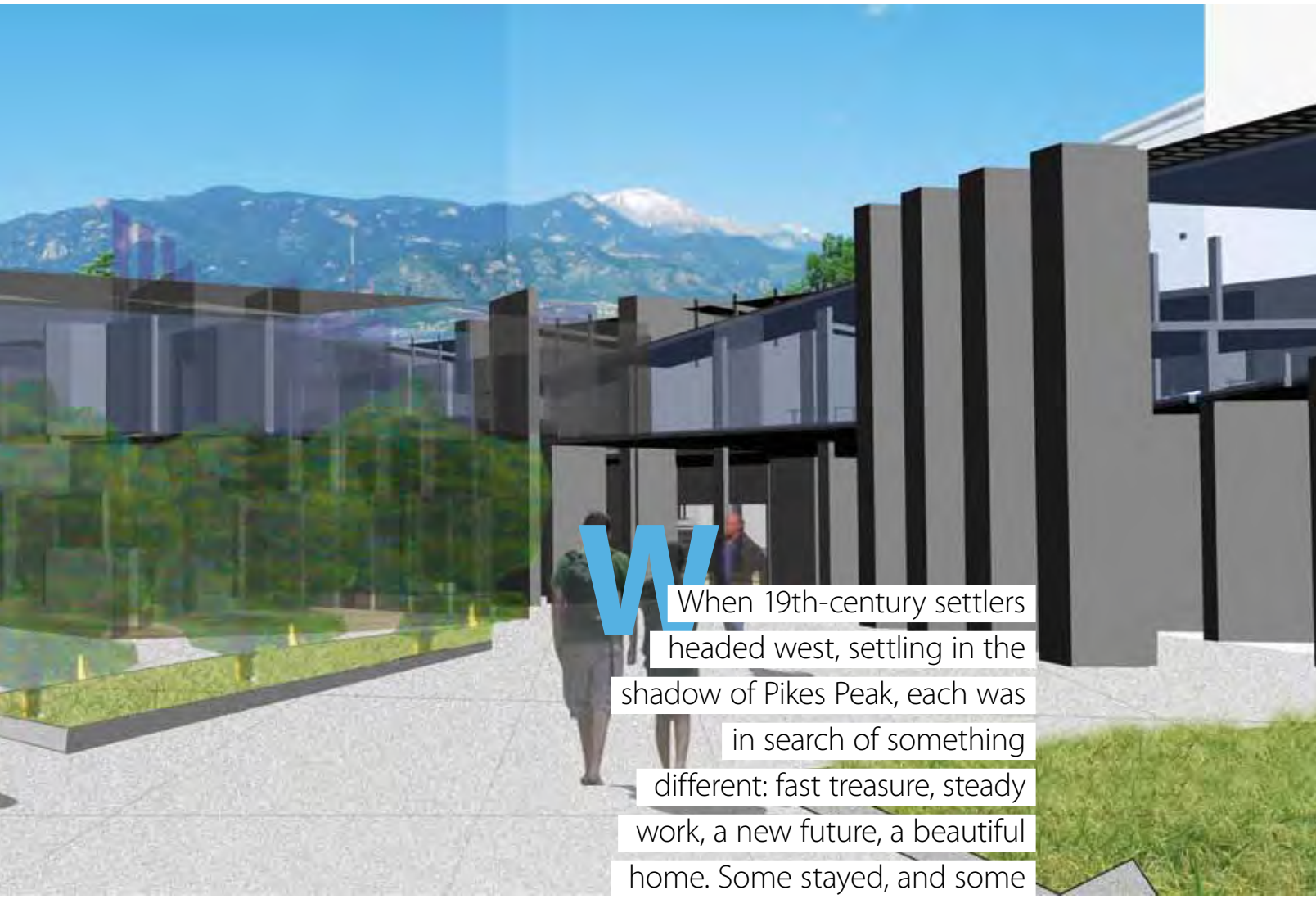
DREAMING a FUTURE

jnb2 design studio
market rendering

What happens when people from all walks of life – architects included – gather to reimagine their city? The Colorado Springs area is trying to find out what the future might hold. *by Kelly Roberson*



When 19th-century settlers headed west, settling in the shadow of Pikes Peak, each was in search of something different: fast treasure, steady work, a new future, a beautiful home. Some stayed, and some didn't. Regardless, the city and surrounding environs grew up around them.

Projected areas of growth - El Paso County

Proposed growth - urban densification

Proposed light rail - commuter bus districts

Existing water bodies

Proposed parks, open spaces - connecting trails

Fast-forward 150 years and some 500,000 residents later, and the story remains the same: Some families have been there for generations, others are relative newcomers, and for some, it's a stopover on the way to somewhere else. But economic, environmental and societal pressures are influencing those half-million people, and by some measures, the region seems to have lost its footing. There's growth that could be characterized as urban sprawl, civic fiscal meltdowns and a general lack of consensus about priorities and next steps.

