

Neighborhood identity at heart of Hangar 2 project

Jim Hartman and Joe Vostrejs knew their Hangar 2 development would be a bit out of the box. There were no local precedents and the barriers they would face seemed almost insurmountable. But that's the kind of project the co-owner of Boulder-based Hartman Ely Investments and the chief operating officer and partner of Denver-based Larimer Associates seek out.

"If it's not challenging, I'm not interested," said Hartman, an architect by training. "We like to do stuff that's hard ... unique projects that provide a huge amount of value to the community ... labors of love."

The challenge: Turning a massive 100,000-square-foot airplane hangar the size of two football fields (and its adjacent site) into a human scale, approachable and inviting epicenter for the quiet Lowry neighborhood surrounding it.

By 2008, at the height of the recession, the landmark had become a genuine eyesore. The declining 1940s-era building – now located in the middle of the Lowry neighborhood – attracted Hartman's attention as he worked on various projects nearby. