Combining Fragments into a Vibrant Whole

An Analysis and Proposal for Downtown Spokane, Washington

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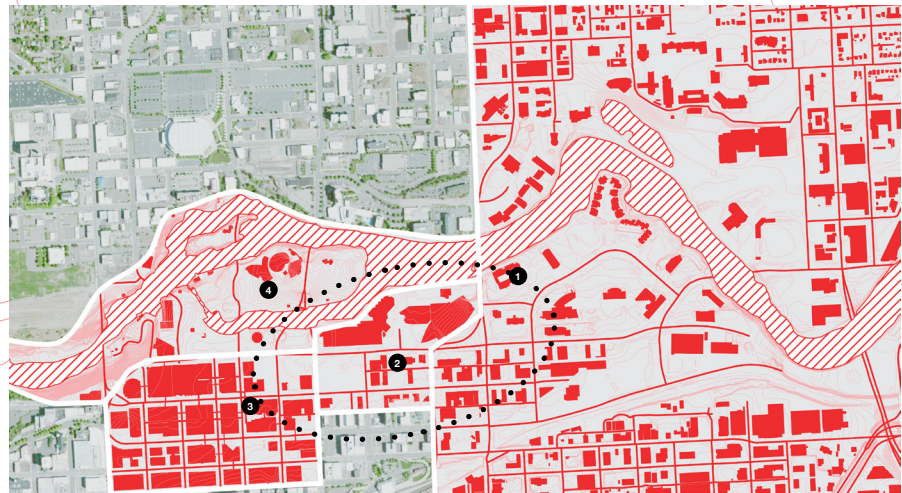*Master of Architecture 2014*

Spokane, Washington is a medium-sized city whose downtown area has seen a large amount of development over the past two decades including the development of the University District, the Convention Center District, and the Downtown Core. These districts are adjacent to a fourth "district," which contains the natural Spokane River, Spokane Falls, and Riverfront Park. The close proximity of these four areas creates the potential for a vibrant downtown. However, these districts do not currently mesh; continued development along these lines threatens future vibrancy. Since Spokane is not fully developed, it should proactively implement strategies to create a better Downtown, before it is too late. This paper discusses those strategies.

Downtown Spokane, Washington is currently characterize¬¬d by fragmentation, non-cohesion, and untapped potential since the four main districts of downtown ignore each other's presence. The growing university district spurs development but does not engage the nearby heart of downtown. Any potential synergy between these two districts is blocked by an expanding convention center district. Furthermore, a wall of downtown development is cordoning off the Spokane River from the city as downtown grows denser. Such fragmentation between districts is not unique to Spokane's downtown, but rather is characteristic of many medium-sized American cities. Fortunately, an opportunity exists for these cities to reach their full potential by connecting and unifying their fragmented districts, while still retaining the unique purpose and character of each, as they continue to grow. These cities do not need to be entirely reimagined, but can instead succeed through strategically using existing features, such as excessively wide roadways, existing buildings, and empty parking lots. This article analyzes specific opportunities for Spokane to integrate its fragmented districts into a unified, vibrant place, and illustrates how the proposals and ideas can act as a model for other cities to follow.

Spokane is a medium-sized city of roughly 210,000 residents (600,000 metro) located near the Washington-Idaho state line. It functions as the regional hub of the Inland Northwest (which encompasses all of Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho). Spokane's downtown area occupies a very compact footprint and boasts two universities (Gonzaga and Washington State University Spokane), vast expanses of nature, and a convention center, all within a stone's throw of the downtown core (Figure 1). These features create the potential for large-scale place and vibrancy, according to Pierre Fillion. In The Successful Few, Filion lists attributes of successful downtowns of small and medium-sized cities, which include having a university in or near the central business district (CBD), historical character, natural amenities such as bodies of water, and public buildings such as convention centers. Downtown Spokane contains all of these features.

