CERTAIN CONSEQUENTIAL DECISIONS that can be understood as gestures of landscape architecture gave Boise the makings of good urbanism. In 1863, even before being designated the capital of the Idaho Territory, the settlement was platted with a 10-block orthogonal street grid. By 1867 the grid grew to encompass 130 blocks. The standard right-of-way was 80 feet, which on most downtown streets now includes a pair of 14-foot-wide sidewalks.

Boise has a semiarid climate. But irrigation canals were constructed, beginning in the 1870s, to distribute water from the nearby mountains; today the city is verdant. And from 1907 an ensemble of parks was established along the Boise River, which defines the southern edge of downtown. Starting in the 1960s, these trails became linked by a 25-mile greenway with paved trails along both shores.

Still, owing to mid-20th-century sprawl, downtown declined. A great deal of human-scale early building stock was replaced by surface parking. The pity is apparent in what remains: two- and
three-story masonry structures, architecturally modest but embellished with patterned brickwork, rusticated limestone detailing, elaborate cornices. A 1968 urban renewal plan proposed devoting 15 blocks to a shopping mall with six parking decks. That plan was soon scaled back to cover eight blocks. Fortunately, it never went up.

Then Boise early adopted what is now an accepted formula for reviving pallid downtowns: public space, pedestrian orientation, and mixed-use redevelopment. This may seem odd for a place where a conservative, private-property ethic is prominent. But Doug Woodruff, by training a landscape architect, the senior project manager at Boise's Capital City Development Corporation (CCDC), which has overseen downtown redevelopment ever since, notes the “geographic isolation and bootstrap mentality—we figure things out for ourselves.”

He also cites the influence of a prominent Basque community, descended from 19th-century immigrant shepherds and ranchers, and their “European sense, the importance of the city, where you celebrate in the streets.” Others suggest, perhaps counterintuitively, that passion for the outdoors also was a factor. “People in Boise appreciate and value the setting,” says Beth Scott, ASLA, the head of the master of landscape architecture program at the University of Idaho's Urban Design Center in Boise. “That has helped create a culture where a lot of the population values the downtown.”

In 1985, the city invited one of the American Institute of Architects' regional/urban design assistance teams to town; these are multidisciplinary volunteer groups that conduct charrettes to help communities articulate vision plans. The charrette addressed the eight blocks of the abandoned shopping mall scheme. A new public plaza would serve as a focal point. In 1986, the Portland, Oregon, firm ZGF Architects was hired to develop a framework master plan and streetscape design guidelines, and to design the plaza itself. The master plan was predicated on public funding for the plaza, enhanced streetscapes, parking facilities, and assistance in adapting remaining historic buildings.

Brian McCarter, FASLA, now a ZGF principal, who grew up in Boise, was at the time a recent hire at the firm. Looking back, he says—borrowing today’s terminology—that “it was unusual for a purple city in a red state to lead with public investment and public space.” But after two decades of stalled redevelopment, there was impatience. The first iteration of the plaza was completed by December of that year.

Flexibility and simplicity guided the design. The plaza is a 200-foot-diameter circle. “A circle has integrity in itself,” McCarter says. It was hoped the circle would establish a center of gravity, given the uncertainty about what would be built on the blocks around it. At the time, a forgettable 1978 bank tower occupied part of one quadrant; the other three were blanks. An aerial photo taken when the plaza first opened shows the rather forlorn bricked island floating on an empty sea. “In those early years, looking out into these gravel parking lots, you were going, ‘Holy shit, I hope something gets built there,’” McCarter says. “It was a little spooky.”

Permanent features to accommodate specific activities, like concerts, or for particular users, such as the Idaho Shakespeare Festival, were
considered but discarded as limiting the plaza’s potential. “It was an exercise in holding yourself back,” McCarter recalls. “You need a beautiful brick floor, you need shade, you need water, and then let people occupy and use it the way they want.” Aside from a subtle slope for drainage, the floor is flat. The rimless fountain that was installed at its center, when turned off, makes the entire space usable. Use it the community did. “To have people believe in this as a catalyst was really a leap of faith,” McCarter says. “It demonstrated a hidden hunger for a civic space.”

