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Article Summary: In 1986 downtown Omaha saw the loss of one major employer (Enron) and was facing the potential loss of another (ConAgra). The riverfront, meanwhile, was an industrial zone dominated by a lead refinery. Omaha’s return to the river involved not just massive physical transformation, but an extensive reconceptualization of the downtown and riverfront.

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Photographs / Images: downtown Omaha, 1950s; looking west on Douglas Street from the intersection of Sixteenth Street, 1920s; Kenneth Lay, CEO of Enron Corporation, Omaha, 1986; H J Lee and Lee-Coit-Andreesen warehouses in Jobbers Canyon, 1977; Nash Block, 1978; American Smelting and Refining Co, 1930s; US Senator Bob Kerrey in Omaha, 1990; Omaha Mayor Hal Daub and Robert Novotny, Asarco vice president; downtown Omaha from Interstate 29, 2000

# Creating an “IMAGE CENTER” REIMAGINING OMAHA’S DOWNTOWN AND RIVERFRONT, 1986-2003

BY JANET R. DALY BEDNAREK

In July 2001 the city of Omaha officially dedicated a new city park. The twenty-three-acre riverfront site was formerly home to the Asarco lead refinery, an enterprise with roots in the 1870s and a symbol of Omaha’s early industrial development. Initially, the city council approved the name “Union Labor Plaza.” However, after an election in May 2001, which witnessed the ousting of the incumbent mayor and five city council members, the new mayor and council decided to review the earlier choice. After asking for public input, the council decided on “Lewis and Clark Landing.”<sup>1</sup> In many ways the new name was perhaps more fitting given the decided transformation of Omaha’s downtown and riverfront involving not only the new park, but also a host of other developments from the ConAgra headquarters project in the late 1980s to a burst of large-scale corporate, civic, and residential projects in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Omaha’s leaders had first promoted “back to the river” ideas in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By the early twenty-first century, those ideas witnessed a full flowering.

Omaha’s return to the river, though, involved not just massive physical transformation, but an extensive reconceptualization of the downtown and riverfront. Omaha’s historic downtown riverfront had been home to commerce, transportation and industry. Omaha’s new downtown riverfront was home to open space, recreation, leisure and cultural amenities. “Union Labor Plaza” evoked the historic, somewhat gritty downtown riverfront. “Lewis and Clark Landing,” on the other hand, hearkened back to a past that pre-dated Omaha itself by a half century and evoked more pristine images of frontier, wilderness and adventure.

Though the plaza eventually held a statue dedicated to Omaha’s working people, the choice of name suggested the degree to which Omaha’s civic leadership had reconceptualized and transformed the downtown and riverfront to serve as a new “image center” for the city.

Though certainly no longer functioning as *the* center of America’s urban areas, downtowns still command a great deal of the attention, energy, and imagination of those concerned with the future of America’s cities. Downtown history has also proved of interest to urban historians. The last decade in particular has witnessed the publication of two major works on the history of this crucial urban area. Robert M. Fogelson’s work is essentially a political history of the downtown, focused, as he said, on power—who held it, how they exercised it, and how that shaped downtowns from the 1880s to the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Alison Isenberg, on the other hand, has produced a social and cultural history of the nation’s downtowns, taking the story into the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

Both works ended in the first decades following World War II. By that time, both argued, downtowns had ceased to serve their traditional function as the central place within cities and were being redefined and rebuilt—with varying degrees of success—for a new role or roles in the future.<sup>4</sup> Carl Abbott focused on the issue of the redefinition of downtowns. He noted that since World War II and through the 1980s the very idea of the downtown had changed multiple times and, as a result, planning strategies for the area had changed as well. He identified five different conceptualizations of the downtown and the planning strategies associated with them. From 1945 until 1955, downtown was still regarded as the “unitary” center of the city. The

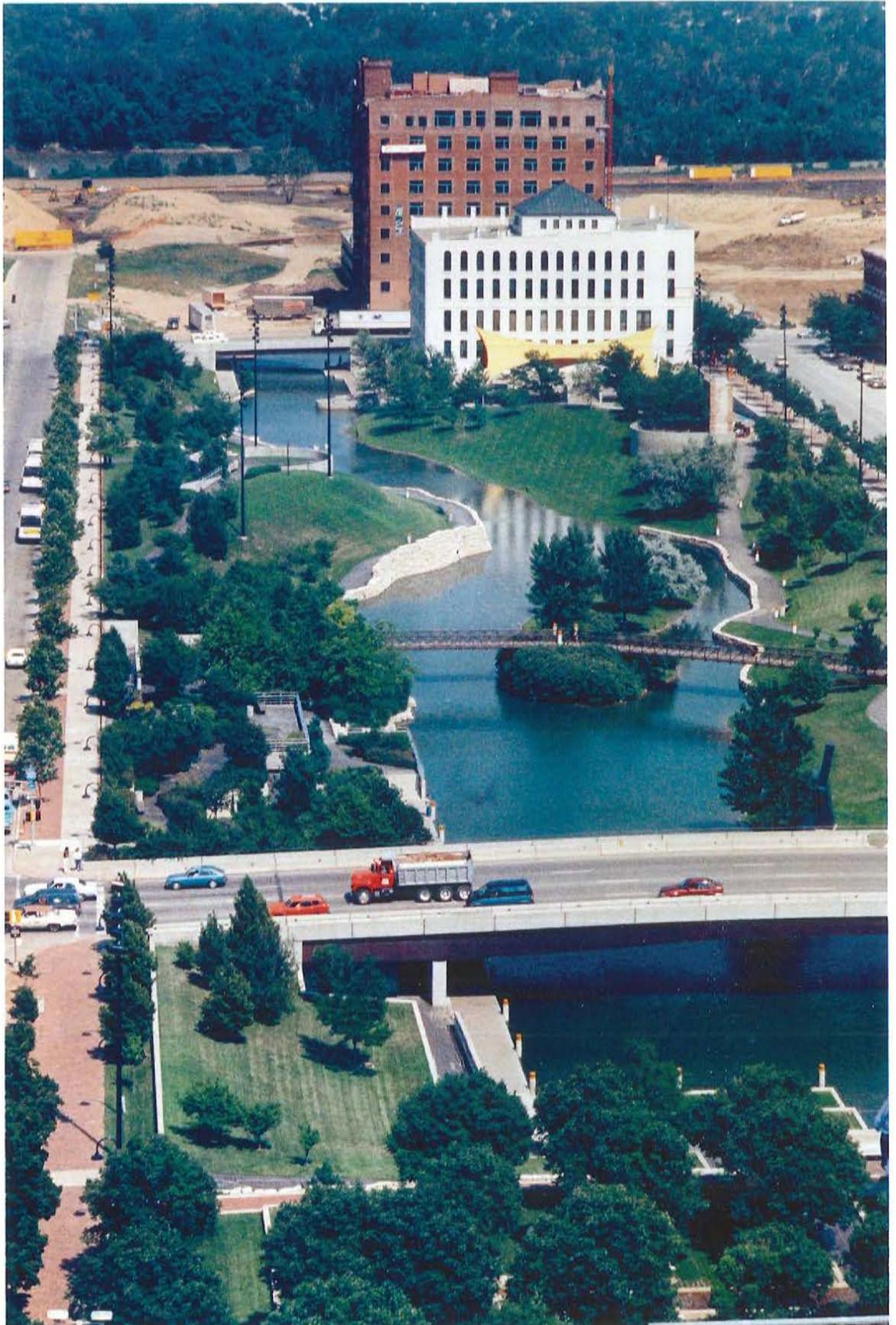


Looking west from above the Missouri River, Heartland of America Park and ConAgra Headquarters occupy the land that once held Jobbers' Canyon—Omaha's warehouse district. Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*.



Shown in July 2005, the Qwest Center dominates the area that once belonged to the Asarco lead refinery, the Union Pacific rail yards and repair shops, and the Aaron Ferer & Sons scrap metal business. Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*.

