

# DESIGNING DOWNTOWNS



SEATTLE'S SOUTH LAKE UNION  
IS THE SITE OF ONE OF THE  
NATION'S LARGEST URBAN  
REDEVELOPMENT PROJECTS.

## CITIES EMBRACE THE TREND OF URBAN LIVING

By Paul Clarke

**D**uring his cross-country travels in 1961, the novelist John Steinbeck visited the city of Seattle for the first time in more than 20 years. In *Travels with Charley*, his chronicle of the trip, Steinbeck recalled Seattle as “a town sitting on hills beside a matchless harborage—a little city of space and trees and gardens, its houses matched to such a background. It is no longer so.” He described how highways now bisected the city, taking residents away from the Seattle he remembered and into expanding suburbs, and how fences and factories covered acres of terrain. After getting his

bearings over a seafood meal at Pike Place Market, Steinbeck observed of the general state of American cities, and of Seattle in particular, circa 1961: “When a city begins to grow and spread outward, from the edges, the center which was once its glory is in a sense abandoned to time.”

Forty-five years later, the center of Seattle is reclaiming its glory.

Just two blocks east of the market where Steinbeck sat down with a plate of clams, a series of towers in various stages of planning and construction are poised to add hundreds of homes and

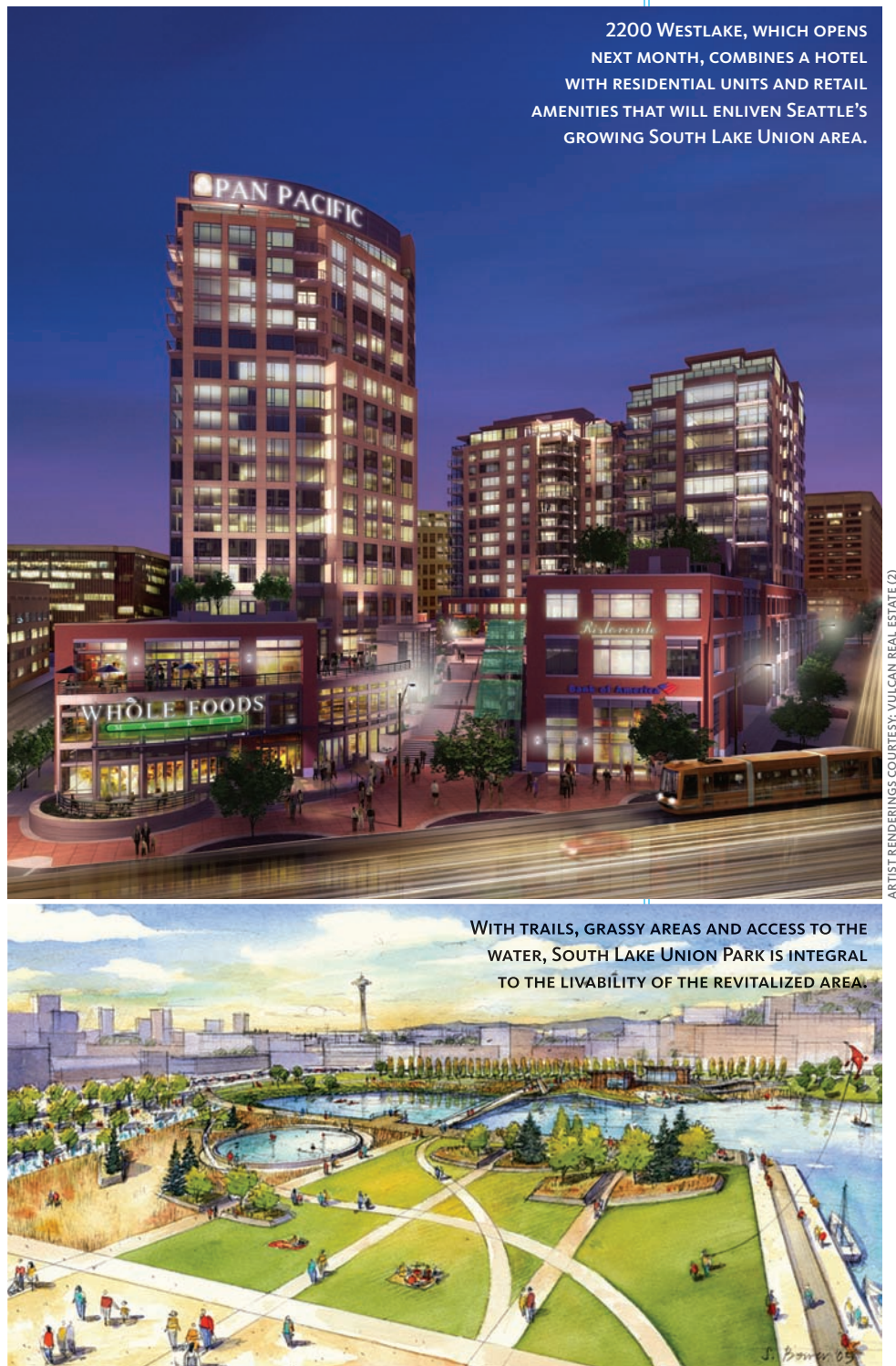
thousands of square feet of office and commercial space over the next few years. Throughout the city center and in the surrounding neighborhoods, tens of thousands of new residents are expected to arrive in the years to come. Several blocks north of downtown, in an area that stretches to the south end of Lake Union, one of the largest urban-revitalization projects in the country is changing 60 acres of primarily industrial land into a series of interconnected neighborhoods.

