The rebirth of an historic four-block, inner city housing project offers opportunities to transform an old Omaha neighborhood into a vibrant downtown community. The charrette team identified opportunities and attributes for sustainable development through mixed uses and revitalized commercial, cultural and affordable housing accommodations.
This charrette focused on developing a unified program for improving the quality of life in the Drake Court Neighborhood on the southwest edge of downtown Omaha. It proposed strengthening the physical, human, social, economic, and environmental capital and creating a safe place for neighbors and visitors.

**Challenges**

The perception of safety is one of the greatest challenges to the neighborhood. Crime, drugs, transients, poor and dilapidated buildings were all cited as reasons the area is considered unsafe. In addition, a large Douglas County corrections facility is located three blocks to the east, adding to the perception of a crime. The overall transient feel of the area also contributes to this perception. Absentee landlords, lack of property reinvestment and one-way streets have all created a “drive through” neighborhood rather than a destination.

**Opportunities**

Fortunately, there is also much to build upon in the area, and considerable progress has been made in rehabilitating the Drake Court Apartments and in boosting public interest in further improving the Drake neighborhood. Area assets include Liberty Elementary School, the Omaha Children’s Museum, The Rose Theatre, and a YMCA. Strong multi-family development in the Drake Court complex and its proximity to downtown 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. There are a number of possible sites for redevelopment that could leverage private sector involvement and encourage participation of the nearby school. The redevelopment of the Drake Court Apartments, facilitated by the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities, is an important catalyst for inspiring new enterprise in the neighborhood.

Earlier studies of the Drake Court area led by the Joslyn Castle Institute examined elements that comprise a “walkable” street environment, including alleyways transformed into “green” pedestrian passageways. The charrette team discussed other enhancements such as improving perceptions of safety, adequate lighting, good sidewalks, green spaces and natural landscaping, public art, and attention to historic preservation and human scale. The 20th and Howard Street intersection was identified as a central point that could provide many opportunities for business, community, and private investment endeavors.
• Improve access to transportation (bus, shuttle) & enhance pedestrian transit (walking, biking).

• Public green spaces with links between neighborhood/downtown along streets or enhanced alleyways. Rooftop garden on parking garage and development of a community garden.

• Identify and develop local leadership and encourage both parent and student education initiatives. Neighborhood identity—a sense of place—is critical to instilling community pride and a feeling of ownership. Redevelopment should minimize gentrification of the neighborhood and not displace residents.

• One-way streets (Leavenworth, St. Mary’s, Harney, Farnum, 20th, 22nd) should be returned to two-way to improve pedestrian safety and enhance street level, mixed-use retail.

• Streetscape improvements including wider sidewalks, trees, on-street parking (diagonal and parallel). New lighting should be similar throughout the community, providing a sense of safety and community identity.

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

• 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.

• New policies that encourage owner-occupied housing units, improve policing of the area, strengthen communication between residents and city, and lead to a neighborhood master plan.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Strengthening the character of buildings and other spaces, emphasizing pedestrian scale, and balancing hardscape and greenspace were all recommended by the Drake Court charrette team, which also noted the need for street trees and the need to address dilapidated structures and vacant lots.**
Environmental

- Green public spaces/green streetscapes increased.
- Walkability and bikeability enhanced/connectivity to adjacent districts and pedestrian destinations.
- 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 commercial shops and stores developed paralleled with the affordable and low-income 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 to be designated a “Green By Design District.”
- District Citizens’ Development Coalition developed with members including property owners, stakeholders, businesses, institutions, and residences in the district.

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.