Looking east at Central Park Mall (known today at Gene Leahy Mall) in 1989. In the background, ground is broken for the new ConAgra headquarters and Heartland of America Park. Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*.





planning strategies employed—mostly involving transportation—aimed at preserving the downtown in that role. By 1955, however, there was a growing realization that downtown no longer functioned as the retail center. To make the downtown accessible and inviting to shoppers once more, planners emphasized urban clearance to, among other goals, clean up “blighted” downtown areas and provide parking. The next major shift came in the mid-1960s as planners began to think of downtown not as a unitary center, but as a “federation of sub-districts,” a conceptualization of downtowns that remains to the present. During this period, planners placed emphasis on the variety of experiences provided by downtowns and pushed for conservation, the preservation of historic structures, and efforts to make the downtown a pedestrian-friendly environment. By the mid-1970s, though still interested in the pedestrian, emphasis shifted to issues of design and the provision of cultural facilities, open space and other “urban” amenities. Since the mid-1980s, however, focus has shifted from the pedestrian to plans that serve the needs of headquarters personnel and other office workers. By that time,

downtown had been redefined once more, this time as the “command post” of not just the urban economy, but the emerging global economy.<sup>5</sup>

Robert Fogelson emphasized in his work that the “downtown of the past is gone—and gone for good.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most striking evidence of that in Omaha was the fact that as its leaders sought to revitalize the downtown and its riverfront, they actually created something new. The traditional center of downtown was Sixteenth Street. In many ways the new center of the new downtown is Tenth Street. Omaha’s “new downtown,” in going “back to the river” has involved, therefore, a shift in the center of gravity from Sixteenth to Tenth Street. Furthermore, as suggested, the downtown’s riverfront has been completely reconceptualized. As with most cities in the United States, Omaha began on the river. The riverfront hosted docks, manufacturing, and transportation uses. The river itself served as both a means of transportation and as a convenient sewer.<sup>7</sup> In reclaiming the riverfront, Omaha’s civic leadership reconceived and rebuilt it as a center of open space, recreation, leisure, and suburban-like office parks. And what had been the

**Downtown Omaha in the 1950s, looking northwest. The large, blocky buildings to the right are part of the warehouse district, including Jobbers’ Canyon. The riverfront is just beyond the right edge of the photo.**  
NSHS RG2341-71



Looking west on Douglas Street from the intersection of Sixteenth Street, 1920s. The Brandeis building, which still stands, is on the left. Sixteenth Street was the traditional center of downtown, but in recent decades Tenth Street has become more prominent. NSHS RG2341-58

oldest part of the downtown is now the newest, with a new function as “image center” for the city.<sup>8</sup>

Omaha’s civic leadership, public and private, has repeatedly addressed the issues that have faced downtown Omaha. To a certain extent since the late 1950s and certainly since the 1960s, various plans were developed to first preserve the central place of downtown and later to re-imagine the downtown as one of many centers in the city.<sup>9</sup> The latest period in downtown planning, that since the late 1980s and continuing into the early twenty-first century, witnessed a significant physical transformation of much of the downtown and riverfront area.<sup>10</sup> Though Carl Abbott suggested a certain level of discontinuity between planning strategies shaping downtowns from 1975 to 1985 and those since 1985, the planning for downtown in Omaha would suggest a certain level of continuity between the two periods. While much of the physical transformation of downtown involved the construction of new corporate headquarters and other office structures, those projects developed within a planning framework that also anticipated the further realization of plans from the 1970s to “return to the river” and provide downtown with open space and recreational amenities, as well as cultural facilities.

This article will trace the major components involved in the transformation of downtown Omaha and its riverfront from the late 1980s through about 2003. First, by all accounts, the key event leading to the rebuilding was the 1986 announcement that

Enron was moving its corporate headquarters from Omaha to Houston. In many ways, the Enron decision and its aftermath provided the context and momentum for a number of related actions and events: the announcement that ConAgra would build its new headquarters in downtown Omaha, passage of tax reform at the state level, and the successful negotiations by public and private entities that resulted in the clearance of the Jobbers Canyon historic district near downtown’s riverfront. The late 1980s and early 1990s then witnessed a private sector effort to complete the “back to the river” plans first developed in the 1970s, but largely unfulfilled, as well as city initiatives including development of a new master plan and the designation of the entire downtown as blighted. The pivotal events in the reconstruction of the riverfront, however, came between 1995 and 2003: the mayoral terms of Hal Daub, the decisions of other Omaha companies to headquarter downtown, and the successful efforts to bring new corporate facilities to the downtown, clean up the riverfront all along the downtown and north to the airport, and build new cultural/recreational facilities in downtown, including a new arena/convention center, a new performing arts center, and riverside parks and trails. The article will end with an examination of the degree to which Omaha’s downtown and riverfront have been rebuilt, transformed and reconceptualized to serve as an “image center” for the city and to what extent Tenth Street has supplanted Sixteenth Street as the main street of the downtown.

### Enron Leaves

In 1985 Omaha-based InterNorth (formerly Northern Natural Gas, a natural gas pipeline company) merged with Houston Natural Gas. Within a year, the new company renamed itself Enron. At the time of the merger, InterNorth was by far the larger of the two companies. However, by the 1986 name change, a number of key individuals with Omaha ties had retired from the board, replaced by Houston-based people. In addition, though executives from InterNorth had originally headed the new company, following their departure, the former head of Houston Natural Gas, Kenneth Lay, assumed the role of chairman and chief executive officer. By the time of its annual meeting in May 1986, rumors abounded that Enron would move its headquarters from Omaha to Houston. Though Lay had announced after the meeting that Enron had “no plans now,” he added that the company would have to “evaluate everything.”<sup>11</sup>

The bad news came barely a month later. On May 12, 1986, Enron announced it would move its headquarters out of its virtually new building on the eastern edge of downtown Omaha to Houston, Texas. Although the announcement focused just on the two hundred people directly involved with the headquarters move, it soon became clear that many more jobs would be lost over the following year. Instead of two hundred jobs, estimates were that Enron would cut up to 1,000 jobs in Omaha, which, at the time of the announcement, had approximately 1,900 Enron employees.<sup>12</sup>

Though many local civic and governmental leaders attempted to put the best “spin” possible on the news—declaring that the move was more about the nature of the natural gas industry than anything about Omaha—nonetheless many began to criticize the business climate, especially the tax structure, in the city and the state. And over the following months public declarations varied between minimizing the impact of the loss of jobs and calling for action, primarily tax reform, economic diversification, and better local leadership.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the Enron presence in the city continued to diminish. By May 1988, the local newspaper reported that most of the four hundred remaining Enron employees in Omaha would be let go or offered transfers to Houston.<sup>14</sup>

Determined not to have history repeat itself, civic leaders responded to another corporate headquarters decision-making process with actions that marked the beginning of a new phase in the development and transformation of downtown Omaha.

### **ConAgra Stays, LB 775 Passes, Jobbers Canyon Falls**

Barely six months after Enron decided to move to Houston, another major company announced the possibility of leaving. ConAgra, a packaged food company in the Fortune 500, announced plans that included the construction of a new food products laboratory (in Omaha or perhaps elsewhere) and the possibility of moving its headquarters from downtown Omaha to another city. In contrast to Enron, a little over a year later, ConAgra unveiled plans for a new downtown Omaha riverfront corporate complex.<sup>15</sup> Between the two announcements, two key pieces had to be put in place to bring about the desired result. First was the passage of new tax legislation at the state level, LB775. Second, city leaders—public and private—had to come together to acquire the riverfront site identified as the best location for the proposed complex. Adding to the complexity of that task,



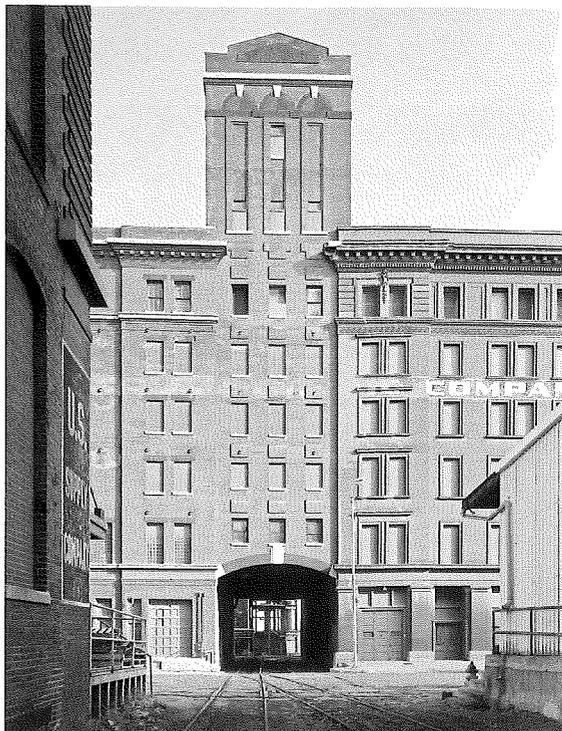
the preferred site was a nineteenth century warehouse district called Jobbers Canyon, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Both pieces were put in place largely because of the effort of local and state civic leaders who were determined to keep ConAgra (and other important companies) from leaving Omaha and Nebraska. The ConAgra complex, even before its completion, sparked great optimism and new enthusiasm for downtown redevelopment.

