

# Drake Court

**D**rake Court, Omaha, Nebraska.

Similar to many pockets of the greater downtown Omaha area, the Drake Court District is just one example of a formerly affluent and prosperous mixed-use neighborhood that has seen better days.

In the last thirty years Omaha has doubled in size, with the majority of its energy focused on developing services along the suburban fringe. Much effort has also gone into redeveloping the riverfront and areas north of downtown.

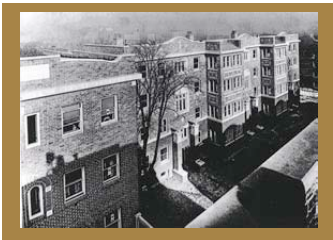
In the Urban Development Element of Omaha's recently revised Master Plan, the need for inner-city revitalization is addressed and met with a commitment to try "arrest the spread of blight, stabilize and/or increase declining population densities and to restore appropriate tax revenues from this area".

The Drake Court District and the neighboring area has great potential as a successful mixed-use community. The YMCA, Children's Museum, Rose Theater & Liberty Elementary School are all strong bastions, supportive of increased revitalization efforts.

Why then, does this area remain blighted? Why do the empty lots and dilapidated warehouses persist? What else can be done?



## drake court: a history



The Drake Court Annex with a glimpse of a neighboring park.

The Drake Court and Dartmore Apartments Historic District was constructed in four phases beginning in 1916. Completed in 1921, the complex resided on the western edge of the city of Omaha, in what was, at the time, an affluent and desirable area of town. The surrounding area contained many mansions and upscale housing units, of which Drake Court was a part.

The Drake Court District incorporates a set of 14 buildings, placed on the property as seven mirrored across a landscaped courtyard and includes the Drake Court Annex buildings located on Jones street to the west of this property. The Drake Court District is listed on the National Register of Historic Places; its buildings are Georgian styled with Prairie influences.

In its prime, the Drake Court complex was home to many professionals and downtown employees and were desirable in location due to their proximity both the CBD and conveniently located streetcar lines. The apartments were offered as furnished efficiency units and boasted rich details, including a deep cherry wood trim. The owner and developer, William Drake, even made his marble-floored home in one top-floor unit of the thirteenth building.

The Drake Court District laid its roots in a mixed-use development area. Once a transportation center, many large warehouse-type structures (formerly bus and auto storage garages, auto sales lots and repair shops) remain scattered throughout the neighborhood to this day. Thoughtfully laid city parks, including one directly across the street from the Drake Court on the northeastern corner of 22nd and Jones, mitigated this industrial presence.

The first phase of development began with the construction of six three-story buildings with raised basements situated on the westernmost edge of the complex at a cost of \$150,000. Chronologically, following from west to east, the two “middle” buildings were erected in 1917, also at a cost of \$150,000. These are four-story structures with raised basements. The largest portion of the interior courtyard separates these two buildings, and a fountain adorns the very center of the yard. By 1918, construction of the last six buildings had begun. Though similar to the first, these are four-story structures with different detailing. The last stage of development refers to the entry courtyard, which borders 20<sup>th</sup> Street on the east. This is included as a phase of development because it was originally intended to be home to one last grouping of apartments. The Drake Court Annex buildings were constructed immediately following, in the years 1919-1921.