While the scope of Seattle's projects is ambitious, it is part of a far-reaching drive across North America to reclaim urban centers and make them into vibrant and appealing neighborhoods that can counter the decades-long shift to the suburbs. Seattle's "Downtown Livability Plan" joins the "Living First Strategy" pioneered by Vancouver, British Columbia, in the late 1980s, and the recent success of Portland's refurbished Pearl District and the popularity of its transit system on the list of Northwest cities' efforts to revitalize their downtown cores. Projects are under way to build denser, more-livable housing and urban amenities in cities ranging from Tacoma to Fort Worth and from San Diego to Denver (see sidebar).

"I think it's become societal, that this is a wave that's taking the United States," says Peter Steinbrueck, a member of the Seattle City Council, chairman of the city's urban development and planning committee, fellow of the American Institute of Architects and a longtime advocate for more livable cities. "There's an interest in urban renaissance and a demand for urban living."

Seattle is one of the cities taking the urban-renaissance idea seriously. By 2024, the city center is estimated to produce 50,000 new jobs and more than 22,000 new housing units. Last year, mayor Greg Nickels proposed a Center City Strategy that would change height and density limits in specific parts of the central city; redevelop the central waterfront; improve public transit; and create and improve parks and mixed-use development. Last April, the City Council expanded on Nickels' proposal

with its Downtown Livability Plan, introduced by Steinbrueck, which incorporates plans for schools, child-care centers and other services designed to appeal to families. The plan also requires fees on new high-rise residential developments to help fund approximately 2,600 new units of affordable housing, in order to give the developing downtown a healthy mix of economic levels. Steinbrueck says it's all part of an effort to keep families in Seattle who might otherwise move to the suburbs.



2200 WESTLAKE, WHICH OPENS NEXT MONTH, COMBINES A HOTEL WITH RESIDENTIAL UNITS AND RETAIL AMENITIES THAT WILL ENLIVEN SEATTLE'S GROWING SOUTH LAKE UNION AREA.

WITH TRAILS, GRASSY AREAS AND ACCESS TO THE WATER, SOUTH LAKE UNION PARK IS INTEGRAL TO THE LIVABILITY OF THE REVITALIZED AREA.



WHILE DESIGNING A TALLER, MORE DENSELY POPULATED DOWNTOWN, VANCOUVER PROTECTED VIEW CORRIDORS, GIVING THE CITY A SENSE OF SPACIOUSNESS.



MACDUFF EVERTON / GETTY IMAGES

“We need to create a market to bring families back into our urban core—working people, not just empty nesters who are already [living in Seattle],” Steinbrueck says. “If all we’re doing is moving people from one part of the city to the next, it’s not really doing anything in terms of reducing sprawl.”

As cities consider revitalization models, the success of Vancouver frequently enters the conversation. For Vancouver, a proposed highway in the 1970s that would have crossed the city, altering or destroying historic neighborhoods such as Chinatown and Gastown, prompted residents to reassess the type of city they wanted Vancouver to be. By the late-80s, internal thinking and external events combined to set the city on a path to be a new model for urban development.