Surely it helped that downtown is compact, and that half a dozen blocks from the plaza to both the north and east the commercial zone segues into long-established residential neighborhoods. Just as close, across the river, is the campus of Boise State University. Today its enrollment tops 25,000, which helps explain the city center’s visibly youthful walking—and bike- and scooter-sharing—population. The plaza itself has proven able to accommodate events of all kinds and sizes. Small as it is, as many as 5,000 people stop by for concerts on summer Wednesday afternoons. The plaza became known as the Grove, for the 36 honey locusts planted in radial symmetry on it, and because it occupies what was the intersection of Grove and Eighth Streets. As intended, its introduction and enthusiastic embrace by the community spurred renovation in the surrounding blocks. Flexibility was a goal in the redesign of these streets, too. Closing a few to vehicles was discussed. But permanent downtown pedestrian malls elsewhere had often failed. Instead, traffic lanes on both Eighth and Grove were reduced in favor of wider sidewalks with rolled curbs. These become stumble-free mass gathering spaces when temporarily closed to cars, as for the weekly farmers’ market that started with about 10 vendors on Eighth Street in 1994 and now attracts some 130 in peak season, filling six city blocks.

Even when streets are in shared mode, with cars present, the wide sidewalks accommodate both outdoor dining and unimpeded pedestrian flow. Most downtown restaurants now have ample front patios demarcated by fixed railings; Eighth Street itself has become known as Restaurant Row. Referring to north–south Eighth Street and the roughly east–west riverside trails, called the greenbelt, Beth Scott says, “Those two axes have defined the energy and activity in the downtown core. Everything else has radiated out from that.
Culturally, it’s significant,” she adds. “The greenbelt is the connection for pretty much everybody” for walking and biking in from outlying areas. The success of the original urban design district led the city to designate three additional, contiguous renewal areas in 1994, 2002, and 2008. ZGF wrote master plans and design guidelines for two of those, and advised CCDC and city planning staff on the third. Not surprisingly, the sensibility is consistent and the boundaries seamless between them. Much of the infill construction that has gone in throughout downtown is of two or three stories and in red brick, replicating the mass and the look—if loosely—of the lost historic buildings.

McCarter remembers the downtown Boise of his childhood as completely devoid of greenery, but an aggressive planting program has now lined virtually the entire city center with street trees, including blocks still mainly occupied by surface parking and awaiting redevelopment. Some streets beyond the original renewal area have been reconfigured like Eighth and Grove with fewer lanes for vehicles and more space for people. Many have bioswales, planted bulb-outs, bricked sidewalks, bike racks, and benches. It’s inviting, if imperfect. Cutting across downtown there is, for example, a couplet of five-lane one-way streets—a fragment of U.S. Highway 20 feeding an interstate highway spur, and thus sacred to transportation engineers—with traffic lights sequenced to propel waves of cars with intimidating speed through what is otherwise an agreeable pedestrian realm.

Downtown Boise’s street tree presence is pervasive, consistent, and healthy. “We’re spending between $10,000 and $15,000 per tree to implement a Silva Cell system. It was a big pill for a lot of people in the community to swallow, but seeing the results, people expect it now,” says CCDC’s Woodruff. The value goes beyond the aesthetic and public health benefits of tree canopy to protecting the Boise River.

Silva Cells are modular frameworks installed beneath pavement that prevent soil compaction; the root networks of trees planted in them can flourish. In Boise, the cells also accept stormwater from drains in the gutter. They fill first; overflow rainwater goes into the citywide stormwater system, which discharges into the river. This at least mitigates spikes in runoff volume during severe storms. The river, which tumbles out of nearby
INVESTING IN STREET TREES WAS AT FIRST A HARD ASK, DOUG WOODRUFF SAYS, “BUT PEOPLE EXPECT IT NOW.”

mountains with little to degrade it before entering the city, Woodruff says, is “a blue-ribbon trout stream and something Boise values highly—a clean, clear river that’s used for recreation.”

McCarter’s early worries aside, after the plaza was built the three empty parcels bordering it were eventually developed. A bank tower went up on one quadrant and a convention center on another, in 1988. Ten years later a hotel atop an arena was built on the third. The convention center and arena have curving facades, helping define the plaza. That new bank tower stands back, though its developers included a one-story retail building that hugs both the circle and one of four pedestrian spokes aligned with Eighth and Grove Streets that serve as walkways into the Grove.

