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Skyline makeover

New high-rises will forever alter face of Denver

By John Rebchook, Rocky Mountain News

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Downtown Denver's skyline is set for its biggest metamorphosis in 20 years.

At least a dozen buildings along the fringe of the Central Business District - the core of downtown - either are under way or on the drawing board.

Together, the buildings represent more than \$1.2 billion in new construction. And no one doubts that others will follow in the coming years.

The buildings will not be as large as skyscrapers such as Republic Plaza, the Wells Fargo Center (the "cash register" building), the Tabor Center and other buildings constructed during the oil boom days of the 1980s.

But there's little doubt that the new buildings will change the fabric of downtown.

"This will clearly be the first major time the skyline has changed since the '80s," said developer George Thorn.

For the most part, the new breed of buildings will be hotels and condominium towers instead of the office projects of the previous boom.

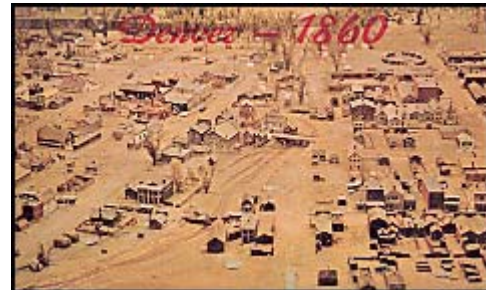
But the new buildings, which range from the first Four Seasons in Denver to smaller buildings by famed architects Daniel Libeskind and Daniel Adjaye, will change the view of downtown from every direction.

The buildings are coming at a time when there's a worldwide trend to spend more money on architecture, especially for residential properties, as developers are finding that the well-heeled are willing to pay a premium for great design.

The concept even has led to a new word: *starchitecture*.

The latest buzzword is used to describe works of celebrity architects such as Libeskind and London-based Adjaye. A recent *Time* magazine article on *starchitecture* used a drawing of Libeskind's Museum Residences in Denver as its main illustration. This marks the first residential development in the U.S. for Libeskind, who created the master plan for the World Trade site in New York City.

"I think the key here is that I hope that the buildings that are constructed are of such significance that they do arouse national and international attention," said Denver Mayor John



Denver's skyline has changed little over the past 25 years. That has begun to change, first with the convention center expansion and next with a dozen or so notable buildings on the books or under way. 1860: Denver was founded as a mining supply settlement, and this model at the Colorado History Museum shows Denver's dusty "cowtown" past.

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makes them a kind of legacy project. I hope 100 years from now, people will cherish these buildings like we cherish buildings constructed a century ago."

Skyline as symbol

Why is the skyline important?

Mark Hinshaw, director of urban design for LMN Architects in Seattle, has an answer.

"Skylines are powerful symbols of culture and community," Hinshaw said. "They're a literal bar chart. You can see it from a distance, and you know it is something that is dynamic and growing."

In earlier eras, churches often created skylines for cities, he said. And as commerce began to take off in Europe, often a "tower was built just for the sake of marking the center. Sometimes it was just a pure symbol," serving no utilitarian purpose, he said.

Architect Brad Buchanan, who is designing the 31-story One Lincoln Park condo tower at 20th Avenue and Lincoln Street, said that Denver is lucky that residential buildings are fueling downtown's latest growth spurt.

Buchanan was recently in Vancouver, British Columbia, and he found himself thinking that he was looking at Denver's future.

"Talk about a phenomenal skyline," Buchanan said. "When you look across the bay at downtown Vancouver, you see all of these residential buildings. Residential buildings have a couple of things going for them naturally. They are inherently more intriguing than office buildings from an architectural and design viewpoint."

The reason is economics.

"Denver buys views," Buchanan said. "If you go from the 12th floor to the 44th floor of an office building, the tenant typically will pay a slight premium. But in residential, you get big upticks in what people are willing to pay by going higher."

Buchanan was a bit coy as far as his opinion of downtown's current skyline. "Let's just say that overall, Denver is due for some exciting additions."

John Schafer, general manager of the new Hyatt Regency that opens in December, said the 37-story hotel will play off the Colorado Convention Center, something that already has changed Denver's skyline. The architect of the convention center, Denver-based Curt Fentress, once compared his design to that of the Sydney Opera House in Australia, although some critics consider that hyperbole.

Love it or hate it, Schafer said there's no question that the convention center makes a huge architectural statement. And the Hyatt will be just as bold, he said.