“The really pivotal move was in the ’80s, coming out of Expo ’86,” says Larry Beasley, a professor of city planning and urban design at the University of British Columbia who, until earlier this month, was the city’s co-director of planning. Beasley played a significant role in the revitalization of Vancouver’s downtown core, and advises cities around the world—including Seattle, Chicago, Shanghai, Auckland, Washington, D.C. and San Diego—on urban planning. “We had a moment of real confidence and energy, and said to ourselves, ‘Let’s rethink our city; let’s think of a new way of building cities,’” Beasley says.

This flurry of energy and creativity resulted in

Vancouver’s Living First Strategy for downtown, a success story that is being studied and used as an example by cities across North America. “Living First is all about trying to create the experience of being in a city that our citizens aspire to when they dream,” Beasley says. “We talked to our citizens about what that experience would be like. They said they wanted the waterfront accessible to citizens, so our waterfront is open to all. People said they wanted green spaces, so we developed a high park requirement, and have put in 65 acres of new parks downtown over the last 15 years. They wanted streets that weren’t just [lined with] towers sitting in unsafe, anonymous plazas, but were lined with interesting things, so we aspired to a domesticity of our streets and developed almost 1,000 row houses that line the streets and provide a sense of graciousness and accessibility. And they wanted to enjoy the views, so we built tall buildings but kept them far enough apart so we could see the mountains and the water, and we have view corridors that extend over all development. We now have views that are protected, even though hundreds of buildings have been built, so there’s a sense of spaciousness.”

Creating neighborhoods with a high density of population and an elegant, spacious appearance required a delicate balancing act, but the combination is one of the hallmarks of Vancouver’s Living First approach. “We set the tall buildings back, and the buildings that people experience directly on the sidewalk are the three- to six-story buildings, not the towers involved in the development. You don’t get

the sense that you're closed in by the high density," Beasley says. "On some of our commercial streets, we set the buildings back about 12 feet, widening the sidewalk and designing places where you can have sidewalk cafes and sidewalk merchandising. And we really emphasize landscape on our streets, such as a double row of trees on the sidewalk, giving the softness and green that come with that."

Since the strategy was implemented, Beasley says, Vancouver's downtown core has doubled in population, to approximately 85,000 people today (nearly 15 percent of the city's population). An estimated 4,400 children were living downtown in 2001, and an anticipated 120,000 people are expected to be living there in the near future.

Essential to this success has been the city's regulatory approach, which mandated amenities such as open space, green space and child-friendly environments in all downtown-building plans. Beasley says a quarter of all housing units have to be designed to be suitable for families with small children, and 20 percent have to be created for low-income residents. "Every aspect of the way that you, as a citizen, would experience the city—either as a visitor, or someone who comes downtown to work, or as a resident—we have tried to think about and build into public policy," Beasley says. "We've been able to insist that developers do their part, and they do make a profit," while contributing funding to features such as public art and community facilities. "A lot of developers don't mind that, because they see the value that results."

**W**ith the success of Vancouver's Living First approach, it's not surprising that cities such as Seattle are taking elements of Vancouver's strategy when designing their own livability plans. "Seattle is taking control of its destiny in a way that a lot of cities aren't," Beasley says. "The new plan adopted last spring calls for additional density and additional height, but with that have come design requirements, investments in affordable housing and sustainability requirements."

Steinbrueck points to the success in Vancouver as something that Seattle can learn from. "The



OPEN SPACES—SUCH AS THIS PLAZA OUTSIDE THE VANCOUVER ART GALLERY—MAKE URBAN AREAS MORE APPEALING FOR DOWNTOWN RESIDENTS.

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downtown jobs-to-housing ratio is 10-to-1 in downtown Seattle today," a surprisingly low ratio for a city that is the second-largest urban employment center on the West Coast, after San Francisco, Steinbrueck says. "One reason Vancouver has such a livable urban core is that it has a balance of 2-to-1—for every two jobs, it has one household."

Steinbrueck says Vancouver's city planners recognized early on that building a successful downtown doesn't mean simply adding apartment buildings among the office towers; it means providing amenities that will prove attractive to citizens from across the economic spectrum, and at different stages in their lives. "The strong message that was carried and heard by our friends in Vancouver was that we have to create a demand to attract people whose choice might otherwise be suburban living," Steinbrueck says. "There's a demographic there we need to be more attentive to. Just jacking up building heights doesn't get you there—you're not necessarily attracting the families with children or enhancing urban livability unless you have grocery stores, parks and open space, safe streets, libraries, schools. We've got a long way to go, and Vancouver stands as a model in North America in their achievements in regards to what it really takes to build community, not just high-rises."