Two years ago, a group of Colorado Springs citizens asked some essential questions: How do you create a city that's livable and lived in? How do you balance different needs and desires within a realistic budget? Their questioning turned into a community-centered effort named Dream City 2020, and architects played an essential part. The process — and continuing conversation — may be as telling for the area as the results.

"When you look at a city, it's like reading the hopes, aspirations and pride of everyone who built it." — Hugh Newell Jacobsen, FAIA

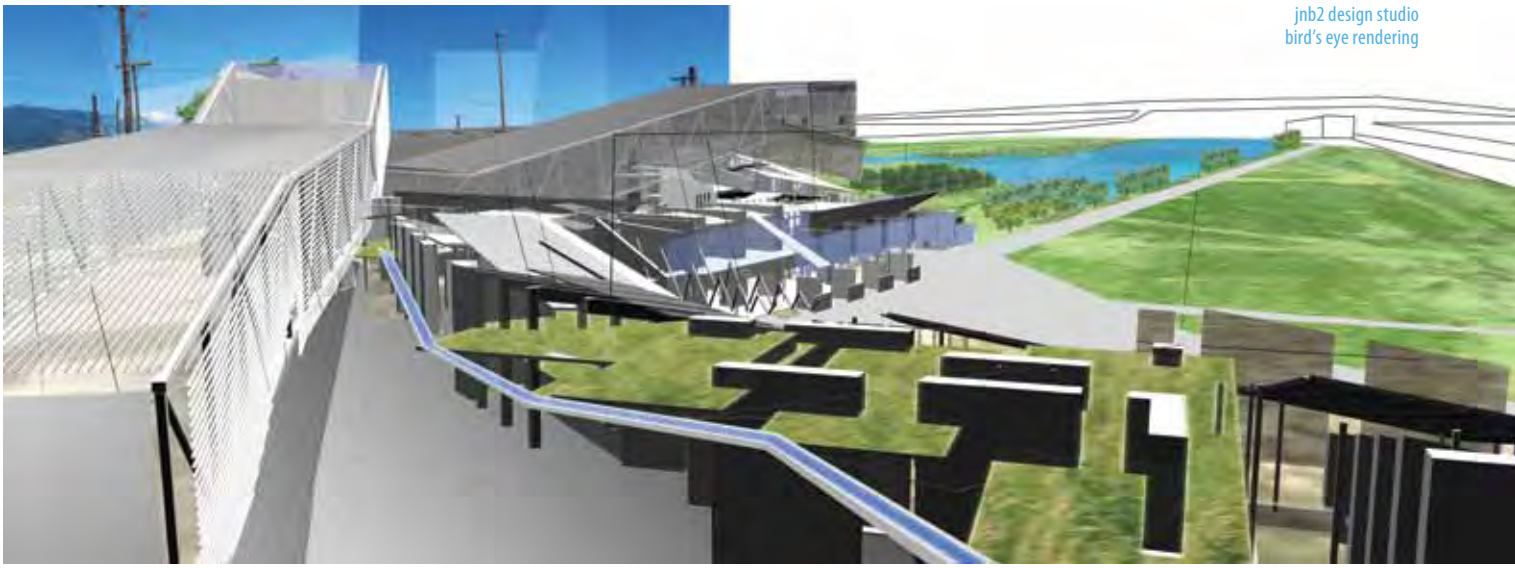
Reality and a Vision

It's not as though Colorado Springs had never taken a look inward; city leaders had various planning discussions and had created concepts periodically throughout the late 20th century. But in 2008, a new reality emerged. The area's projected population would reach 1.5 million swiftly — by 2020 — and there were growing doubts about its ability to deal with that influx and a lack of consistent public and private planning. Like many other metro areas, the Colorado Springs region is wrestling with how to create a livable community, even as the city core decays, older retail areas sit empty and people rethink walking versus driving. "One of the big problems is urban sprawl," says Joseph Brown, AIA, owner of jnb2 design studio of Colorado Springs, Colo. "There's been massive outward growth and a neglect of downtown and historic parts of Colorado Springs."

Those realizations spurred organizers. Leadership Pikes Peak joined with partners, including *The Gazette* and the Pikes Peak Library District, to create Dream City 2020. The AIA Colorado South Chapter, the American Planning Association and the Congress of New Urbanists would come on board, too. Residents were asked for input about arts, education, transportation, the environment and safety, among other topics. The areas for discussion were loosely organized in three categories: inspiration, education and engagement.

