



**Court**   
**Avenue**  
NEIGHBORHOOD

**URBAN DESIGN PLAN**

Roll Call # 99-106 January 4, 1999

Community Development Department  
*Planning and Urban Design Division*  
and  
City Manager's Office  
*Office of Economic Development*  
with  
The Downtown Housing Development Team

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# Picture the Future

## **T 5:00 ON A PLEASANT FRIDAY**

**A**t 5:00 on a pleasant Friday evening in late September, Karen, an associate at Principal Insurance Company in downtown Des Moines, leaves her office for the short walk home to her apartment on First Street in the Court Avenue Neighborhood. At 5:45 she has plans to jog on the Des Moines Riverfront path with her new friends, Sarah and Charles Bergman, empty nesters who've recently moved to the Brown Camp Loft condominiums, whom she'd met at a concert at the Simon Estes Amphitheater in August. After an invigorating jog along the river, the three decide to extend the evening by meeting in an hour for dinner at the new restaurant, *Jake's Crab House*, on the corner of Third Street and Court Avenue.

The restaurant is busy, but a table opens on the attractive outdoor patio, kept comfortable in the cool of the evening by heat lamps. As the three friends share a bottle of chardonnay and dine on swordfish and scallops, they overhear the group of four at the next table remarking that the spectacularly lit Polk County Courthouse and fountain provide a beautiful backdrop for outdoor dining. In Des Moines for a

convention, the four had come to Court Avenue for dinner at the recommendation of someone on the airport van. Karen and the Bergmans offer to show the out-of-towners a favorite dessert shop near the new entertainment center after dinner. As they walk toward *Let Them Eat Cake* later, Karen points out Gabrici's, an Italian restaurant known for its wine selection, pasta dishes, and relaxing ambiance complete with beautifully painted murals and an opera-trained vocalist. Along the street they pause to watch jugglers on the corner of Fourth and Court and admire the intriguing window displays of the specialty shops lining Fourth Street, where the visitors find some unique gifts to take home as mementos of Des Moines.

Back on Court Avenue, they hear the lilting tones of jazz and discover a quartet playing in an outdoor garden. Karen, the Bergmans, and the four conventioners listen for awhile, then continue south toward Riverfront Park. Relaxing on the seating steps, they watch the city lights reflected on the river and listen to the evening sounds muted by the flowing water. Many others also enjoying the crisp breeze stroll by. The out-of-towners thank Karen and the Bergmans for the hospitality and return to their hotel by completing their circle through the district along First Street to Court Avenue.

Saturday morning Karen walks down to the bustling Farmers' Market for coffee and a croissant, which she enjoys as she shops for a

variety of fresh vegetables and meat. On her way home, she stops at the drug store in the interior corridor of the new mixed-use residential development at Second and Court to pick up toothpaste and shampoo. In the afternoon, she decides to take a bike ride along the Raccoon River to Waterworks Park and on to the Great Western Trail. She returns home later than she'd expected but has plenty of time to walk to the district's cinema to meet a friend from work for the first evening show.

Sunday, Karen needs to spend some time on office work. She moves her portable computer to the table on her third-floor apartment balcony so she can take advantage of the fresh air and the view of the river. Her parents, who live in a suburb, call with an invitation for lunch. They're planning to attend an afternoon cooking demonstration at the Public Market building. Karen and her parents meet at their favorite Mexican taco stand and enjoy enchiladas and burritos at a table in the busy outdoor courtyard. On her way home, Karen picks up ingredients for her evening meal and a container of frozen yogurt from market stands.

Karen works until late Sunday night and gets up Monday morning with no time for her usual leisurely breakfast on the balcony while perusing the Des Moines Register. She leaves her apartment at 7:40, walks to Java Joe's to pick up a coffee and cranberry muffin to go, and is sitting at her desk at 8:00 sharp.

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# Executive Summary

The goal of this urban design plan is to chart a course for the revitalization of the Court Avenue area into a vibrant, mixed-use neighborhood with a strong retail entertainment component. Establishing downtown housing is critical to its revitalization. It provides the presence of people twenty four hours a day and creates a demand for retail services. The real rebirth in downtown housing across the country has occurred in historic and warehouse buildings such as those found in the Court Avenue area, providing it with a unique marketing tool.