When ConAgra announced plans for its new laboratory and possible headquarters move, its chairman, Charles M. “Mike” Harper, bluntly told state officials that they needed to restructure the tax system or his company would leave.<sup>16</sup> The entire restructuring package that the state then proposed included four pieces of legislation. By far the most controversial was LB775, the Employment and Investment Growth Act. LB775 gave “a company a tax credit worth 5 percent of the additional payroll it creates if it adds at least 30 new jobs and invests at least \$3 million.” Additionally, a company could receive a “tax credit equal to 10 percent of a capital investment of at least \$20 million.”<sup>17</sup>

LB775 faced strong opposition in the Nebraska legislature. Many there argued that the proposed law was specifically designed for ConAgra and that the state was being pressured by the company’s threatened actions. In the end, the bill survived attempts at unfriendly amendments and even a filibuster by Omaha state senator Ernie Chambers. The bill finally passed by a vote of 37-11 in late May 1987. As Governor Kay Orr announced she would sign the bill, Mike Harper announced ConAgra would stay in Omaha and built its new food product laboratory in the city.<sup>18</sup>

**Kenneth Lay, CEO of Enron Corporation, Omaha, 1986. Years before its infamous bankruptcy and accounting fraud scandal, Enron was founded in Omaha by a merger of Omaha-based InterNorth and Houston Natural Gas. Enron announced in 1986 that it would move its headquarters from downtown Omaha to Houston, Texas. Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*.**

The H. J. Lee and Lee-Coit-Andreeson warehouses on the east side of Ninth Street, between Farnam and Harney, looking east from the railroad alley in 1977. These early twentieth-century buildings (1900, 1916-17) were part of Jobbers Canyon. Photo by David Murphy. NSHS SFN39405



Equally controversial was the proposed site for the new ConAgra complex, Jobbers Canyon. In 1986, the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Board recommended a number of properties for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places, including the city's Jobbers Canyon Historic District, a collection of nineteenth century warehouses on Omaha's waterfront, east of Tenth Street. Only a year after this successful nomination, city officials and representatives from the Chamber of Commerce were working with ConAgra to identify



Looking northwest toward the Nash Blocks in 1978. Located on the northwest corner of Ninth and Harney in Jobbers' Canyon, the buildings were designed by noted architect Thomas R. Kimball and built in 1905-07. Photo by David Murphy. NSHS SFN39406

a downtown riverfront site for its proposed complex. Eventually, the company decided on Jobbers Canyon. For the ConAgra project to go forward, Jobbers Canyon had to go.<sup>19</sup>

By late 1987, the Omaha Development Foundation, the development arm of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, had begun negotiations with property owners in Jobbers Canyon. Though property owners were receptive, Omaha's historic preservation community strongly opposed the purchase and demolition of the warehouses. Throughout the lengthy process of purchase and clearance, historic preservationists waged a determined, but ultimately futile, effort to prevent the demolition.<sup>20</sup> Late on the date set by ConAgra for final resolution of the Jobbers Canyon land deal, January 4, 1988, the Omaha Development Foundation announced it had reached an agreement to purchase all the Jobbers Canyon properties. On January 5, 1988, ConAgra formally announced its plans for the site.<sup>21</sup>

ConAgra's decision to build its new corporate complex on Omaha's downtown riverfront was immediately hailed as a "new chapter" for downtown Omaha. The project, according to local sources, potentially could spark up to \$175 million in private construction spending. Indeed, following the ConAgra announcement, the Union Pacific Railroad announced it would renovate its freight house, located adjacent to the ConAgra site, into a state-of-the-art dispatch center. The mayor and chamber officials all predicted tremendous gains for the area as a result of the ConAgra decision. The final details between the city, county, and ConAgra were worked out by March 1988 and included a commitment by the county to build a thirty-acre park with a fifteen-acre lake, named Heartland of America Park, just north of the ConAgra property, along the Missouri River.<sup>22</sup>

### Refocusing on Downtown and the Riverfront: City Plans and Private Plans, 1988-1995

ConAgra's decision to locate its new complex along Omaha's riverfront prompted a new round of public and private planning for downtown Omaha. Much of it hearkened back to the ideas from the 1970s that had envisioned a revitalized downtown, reconnected with the river. The centerpiece of the 1970s era return-to-the-river planning was the Central Park (now Gene Leahy) Mall, a block-wide green space carved out of the downtown from Fifteenth Street to near the river (Eighth Street), between Farnam and Douglas streets.<sup>23</sup> Construction began in 1975 and the city officially took possession in 1982. Though construction ended,



American Smelting and Refining Co. in the 1930s. Later known as Asarco, Inc., the lead refinery was pressured to clean up its operations, and finally to move. NSHS RG2341-400

at that time the mall was not yet complete. The last two blocks, between Tenth and Eighth streets, remained unfinished for another thirteen years.<sup>24</sup>

City officials had hoped that the Central Park Mall would serve as a catalyst for downtown redevelopment. And there were some notable construction projects along or very near the mall: the W. Dale Clark Public Library, the Peter Kiewit Conference Center–State Office Building, the Central Park Plaza (which housed ConAgra’s headquarters until the move to the new riverfront complex), and the Northwestern Bell (now World-Herald/ Qwest) building.<sup>25</sup> There were also notable failures, including an attempt to rekindle retail activity along Sixteenth Street—the historic retail “heart” of downtown. The Omaha Development Foundation spearheaded the effort to build a small retail complex just one block west of the Central Park Plaza (on the west side of the Central Park Plaza) and the city redesigned Sixteenth Street as a pedestrian friendly mall with fewer lanes of traffic and attractive transit stops. The heated bus shelters, however, acquired the reputation not for commuter comfort but as gathering places for the homeless. Youth “gangs” congregated at and near the small ParkFair Mall, adding to the negative image of the area. As of 2008, the bus shelters were still in place, but the Park Fair Mall has been transformed into indoor parking for tenants of the Central Park Plaza. Very little retail activity remains along Sixteenth Street.<sup>26</sup>

Following the ConAgra decision, both city and private developers seized upon the enthusiasm generated by the project to draw up new plans that each hoped would finally result in the dynamic revitalization of the downtown promised, but never fully realized, in the 1970s plans. First, to speed redevelopment projects—and potentially the ConAgra project in particular should private negotiations with property owners fail—the city council in late December 1987 declared the entire

downtown area as blighted. Under Nebraska law, the designation paved the way for the city to create redevelopment plans, to use the power of condemnation, and allow tax-increment financing.\* The city could also create special redevelopment districts within the blighted areas. That action allowed the city to assemble land through purchase or condemnation and turn it over to private developers, as long as the project was identified as having a public benefit.<sup>27</sup> Although the city did not need to use its powers of condemnation for the ConAgra project, the ability to create special redevelopment districts proved very important later.<sup>28</sup>

Then in 1988, the city planning department, city council and the office of the mayor began work on a new city development plan, approved in June 1990. Though designed for the entire city, the development plan included language defining the downtown, and policies directed specifically at the area. First, the plan declared that downtown Omaha was “a special place for Omaha” and called for “its comprehensive revitalization.” It pointed out that the downtown was “geographically remote from newly developing parts of Omaha” but a healthy downtown was “especially important to all parts of the city.” It emphasized the “unique built environment” and that it was still “a critical part of the city’s view of itself” as well as “the city’s single biggest concentrated employment center” and “the center of Omaha’s civic and cultural life.”<sup>29</sup>

As the city developed its own plans, a group of prominent local civic and corporate leaders proposed its own set of ideas. Their plan was eventually labeled “Gateway” and focused on

\*Tax increment financing is an economic development tool. It allows municipalities to finance improvements (demolition, environmental remediation, utilities and so on) associated with economic development projects within defined tax increment districts. The financing is based on the projected tax revenue increases produced by the improvements and by subsequent development within the district.

U.S. Sen. Bob Kerrey  
(right) in Omaha in 1990.



the riverfront north of the ConAgra complex. The Gateway project centered on a proposal to transform the Union Pacific repair shops/yard on the northern edge of downtown into a \$150 million (later \$500 million) 235-acre development with office buildings, apartments, condominiums, a marina, hotel, botanical center, and parkland. Full realization of the plan depended not only upon the cooperation of the Union Pacific Railroad, which backed the plan, but also upon the relocation of a number of industrial operations along the river, including a lead refinery, a scrap metal yard, and a barge terminal. The need to relocate those activities prompted strong and determined opposition from some of the companies involved. Though the Union Pacific pledged to donate land and several city and county officials pledged support, the Gateway plan was delayed as long as the private interests behind it struggled to deal with the companies determined not to make way.<sup>30</sup>

#### **The Pieces Come Together: The Transformation of Downtown Omaha, 1995-2003**

Though ideas and plans for downtown and the riverfront appeared periodically between 1988 and the early 1990s, most projects remained on the drawing board until the mid-1990s. Between

1995 and 2001, during the mayoral terms of Hal Daub, a new city plan involving the downtown was approved and a number of major projects were started or announced. Together they formed the foundation for the physical transformation of much of the eastern downtown area. Three companies—the Union Pacific Railroad, the First National Bank, and the Omaha World-Herald—all announced major construction projects. Another company, the Gallup Organization, announced it would move its headquarters to Omaha. The National Park Service decided to build a new regional headquarters building. And Omaha's voters approved a bond issue to build a new arena/convention center. Few of these would have been possible absent a dynamic public-private partnership between city leaders, especially Daub, along with state and federal officials and local civic leaders.<sup>31</sup> And in many ways the key action taken by this partnership was the clearance of the riverfront area, which involved the demolition of the Union Pacific yards, the removal of a lead refinery and a scrap metal operation, and the relocation of the municipal river port. All this was in place by 2001.

By far the easiest piece of the riverfront puzzle was the Union Pacific's shuttered repair shops and rail yards. The Union Pacific had supported the

private Gateway project in the early 1990s and even offered to donate land. As that effort languished, the Union Pacific made plans to prepare its 235-acre property for redevelopment. The original Gateway project had envisioned the refurbishing and reuse of some of the buildings. However, by 1995, the Union Pacific had decided to demolish the structures and clear the area in order to prepare it for redevelopment. At that time, though, the railroad had no buyers for the property.<sup>32</sup> Another piece fell in place in 2001 when the city developed a plan to move the municipal port to a location north of the airport.<sup>33</sup> Far more difficult were the negotiations involving Asarco and Aaron Ferer & Sons.