"We've got the convention center all lit up at night, and it is clearly a new, big presence in the skyline," Schafer said. "The design of the Hyatt is going to play off that. It's not a big, square structure. And it has this 10-story, all-glass beacon that will be lit up at night. It's probably 10 or 15 feet around, so I think it will be pretty spectacular when it's lit up."

Ripe for a change

Chris Frampton, of East West Partners, the development company that is building the 23-story Glass House condo tower in the Central Platte Valley, said downtown's skyline has been "staid" for a while.

That will soon change, he said.

"All of the drawings I've seen for new buildings are really pretty thoughtful," Frampton said. "I think that is pretty darn cool. Taken together, it's going to be pretty spectacular."

On the other hand, "it will never be like driving along the BQE (Brooklyn Queens Expressway)

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and looking at Manhattan," Frampton said. "But it's pretty exciting to think that on Monday Night Football, millions of fans are going to be seeing a different view of downtown."

Charlie Woolley, president of the St. Charles Town Co., which is co-developing a 30-story residence tower aimed at seniors along 14th Street, said the skyline will change from every direction. It won't matter if you take the classic Chamber of Commerce shot from City Park or you are looking at downtown Denver from the southwest, southeast or north, there will be new jewels of buildings in the view, he noted.

Some buildings, such as Adjaye's Museum of Contemporary Art at 15th and Delgany streets, will be too small to be seen from many vantage points. But it will stand out if you're gazing at downtown from the Highland neighborhood, Woolley said.

"I think these new buildings will fill up your view of downtown all the way around," Woolley said. "It doesn't matter if your angle is from Curtis Park or Highland, you're going to get a different feel of downtown than you have today."

Developer Randy Nichols, who plans a 41-story high-rise condo project, which he is calling the Spire, takes a contrarian view regarding the aesthetics of most of the new buildings.

"I don't think most of them will be considered icons," including his own, he said. "Now, I think the new Hyatt is a great piece of architecture. It is the best-looking high-rise downtown. And the new Four Seasons looks like a very nice, very traditional building."

Nichols developed the Clayton Lane development in Cherry Creek. He said he thinks the Janus building in Cherry Creek has very nice architecture, because it serves as a world headquarters and the mutual fund company was willing to pay a premium. The nearby J.W. Marriott hotel, by contrast, has to pay for itself solely based on revenues from the rooms and restaurants, so its architecture and materials aren't as nice, he said.

"It is a pretty ordinary, plain box," he said.

"It all comes down to what the market will bear, and most of this will be for (relatively) lower-point residential, and so you don't have super, dramatic architecture," Nichols said.

Still, they could be an improvement over the high-rise offices built 20 years ago.

"I do think we have some great buildings in downtown; they just don't happen to be the high-rise buildings," Nichols said. "If you look at the tallest buildings, nothing stirs the imagination."

'80s featured plain facades

One reason is that the 1980s was the latter part of the International style of architecture, which favored "pretty rectangular, simple structures," Nichols said. "In the '90s, we started seeing more glamorous architecture, like the AT&T building in Chicago and a number of buildings by (Gerald) Hines in New York. But Denver completely missed two building cycles by not having any high-rises built for 20 years."

Paul Goldberger, arguably the most important architectural critic in the country, blasted Denver's skyline when he was a guest speaker at a University of Colorado School of Urban Design symposium in 1982, when Denver was in the early stages of its downtown building boom. At the time, Goldberger was the architecture critic for *The New York Times*. Now, he serves that role at *The New Yorker* magazine and is the dean of Parsons, The New School for Design in New York City.

"It doesn't make much difference in a Houston, because all you have is ugly, flat Texas land," Goldberger said at the time. "But when you have an extraordinary natural setting, you shouldn't treat it indifferently. . . . Denver is a little like a singer who is always being reviewed as promising. One day she is 60 years old and still showing talent. There comes a point where that singer or this city has to deliver."

Libeskind, who is typically ranked as one of the world's most influential architects, couldn't disagree more with Goldberger's 1982 musings.

"Well, it shows the limitation of architectural criticism," Libeskind said from New York City in a recent cell-phone interview. "Denver has a gorgeous, crystalline skyline."

And with all of the new buildings moving forward, it's only going to get better, he said.

"Denver is a city of the future, not of the past," Libeskind said. "Clearly, Denver is going to be on the cutting edge. What is happening in Denver represents the best of what modern architecture is about. I say let it grow, let it develop."

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