Revitalizing an Omaha landmark for an urban neighborhood’s sustainable future

Drake Court

A Joslyn Castle Institute Final Report to The Drake Partnership • May 2007
Rebirth of a neighborhood landmark

Redevelopment of the four-square-block Drake Court housing project near downtown Omaha began in 1998 when Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities (JCI), at the request of the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority (NIFA), initiated the Drake Court Environs Predevelopment Study to investigate and demonstrate the potential of this area as an inner-city neighborhood based upon concepts of sustainability.

Following the completion of the comprehensive study, JCI and NIFA partnered with NuStyle Development and the City of Omaha to assist in the transformation of the Drake Court district into a model sustainable urban neighborhood.

Prior to redevelopment, the ninety-year-old Drake Court apartments had become blighted and mostly uninhabited. The partnership, however, saw an opportunity to revive the four-block complex to meet the growing need for affordable housing near the downtown, noting positive signs of urban revitalization in the vicinity including the restored Rose Theater, the Omaha Children's Museum, the Flatiron Building, and the Sheraton Hotel.

Following the decision to restore existing buildings, issues such as environment, government support, technology and social aspects were addressed.

Omaha city government officials helped locate housing funding sources and developed incentives to attract people and businesses into the area. Technology issues included renovating the buildings and apartments to bring them into compliance with energy and technology requirements.

Social concerns included the need to address diverse income levels, available transportation and services in the area, potential job opportunities in relation to the apartments’ location, and an overall safe and attractive living environment. To partially address this last concern, planners and architects designed and restored a beautifully landscaped courtyard within the complex.
The restored Drake Court apartments, the new Liberty Elementary School and the Omaha Children’s Museum are among signs of restoration and renewal in this near urban core neighborhood southwest of downtown Omaha.

The neighborhood’s proximity to the Old Market and the developing arts and entertainment corridor on 20th Street are among key factors in building a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly community that emphasizes affordable housing, mixed uses, transportation options, and sustainable design.
One of the brightest signs of the neighborhood’s revitalization is Liberty Elementary School, which opened its doors to more than 400 students in the fall of 2004.

The project ultimately involved restoration of 14 buildings originally constructed between 1916-1919. The newly renovated buildings comply with National Parks Services guidelines for historic structures and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Through the years the buildings were transformed into one- to three-bedroom apartments. People of all income levels occupy the 138 apartments. Eighty percent of the units are affordable to tenants who earn up to 60 percent of the area median income. Property amenities include a fitness center, a community room with kitchen facilities, and free indoor parking.

“Our partnership allowed us to transform the property and provide a safe, attractive, and affordable neighborhood (including a school),” said Tammy Barrett, co-owner of NuStyle Development in a 2004 report on the project by Fannie Mae.

“We focused on the vision, the end result of what the neighborhood could be, despite the programmatic roadblocks and naysayers,” said Timothy Kenny, executive director of the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority.

To complete this $14.3 million redevelopment project, the City of Omaha approved $2.7 million in tax increment financing and federal and state funds. The Nebraska Investment Finance Authority awarded federal Low Income Housing Tax Credits, which resulted in an investment of more than $9 million by the Midwest Housing Equity Group. Fannie Mae provided a $2.3 million forward commitment to finance a permanent mortgage loan originated by AmeriSphere Multifamily Finance, a Fannie Mae Delegated Underwriting and Servicing Lender. US Bank served as construction lender and put together a below-market interest loan.

The Federal Home Loan Bank of Topeka provided a $300,000 zero percent forgivable loan through Commercial Federal Bank. Fannie Mae’s American Communities Fund provided $102,000 in pre-development financing.
The project received support from many sources including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development HOME funds (through the Nebraska Department of Economic Development), private and public funding, and tax increment financing, to name some. Omaha Public Schools, and numerous private organizations

**Drake Court: A brief history**

Drake Court Historic District was constructed in four phases beginning in 1916. Completed in 1921, the complex resided on the western edge of the city of Omaha, in what was, at the time, an affluent and desirable area of town. The surrounding area contained many mansions and upscale housing units, of which Drake Court was a part.