Asarco Inc. owned and operated a lead refinery along the riverfront at 500 Douglas Street, near the northeastern boundary of the Central Park Mall and Heartland Park. The company had been under pressure to clean up its operations, particularly the release of lead into the atmosphere, for a number of years. In 1989 the company spent \$6.7 million to install a new facility to improve the recovery of precious metals during the refining process and to reduce lead emissions. Immediately following the opening of the new facility, lead levels measured

in the downtown area dropped, but in 1990 the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reported that lead levels in the downtown area again exceeded federal standards. The blame was placed not on Asarco, but on demolition work around an old battery plant.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, the continued high lead levels resulted in renewed efforts by state and federal environmental agencies to reduce lead emissions.

The Nebraska Council of Environmental Quality issued a July 6, 1993, deadline for the company to cut lead emissions. As that deadline approached, the company requested a six-month extension. It argued that without the extension, it would have to close its Omaha operations, which had 220 employees. Following a series of negotiations, the company agreed to spend \$25.8 million on plant improvements and \$1.9 million per year on operations to bring lead emissions down to healthy limits. The state then extended the deadline to January 6, 1997.<sup>35</sup> Just as it seemed the company had put its environmental problems behind it, in March 1994 two residents of Bellevue, Nebraska, a community just south of Omaha on the Missouri River, filed suit against Asarco. Their concern was not air pollution, but water pollution. This action came one day after the company filed suit against the Nebraska Council of Environmental Quality arguing that it had a valid permit to discharge wastes into the river. The following month the Environmental Protection Agency filed suit to halt discharges into the river.<sup>36</sup> As the various suits made their way through the court system, a number of Omaha and Nebraska politicians began negotiations with the company. Their aim was to convince the company to move rather than improve.

About a year after the first lawsuits were filed, Senator Bob Kerrey (D-NE) confirmed in March 1995 that he was leading negotiations between Asarco and other local officials including Governor Ben Nelson (D) and newly elected Mayor Hal Daub.\* Kerrey was interested in the creation of a park that would stretch along the Missouri River from the Heartland of America Park north along the river to near the airport. This park would be part of a larger complex of riverfront trails envisioned to stretch from the city of Tekamah to just south of Bellevue. The creation of such a riverfront park, it was suggested, would aid in the commercial



**In June 1998, Omaha Mayor Hal Daub (right) listens to Robert Novotny, Asarco vice president, before signing an agreement on the city takeover of Asarco's riverfront property.** Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*.

\* Kerrey and Nelson were both Democrats. Even though elected mayor on a non-partisan ballot, Daub was a well-known Republican who served in the U.S. House of Representatives during the 1980s. Daub came to office following a special election in January 1995 to fill the term of Mayor P. J. Morgan, who resigned as mayor to take a job in the private sector.

Downtown Omaha as seen from Interstate 29, near the I-480 exit. By January 2001, the First National Bank Tower was overtaking the Woodman tower in height. Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*.



development of the Union Pacific property. Kerrey strongly suggested that Asarco could spend the money it planned to use to meet environmental standards at its current location to instead fund a move to a new location.<sup>37</sup>

As determined negotiations with Asarco proceeded, in June 1995, Mayor Hal Daub announced his own vision for the downtown riverfront. Looking more to the major projects that might be inspired should a riverfront park be realized than to the scenic trails system emphasized by Kerrey, Daub spoke of a downtown riverfront that would include “a 35,000-seat domed stadium, a 250,000-square-foot convention center, two major hotels, apartments, restaurants, shops and a monorail.” He estimated the price tag at “\$600 million to \$1 billion.” He also estimated that the project could take seven years to complete—three years to plan and four years to build. He admitted that the plan was ambitious, responding: “But if you don’t stick your neck out, you’re never going to make any progress . . . There are risks involved in this . . . It will take persistence, determination and a commitment to cooperate instead of figuring out some little nit-picky thing that they want to hang up on and become a naysayer.”<sup>38</sup> An examination of the plan in the local newspaper, the *Omaha World-Herald*,

the following month noted the similarities (in spirit especially as well as in a few details) between Daub’s vision and the Gateway plan of the early 1990s as well as with the riverfront plans developed in the early 1970s.

Before any of those visions could be realized, however, local, state and federal officials needed to work out a plan to move Asarco from its riverfront location. Negotiations continued through 1995 and into 1996. Finally, following a settlement of the federal lawsuit concerning discharge into the river, the city and Asarco announced an agreement. Though the company suggested that it might build a new plant somewhere near the city, the agreement announced in April 1996 did not specify when or where. Instead, it simply stated that the company would close the refinery, demolish its buildings, and perform an environmental cleanup so that by the end of 1998 the city would be presented with a 23-acre grassy area that could be developed as a park. However, negotiations over some details of the plan, especially concerning cleanup and future liability, continued through 1998. The company came to final agreement with the state in September 1997; the city and the company signed a final deal on June 10, 1998. Operations of the refinery ended in July 1997 and demolition began in August 1998. The company turned the property, now known as Lewis and Clark Landing, over to the city in 2000.<sup>39</sup>

The final piece fell into place in 2001. Aaron Ferer & Sons, a scrap metal business, had resisted plans to force it to move since the announcement of the Gateway plan in the early 1990s. In September 1996, Mayor Daub indicated that talks with the company were underway.<sup>40</sup> Following the Asarco deal and the cleanup of the Union Pacific property, the momentum behind the riverfront idea put additional pressure on Aaron Ferer & Sons. In early June 1998, company officials still voiced strong opposition to any plan to relocate the firm. Later that same month, Matthew Ferer, company president, gave an interview to the *Omaha World-Herald* in which he emphasized the value of the recycling done by the company. He also noted that the city had approached the company about riverfront plans as early as 1995, but then nothing happened. In the meantime, the company purchased a new \$2 million machine to shred metal into “pieces that steel foundries or other customers can throw into their furnaces.” A move, he argued, would cause “irreparable harm.” When asked if his statements meant that any attempt by the city to move the company would cost a considerable sum of

money, Ferer responded, "Oh, yes."<sup>41</sup> However, a deal was struck in March 2001 following the news that the Gallup Organization wanted to move its headquarters to Omaha and build a new complex along the riverfront (see below). The Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce spearheaded a private fund-raising effort to purchase the property. The company received \$6 million for the land and \$8 million to cover relocation costs. With the city's agreement to clean up the refinery property, as well as the former municipal port area, the entire riverfront area was available for redevelopment.<sup>42</sup>

The projects constructed in the eastern part of the downtown and along the waterfront reflected ideas expressed by the mayor and in a city planning document produced in 1995. That document was a follow-up to the city's development plan approved in 1990. Following the approval of that plan, Mayor P. J. Morgan appointed a fifty-member citizen task force to work with the city planning department to develop a new city master plan. The committee first met in July 1991 and completed its work in 1995. The new master plan included a number of sections or reports including a "concept element" and one on "land use." The "concept element" of the master plan contained a vision statement: "Omaha must be a community committed to promoting and maintaining a high quality of life for all of its people." To realize that vision, the document included a number of goals, two of which were important for the downtown. The first goal declared the need to "manage the growth of the city." To do so, the city must "be pro-active rather than reactive regarding development." The second goal was to "develop and maintain a positive city image." To do this, the city must take action to "strengthen the CBD [Central Business District] as the City's 'image center.'"<sup>43</sup> Over the next several years, city leaders took both goals to heart.

Another section of the plan, the "land use element," further articulated the idea of the downtown as the "image center" of the city, declaring:

Omaha's downtown will be the clear and positive "image center" for the City. The Downtown/Riverfront area should contain a wide variety of activities and facilities, but should focus on being the location for major governmental offices, major corporate offices, major culture/entertainment facilities, major public open spaces and attractions, major convention/hotel facilities, educational facilities, and specialty retail and residential facilities.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to more fully defining the idea of the downtown as the "image center," this part of the

plan also included a number of other important ideas. First, it clearly linked the downtown and the riverfront as a focus of land use planning. Second, it articulated a desire to bring certain specific land uses to the downtown and riverfront, stating: "Public funds must not be used to construct . . . facilities outside of the Downtown unless it has been determined that the proposed facility does not fit within the overall plans for Downtown and it is clear the development of the amenity elsewhere would not detract from the effort to establish the Downtown/Riverfront area as the City's 'image center.'"<sup>45</sup> In many ways, whether in response to this new city plan or due to other factors, the projects constructed within the downtown and on the riverfront reflected the vision and goals of the new city master plan.