Experts, including architects and planners, looked to other visionary urban planning efforts, including Salt Lake City, Utah; Albuquerque, N.M.; and Portland, Ore., for guidance. "The effort in Utah, for example, became a political force," says Mark Tremmel, AIA, owner of Tremmel Design Group of Colorado Springs. "The interesting thing is other cities such as Portland have growth boundaries, and we have an incredible amount of space to be built. It's great for developers, but if we don't control how it gets built, it's going to be stretching ourselves to what we consider to be unsustainably spread out."

Volunteers, including architects, broke into small groups to process the community input; eventually, firms were asked to submit boards that coalesced their creative ideas into plausible plans that were presented at a summit. "Dreams have to have a visual component, or they don't become real," Tremmel says. "As architects, we always establish a visual language with a client. If you envision a



jnb2 design studio
bird's eye rendering

future and say the words 'smart growth' or 'high-density,' suddenly people may have things on their minds that can be very negative, and we're trying to be very positive."

Plans on Paper

Before Dream City, many local firms had begun on their own to think about what was happening in the city — lack of public transportation, stressed infrastructure, closed schools. The latter had made the rounds at the offices of RTA Architects. "There have been a bunch of schools decommissioned in our neighborhood. We believed that could have a negative impact on the neighborhood, but the sites have great potential and we had talked about what to do with them," says Allison D. Johnson, Assoc. AIA, with the firm.

Dream City was a natural fit for RTA's brainstorming; they picked one school site, Ivywild, and created a proposal that rehabbed the blighted area, transforming it with gardens, a café and affordable housing. "We believed there was potential for the site, so we decided to dream big and be practical, too," Johnson says. "It was well-received at Dream City because it was so personal — people had gone to the school, were upset about it closing and wanted to figure out what to do with it."

RTA's boards, created with volunteer effort for a visionary citywide project with no money, even garnered a meeting with the school district's architect. "What we do in architecture school is dream, push the boundaries, and so often with practice, you get bogged down with budgets and realities," Johnson says. "It was refreshing; that's what we're designed as architects to do. Going into Dream City, we had no idea what it was going to be and it was so collaborative. For a grassroots effort, for people to show up, spend all day and be concerned about the future of the city was very encouraging."

Brown used his boards to hone in on the neglect of downtown, suggesting mixed use, an extension to the library and a shared research facility for the city's three universities. "For a healthy city, Colorado Springs needs to refocus efforts downtown so we can have less of an impact on the environment and update our existing infrastructure, to do all the things that are going to create a 21st-century city — light rail and greenways and parks and pedestrian access," Brown says.

Ivywild
Elementary
Proposal

Inspiration and Reality

William Fisher, AIA, owner of Fisher Architects and 2010 president of AIA Colorado South, tracked the Dream City project from its inception. His firm also submitted boards for consideration. While the discussions certainly all had an aspect concerning the built environment, Fisher came to the realization that people were talking about much more than the physical form of the area. "There were a whole bunch of visions that didn't have anything to do with the built environment directly," Fisher says. "At a grassroots level, it was

The Lowell Neighborhood,
Aerial perspective looking southeast

about how to deal with the concepts of what a city is."

Still, it was a process ideally suited to the training and talents of the architectural community. "As architects, a lot of times, this is exactly what we do — take a bunch of information that may or may not be directly related to a building and figure out the complex process going on," Fisher says. "The buzzword is problem-seeking, and that's what Dream City is — trying to organize problems into a solution. It's a juggling exercise, and we need to juggle them into the right spot, and do so creatively and aesthetically."

As with any dream, the transition to reality is fraught with all sorts of real-world concerns, but the Dream City participants are hopeful that there will be public and private partnerships to implement some of those visions. To start, a smart growth charrette focusing on the metro area will be held in May. Not only city leaders but other groups, including developers, have begun to realize the recent pattern of growth is not sustainable. "Ring road decline is endemic but represents economic opportunity. Existing declining strips must be renovated into new 'nodes,' connectable to downtown and to their neighborhoods," Fisher says. "Older strips are surrounded by residents — customers — who drive elsewhere. These places are there, they're not going away, they shouldn't be that hard to fix, and they represent intelligent opportunities for urban and economic growth."

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There seems to be an understanding now of what the city will look like, if the path it's on doesn't change and growth continues to happen as it is now. The design community, for one, is willing to help in making positive change. "There are alternatives to it, and the question is: 'Can we create a bigger that's also a better city?'" Tremmel says. "Dream City showed us that we had this group of volunteer architects, planners and illustrators who came together at a moment's notice with short deadlines and did beautiful work. It's inspiring for us as a design community to see that kind of commitment to community." ●