companies' in a *Business Wire* article<sup>28</sup> and named the third-largest 'insurance capital' of the world.<sup>29</sup> Today, the city is the headquarters for the Principal Financial Group, the Meredith Corporation, Ruan Transportation, EMC Insurance Companies and Wellmark Blue Cross Blue Shield. Other major corporations such as Wells Fargo, Voya Financial, Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company, ACE Limited, Marsh, Monsanto and DuPont Pioneer have large operations in or near downtown or in the metropolitan area. In recent years, Microsoft, Hewlett Packard and Facebook have built data-processing and logistical facilities in the Des Moines area.

### CONCLUSION

As Winston Churchill said,

'We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.'<sup>30</sup>

'What Plato never suspected, apparently, was that the Athens of Solon and Themistocles was itself a greater school than any imaginary commonwealth he was capable of creating in his own mind. It was the city itself that had formed and transformed these (Athenians) not alone in a special school or academy, but in every activity, every public duty, in every meeting place and encounter.'<sup>31</sup>

The first decades of the 21st century have been mostly good for American cities and especially for downtowns. Urban planners and city officials seem to have discovered a formula that works. Unlike many cities, however, in Des Moines, the formula was applied fully and with great gusto. Leadership at all levels was intelligent, collaborative, committed and often visionary. A shared vision was developed with the help of world-renowned planners and architects. The vision was implemented by an especially

effective combination of public agencies, corporations and intermediary non-profit organisations. Ordinary citizens participated in planning, and then gave their support to investments of tax dollars in projects that would enhance their quality of life. Moreover, Des Moines is evidence of genuine civic pride and faith in the future. Thus, while the people of Des Moines shaped the downtown, the downtown shaped and transformed them.

As the authors consider the transformation or evolution of downtown Des Moines, we are left to ponder and acknowledge whether and to what degree the citizens of Des Moines have also been transformed — whether the process of creating a great city has caused them to think about the need for gathering places, about the beauty of their surroundings and about how they can work together to build an inspiring environment. We believe Churchill was right.

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For the benefit of readers, the terms ‘downtown’ and ‘town centre’ are used interchangeably.

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