As noted, three important components of the ultimate redevelopment of the downtown and riverfront involved the decisions by three locally headquartered companies to build new facilities in the eastern half of the downtown. Following a major corporate merger that sparked rumors of its imminent departure, the Union Pacific Railroad, long headquartered in the city, announced in 1997 that it would remain in the city. While that cheered local leaders, in some ways even better news came two years later.<sup>46</sup> The Union Pacific Corporation, a holding company formed in 1969 and, from that point on, the parent company of the Union Pacific Railroad, initially established its headquarters in New York City. In 1987, the Union Pacific Corporation moved to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and then in 1997 to Dallas, Texas. However, that same year the corporation moved its chief financial officer and those reporting to him to Omaha, leaving only nineteen headquarters employees in Dallas. Finally, in April 1999, the Union Pacific Corporation announced plans to move its headquarters to Omaha. Though few jobs came with the move, the relocation put the headquarters of another Fortune 500 company (the others at the time being ConAgra, Berkshire Hathaway, IBP, Inacom, Mutual of Omaha, and Peter Kiewit Sons Inc.) in Omaha.<sup>47</sup>

Almost immediately speculation on a new headquarters building began. Behind the scenes the city and the Chamber of Commerce held negotiations with the company. Attention focused on the city block between Fourteenth and Fifteenth streets, Douglas and Dodge streets. The city—having created within the "blighted downtown" a special redevelopment district (see below)—agreed to handle the acquisition of the site and to purchase the company's old headquarters building. The

agreement between the city and the Union Pacific Corporation was finalized with a city council vote in April 2001. The company unveiled the plans for the new building the following June. The new headquarters building opened three years later in June 2004.<sup>48</sup>

The same special redevelopment area containing the new headquarters of the Union Pacific Corporation also included building projects by First National Bank and The World-Herald Corporation. On October 23, 1996, city leaders unveiled an extensive downtown redevelopment plan that included the creation of a Downtown Northeast Redevelopment Area, a thirty-two-block area bounded by Douglas Street to the south, Interstate 480 to the north, Eighth Street to the east and Seventeenth Street to the west. Only twenty-three of the thirty-two blocks, though, would be targeted for redevelopment. The creation of the redevelopment area allowed for government assistance to the companies for the projects, including tax-increment financing, redevelopment bonds, and the use of eminent domain to acquire properties. The city also agreed to build a number of new parking garages. Just over a year after the call for transforming the downtown into the city's "image center," the planning board approved the downtown redevelopment project in November 1996.<sup>49</sup>

In response, First National Bank announced a plan to build a new data operations center at Sixteenth and Capitol. That project was scheduled to begin in 1997 and be completed by 1998. The bank also announced plans for a new headquarters building. The bank stated that initially it had considered building its new headquarters on land it owned in the western part of the city. However, the aid from the city, plus the symbolic advantages of locating in the center city, caused it to reconsider. The bank unveiled the final plans for its headquarters building in September 1998. The bank's new headquarters would soar to forty stories (638 feet) above street level, making it the tallest building in the city. As designed, the First National Center was estimated to cost \$200 million (actual \$208 million), and included a privately owned, public-access park with fountains and sculptures on about a quarter of the city block occupied by the building and an indoor, glass-enclosed "Winter garden" at the base of the tower. The First National Center, designed to help promote the downtown as the city's "image center," opened in September 2002.<sup>50</sup>

At the same October 1996 press conference announcing the bank's plans, the parent company of the local newspaper, The World-Herald Corpora-

tion, declared that when it built its new production facility and if it built a new headquarters building, both would be located downtown. Though World-Herald President and CEO John Gottschalk stated bluntly that it might be economically disadvantageous to build downtown instead of at a vacant suburban location, he went on to say that the company did have a "civic responsibility to keep downtown healthy." Gottschalk declared that "the company is committed to downtown."<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, the company chose a downtown location at Fourteenth and Capitol streets for its new \$125 million production plant and broke ground on May 1, 1999. The new building opened in 2001. On the other hand, the World-Herald decided not to build a new headquarters building. Instead, in April 2006 it announced that it would buy the Qwest Communications building at Thirteenth and Douglas. Northwestern Bell Telephone built the structure in 1980; it was one of a group of building projects credited to the construction of the Central Park Mall. Through mergers, what had been Northwestern Bell first became part of US West Communications and finally Qwest Communications. When Northwestern Bell occupied the building it had 2,000 employees working in it. In 2006, Qwest had only 700-800. Under the terms of the sale, Qwest would continue to occupy half the building and the World-Herald would occupy the other half.<sup>52</sup>

The Union Pacific, First National Bank and World-Herald projects all came from companies with long ties to the city. Another important part of the downtown redevelopment came when the city successfully persuaded the Gallup Organization to move its headquarters to Omaha and to build its new facility on the soon-to-be fully cleared riverfront. Gallup bluntly told the city that it was looking for both a site and incentives to move to Omaha. In June 2000, Mayor Daub revealed that the city and Gallup had been in negotiations for several months and were ready to come to a final deal. That deal basically was struck by late September 2000; the site selected was a sixty-acre tract along Abbott Drive (the road between the downtown and the nearby airport). It included land occupied by Aaron Ferer & Sons (still in negotiations with the city) and the Port of Omaha (soon to move). Gallup's planned new complex included a headquarters building and a leadership training center called Gallup University. Final negotiations between the city, the Chamber of Commerce, and Gallup continued into 2001. The big remaining issue involved who would be responsible for the estimated \$62

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million cost of land acquisition and clearance. The plan was to have everything in place so that Gallup could begin construction in spring 2002. As noted above, the final details with Aaron Ferer & Sons were in place by March 2001, and by April 2001 the last details had been worked out with Gallup and the decision finalized shortly thereafter. The city and county took responsibility for footing the bill for land acquisition and clearance. The full development package also included a donation of county-owned land within the riverfront redevelopment area for a new National Park Service headquarters.<sup>53</sup>

Though the deal to move Aaron Ferer & Sons was important, Mayor Daub said that Gallup finalized its decision at least in part following voter approval (in May 2001) of bonds to build an arena-convention center on the soon-to-be cleared riverfront. Now known as the Qwest Center, it was viewed as the most important of all the projects aimed at transforming the downtown/riverfront and the image of Omaha.

The idea of replacing the 1950s-era municipal auditorium with a new arena-convention center had been floating since the 1970s. A certain degree of urgency was injected into the lingering discussion in the late 1980s. Douglas County was proposing to purchase the Ak-Sar-Ben property, a 300-acre site northwest of Sixty-third and Center streets.\* The proposal included a request that the city build a new convention center and arena there. In January 1989 City Council President Fred Conley responded by arguing that any new arena-convention center must be built downtown. Though discussions between the city and the county continued, the next month the city council voted to support the idea of building the facility downtown, pending the availability of funds.<sup>54</sup> However, Mayor P. J. Morgan, elected in June 1989, pushed forward a renovation of the existing municipal auditorium rather than incurring the expense of building a new facility.<sup>55</sup>

The arena-convention center project, thus, remained in the talking phase for another seven years. However, shortly after the announcement of the First National Bank and World-Herald construction projects, the *World-Herald* printed an editorial calling on the mayor to support a new downtown arena-convention center. By early 1997, Mayor Hal Daub, who had announced his expansive vision for riverfront development in June 1995, was ready to fully back the idea. In his State of the City address

in January 1997, Daub declared that Omaha needed both a new convention center and a new sports stadium. He believed that such projects, located in the downtown/riverfront, could inspire a number of other possibilities such as a science center, an outdoor amphitheater, and a new symphony hall. All those facilities were needed, but particularly the convention center and sports stadium to promote economic development. Though initially more local leaders voiced support for the sports stadium than the convention center, attention soon focused on the latter as a Chamber of Commerce study released in May 1997 called for the construction of a \$200 million arena-convention center as well as the creation of a special authority to manage the planning and construction of the complex.<sup>56</sup>

Local leaders expressed strong support for the arena and convention center idea in a specially commissioned report, but the campaign did not begin immediately.<sup>57</sup> Debate still centered on location—downtown, Ak-Sar-Ben, or some other site. By early summer 1998, Mayor Daub vowed to work to get the process moving and pushed again for the downtown site. He also proposed the creation of an authority, the Metropolitan Entertainment & Convention Authority (MECA), to manage the new convention center.<sup>58</sup> By the end of 1998, Daub presented a \$300 million development plan for the riverfront to the city council that included “a convention center-arena complex, a new 400-room hotel” as well as “a science education center, an expanded marina, condominiums, and a cluster of shops on the banks of the Missouri River.”<sup>59</sup> In 1999 Daub won the approval of the city council and the city made plans for a \$198 million bond issue to finance the convention center part of the plan. He also renewed his call for the creation of an authority to manage the facility.<sup>60</sup> The civic leadership got behind the effort. In January 2000, the Chamber of Commerce declared that passage of the bond issue would be “their top priority for this year.”<sup>61</sup> In a May 2000 election, voters approved the bonds by a margin of 63 percent to 37 percent and the creation of MECA by 60 percent to 40 percent.<sup>62</sup>

As the city prepared to break ground on the new convention center, the momentum that had been building since the mid-1990s for downtown/riverfront development seems to have reached a high point. A number of dramatic, visible changes were already in place: the World-Herald Freedom Center printing facility was open; the First National data center was up and running; and the First National Tower was under construction. Most impressively, the riverfront was cleared awaiting the construc-

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\* Ak-Sar-Ben is a civic/social organization. Its property included an arena with ice rink and a horse-racing track.

tion of not just the convention center, but also the new Gallup complex and the new headquarters for the National Park Service. Abbott Drive, the route from downtown to the airport, and Tenth Street were both scheduled for major improvements, with the latter becoming “the new main route into downtown Omaha.” Starting with the arena and other downtown projects, city planners anticipated a wave of development that would “dwarf the last 20 years of downtown redevelopment.”<sup>63</sup> By the time the Qwest Center opened in September 2003, the First National Tower was finished, the Union Pacific was building a new headquarters building, and a new \$90 million performing arts center was under construction. Gallup had begun construction on the riverfront and a number of high-rise condominium projects were either underway or soon to be approved.<sup>64</sup>

### **Downtown Since 2003: Shifting Center of Gravity and “Image Center”**

By 2003, Omaha’s downtown and riverfront had undergone a remarkable transformation. For the most part the warehouses, railroad facilities, and industrial plants that had marked the historic downtown and riverfront had been replaced by modern corporate headquarters, a convention center, hotels, condominium projects, and open space. Up through the 1960s, for most in Omaha, going downtown meant going to the retail core on Sixteenth Street. By the early twenty-first century, going downtown increasingly involved visiting the Qwest Center, Heartland of America Park, Lewis and Clark Landing, the Old Market, or the Durham Western Heritage Museum (the former Union Pacific Station), all on or near Tenth Street.

