

An industrial evolution

Brighton Boulevard appears primed for transformation into a residential area close to downtown

By Margaret Jackson
Denver Post Staff Writer
DenverPost.com

Not much has changed since Larry Burgess bought his first building on Brighton Boulevard in 1978.

Run-down houses are squashed between industrial buildings, a testament to the area's long history of housing working families near their jobs.

Over the years, Burgess has purchased another 18 buildings that were occupied by a tortilla factory, a machine shop, an automotive repair shop and a bar.

A retired naval officer and former Lockheed Martin engineer, Burgess originally didn't have a plan for the properties. He viewed them as an investment.

"That first building, I bought so I'd have an extra \$300 a month in my pocket when I turned 60," he said. Now 64, Burgess has landed in the middle of what could be Denver's next big redevelopment corridor.

The city has identified it as a natural place to grow because of its proximity to downtown and access to the South Platte River.

"In some ways, it has always been the back door into downtown," said Steve Gordon, development program manager for the city and county of Denver. "Now it has the potential to be the front door into downtown, except that the street is not attractive. It doesn't give people a good impression of Denver."

Largely cut off from downtown by the river and the railroads, the River North area evolved as its own community, with its own businesses providing goods and services to the area's residents. Over time, industrial operations replaced stores and schools.

Artists were the first contemporary residents to move in, looking for affordable digs when Lower Downtown's development claimed their studio lofts. That's how well-known developer Mickey Zeppelin found it. He and his partner, artist Susan Wick, converted an old building at 36th and Wazee

streets into studios and living space.

The transportation networks, big chunks of cheap land, riverfront access and gritty environment made the area irresistible.

"It hadn't been scrubbed and cleaned, and there was the opportunity to mix the old industrial with the new," Zeppelin said.

Dana and Jack Crawford also have set their sights on the area, planning to build a living/working space on a lot Jack believes once housed a topless truck stop.

There has been speculation that a Dallas developer plans to buy Denargo Market, a roughly 40-acre parcel that was the port for produce shipped into and out of metro Denver.

Zeppelin, long considered a pioneer of Denver's emerging urban landscape, recently started work on the second phase of Taxi, a live/work project at the site of the former Yellow Cab headquarters on Ringsby Court.

"We always looked at it as a catalytic site triggering things happening in the whole area," Zeppelin said. "Our target was creative work spaces for people who couldn't find what they were looking for downtown."

The Crawfords, probably best known for redeveloping historic Larimer Square, are planning another live/work project near the southwest corner of Brighton Boulevard and 31st Street.

"We just thought it followed the line of development logic," said Jack Crawford of Urban Neighborhoods Inc. "You come out of LoDo, fill up Central Platte Valley, and where do you go from there? You can't go south, you can't go west, but you can go north."

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As part of the citywide planning process known as Blueprint Denver, the Brighton Boulevard area was designated as River North, also affectionately known as RiNo. The area includes the Denargo Market neighborhood and extends northeast to the Nestlé Purina plant.

"This is a neglected industrial area," Zeppelin said. "Industrial is not the highest and best use of the land. There are some real opportunities here."

When the River North Plan was completed in 2003, only 200 people lived in the area. Since then, the 241-unit Jefferson at City Gate has opened and is 94 percent leased. By 2022, the area could house 5,000 people in as many

as 900 single-family attached units and 675 multifamily units, according to market studies done for Blueprint Denver.

Yet none of the 74 single-family homes in River North, primarily built before 1900, are zoned for residential use.

The market study, performed by Leland Consulting Group, documented potential demand for up to 400,000 square feet of new retail space in the area, 1.7 million square feet of office space and up to 750,000 square feet of industrial space.

Real estate consultant Bob Gollick has gotten a number of calls about the corridor over the past three years. As president of Robert Gollick Corp., he has helped several developers, including the Crawfords, Tim Larson and Bill Downey, get their properties rezoned for residential and commercial use.

Larson plans to redevelop the Brighton Ironworks Foundry, recent home of Bud's Warehouse, into 24 for-sale units, and Downey plans to build 16 townhomes in the 3400 block of Larimer Street. Gollick is working to rezone three other parcels.

The commitment of neighbors who are heavily invested in the area will make development successful, Gollick said. People such as Burgess - president of the Eyria Swansea/Globeville Business Association - will make sure it's developed responsibly.

Burgess has his own vision for the city block he owns, bounded by Delgany Street and Brighton Boulevard and 35th and 36th streets. He plans to build live/ work spaces and would like to see larger retailers fronting Brighton, with smaller independent retailers in the rear facing the South Platte River.

A pedestrian bridge would span the creek between Burgess' project and Taxi.

Meanwhile, Burgess is leasing space in his building at 3519 Brighton to small entrepreneurial businesses. He's got a sign company, an art gallery and a small recording studio.

"I originally selected this location because of the price of rent," said Mike Villano, owner of Mike's Killer Fish, which specializes in rare and wild-caught fish for collectors. "For a specialty store, people find you."

Developers such as Zeppelin and Crawford have the experience lenders look for when financing projects. Burgess will need to come up with about \$42 million to redevelop his block, and he knows that will be a challenge.

Brothers Mickey, Kirk and Fred Michel aren't in any hurry for the

redevelopment. As owners of the Butcher Block restaurant at 38th Street and Brighton, they worry that it will force their loyal working-class clients to jobs in other parts of the city as trendy sushi restaurants replace tried-and-true diners.

"We need people who work for a living who don't sit behind a desk," said Mickey Michel, who sold his location at 25th Street and Broadway in 2000 after the development of Coors Field drove his customers away. "Every time there's a redevelopment, it forces out the small-business people."

Only time will tell what Brighton Boulevard's well-planned growth will bring, but Burgess has a different intention.

"As I start developing my block," he said, "I may want the guy across the street to put in more trees, but I don't want to get rid of the third-generation family businesses."

Staff writer Margaret Jackson can be reached at 303-820-1473 or mjackson@denverpost.com.