


# Urban design risks are paying off in Oklahoma City's MidTown

OKC Central columnist Steve Lackmeyer writes that some of downtown's boldest urban design and planning risks are being attempted in MidTown, one of Oklahoma City's leading urban success stories.

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It might just have started with a traffic circle.

Over the past dozen years, I've witnessed downtown neighborhoods such as Deep Deuce and Automobile Alley come back from the virtual dead. MidTown was another hard-luck story just a decade ago, and it's there that some of the boldest urban design risks are being attempted downtown.

MidTown had a lot going against it in the late 1990s; two large properties, the old Mercy Hospital and Sieber Hotel, were both boarded-up and blighted. Landmarks such as the Plaza Court were abandoned, and St. Anthony Hospital was contemplating leaving for the suburbs.

A collaboration between St. Anthony Hospital, the city and the county began what ended up being a relatively short road back to recovery. A complicated six-way intersection at NW 10, NW 11, Walker Avenue and Classen Drive was converted into a traffic circle. The city had scrapped the last traffic circles some 20 years earlier, so this was a bit of a risk.

The intersection is by most accounts a success — the city is responding to fewer accidents, and pedestrians feel safer crossing the street from a now revitalized Plaza Court to an equally revitalized Kaiser's.

MidTown Renaissance, a development led by Bob Howard, Mickey Clagg and Chris Fleming, bought old flop houses in the area and successfully converted them into upscale apartments. Retail is taking root. And of the old eyesores, the Sieber is now an upscale apartment building, and the old Mercy Hospital was torn down and is set to be replaced with more than 200 apartments.

The next urban experiments are set to take place at NW 10 and Robinson, where MidTown Renaissance is renovating the old Packard dealership and Guardian Garage. Designs by Brian Fitzsimmons call for a large parking lot for the two buildings — but one that will look nothing like lots elsewhere downtown. A series of lit screen-mesh fencing and coverings designed by Fitzsimmons will create a transparent structure that can double as an outdoor marketplace.

For Fitzsimmons, the inspiration for the designs came from a simple instruction from Howard, Clagg and Fleming: turn an ordinary space into something special. The same instruction was issued for a plan going before city council next month that calls for converting an alley between the old Packard Building and Guardian Garage into a retail courtyard.

When one looks at the design, it's not necessarily a radical notion until one considers that no similar space exists downtown. Officials with Devon Energy Corp. had interest in creating such a space along Broadway when the neighboring Renaissance Hotel was built in 1999, but the hotel's developer couldn't see how the interaction between the two very different properties might make such a space successful.

Sometimes it just takes one pioneer to show everybody else what's possible. And if so, don't be surprised if the concepts being tried out in MidTown, if successful, are duplicated throughout downtown in years to come.



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