However, these four elements of Downtown Spokane are growing without careful consideration for connectivity and cohesion. Despite their adjacency, they do not respond to one another to create a vibrant downtown. As a further testament to the lack of cohesion, these districts (with the exception of the 100-acre Riverfront Park born out of the 1974 World's

Fair) all saw major simultaneous growth in the last 15-20 years but have not yet joined to create a vibrant street life across downtown. In the University District, Gonzaga University's enrollment nearly doubled from 1999 to its present-day enrollment of roughly 7,800 students (Lawrence-Turner, 2013), but most of the new buildings that have accommodated this growth (specifically student housing projects) turn their backs on the edges of campus. Most of the adjacent Washington State University Spokane campus was developed in the last 5-8 years and similarly faces inward. In the downtown core, a revitalization initiative in the late 1990s/early 2000s resulted in . an upscale indoor shopping mall and prominent restorations and adaptive re-uses of historic buildings such as the Davenport Hotel, Fox Theater, and Steam Plant Square. While these projects have undoubtedly attracted people back to the downtown core, they emphasize

activities and life on their insides more than engaging the streets that surround them. In the Convention Center District, the Spokane Convention Center tripled in size in 2004 and currently has two more expansion projects under construction – a 90,000 square foot expansion and a 700-room hotel. Both projects are expected to be completed by 2015 (Spokane Public Facilities District, 2013). Like the projects in the downtown core, the expanded facilities of the convention center emphasize the insides of the buildings more than the urban fabric that surrounds them. Continued development down this same fragmented, non-cohesive path threatens the future success of Downtown Spokane.

Despite the fragmentation, opportunity exists since Downtown Spokane – like other medium-sized cities across the United States – is not yet fully built out. The numerous surface parking

Fig. 3.1. Downtown Spokane's four main districts: (1) University District, (2) Convention Center District, (3) Downtown Core, (4) Nature The dotted, black oval represents an area where these four districts can coalesce. Jason Wong.

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lots and low-density developments that dot the downtown landscape provide space for future development. By developing these sites, Spokane can proactively implement place-making strategies now, to ensure that a sense of place and vibrancy are present in the future. Creating this future depends on activating connections between Spokane's natural assets, University District, Convention Center District, and downtown core. The sum is greater than its parts: by uniting these districts, Downtown Spokane can increase street life, friendliness, and vibrancy across its districts. To achieve this, Spokane should (1) reinforce an emphasis on nature, (2) promote "related development," (3) blur the lines between public and private space, (4) balance the needs and experiences of tourists and residents, and (5) continue the historic preservation efforts currently in place.

Emphasis on Nature

Spokane has a great natural asset, the Spokane River, which drops over a series of waterfalls

their analysis of the University of Wisconsin's Arboretum. They find the Arboretum evokes memories and interactions such as "birthday parties…hiking with parents and friends while looking for or coming across wildlife…and often 'being surprised by something' such as a pair of cranes with chicks or a flock of wild turkey" (p. 348). Nature can also provide a sense of mystery, enticing people to further explore the area (Kaplan and Kaplan, 2005, p. 276). Spokane can support its economic development by leveraging its natural assets to encourage tourists and convention attendees to explore, experience, and make memories in the city, spending their money along the way.

Additionally, nature boosts the mental and physical health of people who use it. Nature has restorative properties for attention fatigue (p. 277), which can help reduce stress levels and increase civility (p. 272). Increased integration of nature would benefit all the districts in Downtown Spokane by reenergizing workers in the downtown core, aiding university students

*Fig. 3.2. **Spokane River** and Spokane Falls run through the heart of Downtown Spokane. Jason Wong.*

and into a deep, scenic river gorge while flowing through the heart of Downtown Spokane. In the past, the public did not have access to the river because a large rail yard – a relic of Spokane's railroad heritage – occupied the river frontage downtown. This changed when, in 1974, Spokane hosted Expo '74, an environmentally themed World's Fair. The site for the fair completely replaced the rail yards and ultimately became the 100-acre Riverfront Park – now one of the biggest integral components of Spokane's community and culture. Most importantly, the construction of the park created public access to the river and waterfalls that flow past the Downtown Spokane skyline (Figure 2).