In addition to unique housing opportunities in older buildings, downtown dwellers seek a pedestrian friendly and human scaled neighborhood with sufficient urban vitality that attracts visitors from other parts of the city. Strong retail and entertainment opportunities are key components of building a successful downtown neighborhood. This plan recognizes the critical importance of Court Avenue as an entertainment district, not only to future residents but to the metropolitan area as a whole, including the convention and visitor market. It is currently Des Moines' only pedestrian entertainment district.

The ability of Court Avenue to fulfill its entertainment role is currently limited by the

lack of a critical mass of building frontage providing street level retail and restaurant variety. This in turn contributes to a weak district identity and an image problem. The area south of Court Avenue still functions largely as a light industrial district with the presence of large surface parking lots, and a fragmented street system and the absence of strong pedestrian oriented activity nodes. The plan recommendations are aimed at addressing the elements that contribute to the area's image problems by building upon its existing strengths.

These strengths include

- a good stock of historic and warehouse buildings with the urban aesthetic that attracts people to downtown housing,
- a significant amount of undeveloped land available for new construction opportunities,
- the historic and pedestrian character of Court Avenue and Fourth Street,
- the highly successful Des Moines' Downtown Farmers' Market and other special events and festivals located in this district,
- the Des Moines Riverfront.

This urban design plan makes a broad range of observations and recommendations for revitalizing the Court Avenue area. Many of these, namely the first phase recommendations, center on three major locales in building on the district's existing strengths. These three sets of recommendations are considered catalytic in their anticipated ability to spur additional residential and retail development in the district.

The three phase one initiatives identified are

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## A. A New Riverfront Residential District along First Street

A new riverfront residential district involves establishing a neighborhood along a riverfront park. Dominated by surface parking lots, First Street is currently underdeveloped and presents a major opportunity to establish new residential construction in the district with river views. The Brown Camp Lofts have already established the south end of this district. The riverfront also presents a major opportunity to create a public open space that can serve as the residents' front yard. (*Refer to map.*)

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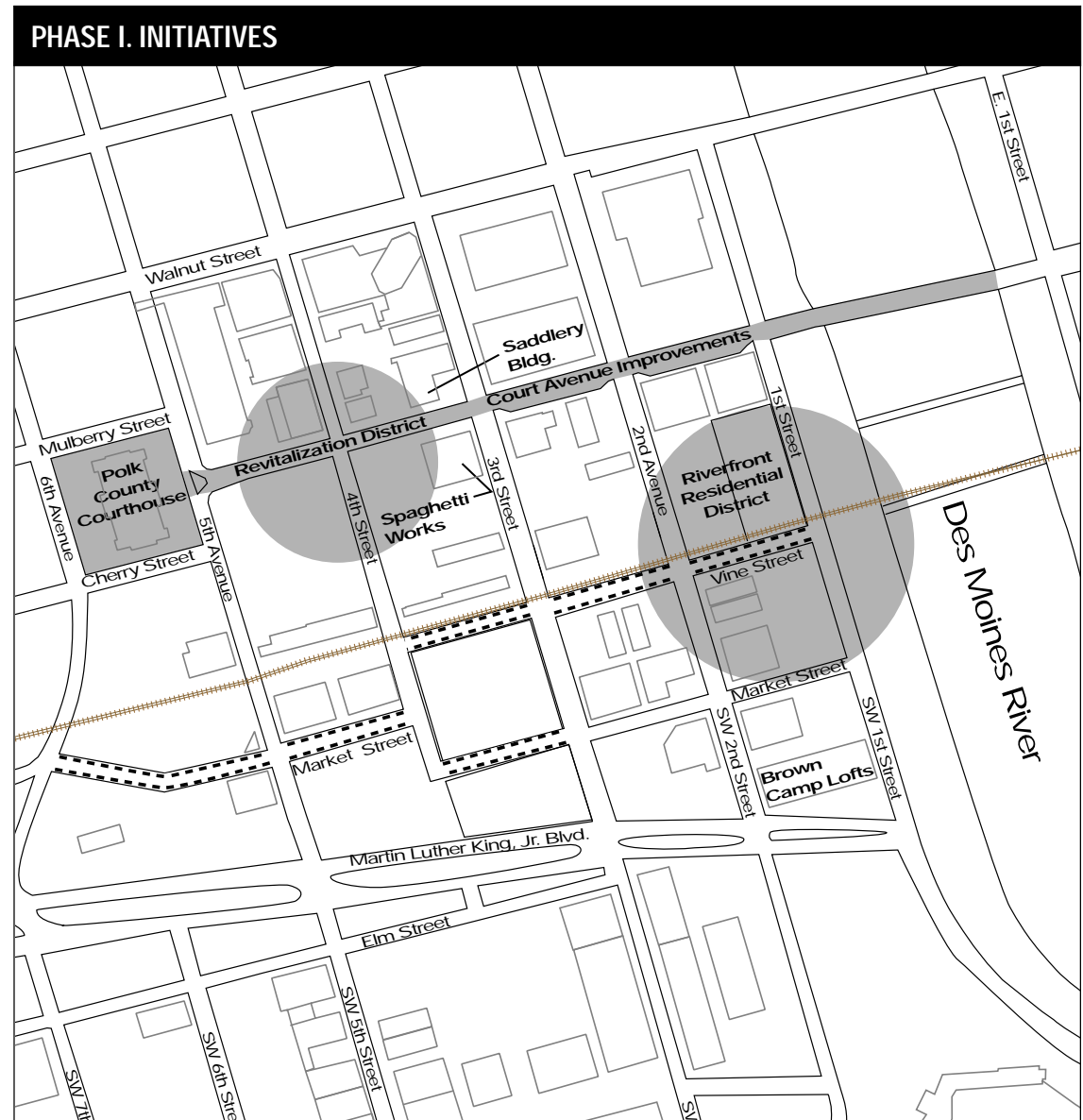
## B. A Revitalization District Centered on Court Avenue and Fourth Streets