The Drake Court District incorporates a set of 14 buildings, placed on the property as seven mirrored across a landscaped courtyard and includes the Drake Court Annex buildings located on Jones street to the west of this property. The Drake Court District is listed on the National Register of Historic Places; its buildings are Georgian styled with Prairie influences.

In its prime, the Drake Court complex was home to many professionals and downtown employees. It was desirable in location due to its proximity both the CBD and conveniently located streetcar lines. The apartments were offered as furnished efficiency units and boasted rich details, including a deep cherry wood trim. The owner and developer, William Drake, even made his marble-floored home in one top-floor unit of the thirteenth building.

The Drake Court District laid its roots in a mixed-use development area. Once a transportation center, many large warehouse-type structures (formerly bus and auto storage garages, auto sales lots and repair shops) remain scattered throughout the neighborhood to this day. Thoughtfully laid city parks, including one directly across the street from the Drake Court on the northeastern corner of 22nd and Jones, mitigated this industrial presence.
The first phase of development began with the construction of six three-story buildings with raised basements situated on the westernmost edge of the complex at a cost of $150,000. Chronologically, following from west to east, the two "middle" buildings were erected in 1917, also at a cost of $150,000. These are four-story structures with raised basements. The largest portion of the interior courtyard separates these two buildings, and a fountain adorns the very center of the yard.

By 1918, construction of the last six buildings had begun. Though similar to the first, these are four-story structures with different detailing. The last stage of development refers to the entry courtyard, which borders 20th Street on the east. This is included as a phase of development because it was originally intended to be home to one last grouping of apartments. The Drake Court Annex buildings were constructed immediately following, in the years 1919-1921.

Topographically, the Drake Court Complex is situated on one of the highest points in the downtown Omaha area. From the site, the ground slopes away significantly in the north, east and south directions. This vantage point affords a wonderful view of Omaha’s Central Business District and at the same time lends a certain prominence to the Drake Court itself, as it is readily visible from the downtown area.

The trees located on the Drake Court property are tall, mature deciduous trees. Some are found scattered on the north end of the pedestrian alley and in the east courtyard, as well as in clusters of growth along the north-south level changes, bordering the retaining walls. These trees also provide a buffer from traffic noise.

Due to Drake’s hilltop location, the neighboring commercial buildings along St. Mary’s Avenue fall below the line of site. The topography is also advantageous for drainage and runoff issues. Surface water drainage flows to the alleys and then to the city streets, while rooftop drainage goes directly into the city sewer system.
Environs of the Drake Court District

While these physical elements give the Drake Court District a distinctive air, the surrounding neighborhood has lacked the very sense of enclosure and identity that makes the Drake Court so unique.

The mature vegetation on the north side, the massive warehouse along Leavenworth and 20th and 22nd Streets combine to create an unmistakable sense of place the Drake Court, a sort of “urban oasis” in an area that seems to be otherwise without boundary and without identity.

The blocks surrounding Drake Court contain many housing units of varying conditions. Some of these buildings, like Drake, have been rehabilitated; many are in great disrepair. Most of the businesses in the area are service oriented commercial entities. Little retail exists. Warehouses abound, alluding to the former uses of the area.

South

A large warehouse, dubbed the “Bus Barn”, lies immediately to the south of the Drake Court Apartments, lining a two-block stretch of Leavenworth. The warehouse establishes both a visual and physical boundary to the site. Across Leavenworth to the south, the area is mostly residential and belongs to the Columbus Park Neighborhood Association. Commercial and industrial uses are scattered along 20th, 24th, Pierce and Leavenworth streets. Homes in this area are mostly single-family.

East

Drake Court is abutted on the east by 20th Street, a major link to the Central Business District. This street abounds with positive community forces as it approaches the CBD to the north. Across the street there is two blocks of residential structures that then yield to a warehouse district.
West

The area that lies immediately to the west of Drake Court is made up of many different styles of housing, both in accommodations and appearance. The Rorick and Avenue apartments are the greatest departure from the Georgian style of Drake Court and the Annex buildings, of which there are five. (The Rorick and Avenue buildings are 11 and 6-storied cross-shaped structures, respectively.) Despite some variance, similar building materials were employed throughout the years and the area does have a distinguishable sense of character.

North

The Drake Court shares its mega-block with Liberty Elementary School to the north. As one moves north toward the CBD along the 20th Street corridor, more neighborhood amenities emerge, including the Children’s Museum and the YMCA.