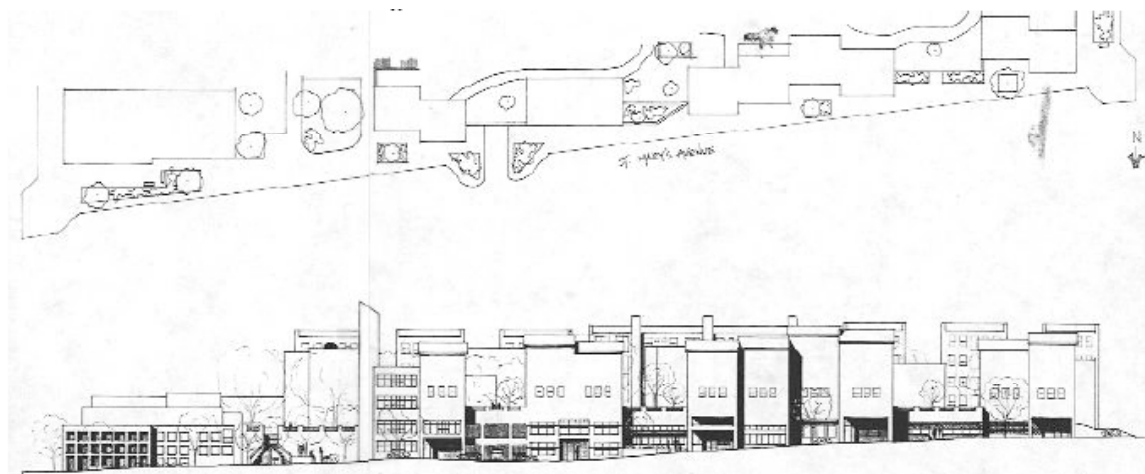
Topographically, the Drake Court Complex is situated on one of the highest points in the downtown Omaha area. From the site, the ground slopes away significantly in the north, east and south directions. This vantage point affords a wonderful view of Omaha's Central Business District and at the same time lends a certain prominence to the Drake Court itself, as it is readily visible from the downtown area.

The trees located on the Drake Court property are tall, mature deciduous trees. Some are found scattered on the north end of the pedestrian alley and in the east courtyard, as well as in clusters of growth along the north-south level changes, bordering the retaining walls. These trees also provide a buffer from traffic noise.

Due Drake's hilltop location, the neighboring commercial buildings along St. Mary's Avenue fall below the line of site. The topography is also advantageous for drainage and runoff issues. Surface water drainage flows to the alleys and then to the city streets, while rooftop drainage goes directly into the city sewer system.

## physical context

While these physical elements give the Drake Court District a distinctive air, the surrounding neighborhood lacks the very sense of enclosure and identity that makes the Drake Court so unique. The mature vegetation on the north side, the massive warehouse along Leavenworth and 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Streets combine to create an unmistakable sense of place, a sort of "urban oasis" in an area that seems to be otherwise without boundary and without identity.



*elevation of St. Mary's commercial development, looking south*

## surrounding building environs



The blocks surrounding Drake Court contain many housing units of varying conditions. Some of these buildings, like Drake, have been rehabilitated; many are in great disrepair. Most of the businesses in the area are service oriented commercial entities. Little retail exists. Warehouses abound, alluding to the former uses of the area.

### **South**

A large warehouse, dubbed the “Bus Barn”, lies immediately to the south of the Drake Court Apartments, lining a two-block stretch of Leavenworth. The warehouse establishes both a visual and physical boundary to the site. Across Leavenworth to the south, the area is mostly residential and belongs to the Columbus Park Neighborhood Association. Commercial and industrial uses are scattered along 20<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, Pierce and Leavenworth streets. Homes in this area are mostly single-family.

### **East**

Drake Court is abutted on the east by 20<sup>th</sup> Street, a major link to the Central Business District. This street abounds with positive community forces as it approaches the CBD to the north. Across the street there is two blocks of residential structures that then yield to a warehouse district.

### **West**



The area that lies immediately to the west of Drake Court is made up of many different styles of housing, both in accommodations and appearance. The Rorick and Avenue apartments are the greatest departure from the Georgian style of Drake Court and the Annex buildings, of which there are five. (The Rorick and Avenue buildings are 11 and 6-storied cross-shaped structures, respectively.) Despite some variance, similar building materials were employed throughout the years and the area does have a distinguishable sense of character.

### **North**

The Drake Court shares its mega-block with Liberty Elementary School to the north. As one moves north toward the CBD along the 20<sup>th</sup> Street corridor, more neighborhood amenities emerge, including the Children’s Museum and the YMCA.

