

# DESIGN QUALITY AND CHARACTER PRESERVATION FOCUS GROUP MEETING NOTES

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**JAN 29, 2019 | CARLA MADISON RECREATION CENTER**

Consultant team attendees: JJ Folsom (P.U.M.A.), Cheney Bostic (Studio Seed), Dick Farley (RF Urban Design), Harry Brennan (Winter & Co.), Arleen Taniwaki (ArLand), Ben Kelly

CPD staff attendees: Curt Upton, Liz Weigle, Josh Palmeri, Ellen Forthofer

## **Focus group and public attendees: 28**

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### **1. Introductions and one word to describe what “good design” means to them**

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|---|--------------------|
| a. Timeless (II)                        | k. Inclusive       |
| b. Can't define, but know when I see it | l. Inspiring       |
| c. Interesting                          | m. Poetry          |
| d. Character                            | n. Makes sense     |
| e. Creativity                           | o. Cultural        |
| f. Materials                            | p. Holistic        |
| g. Contextual                           | q. Magnetic        |
| h. Durable                              | r. Eye of Beholder |
| i. Authentic (II)                       | s. Compelling      |
| j. Integrity                            | t. Quality         |

### **NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTER:**

### **2. What are the major design and character preservation issues we need to focus on, and what are the drivers of the issues?**

- Size and mass are different – don't care so much about the overall size of the house or big house next to small house, but the feeling you get when standing next to a giant wall with a tiny window feels more massive than it might actually be.
- Proportions are important, and off in some new development – need to be proportional to neighbors and proportional within own design.
- Denver doesn't require a licensed architect for single family homes. Design is hurried because it's a hot market.
- Developers and drafters are from out of town.
- South Park Hill is mostly additions and renovations – many good examples. But context is a bigger issue for new construction and needs to be considered on a block-scale.
- Many people want bigger houses, but they also want to live in a neighborhood with “character” – even when that “character” is defined by smaller houses.
- Can't forget about the PEOPLE. People are often what make up these neighborhoods' definition of “character”
- Maximizing square footage reduces quality materials due to cost...all people care about is having the bigger house and getting the maximum square footage.

### **3. What tools should we be considering?**

- We must be careful – “don’t throw the baby out with the bath water” –
  - i. Cannot make blanket assumptions such as: no flat roofs because there are compatible ways to do flat roofs too.
  - ii. Regulating materials can make affordability a bigger issue (but big, ugly houses are not solving the housing issue to begin with)
- Bad design only gets better with design review, otherwise developers will continue to do what’s cheap and easy (but can also be viewed as elitist, especially if run by people that don’t want change and can add cost to process.)
- Cannot talk about character preservation without actually talking about some level of historic preservation.
- Modern infill can (and does) occur in historic neighborhoods. Even many of the landmarked districts in Curtis Park have modern homes, but they have to meet certain standards and guidelines.
- DZC – there are unintended consequences, such as the side setbacks, block-sensitive setbacks (big loss on small lots)
- DZC – height often varies by block, but can build same everywhere – maybe think about block sensitive height requirements.
- Park Hill off Colfax includes a variety of housing options, but was rezoned to single family in 2008. That is reducing affordability and diversity.
  - i. Need to allow duplexes and triplexes.
- Renovation requirements are lax – too many loop holes. Example project in City Park that saved two walls, built around them and then demolished them. Cannot even tell – it looks like a scrape.
- Design guidelines provide predictability. Pattern Book can be a starting point for neighborhoods to make a decision on how far to go and how to use.
- Require existing neighbors to “sign off” on a proposed design. This promotes neighborly feeling.
- Encourage additions and renovations over scrapes. How can we incentivize this?

#### **4. Where are other places getting it “right”?**

- Portland has made it more challenging to demolish old homes.

#### **COLFAX AND MIXED USE CHARACTER:**

##### **1. What are the major design and character preservation issues we need to focus on, and what are the drivers of the issues?**

- Can you preserve a façade to keep the character, but put new, bigger building behind? Yes, often referred to as “facadectomy” but that technique doesn’t technically meet Secretary of Interior Standards for renovating a historic building, so it can’t be done in historic districts. BUT, there are plenty of examples of popping the top to a historic building even in historic districts – it can be done. Many examples in downtown Denver did this. In fact, some buildings are built structurally to accommodate additional floors when market demand was there.
- Tree planting! Trees improve experience.
- Sometimes something is better than nothing. All of the examples shown were better than what existing before, so don’t prevent that from happening.
- History isn’t mentioned enough – go to the Colfax Museum, host history tours, talk about neon signs and different eras of Colfax. Promote the history!

##### **2. What are the major obstacles of doing adaptive reuse projects?**

- Change of use triggers so many obstacles (landscape, restrooms, etc.) – not fair that a restaurant changing to another restaurant has a leg up on another property that wants to change to a guitar shop. Some have economic advantage.
- Many requirements are disproportional to project cost.
- Information needs to be clearer – given to property owners, developers, designers so they know what to expect.

### **3. What tools should we be considering?**

- Maybe along Colfax the north side of the street is different than south side. For example, in City Park, a neighborhood that's only 2 blocks long, our neighbors fear taller buildings because we all would be affected.
- DZC – the entrances on Colfax that people build and then lock the doors is not good. Have transparency rules, but then get covered up with paper or shelves put in front. Need to re-look at this standard and enforce the rules.
- An image file, or pattern book for Colfax that has high quality images and details out the character-defining features would be helpful. Also use case studies and precedent images from elsewhere to describe appropriate design and detail.
- We need a smaller-scale strategy – figure out barriers to 2, 3, and 4-story buildings. These are the types of development that will have local services and small businesses. We need the smaller spaces so our local businesses can afford to stay. Pattern book could include examples of how to feasibly develop some of the smaller lots on Colfax.
- Revise sign code or do overlay – this is being talked about. Allow moving neon signs.
- Sign code needs to be revised to allow maintenance of historic signs without removing – Landmark staff looking into this. Landmarking signs without the building is also possible and being considered.
- Use overlays exist for keeping historic buildings – many have offices now. Can we think about something like this for Colfax?
- Parking regulations – especially with BRT coming – too expensive and unnecessary.
- Encourage small buildings – grandfathered codes/regs
- Try to get back to special review like LoDo did – Former Chapter 31. It was controversial, but it helped in the end.
- Curb cut obstacles – need to reduce/eliminate on Colfax – especially in high pedestrian areas.

### **4. What are the best ways to transition to single unit zones along the corridor?**

- Single family next to Colfax and a future bus rapid transit doesn't make sense – how about stepping up to Colfax with additional density instead of having new development step down to the neighborhood?

### **5. Where are other places getting it “right”?**

- Can we look to other corridors like Colfax? Toronto's corridor (name?)
- Legacy business ordinance in L.A.
- Adaptive Reuse ordinance in L.A.