While the establishment of Riverfront Park propelled Spokane forward, the city should do more to take full advantage of the natural setting in order to aid the creation of place. Natural spaces provide opportunities for memories to form and social experiences to occur. J. T. Spartz and B. R. Shaw (2011) speak about this in

taking a break from their studies, and providing a unique experience for convention goers who need to relax between meetings, seminars, and lectures. Considering these benefits, there are two ways Spokane can more tightly integrate nature into the experience of downtown: eliminating the hard edge that exists between nature and city and preserving views of nature.

A Hard Edge

Although Riverfront Park is a valuable asset to Downtown Spokane, it has limited benefits because of the park's distinct and hard boundaries. Nature is separated from the city; one must physically move from downtown to the park to experience nature. This can make it difficult for stressed office workers or university students to access nature for a brief mental break mid-morning; they must wait until lunchtime to take a stroll in the park.

Spokane can remediate this flaw by developing a network of nature within the built environment of downtown. Vancouver, British Columbia successfully developed a network of nature and street trees within the city (Walsh, 2013, p.14.). Spokane can easily follow suit and develop its own network of nature within pre-existing downtown infrastructure. Many of the roads downtown possess car lanes that are unnecessarily wide – many exceeding 11 feet, a width intended for high-speed roads and inappropriate for a downtown-scale street. Strategically re-allocating some of this excess right-of-way would provide enough space to create strips and networks of nature throughout Downtown Spokane. Furthermore, surface parking lots can provide space large enough to create either pocket parks within downtown or seamless transitions from the network of nature into the parking lots.

Preserving Views of Nature

Another obstacle to the integration of city and nature is that recent building developments – both private and public – are creating a wall, interrupting views and limiting access to Riverfront Park. For example, the privately developed hotel currently under construction near the Spokane Convention Center will add a massive, 180-foot tall by 400-feet wide impenetrable wall less than 350 feet from the river bank (Figure 3). Although this hotel project is extremely vital to the future growth of Spokane, its location and design will block views to the river from existing development. To reclaim views to the river, any future buildings will need to be exponentially taller than this hotel. Such development disproportionately affects the general population (as opposed to a privileged group of people who live and work downtown and therefore have easier access to nature).

To address this issue, Spokane should protect public views by following another one of Vancouver's successful urban planning strategies. Vancouver has 27 protected view cones of the waterfront and mountains and has "abandoned the practice of building tallest on the parcels closest to the waterfront, instead adopting an approach in which views become available to towers several blocks further back by permitting the towers [farthest] from the water to grow the tallest" (Walsh, p. 19). Spokane should preserve the views to the river by adopting a similar strategy.

Promoting Related Development Near the Convention Center and Universities

Jane Jacobs uses the term "related development" to describe how development of primary programs (i.e., building uses/activities/functions) can spawn related development to make a district vibrant (Grodach, 2008, p. 197). In his critique of Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Carl Grodach points out that the area around the art museum lacks related development such as restaurants, retail, and art spaces (p. 203). As a result, MOCA and its surrounding area are not as vibrant and frequented as they could be because people are unable to have the "full art experience" while in that district.