Steinbrueck says cities need to be proactive about creating amenities that will make these new residential neighborhoods survive, and uses Seattle's Belltown neighborhood, immediately to the north of downtown, as an example of how the

city needs to strike an effective balance. “Belltown is the fastest-growing residential neighborhood in the state of Washington, yet it lacks the basic elements for a full and vibrant and livable community, and residents will tell you that,” he says. Steinbrueck points to the lack of a large park in the area (recent legislation has called for creating a large new park in the neighborhood) and a lack of a nearby elementary school for neighborhood children as examples of the types of things the city must deliver if urban neighborhoods are to succeed. “In Belltown, young families come and go because they don’t have their needs met. The last census tract showed around 900 school-age children between South Lake Union and downtown—that’s enough to start an elementary school. But they come and they leave because we don’t have these things. If we’re serious about fighting sprawl, we have to focus on a full, family community.”

Vancouver also provides a lesson in what can happen after a city center has been reorganized. Nearly 20 years after implementation of the Living First Strategy, the plan has not only brought thousands of new residents into the city center, it has breathed new life into the local economy.

“It’s created a phenomenal array of demands for goods and services that is re-energizing our retail streets,” Beasley says. He gives the example of Davie Street, a main artery in Vancouver’s core, and said the street’s retail activity has blossomed and spread down the street’s length over the past 15 years. “We found that downtown commercial activity has continued to grow as companies like the fact that workers can be right downtown,” he says. “We’ve found that there’s been a resurgence of cultural activities—we have an amazingly successful Shakespeare festival, Bard on the Beach, that is really driven by local consumers who aren’t very far away. Granville Island has flourished economically, because the consumers are right there, and we’ve developed a small ferry system to get people around.”

Several blocks north of downtown Seattle, a private company is in the process of creating a massive mixed-use development that, while separate from the city’s Downtown Livability Plan, incorporates many of the design principles of enticing urban neighborhoods. Covering 60 acres in the center of Seattle, South Lake Union is one of the largest urban-redevelopment projects in the country. Managed by Vulcan Real Estate—a company founded and owned by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen—South Lake Union is destined to be a vast mixed-use region that will provide 10 million square feet of space for housing, offices, retail and biomedical research.

“Our goal is to offer a variety of different uses to the [properties], where there’s residential, not just office or retail,” says Ada Healey, vice president of real estate for Vulcan. “It’s a 24-7 type of community, where you can walk or rely on public transportation, or a bicycle—you don’t need to rely on a car. We think offering retail amenities to complement office and residential use is important, so you can walk outside your door and go to the grocery store, the dry cleaners, the drugstore. Part of our goal is to really foster a mixed-use community, and to offer housing opportunities at a variety of different price points.”

While prices for luxury condominiums at one of South Lake Union’s first structures, 2200 Westlake (which opens next month), ranged as high as \$2 million, the company is also building two apartment buildings with prices designed to be affordable to people earning \$35,000 to \$60,000 per year, as well as condominiums geared toward first-time home buyers.

The size of the South Lake Union development has given Vulcan an unprecedented level of freedom in determining the composition and character of the neighborhood. “We have the opportunity to offer office, life-sciences research and retail, as well as housing, and that’s pretty unique,” Healey says. “Our ability to offer different product types enables us to be more responsive to different market

conditions, and since [all] markets are not always strong at the same time, we’re better able to respond to market conditions.”

The size has also made it possible for Vulcan to determine the range of retail shops, with an eye to balancing the different needs of the community, and hence to realize South Lake Union’s 24-7 ideal. “If we own property in the area, we’ll be thoughtful about how it’s developed, and be thoughtful about the tenants and other uses so we complement the existing neighborhood. At 2200 Westlake, for example, we’ve worked very hard to bring in a grocery store, a pharmacy, a dry cleaner—and of course, we have a Starbucks,” Healey says. “Because we have so much property, we’re able to think more thoughtfully about the retail mix, so we don’t have all coffee shops, or all jewelry stores—we mix it up. We have a critical mass that allows us to have an impact.”

While a major emphasis of downtown design is new developments, historic character is seen as essential to any city’s success. In Vancouver, the entire movement toward building a healthy downtown stemmed from an effort to preserve the city’s historical neighborhoods. In Seattle, historical buildings are a significant part of the city’s urban charm, and they’re playing a role in creating a vibrant downtown. At Alley24, a mixed-use residential and commercial development in South Lake Union, for example, Vulcan utilized a historical building originally on the site, and preserved and incorporated the architectural components into the larger development.