## Previous Studies of the Area

### **Historic Bus Barn Charrette (2006):**

Orchestrated by the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority, local stakeholders came together to brainstorm various uses for the warehouse sandwiched between Drake Court and a two-block stretch of Leavenworth. Suggestions ranged from converting the Bus Barn into a community center, an indoor park or farmer's market.

### **20<sup>th</sup> Streets Art Corridor (2002):**

Part of Lively Omaha's Place Game exercises, the American Institute of Architects and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln came together to attempt to create an identity of 20th Street as an arts corridor, a children's corridor and an educational corridor from elementary school to high school to university levels including Liberty Elementary, Central High School and Creighton University. "The philosophy for designing 20th Street was to create an urban experience for people of all ages, emphasizing the cultural arts of the community. Ultimately, the destination of the concept is steering 20th Street to become a new and active district for the Omaha Community."



**JCI/NIFA (1998):** Nebraska Investment Finance Authority and the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities spearheaded the revitalization effort on behalf of this distressed portion of downtown Omaha in 1998. JCI conducted pre-development studies of the area and lead the renovation process of the historic Drake Court Apartments and a newly created downtown neighborhood school, as a catalyst for urban revitalization. The objective is to develop a strong inner city neighborhood that includes low-income and market-rate residential units with mixed-use commercial development. This initiative will provide a physical illustration of a neighborhood that depicts the potential of urban redevelopment based upon the concepts of sustainability. The project is intended as an example for local decision leaders such as public officials, developers, investors and residents. Conducted in affiliation with several interested parties this effort will change a part of our downtown by creating a neighborhood with distinct character and a lively, healthy, pedestrian environment in which to live, work, and play.

### **Seeking Regional Solutions**

- Coordinate planning with other cities, towns and counties in the region. Conduct regular conferences, meetings, and workshops for exchange of information and ideas.
- Identify and publicize examples of best practices to be used as models for creating healthy and sustainable communities.
- Establish a consensus of the region's most fragile natural, social and historic environments. Create strategies/mechanisms to protect these environments.

## **challenges & solutions**

- Define policies that clarify or limit acreage development, protect rural lands for food production and natural habitat,
- Coordinate reviews of water-related policies to ensure equitable access to clean water for agriculture, municipalities, industry and wildlife.
- Encourage energy conservation and alternative energy production through effective planning and green building techniques.
- Encourage healthy lifestyles and rich living environments with compact, walkable communities.
- Create food-based, rural/urban coalitions; foster understanding of interdependencies of communities & natural systems.

### **Regional Challenges**

Several regional challenges face this and other charrette locations in Nebraska's urban metroplex:

- Critical ecological systems are in path of rapid growth.
- Economic growth will not occur without attention to quality of life and the environment.
- The region's most valuable natural resources (water, wind, fertile soils, a 4-season solar climate) underutilized.
- There is no shared vision of preferred regional growth patterns or land use policies.
- Municipal and county governments have very different, conflicting approaches to planning and public policies.
- Water resources are uneven in quality/quantity.
- Infrastructure is lagging behind growth pressures.
- Agricultural and urban growth interests are in conflict.
- Region does not see itself as a unit of common economic interests; competitive tensions exist between communities and threaten growth.

*tip: ideal outcomes should provide multiple solutions rather than one big solution; regional significance will be discovered through a multitude of potential concepts that make your charrette site more livable, sustainable, and environmentally appropriate.*

Environmental



Social/Cultural



Technological

## 5 domains checklist

Economic



Public Policy



1. What was the most positive aspect of the workshop in your opinion?

2. If this workshop were to be held again, what three changes would you suggest to make it more effective?

3. Was the time for the workshop too short, too long, or just right?

4. What do you see as an immediate action item you can undertake in terms of sustainability after participating in this workshop?

5. Should any topics have been added to the charrette? 5.

6. What additional training would be useful to you?

7. Other comments?

Name (Optional)

## charrette evaluation