Spokane's current situation somewhat resembles the situation around MOCA because, while the convention center and universities are the

Spokane's Tallest Building (for reference)   288'   170'

New Hotel   Spokane River
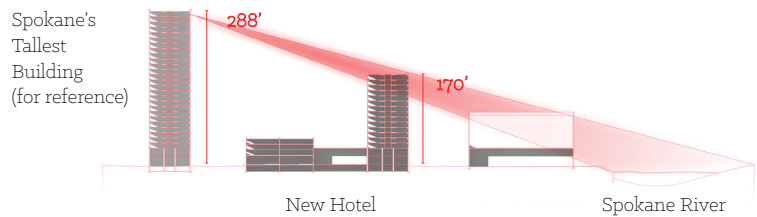
primary anchors of their respective districts, they lack the related development to engage residents and visitors in a full experience of place. Currently, most of the related development for these districts is located in the core of downtown; it becomes increasingly sparse – giving way to surface parking and unrelated business types – as one moves toward the Convention Center and University Districts. Therefore, convention goers and students currently need to go to a different "neighborhood" (i.e., the downtown core) to find the activities and venues they actually seek. As these districts grow, they will create more demand for shopping, gathering, and dining venues that are conveniently located. Because the needs and desires of the University and Convention Center users are similar – they shop, gather, and dine – related development in these districts can serve both crowds, thus creating a unique opportunity to vibrantly connect the two

*Fig. 3.3. **Cross-Section Diagram** of the new Convention Center Hotel. To reclaim views of the river, new buildings built behind the hotel would have to be built above the obstructed sightline. To put it in perspective, this would be nearly twice as high as the 288-foot tall Bank of America Financial Center, Spokane's tallest building. Jason Wong.*

districts. Such new developments can occupy the many vacant lots, vacant storefronts, and surface parking lots that exist within these districts, in order to minimize the displacement of existing businesses.

Blurring of Public and Private Space

As the aforementioned related developments are established, the lines between public and private space should also be blurred. An analysis of college towns across the United States shows a direct correlation between the proximity of a university to a city and the blurring of public and private space (Adhya, 2008). For example, in Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan, the main campus is immediately adjacent to and mixes with the city. By contrast, East Lansing's downtown is

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distinctly separate from the campus of Michigan State University. According to Adhya, "Ann Arbor's close city-university relationship and the shared integrated experience of places are major factors in developing a quality experience of publicness" (p. 184).   By blurring the lines between town and gown, the same places serve both the university crowd and the local crowd. New developments and local establishments can attract a variety of professionals, families, empty nesters, and university students. University towns are often found to facilitate pedestrian activity and generate local commercial activity. Like Ann Arbor, Spokane's University District should take advantage of its close proximity to the downtown core.

Another method of blurring the lines between public and private spaces is to create what Matthew Carmona (2010) calls "third spaces": privately owned spaces that facilitate important public functions like meeting and socializing. Such places include cafés, bookstores, and coffee shops that "host the encounters from the accidental to the organized and regular, and have become fundamental institutions of mediation between the individual and society" (p. 132). Third spaces are neutral, inclusive, low profile, taken for granted, open during and outside of business hours, psychologically supportive and comfortable, and places of conversation (pp. 132-133). Developing third spaces to blur the lines between the convention center, university, and downtown core districts will create an integrated ribbon of publicness and place – where tourists, students, and residents would feel welcome to engage with one another – that spans the entire Downtown Spokane area.

Balancing the Experience of Place Between Tourists and Residents

As Spokane's growing Convention Center draws an increasing number of visitors into the city, it will be important to strike a balance between the differing needs and experiences of tourists and those of residents. For example, conflict can emerge when residents who need to commute to work or travel through the downtown are delayed by the road closures and traffic that large conventions often bring. Frustration can also occur when tourists ask for directions, but the locals are unable to describe them clearly due to the lack of clarity in the city's urban form. Successfully balancing the needs of both groups strengthens the sense of place because tourists and locals can interact freely without any tension between one another. Spokane can achieve this balance at both the human scale and the urban scale.