Altogether, the Drake Court Environs present both opportunities and challenges to future development. UNL architecture student and JCI intern Patrick Moore, in his 2003 Drake Court Environs Study, notes that the neighborhood is “by no means lacking in opportunities for residents or developers. It possesses numerous qualities in its history, in its location, and in its amenities that make it a desirable place to be. Many of the buildings in the area were once prosperous business places and high-value residences. The architecture represents wonderful examples of the features of early twentieth century art-deco detailing. Solid masonry buildings with existing non-arterial passageways provide enticing prospects for interior renovations and exterior pedestrian courtyards. A few restored and well-kept jewels, such as the Mary Rogers Kimball residence and Harvest Tabernacle church, exist as models (for restoration.) From Drake Court, pedestrians are merely steps from Omaha’s downtown business district and the Old Market area. The neighborhood’s proximity to downtown Omaha makes it an attractive location to many people for a residence.”
**Previous Studies**

**Drake Court Environs Predevelopment Study • 1998**

At the request of the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority (NIFA), the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities initiated the Drake Court Environs Study to investigate and demonstrate the potential of the Drake Court apartments and environs as an inner-city neighborhood based upon concepts of sustainability.

The viability of the area as a working, functioning community of residents was based upon the assumption that there is a distinct consumer demand for near-urban core residential life and a need for choice in Omaha’s housing and lifestyle options. The study noted the need for an affordable, safe and attractive neighborhood that fosters a pedestrian environment, provides mass transit, facilitates social interaction and provides essential living services.

The study identified the Drake Court apartments as a potential catalyst for implementing a community development process and marked the initiation of a dialogue with investors, developers, and civic officials on the revitalization and the formation of a sustainable inner-city neighborhood with the Drake Court at the center.

**UNL Sixth Year Terminal Project • 1999**

Led by Dean and Prof. W. Cecil Steward, this project consisted of a year-long investigation into the rehabilitation of the Drake Court apartments and the surrounding environs and examined various aspects in great detail.

The project proposed innovative solutions for the Drake Court apartments, the Leavenworth warehouse, development of green pedestrian alleyways, mixed-use parking structure and park, St. Mary’s Avenue and 20th Street, periphery development, park-level housing and green design standards.
20™ Street Charrette • 2002

As part of Lively Omaha’s Place Game exercises, the American Institute of Architects and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln came together to attempt to create an identity of 20th Street as an arts corridor, a children’s corridor and an educational corridor from elementary school to high school to university levels including Liberty Elementary, Central High School and Creighton University. The guiding philosophy was the creation of an urban experience for people of all ages, emphasizing the cultural arts of the community. Ultimately, the destination of the concept was to steer “20th Street to become a new and active district for the Omaha Community.”

Drake Court Environ Study • 2004

In this JCI-sponsored study, Patrick Moore noted “an interesting dichotomy” in the Drake Court neighborhood: “A newly renovated apartment complex sits in between dilapidated turn of the century houses and apartment buildings, a newly-constructed elementary school, and a large warehouse building that currently serves as a temporary location for this school. Young professionals, panhandlers, and school children pass each other on the sidewalks. This scene illustrates the progressive changes that are happening in this neighborhood. They also demonstrate the importance of continuing dedication on the part of planners and developers to ensure that those changes continue.”

Historic Bus Barn Charrette • 2006

In this NIFA-led charrette, local stakeholders debated various re-uses for the large warehouse/bus barn sandwiched between Drake Court and a two-block stretch of Leavenworth. Suggestions ranged from converting the Bus Barn into a community center, an indoor park or farmer’s market.
Envisioning Regional Design Charrette • 2006

This six-environment charrette, conducted at the SAC Museum near Ashland, proposed strengthening the physical, human, social, economic, and environmental capital of the Drake Court District to create a safe and inviting place for district neighbors and visitors.

The perception of safety was identified as one of the greatest challenges to the neighborhood. Stakeholder participants in the charrette noted that absentee landlords, lack of property reinvestment and one-way streets have all created a “drive through” neighborhood rather than a destination.