In the early 1970s, Omaha’s civic leadership dreamed of a “return to the river.” Though the Gene Leahy Mall was constructed and several other major projects completed, the expansive vision remained largely unrealized into the early 1990s. With the clearance of the riverfront and the many corporate and civic projects built there, Omaha’s downtown finally connected to its long neglected riverfront. Many of the projects reflected the latest trends and ideas in downtown and riverfront revitalization. Critics, however, decried the loss of many historic properties, especially those in Jobbers Canyon.<sup>65</sup> In fact, Omaha’s return to the riverfront involved not so much an embrace of a historic area, but an extensive reconceptualization of it. The historic riverfront had been a location of commerce, industry and transportation facilities. The new downtown riverfront—stripped of

its warehouse district, industry, and railyards—instead emphasized recreation, leisure, and open spaces. The headquarters for both ConAgra and the Gallup Organization recalled not so much the compact and vertical downtown of the past, but more the horizontal suburban office park.

The revitalization along Omaha’s riverfront has also in many ways shifted the center of gravity in the downtown from the traditional retail corridor on Sixteenth Street to the new “front door” on Tenth Street.<sup>66</sup> Visitors coming to Omaha via its airport travel into the city center via Abbott Drive and can first enter the downtown at Tenth Street. Most downtown attractions drawing locals and tourists to the area are located on or near Tenth Street and/or east of Sixteenth Street. Most of the new residential developments planned, underway or just completed are also located in or adjacent to this eastern part of the downtown. And the bold architecture of many of the projects, including the Qwest Center and the recently completed pedestrian bridge across the Missouri River, have been used to give Omaha a new, modern image. When Omaha’s civic leadership first developed plans for its downtown in the early 1960s, they focused on maintaining it in its traditional role as the center of the city. In the late twentieth century, the civic leadership—an engaged business community and an energetic mayor—guided a remarkable physical transformation of the area.<sup>67</sup> No longer considered the single center of Omaha, the transformed and reconceptualized downtown and riverfront, emphasizing recreation, leisure and open space, nonetheless now serve as the city’s new “image” center. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence H. Larsen, Barbara J. Cottrell, Harl A. Dalstrom, Kay Calame Dalstrom, *Upstream Metropolis: An Urban Biography of Omaha & Council Bluffs* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 409; Rick Ruggles, “It’s Official: Riverfront Park is Lewis and Clark Landing,” *Omaha World-Herald* (hereafter OWH), July 23, 2001, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> For an assessment of both success and failure in rebuilding downtowns from the 1940s through the early 1980s see Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Carl Abbott, “Five Downtown Strategies: Policy Discourse and Downtown Planning Since 1945,” in Martin V. Melosi, editor, *Urban Public Policy: Historical Modes and Methods* (University

Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Fogelson, *Downtown*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> For a brief discussion of the traditional view of the city's downtown and riverfront and the early steps toward transforming their image see Janet R. Daly-Bednarek, *Changing Image of the City: Planning for Downtown Omaha, 1945-1973* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 73-76.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the perceived problems with Omaha's image—or lack thereof—and efforts to address it see Larsen, et al., *Upstream Metropolis*, 399-402.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed look at planning for downtown Omaha through the 1970s see Daly-Bednarek, *The Changing Image of the City*.

<sup>10</sup> Omaha is not unique in focusing renewal efforts on its riverfront. For additional examples of recent efforts to use riverfront projects to promote urban revitalization see Paul Stanton Kibel, ed., *Rivertown: Rethinking Urban Rivers* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007). An early post war and highly influential example of combined downtown and riverfront redevelopment can be found in Portland, Oregon. For an overview of the riverfront and downtown redevelopment process in Portland see Carl Abbott, *Portland: Planning Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 207-28.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Gersten, "'Cost Efficiency is Goal' Enron Chief: No Moving Plans, but Evaluation a Possibility," OWH, April 10, 1986, 1; "Some Debate Enron Corp. Home Office," OWH, April 13, 1986, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Doug Gollin, "Houston Move Clouds a Sunny Morning," OWH, May 12, 1986, 1; Robert Dorr and Steve Jordon, "Enron to Keep Gas Division in City, but Move 200 Jobs," OWH, May 12, 1986, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Jordon, "Executives Say Omaha Should Work to Improve Business Climate," OWH, May 25, 1986, 1; Jeff Gauger, "Enron Job Loss 'Not Serious,'" OWH, August 7, 1986, 1; Alan Gerstein, "Omaha Must Not Stand Still, Says Commerce Official," OWH, September 12, 1986, 1; Nick Schinker, "Diversification Is Seen as the Key to Future of Omaha's Job Market," OWH, January 4, 1987, 1.

<sup>14</sup> "Steve Jordon, "Physicians Mutual to Buy New Enron Office Center," OWH, December 10, 1986, 1; Jim Baker, "Enron Puts Omaha Building on Sale," OWH, October 14, 1987, 1; Jack Phinney, "Enron Sells East Annex, Scouler Planning \$4 Million to Renovate Its New Home," OWH, December 23, 1987, 1; John Taylor, "Enron Reported Ready to Sever Most Ties Here," OWH, March 8, 1988, 1.

<sup>15</sup> "ConAgra Decision Chronology," OWH, January 5, 1988, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Dorr, "Hard-Driving ConAgra Chairman Doesn't Shy Away From Conflict," OWH, May 31, 1987, 1.

<sup>17</sup> "Growth Bill Passed, 37-11," OWH, May 27, 1987, 1. LB 775 was effectively replaced by a "next generation" incentives bill, LB 312 (Nebraska Advantage Act), passed in 2005 and effective January 1, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> "Gov. Orr Sees Bigger Picture on ConAgra," OWH, May 19, 1987, 1; "Sen. Schmidt Displays Skills in Bringing Issue to a Vote," OWH, May 21, 1987, 1; Gabriella Stern, "Gov. Orr, ConAgra Are Optimistic," OWH, May 21, 1987, 1; "Growth Bill Passed, 37-11," OWH, May 27, 1987, 1; "Gabriella Stern, "ConAgra Says It'll Stay as Gov. Orr Signs Bill, Laboratory to Be Built In Metro Area," OWH, May 27, 1987, 1.

<sup>19</sup> "12 Properties Might Join Historic Places," OWH, October 9, 1986, 1; Kevin Collison, Robert Dorr, and Alan Gersten, "Simon Hopes to Lure Two to Riverfront," OWH, August 26, 1987, 1; Robert Dorr, "ConAgra's Plans Praised at Ceremony," OWH, August 31, 1988, 19; Kevin Collison, "Harper Says Progress Being Made, ConAgra, City Make Waves on Riverfront Site," OWH, September 11, 1987, 1; Kevin Collison, "Negotiations On For Warehouses In

Riverfront Site," OWH, September 28, 1987, 1.

<sup>20</sup> For a sense of the battle over the demolition of Jobbers Canyon see "Views Conflict on Future of Omaha's Jobbers Canyon," OWH, December 6, 1987, 1; Kevin Collison, "It Helped Fuel Growth, He Says, Preservationist Defends Jobbers Canyon," OWH, December 16, 1987, 1; Kevin Collison, "Jobbers Canyon Demolition Work May Start In April," OWH, March 16, 1988, 1; Nick Schinker, "Shukert Calls Riverfront Plan 'Best Option'," OWH, July 12, 1988; Nick Schinker, "Magistrate to Accept Only Part of Paper in Riverfront Dispute," OWH, July 12, 1988, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Collison, "Toast at 11<sup>th</sup> Hour Sealed Canyon Deal," OWH, January 5, 1988, 1; Kevin Collison, "ConAgra Drops Anchor At Omaha's Riverfront, 'New Chapter' Is Predicted for Downtown," OWH, January 5, 1988, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Collison, "ConAgra Drops Anchor At Omaha's Riverfront, 'New Chapter' Is Predicted for Downtown," OWH, January 5, 1988, 1; Kevin Collison and Paul Goodsell, "Riverfront Interests More than ConAgra, Park May Lure \$175 Million," OWH, January 6, 1988, 1; Kevin Collison, "Mayor, Simon Predicts Boom in Development," OWH, January 8, 1988, 1; "Officials Hope for Snowball Effect," OWH, January 10, 1988, 1; Kevin Collison, "Agreement Sets Blueprint for Riverfront," OWH, March 2, 1988, 1; Cindy Gonzalez, "County Board Gives Riverfront Go-Ahead," OWH, March 15, 1988, 1; Kevin Collison, "Council OKs Riverfront Agreement," OWH, March 15, 1988, 1.

<sup>23</sup> For greater detail on the riverfront initiatives of the 1970s and the Central Park Mall see Daly-Bednarek, *The Changing Image of the City*, 208-25.