On the fourth quadrant, the tower that predated the plaza sat back at the street edge, with nothing between it and the plaza. In 2014, a mixed-use project was undertaken to fill that space and complete the plaza’s enclosure. It incorporates ground-level retail, Boise State’s computer program on the second and third floors, upper-level office space, and satellite meeting rooms for the conference center across the way, to which it is linked by an elevated, glassed-in bridge replicating the plaza’s curve. In its basement, and extending partially beneath the plaza, was built a transit center where riders get information and passes...
The section of the plaza above the bus space had to be torn up during construction. This disruption was an opportunity to rethink the entire plaza, by then nearly 30 years old. Its brick had taken a lot of wear. The fountain malfunctioned. The trees were mature but parts of the canopy were dead, some had been hit by event trucks, roots were heaving the pavement. Again, different configurations were contemplated. “But people asked, ‘What’s wrong with the plaza we’ve got?’” McCarter recalls.

The below-grade transit center, however, posed a challenge. It required ceiling clearance for a tow truck rescuing a disabled bus. Reconstructing the plaza floor at its original grade would leave no space for soil. The developer proposed raised planters, but they would obstruct the continuous plaza floor and subvert its flexibility. The solution for the five replacement trees above the transit center was to suspend precast tubs, topped with reinforced slabs, between the 1 beams supporting the plaza floor. At about 20 feet by six, though shallow, they hold around 300 cubic feet of soil per tree, whereas the original tree pits provided about 200. The remaining replacement trees were planted beneath the plaza in Silva Cells, each with 500 cubic feet of structured soil. “I don’t know that we’d have been able to pull that off if CCDC didn’t already have the precedent of doing Silva Cells in the streetscape,” McCarter says.

The modifications for what’s now sometimes called Grove 2.0, completed in 2017, were pretty subtle. No longer needed to suggest enclosure, fewer trees were replanted. To compensate for reduced shade while the trees mature, tensile structures were considered but rejected because their supports would interrupt circulation; removable umbrellas are used instead. Restrooms were added, and a sound system. It’s still imperfect. One of the entry spokes, for example, is a corridor between blank walls, and another tunnels darkly through a building—but this doesn’t keep people away.
Bike share, weekly concerts and a way to cool off, all thanks to the Grove plaza.

With nozzles at grade, the fountain can be turned off to accommodate events.

Nearly every restaurant in the surrounding streets has permanent sidewalk seating.
Downtown Boise is on track to add seven new hotels and 1,000 residential units during this decade, Woodruff says. There are now three supermarkets there. A number of cultural institutions have taken up residence, including an arts and sciences charter school that moved to Eighth Street in 1995 and just moved again—a block away. Katy Young, a Boise native, has worked at the school for 20 years. “We want our kids to be global thinkers,” she says, “to ask big open-ended questions. And we partner with downtown organizations to help them answer those.” One class got involved with a shelter for homeless families, for instance. “Complicated issues come up with increasing population—but those are good conversations to have.” She recalls, “When I was in high school you couldn’t do anything downtown. It feels alive down here now.”

There’s a bit of architectural excitement there, too. Safdie Architects, for example, is planning a new central library for a riverfront site five blocks from the plaza. But as coherent and animated as downtown has become, it, too, has issues. There appears to be as much chain retail and hospitality—White House Black Market, P. F. Chang’s—as homegrown, one-off enterprises. Many buildings are new but mediocre. From certain angles the area looks like a suburban edge city or “Main Street festival marketplace.” But Boise is hardly soulless. Maybe physical form and public amenities matter most—substance over style—in engendering an urban environment.

JONATHAN LERNER WRITES ABOUT PEOPLE, PARKS, AND NATURAL SYSTEMS, BUT HIS MAIN PASSION IS REVIVED CITY CENTERS.

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“WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL YOU COULDN’T DO ANYTHING DOWNTOWN. IT FEELS ALIVE DOWN HERE NOW.”

—KATY YOUNG

OPPOSITE Crowds gathering for the plaza’s reopening celebration in 2017.