Balancing Needs Through the Human Scale

Regarding human scale, the rehabilitation of Acre, Israel's historic fabric, is a strong precedent to follow. Because the rehabilitation project emphasized balancing the needs and experiences of both local residents and visitors, citizens welcomed the tourists with open arms. The plan most notably created the framework for local residents to run bed and breakfasts as a way to proudly showcase the community's hospitality. The ensuing social exchange between the two parties enhanced tourists' experience of the place (Khirfan, 2006, p. 32). Spokane is not a major tourist destination, so
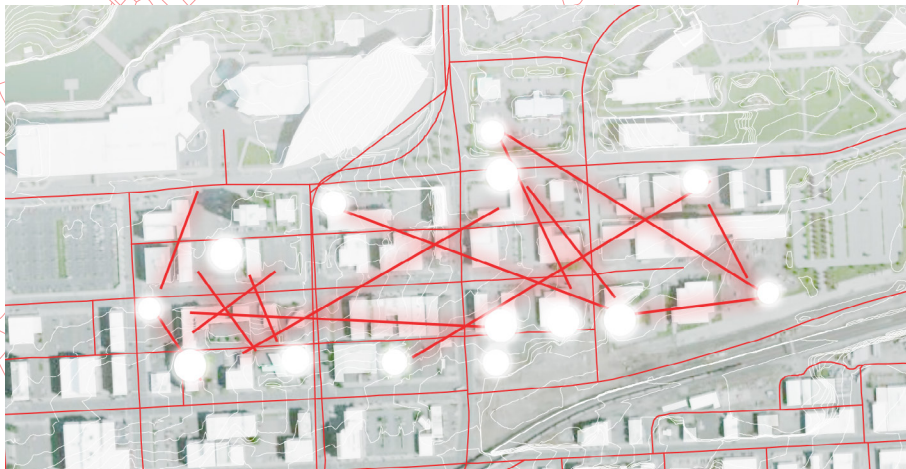
*Fig. 3.5. **Nature Strategy**: Pull nature into the built environment to create a network of green spaces. At the same time, preserve public views of the river by regulating development near the shoreline.*

*Fig. 3.6. **Related Development Strategy**: The development of related program near the Convention Center and University can create a network of "third spaces" that will add to vibrancy in the area and blur the lines between private and public, creating an overall greater sense of publicness in the area.*
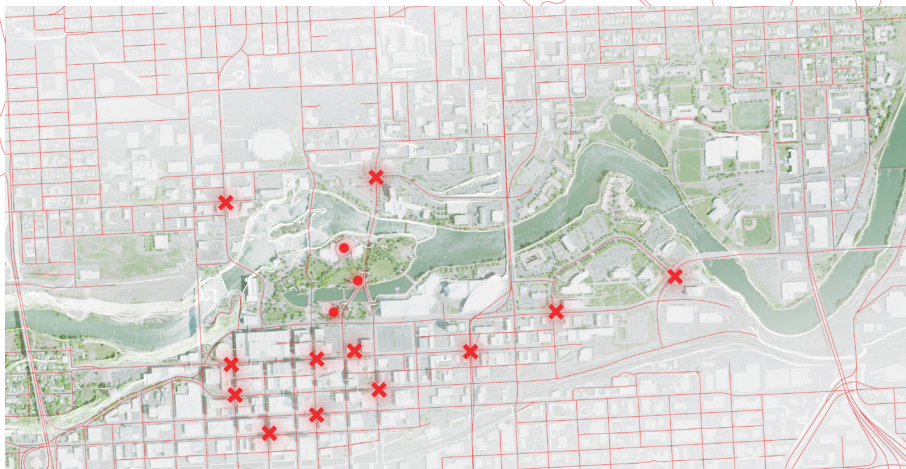
*Fig. 3.7. **Wayfinding Strategy**: Landmarks that currently exist in Spokane (blue sunbursts) do not aid in wayfinding for those in not in Riverfront Park. Creating a network of landmarks within the built environment (red X's) will accommodate the wayfinding needs of visitors.*

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the city needs to provide an extra incentive to entice people to come. Spokane can follow the example set by Acre, leveraging social exchange through its local hospitality, to create a unique sense of place and further differentiate itself as a major convention and tourist destination that maintains a small-town hospitality culture.