<sup>24</sup> "1954-1979: Growth, The mall's evolution," OWH *Magazine*, June 13, 2004, 101. Construction of Heartland of America Park in many ways set the stage for the completion of the mall and its connection to the river.

<sup>25</sup> Jena Janovy, "Omaha's Doorstep Mall Began Downtown Renaissance That Could Continue on the Riverfront Part of a Vision History of the Mall," OWH, October 25, 1995, 12.

<sup>26</sup> For a sense of the "rise and fall" of the ParkFair Mall and retailing on Sixteenth see Steve Jordon, "Park Fair (sic) Likened to Endowment, Retail Mall called 'Vital Step,'" OWH, November 14, 1983, 1; "ParkFair Merchants See Sunny Outlook," OWH, June 23, 1985, 1; Mike Reilly, "Morgan to Write off ParkFair Loan," OWH, December 8, 1990, 1; Deborah Alexander, "16<sup>th</sup> Street faces exodus of businesses, FedEx Kinko's, Blimpie are the latest retailers to pull out of the downtown area," OWH, December 9, 2004, 1D; Deborah Shanahan, "Retail spot a parking lot, Parkfair (sic) becomes a garage; downtown full of empty offices, Chronology of buildings," OWH, March 1, 2005, 1D.

<sup>27</sup> For information on tax increment financing as related to urban redevelopment see the webpage of the Nebraska Department of Economic Development – Tax Increment Financing [www.neded.org/content/view/100/232](http://www.neded.org/content/view/100/232) (accessed September 4, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> "Omaha Downtown Area Declared Blighted," OWH, December 30, 1987, 1; Leslie Reed, "'Blight' label might be dropped, Voters on Nov. 7 will decide fate of a designation that has often been stretched to promote development. High-profile 'blighted' sites," OWH, October 14, 2006, 1A.

<sup>29</sup> City of Omaha, "City Development Plan: A Comprehensive Plan for the City of Omaha," P. J. Morgan, Mayor, June 1990, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Steve Jordon, "Downtown's Riverfront Project Moves Toward Gateway Phase," OWH, November 22, 1990, 47; Steve Jordan, "Problems Not Conceded as Insurmountable, Gateway Plan Has Obstacles," OWH, January 13, 1991, 1M; Jim Rasmussen, "Riverfront Plan Backers Urge Big Thinking," OWH, January 30, 1991, 17; Jim Rasmussen, "U.P. to Offer Land to Build Riverfront Site," OWH, March 10, 1991, 1B; Jim Rasmussen, "\$500 Million River Plan Is Endorsed, Project Would Rise North of Downtown," OWH, September 24, 1991, 1.

<sup>31</sup> While Omaha's civic leadership has generally been quite strong and active over the years, particularly through the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, leadership from city hall has been somewhat less consistent. Between 1973 (the end of the term of Mayor Eugene Leahy, who pushed for the original riverfront development plans) and 2003, Omaha had twelve different mayors—six of whom served as acting or interim mayors for terms ranging from one week to a little over a year. Of the other six, Edward Zorinsky, a very popular mayor and Leahy's immediate successor, resigned after a little more than three years into his four-year term upon election to the U.S. Senate. Al Veys, after being elected as a write-in candidate, served only one term. His successor, Mike Boyle, was elected to a second term, but removed from office less than three years into that term as the result of a recall election. P. J. Morgan resigned shortly after being elected to a second term in order to accept a job in the private sector. Hal Daub was first elected in a special election to fill Morgan's unexpired term. He was then elected to one full term, but voted out of office in 2001. His successor, Mike Fahey, was elected to a second term in 2005. He did not seek a third term in 2009. Fahey was the first mayor in nearly a half-century to serve two full terms in office.

<sup>32</sup> Fred Thomas, "Big Stuff' Comes Down at U.P. Shops," OWH, March 22, 1995, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Chris Burbach, "Omaha's Port Rollin' on the River, A city plan to be unveiled today would move the dock northwest of Eppley Airfield to make way for redevelopment," OWH, July 11, 2001, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Alan Gersten, "ASARCO has Omaha Plans, \$6.7 Million on Tap For Improvements," OWH, March 22, 1989, 43; Fred Thomas, "Lead Level in Air Rises Downtown; EPA Says Lower It, Clean Air Act's Passage to Bring Nebraska Money," OWH, June 29, 1990, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Fred Thomas, "Asarco Expects to Close Unless Deadline Eased," OWH, May 22, 1993, 49; Fred Thomas, "Refinery Plans Strategy to Cut Lead Emissions, Parks Director Says Riverfront Will be Safer, ASARCO Lead Output," OWH, June 17, 1993, 13; Fred Thomas, "State Says Refinery on Track, ASARCO Cleanup Discussed at Hearing," OWH, December 16, 1993, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Fred Thomas, "Suit Filed Against Asarco; Company Sues State Agency," OWH, March 15, 1994, 12; Fred Thomas, "EPA Files Suit to Prevent Discharges From Asarco," OWH, April 5, 1994, 18.

<sup>37</sup> Fred Thomas, "Riverfront Plan Would Move Asarco, Riverfront Businesses," OWH, March 8, 1995, 1; Fred Thomas, "Park Viewed as Jewel In Plans for Riverfront, Riverfront Businesses," OWH, March 9, 1995, 1; Fred Thomas, "Park Supporter Says Plans Could Mesh," OWH, March 10, 1995, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Jena Janovy, "Daub Fleshes Out Riverfront Dream," OWH, June 25, 1995, 1A.

<sup>39</sup> For a sense of the course of the lawsuits, the various negotiations and the final deals see Joy Powell, "Asarco, Government Propose Agreement, Deal Would Impose Fines, Settle Claims Asarco Case," OWH, June 29, 1995, 1; Julie Anderson and Joy Powell, "Suit Settled, Asarco Looks at Relocation," OWH, January 9, 1996, 11; Julie Anderson, "City, Asarco Reach Agreement on Site, Firm to Vacate Refinery; Area To Be Park," OWH, April 13, 1996, 1; "Asarco Agreement Clears the Way," OWH, April 18, 1996, 24; Jena Janovy and Julie Anderson, "Council Get Behind Asarco Cleanup Plan, Amendment Born of Concern Over City's Liability," OWH, July 31, 1996, 1; Julie Anderson, "Asarco accelerates plan, will close July 1," OWH, February 15, 1997, A-1; Jennifer Dukes Lee, "Asarco Cleanup Plan Wins State Approval; The ruling requires that the property be turned over to the city or a 'city-created entity' after the site is cleaned," OWH, September 5, 1997, 13; "The Asarco Plan Opens Door to Better Times on Riverfront," OWH, June 4, 1998, 12; Kendrick Blackwood, "City, Asarco Sign Deal To Turn Plant to Park; Asarco Park Plan;

Asarco Liability Amendment," OWH, June 10, 1998, 1; "Asarco, Omaha Negotiators Did Well," OWH, June 10, 1998, 8; Julie Anderson, "Asarco Hires Firm to Demolish Refinery Site," OWH, August 13, 1998, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Steve Jordon, "Problems Not Conceded as Insurmountable, Gateway Plan Has Obstacles," OWH, January 13, 1991, 1M; Fred Thomas, "Things Taking Shape Along the Riverfront," OWH, September 1, 1996, 10B.

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Burbach and Todd Cooper, "River Not Just a Place to Play, Busy Firms Have Roots Where Daub Wants New 'Front Yard,'" OWH, June 14, 1998, 1A.

<sup>42</sup> C. David Kotok, "Gallup Project's Path Is Cleared, Omaha obtains the key Aaron Ferer & Sons scrap-metal property along Missouri River," OWH, March 21, 2001, 1; Robert Dorr, "Ferer Land Price Tag: \$14 million, If the City Council approves the deal, construction of the Gallup riverfront campus would be assured, Daub says, Riverfront Area," OWH, March 23, 2001, 1; Rick Ruggles and Tom Shaw, "Gallup Plan Gets Council's OK," OWH, April 11, 2001, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Omaha Planning Department, "Omaha Master Plan Report No. 264 (revised): Concept Element" (City of Omaha, September 1995), 2, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Omaha Planning Department, "Omaha Master Plan Report No. 272: Land Use Element" (City of Omaha, September 1995), 12. The emphasis on the downtown and the idea that downtown must house amenities aimed at attracting people to the area in many ways built on earlier plans for the downtown promoted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, thus demonstrating a certain level of continuity between plans produced before and after 1985. For more on the history of planning the downtown as a location for cultural and recreational amenities see Daly-Bednarek, *The Changing Image of the City*, 200-25. This also details the development of the Old Market, another key in the redevelopment of the downtown but outside the precise scope of this work.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Matt Kelley and Stephen Buttry, "Merger raises question: Where will home be?" OWH, August 6, 1995, 1A; Matt Kelley and Stephen Buttry, "Enron Left; ConAgra Stayed: U.P. Factors Invite Comparison," OWH, August 6, 1995, 12A; Matt Kelley, "U.P. to Stay in Omaha After Merger, City Pressing for Building of a New HQ," OWH, 1A; Matt Kelley, "U.P. Leader: New Building Not in Plans, City Officials Had Pushed Riverfront Site," OWH, July 11, 1996, 1; Matt Kelley, "Chamber Holds Hope for U.P. Offices," OWH, July 12, 1996, 17; Matt Kelley, "U.P.: Any New Site to Be Downtown," OWH, November 1, 1996, 1; Chris Olson, "U.P. Decides It Will Lease Office Space, Nothing's Final on Construction of New Building," OWH, January 9, 1997, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Jim Rasmussen, "U.P. Corp. Eyes Move to Omaha," OWH, September 25, 1998, 1; "Homecoming for the U.P.," OWH, April 17, 1999, 14; "It's Official: Omaha Is U.P. Headquarters," OWH, July 1, 1999, 22.