The intersection of Court Avenue and Fourth Street is the heart of the district. It has a critical mass of historic buildings and viable retail establishments. There are a number of buildings that are ideal for rehabilitation into mixed-use residential facilities as well as underutilized parcels for redevelopment. This plan supports the development of an urban entertainment center at this location and recommends that additional building rehabilitation and new development should also be specifically targeted here. *(Refer to map.)*

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## C. Court Avenue/Fourth Street Streetscape Improvements

The economic health and image of this district are dependent on a vibrant Court Avenue. Court Avenue with its historic bridge over the Des Moines River and buildings, including the magnificent Polk County Courthouse, has the potential to become one of Des Moines' greatest and most memorable streets. Streetscape improvement should occur on Court Avenue to include street design, traffic improvements, and public realm management solutions to ensure its success. *(Refer to map.)*



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## From Concepts to Projects

The concepts put forth should serve as a framework shaping the development opportunities as they go forward. To this end, the plan should remain flexible in accommodating variations on them within the defined role of the district as a mixed-use neighborhood. In turn, all of the recommendations put forth in this plan must evolve from a concept to an actual project. Each must develop a scope and time frame and establish a constituency of supporters including businesses, property owners, and the leadership of the public sector. The success of some of these initiatives will come through the engagement of the private sector, as the improvements are intended to attract private investment to the Court Avenue district. It is known that if a good variety of goods and services is available, a downtown resident will spend approximately \$10,000 to \$11,000 a year there.

The City and County, with the participation of public/private partnerships such as the Des Moines Development Corporation, must take the lead in this effort in order to establish a housing market in central Des Moines and a retail stronghold as critical elements of revitalizing this unique downtown district.

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## Document Organization

**SECTION I** of the document presents the planning framework including a description of the plan approach and process, as well as the physical study area. It also describes the goals involved in creating a mixed-use urban neighborhood. A list of the plan recommendations by phase is provided as well.

**SECTION II** describes in detail the development concepts supported with images, in addition to the rationale and background information that support the recommendations.

**SECTION III** presents the *The Court Avenue Neighborhood District Design Guidelines* assembled as a tool for developers, city staff, and property owners. They are not required to be met to receive tax abatement but are strongly encouraged to be followed in achieving the desired character for the district that they describe.

**THE APPENDICES** provide additional detailed information relating to various plan recommendations including Court Avenue and Fourth Street retail *streetscape* considerations, approaches to *district zoning, building rehabilitation suitability* information, as well as *residential survey data* conducted for downtown Des Moines as part of the *Capitol Gateway East Urban Design Plan*. Background information on *Public Markets* is also provided as an appendix.

The district's *Proposed Land Use Plan* can be found as an appendix, as can the amended *Design Guidelines: Court Avenue Historic Area* document for the Capitol Center West Urban Revitalization Area "D" which identifies the design and development requirements for receiving tax abatement in the district.