The charrette report listed such assets as Liberty Elementary School, the Omaha Children’s Museum, The Rose Theatre, and a YMCA, and noted that strong multi-family development in the Drake Court complex and its proximity to downtown and Omaha’s Old Market make it an ideal location for a number of pedestrian activities.

In addition to nearby art-based programs, the area has interesting architectural details and human scale development. There are a number of possible sites for redevelopment that could leverage private sector involvement and encourage participation of the school.

UNO Urban Studies Project • 2006

This project, led by University of Nebraska-Omaha Prof. Robert Blair, built upon the results of the Envisioning Regional Design Charrette and provided a pictorial/graphic overview of the Drake Court environs and key issues. Included were historic and current photos of the Drake Court and environs as well as a number of aerial maps that include such data as the construction year of various buildings/blocks, census data including population change, land use classifications and zoning (Aerial data maps are included in the Appendix of this report).
Conclusions & Recommendations

Nearly eight years of regular and intensive study of the Drake Court area suggests a number of actions and initiatives that build on the successful rehabilitation of the Drake Court as a catalyst for change in the surrounding district. Development of a comprehensive plan could:

• Improve access to transportation and enhance pedestrian transit.

• Create public green spaces with links between the neighborhood and downtown along streets or enhanced alleyways.

• Develop local leadership and improve neighborhood identity. A sense of place is critical to instilling community pride and ownership.

• Encourage owner-occupied housing, improve policing of the area, strengthen communication between residents and city. Redevelopment should minimize gentrification.

• One-way streets should be returned to two-way to improve pedestrian safety and enhance street level, mixed-use retail.

• Streetscape improvements should include wider sidewalks, trees and on-street parking. Lighting should be similar throughout the community, providing a sense of safety and identity. A rooftop garden on a parking garage and development of a community garden would add to greening of the community.

• Daily services such as a drug store, medical clinic, and grocery store should be attracted and retained to enhance pedestrian opportunities.

• Invent new avenues for restaurants, cafes, and retail and strengthen existing business to encourage residents and visitors to spend more time in the area and enliven public spaces.
Indicators for Change

Indicators for sustainable change were identified by W. Cecil Steward of JCI based on previous studies and the results of the Envisioning Regional Design Charrette. At right is a proposed tool for measuring progress on these indicators in Five Domains of Sustainability.

Environmental
- Green public spaces/green streetscapes increased.
- Walkability and bikeability enhanced to adjacent districts.
- Building stock upgraded/District has a distinct identity.

Socio-cultural
- New mixed uses developed, character of an “urban village.” Emphasis on mixed income housing, with daily-needs commercial.
- Safe streets and public places/new civic plaza.
- Public facilities/arts corridor emphasized and accommodated.

Technological
- Multi-modal transit and transportation plan through the district.
- WIFI electronic access available throughout the district.
- Feasibility plans for “district energy & utilities system.”

Economic
- City incentives for the development of infill and new development.
- Daily-needs shops/stores developed with the affordable housing.
- Developments with locally owned businesses have priority.

Public Policy
- “Sub-area Plan” for District incorporated by the Omaha Planning Board and City Council into the City’s Comprehensive Plan.
- Overlay plan for the district designated as “Green By Design.”
- District Citizens’ Development Coalition developed with members including property owners, stakeholders, businesses, and institutions.

Creation of a district Citizens’ Development Coalition, with members including property owners, stakeholders, businesses, institutions, and residences in the district, are among suggested policy indicators for the Drake Court Neighborhood and environs.
APPENDIX

Map overlays on the following pages were created by students in the 2006 UNO Urban Studies Project, which was led by Professor Robert Blair. The project built upon the key themes of the 2006 Envisioning Regional Design Charrette.
2000
Population
U.S. Census Bureau
Land Use Classifications

Commercial
Residential
Multi-family
Industrial
Exempt
(public, civic)
Zoning
2006
City of Omaha
Nodal Networks

Urban Studies Project
This report was prepared by David Ochsner of the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities (JCI) with material from W. Cecil Steward and Katie Torpy of JCI. Other text and image sources include NIFA, City of Omaha, Omaha Public Schools, Omaha Children’s Museum, UNL College of Architecture, UNO Design Studies Program, Omaha By Design and HistoricOmaha.com. Founded in 1996 by President W. Cecil Steward, JCI is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization dedicated to fostering sustainable communities at every scale.