Such attention to the historical aspects of the city’s urban character is a large part of Seattle’s future development. “We emphasize things like historical preservation, and there’s work under way to identify all potential historic sites in downtown that would then be proposed for landmark status—that could be as



## DETAILS

Seattle and Vancouver are only two of many North American cities focusing on downtown development; others include the following:

**DENVER** In 1986, Denver adopted a Downtown Area Plan that provided a long-term vision for the revitalization of approximately 1,800 acres in the city's core. Today, Denver enjoys a reputation as an attractive and affordable city, with a premium on open space—recently established downtown parks include Skyline Park, which opened in 2004, and the 30-acre Commons Park, in 2001—and the city is currently expanding its rapid-transit system.

**FORT WORTH** In 2001, Fort Worth's City Council approved zoning changes that emphasized preservation and growth of housing in the city's center. The 19 blocks of downtown Fort Worth have blossomed with cultural and commercial activity, and the city is making the region appealing to new residents: In 2004, voters passed a \$273.5 million bond package that will improve physical infrastructure, libraries and community services.

**SAN DIEGO** California's second-largest city expects to add another 284,000 residents to its metro region by 2020, and by 2030 it expects an estimated 85,000 residents living downtown. To support this future growth, the city is strengthening its "City of Villages" strategy, designed to enhance urban neighborhoods by creating gathering spaces, schools and community facilities.

**TACOMA** This city at the south end of Puget Sound has reclaimed its heart, renovating old buildings and adding new housing. An important component has been growth along the Thea Foss Waterway: The city bought 27 waterfront acres in 1991 and undertook a massive cleanup, which attracted private reinvestment for housing and retail, and led to the current development of a new esplanade rich with shopping and parks.

many as 80 buildings," Steinbrueck says. "Developing along the lines of livability means preserving character, too, not just building everything new. You've got to have life on the street and diversity of the urban fabric, and that means preservation and scale to the streetscape."

New downtown developments are also placing a premium on environmental sustainability. Part of Seattle's Downtown Livability Plan provides incentives for developers to meet industry standards for environmentally friendly buildings. "I believe that Seattle is the first in the nation to adopt land-use regulations that basically require that all private buildings—both commercial and residential—be built to a green building standard called LEED Silver," Steinbrueck says. LEED—an acronym for "Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design"—is an increasingly popular set of ratings and standards created by the U.S. Green Building Council, that gauge the environmental sustainability of a structure. The LEED Silver rating is given to buildings that meet certain criteria for sustainability. "We were also the first to apply it to our public-works buildings, in 1999, and we now have 40 of them. We're showing the way, and setting an example that this can be done on a private level."

Of course, revitalizing urban cores has not been painless. Despite its objectives, building density downtown often means supplanting longtime residents and altering a neighborhood's social character. While denser urban neighborhoods are more pedestrian-friendly, cities have also found that greater density is often accompanied by greater competition for parking and more traffic congestion. As Seattle has learned through the experience of its Belltown neighborhood, building housing without accompanying features such as grocery stores and schools makes it difficult to turn a series of developments into a community. Even success stories such as Vancouver find it a challenge to keep home prices and rents

within the reach of middle-income families.

But as cities such as Vancouver and Seattle are proving, ultimately it's the job of city leaders to ensure that livability principles are embraced as a part of reviving urban areas. Beasley says each city has its own personality and style, but cities need to come to terms with the regulatory changes that may be necessary to make a downtown succeed. "We're moving to a time when cities have to be designed, and cities are going to have to take on the task and not just accept the regulatory frameworks they've inherited," he says. "There is

**Cities need to be proactive about creating amenities that will help these new residential neighborhoods survive.**

a kind of consciousness that is growing among many cities that you need to pay attention to these qualities of design. You need to think about the experiences you're offering your citizens as they go about their lives. It's not enough to just think about water, sewer and police protection."

How cities address these greater issues will impact not only the success or failure of revitalization efforts—they'll affect the futures of cities themselves. "The world is breaking into cities that are paying attention to these quality requirements, and those that aren't," Beasley says. "Increasingly, those that aren't are not going to be attractive to wealth and talent. People with choices won't choose to go there." ▲

*Paul Clarke lives near downtown Seattle.*