

## Omaha by Design

DAVID C. LEVY AND  
DOUGLAS J. BISSON

**Omaha, Nebraska, is transitioning from stockyards to high tech and beyond.**

**The city of Omaha committed to building a 25,000-seat downtown baseball stadium to host the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) College World Series. The planned facility is expected to be a significant catalyst for additional development of the “North Downtown,” or “NoDo” area, where new retail stores have gone in—the first in 30 years—plus four new hotels, a mixed-use project with offices, a performance venue, retail bays, apartments, and a movie complex.**

THE CONTINUING transformation of Omaha, Nebraska, includes development in a broad range of sectors, from entertainment, to residential, to commercial to retail. For example, last spring the city committed to building a 25,000-seat downtown baseball stadium on the eastern edge of the “North Downtown” or “NoDo” area, near the Qwest Center Omaha, to host the NCAA College World Series. Community leaders anticipate that the new stadium will be a significant catalyst for additional development in the NoDo area, possibly resulting in \$1 billion worth of economic growth and development over the next quarter century. The National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) responded by committing to a deal that will keep the College World Series in Omaha for the next 25 years. Other possible tenants for the new ballpark include the Omaha Royals—the American Athletics Association (AAA) affiliate of the Kansas City Royals—and the Creighton Blue Jays.

In addition to the ballpark, a number of other significant development projects are already under construction. Midtown Crossing at Turner Park, developed by Mutual of Omaha, is located in the heart of the historic midtown area, directly east of Mutual of Omaha’s corporate headquarters. Expected to open in the fall, the estimated \$300 million mixed-use project will include seven buildings totaling 1 million square feet (92,903 sq m) of finished space, with 297 luxury condominiums; 196 luxury apartments; a 132-room Element by Westin extended-stay hotel; a Prairie Life Fitness club; a five-screen Marcus Theatres movie complex; a grocery store; 220,000

square feet (20,438 sq m) of retail space for restaurants, entertainment, and shops; and parking for more than 3,000 vehicles. Turner Park, a seven-acre (2.83-ha) existing city park, will be renovated and incorporated into the project, and will be the site for farmers markets, art fairs, and neighborhood festivals.

Another large mixed-use development currently under construction is Aksarben Village, a pedestrian-oriented infill project located on the former Aksarben thoroughbred horse race track, near 67th and Center streets. The project, centered on an urban park, will contain several blocks of entertainment, retail, office, hospitality, and residential uses. With its location adjacent to the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the Peter Kiewit Institute of Science and Technology, and the Scott Technology Center, Aksarben Village will integrate academic, research and technology, corporate, and village uses with the adjacent neighborhoods.

Revitalization is continuing in the aforementioned NoDo area, with the area’s first new retail stores (Urban Outfitters and American Apparel) in 30 years; four new hotels; Slowdown, a mixed-use project developed by Saddle Creek Records, containing a performance venue, offices, retail bays, and apartments; and Filmstreams, a two-screen independent movie complex.

With the NCAA’s recent commitment to keep the College World Series in Omaha, there has been renewed interest in connecting NoDo with downtown and midtown via a new streetcar line. An initial streetcar feasibility study has been completed, and Mayor Mike Fahey has shown support for the project, seen as a development catalyst that will help shape the form of adjacent development and connect several of the key nodes in Omaha’s pre-war neighborhoods. This past November, the city council showed its support by approving a follow-on study to examine the financing of the proposed starter route, along with a parallel update of the city’s downtown master plan, both of which are to be completed by May.

Despite the downturn in the national residential real estate market, the surge in downtown condominium and commercial development continues in Omaha, with the 32-story Wall Street Tower Omaha residential project leading the way, and the redevelopment into condos and apartments of the historic Brandeis



HOK SPORT/HDR, INC.

Building, which had been mired in bankruptcy. Other ongoing residential projects downtown include the Rows at SoMa, the Towns at Little Italy, and jLofts. The first new major condominium project outside of downtown, 80 Dodge, is proposed for a site at 80th and Dodge streets, adjacent to Methodist and Children's hospitals. Demographically, Omaha is both a relatively young and a relatively old city. Each of these representative demographic cohorts provides a strong demand for urban living, and as these segments continue to grow, so, too, should demand, predicts Census Trends.

Omaha's riverfront, located between NoDo and the Missouri River, has experienced significant redevelopment, led by the \$290 million Qwest Center Omaha, which opened in September 2003. This past fall, the city completed construction on the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge over the Missouri River, a \$23 million cable-stay pedestrian bridge connecting trails on the Nebraska and Iowa sides of the river. The Gallup Organization is currently constructing a 100,000-square-foot (9,290-sq-m) expansion to its riverfront campus, and a second 14-story condo tower overlooking the pedestrian bridge is expected to break ground at Riverfront Place this spring. The city of Council Bluffs, Iowa, is moving forward with a developer solicitation process for a new mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented neighborhood to be located at the Iowa landing of the pedestrian bridge. On the Nebraska side, private donations are funding the construction of an art-filled outdoor gathering space.

In the open spaces north and west of Omaha will be Leytham, a traditional neighborhood development located at 168th and State streets, which will combine a variety of residential typologies with parks, plazas, walking paths, and gathering places. Modeled after the old-style, pedestrian-oriented Omaha neighborhoods of Benson and Dundee, the project will include a mix of uses that enable residents to walk from home to shops, work, and other amenities amid a mix of housing types that are expected to draw a diverse community.

Despite much of the development action taking place downtown and in midtown, Omaha continues its march westward, a movement that initially sparked an annexation battle with Elkhorn, a nearby community. In early 2007, the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled in



DOUG BISSON/HDR, INC.

Omaha's favor on procedural grounds, and the annexation proceeded. The city of Omaha continues to work on incorporating this newly annexed area into the greater Omaha community.

Omaha currently is working to establish and implement new stormwater regulations, which address issues of funding for effective stormwater operations and maintenance, pollution control, landscape preservation, restoration and conservation, erosion and sediment control, and floodplain management. Municipal officials are also working on an estimated \$1.5 billion project to bring the city's aging sewer system into compliance with federal clean water rules.

Likewise, Omaha by Design—an initiative of the Omaha Community Foundation that is dedicated to changing the face of Omaha through the use of urban design principles and citizen engagement—and the city are working on their next major undertaking, a sustainability element for the city's master plan. This element will address issues such as stormwater, as well as items such as green building incentives and sustainable development. Douglas County, which comprises Omaha, has set the example in this realm, with a sustainability plan of its own.

Omaha, which has undergone major growth and change over the last decade, is expected in the next decade to move into a more mature phase, building on the foundation that has been laid to become a world-class city. Achieving that, however, will take continuing and new



HDR, INC.

**With the NCAA's recent commitment to keep the College World Series in Omaha for the next 25 years, there has been renewed interest in connecting NoDo with downtown and midtown via a new streetcar line (above). A \$23 million cable-stay pedestrian bridge (top) along Omaha's riverfront, located at NoDo, now connects trails on the Nebraska and Iowa sides of the Missouri River.**

public/private partnerships, continued cooperation and foresight, and significant public and private investment. **UL**

**DAVID C. LEVY** is a partner in Omaha-based Baird Holm LLP's Real Estate Group and a member of the Omaha by Design Advisory Board. **DOUGLAS J. BISSON** is a vice president and community planning manager for Omaha-headquartered HDR Engineering, Inc., and a member of the Omaha by Design Advisory Board. (HDR is involved in the conceptual design of Aksarben Village, the north downtown master plan, the original streetcar feasibility study, Omaha baseball stadium design, and the Downtown Omaha/NoDo update master plan.)