Balancing Needs Through the Urban Scale

Spokane should also balance needs at the urban scale by designing a wayfinding logic that accommodates the contrasting ways in which the groups navigate. John Montgomery (1998) explains in Making a City that, "…long-term residents produce more complex mental maps containing both paths and landmarks (environmental cues). Visitors to new places, by contrast, tend to use landmarks as anchor-points in constructing route knowledge" (p. 101).

In Spokane's case, its downtown streets are laid out in a simple grid, which adequately caters to residents. However, without landmarks and open space to use as reference points, the efficiency of the grid may result in a repetitive and hard-to-navigate landscape for visitors. While Spokane does have landmarks, most of them (such as the historic Looff Carousel, Red Wagon, US Pavilion, and Clock Tower) are located inside Riverfront Park and not within the built part of downtown. This arrangement does not aid visitors; a local resident cannot simply direct them to the cafe that is "next to the purple apple sculpture" because such landmarks do not exist. One method to remediate this flaw is to leverage the existing stock of Spokane's old and historic buildings to become those landmarks through the juxtaposition of architectural styles and building scales. Some of these buildings are architecturally distinctive and will stand out in contrast to future, contemporary works of architecture. This contrast will give these older buildings a more prominent place in the landscape, as illustrated by the streetscape in Figure 5., Such landmarks would help meet the navigational needs of visitors to Spokane.

Historic Preservation Efforts

Preserving historic buildings has many other benefits as well. First, historic buildings are a proven attraction to downtown users. In Filion's (2004) research, "historical character" ranked high on the list of important factors that attracted people to the downtowns of small and medium-sized cities (pp. 331-332). Therefore,

Spokane should use historic buildings to attract more people downtown and help enhance its vibrancy.

Furthermore, in regards to creating place, a community that exhibits a distinct aesthetic identity sees higher self-esteem among residents, with historic towns specifically "creating a sense of pride by association" (Twigger-Ross, 1996, p. 208). For example, Santa Barbara, California is widely known for its Spanish Colonial aesthetic (Blanco, 2000, p. 56). Perhaps Spokane can become known for its historic building aesthetic. While Spokane does not have a single, distinct name for its collection of historic buildings, many are red-brick, built between 1900 and 1930, and designed by local architects such as Kirtland Cutter. The similar appearance of these historic buildings can speak for itself as a singular "aesthetic."

Many of the buildings are also on local and/or national historic registers and are spread across the four districts of Downtown Spokane. This spread creates an opportunity to form a cohesive place identity across the entirety of Downtown Spokane. Furthermore, historic buildings played a major role in the late 1990s – early 2000s revitalization of the downtown core, which saw the restorations and adaptive re-uses of the Davenport Hotel, Steam Plant Square, and Fox Theater, among others. Because of preservation's proven track record in Spokane, it should receive ongoing attention as the region continues to develop.

Conclusion

Spokane currently contains four districts and components that rank high on Filion's list of attributes for creating a successful downtown: a university, convention center, nature, and a downtown core. Thus there is no doubt that Downtown Spokane has the right ingredients to reach a higher potential. However, these districts do not speak to one another. Disconnected and internally focused, such development will be detrimental to the future of Downtown Spokane. Because Spokane and many other medium-sized cities across the United States are not fully built out, these cities have the opportunity to integrate their fragments into vibrancy as they continue to grow. Creating a stronger place in Downtown Spokane can be achieved by better integrating nature into downtown (Figure 5), developing related programming near the university and convention center, blurring the public/private lines of those related developments (Figure 6), balancing the needs of tourists and residents (Figure 7), and continuing the historic preservation

efforts that presently exist in Downtown Spokane. Implementing these place-making strategies will help integrate these fragmented components into a better Downtown Spokane with a unique and strong sense of place for all stakeholders. ∎

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