<sup>48</sup> Grace Shim, "City May Buy Building From U.P." OWH, October 31, 2000, 1; Grace Shim, "U.P. Selects Site Downtown, The rail giant will build its new headquarters across the street from its present location," OWH, November 1, 2000, 1; Rick Ruggles and Grace Shim, "Building's Future Use Still Open After U.P. constructs a new headquarters, the city plans to acquire its current building and turn it over to a developer," OWH, November 2, 2000, 2; Grace Shim, "U.P. Building Plan Moves Forward, The City Council approves an agreement for the railroad's new downtown headquarters," OWH, April 18, 2001, 13; Grace Shim, "U.P. Gives Thumbs Up to Building, The railroad will unveil more details today about a new 19-story headquarters downtown," OWH, June 1, 2001, 1; "U.P. opens up, New office headquarters adds to city's increasing shine," OWH, June 6, 2004, 12B.

The city tried for years to find a developer to take over the old

Union Pacific headquarters building, but in 2005, having failed to do so, decided to demolish the building in hopes of finding a developer for the vacant lot. Tom Shaw, "Demolition likely end for U.P. building, No one has come forward with a place to restore the railroad's historic headquarters," OWH, March 30, 2005, 2B.

<sup>49</sup> Steve Jordan, Alva James-Johnson, "Big Project Bubbling in Downtown Omaha," OWH, May 12, 1996, 1A; Steven Jordan and Jena Janovy, "Announcement Expected On Downtown Project," OWH, October 22, 1996, 1; Steve Jordan, "Office Park to Reshape Downtown, Bank, World-Herald Plan Major Projects, Downtown Projects," OWH, October 23, 1996, 1; Steven Jordan and Jena Janovy, "A Vibrant Downtown Called Vital, Revitalization Plan Seen as Partnership," OWH, October 24, 1996, 1; Fred Mogul, "Planning Board Approves Downtown Development," OWH, November 7, 1996, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Steve Jordan, "Office Park to Reshape Downtown, Bank, World-Herald Plan Major Projects, Downtown Projects," OWH, October 23, 1996, 1; Chris Olson, "Omaha Skyline Climbs, first National Bank to Build 40 Stories of Glass, Granite, First National Center Coming Thursday," OWH, September 23, 1998, 1; Steve Jordan, "Park, plaza to take flight, First National's downtown oasis will enliven street outside tower with fountains, sculpture, Park facts, First National Tower," OWH, September 18, 2002, 1D.

<sup>51</sup> Steve Jordan and Alva James-Johnson, "Big Project Bubbling in Downtown Omaha," OWH, May 12, 1996, 1A; Steve Jordan, "Office Park to Reshape Downtown, Bank, World-Herald Plan Major Projects, Downtown Projects," OWH, October 23, 1996, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Dorr, "The World-Herald Freedom Center Press Facility Invests in Future, Newspapers and Downtown Freedom Center," OWH, May 1, 1999, 1; Deborah Shanahan, "World-Herald buying Qwest office building, Newspaper offices to move across street," OWH, April 3, 2006, 1A; Virgil Larson, "Building has weathered phone business changes, Qwest sells predecessor's former headquarters," OWH, April 4, 2006, 1D; Steven Jordan and Deborah Shanahan, "Another boost for downtown, The World-Herald's move shows commitment to city's heart," OWH, April 4, 2006, 1A; Steve Jordan and Deborah Shanahan, "Corporate support for downtown is up, The World-Herald's purchase of a major building is seen as a commitment to the commercial core," OWH, April 5, 2006, 1D.

<sup>53</sup> Victor Epstein, "City works to Lure Gallup Headquarters, The polling firm wants to secure a 50-acre site and financial incentives before it moves its operational base here," OWH, July 29, 2000, p. 1; Victor Epstein, "Gallup's Headquarters To Be Built in Omaha," OWH, September 27, 2000, p. 1; Steve Jordan, "Gallup Negotiations Called Complex, The city, and company and the chamber of commerce officials try to figure out how to split costs, Gallup Riverfront Campus," OWH, February 18, 2001, 1M; C. David Kotok, "Gallup Project's Path Is Cleared, Omaha obtains the key Aaron Ferer & Sons scrap-metal property along Missouri River," OWH, March 21, 2001, 1; Rick Ruggles and Tom Shaw, "Gallup Plan Gets Council's OK," OWH, April 11, 2001, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Goodsell, "Officials Say They See Erosion in Plan for River Front Center," OWH, May 18, 1986, 1; Cindy Gonzalez, "Conley: Put New Arena Downtown, Says City Should Act Before Ak Is Bought," OWH, January 12, 1989, 1; "A Variety of Options Available, Too Soon to End Debate On Convention Center," OWH, January 27, 1989, 40; Cindy Gonzalez, "Downtown Site for Center Gets Council Backing," OWH, February 1, 1989, 1.

<sup>55</sup> "Morgan's Good Grades as Mayor Tempered by His Early Departure," OWH, September 18, 1994, 24A.

<sup>56</sup> Matt Kelley, "Daub: Omaha Must Plan for Stadium, Competitive Edge Depends on It, He Says," OWH, January 8, 1997, 1; "Focus on City Arena Question Comes at an Appropriate Time," OWH, May 26, 1997, 10B.

<sup>57</sup> See Metropolitan Omaha Convention Sports & Enter-

tainment Authority, "Report to the Citizens of the Omaha Metropolitan Area and Their Governmental Representatives on the Feasibility of a Convention Center and Arena Facility" (December 29, 1997).

<sup>58</sup> "Daub Eyes Arena Prize," OWH, June 5, 1998, 41.

<sup>59</sup> Jason Gertzen, "A Billion-Dollar Maybe Arena Is 'Crown Jewel' of Daub Plan, Plan Highlights," OWH, November 9, 1998, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Dorr, "Daub Projects Subsidizing Center-Arena for 5 Years," OWH, September 21, 1999, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Ed Russo, "Top Priority; Chamber to Back Convention Center In Ad Campaign," OWH, January 29, 2000, 57.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Dorr, "Arena Work to Start Fast, Voter-Blessed Project Aims to Open in 2003," OWH, May 10, 2000, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Chris Burbach, "Arena Could Usher In Lively New Downtown, Omaha's Front Door, from Iowa and Eppley Airfield, is opening to dramatic changes," OWH, June 11, 2000, 1A.

<sup>64</sup> "New center is symbol of change," OWH, August 10, 2003, 2ss. For a sense of the residential developments sparked by the riverfront redevelopment see Grace Shim, "Developers say demand is strong, Downtown Omaha area is conducive to condos," New projects," OWH, November 23, 2002, 1D; C. David Kotok, "Condo competition by the river, The developer of a Bluffs project isn't fazed by plan unveiled for the Omaha side," OWH, November 10, 2003, 1B; C. David Kotok, "Riverfront Place project moving toward reality, Construction to being in the spring on the condo community south of the Gallup University campus," OWH, August 30, 2004, 1B; Deborah Shanahan, "New life for a landmark, A developer will convert Omaha's Brandeis Building into condos," OWH, December 9, 2004, 1A; Karen Sloan, "Council approves condo plan for former U.P. site, A redevelopment agreement calls for city to provide \$15.6 million in tax-increment financing, but it won't have to pay for the demolition of the old building," OWH, December 20, 2006, 1D. For details on the performing arts center see Ashley Hasselbroek, "Omaha's arts center named after Hollands," OWH, September 22, 2004, 1A.

<sup>65</sup> For examples of critiques leveled at downtown/riverfront development by those objecting to the loss of historic structures see "Razing Tears City's Heart," OWH, May 5, 1997, 27; Robert Dorr, "Should History Give Way to the Future? Arena Touches A Sore Spot," OWH, November 18, 1997, 1; "Razing of Past Limits Future," OWH, October 27, 1999, 45.

<sup>66</sup> For a sense of the centrality of Tenth Street to downtown and the revitalized riverfront see Jeffrey Robb, "Opening of 10<sup>th</sup> Street revives hopes for glory, The Omaha Convention Center and Arena will begin greeting visitors up close as the new 10<sup>th</sup> Street beckons. The corridor is prominent in Omaha's history and is a connection between some of the city's major attractions," OWH, September 10, 2003, 1A; Chase Davis, "Fun will flow on revamped riverfront, The area where Omaha got started looks better than ever, and it's a key part of the city's 150th birthday plans," OWH, July 14, 2004, 1A.

<sup>67</sup> Daub lost his bid for a second full term in 2001. However, he was credited with bringing great, if sometimes controversial, leadership to the revitalization of downtown and the riverfront. See Henry J. Cordes, "Daub Will Leave His Imprint On the Downtown Landscape, Significant Events in Hal Daub's Mayoral Career," OWH, May 20, 2001, 1A.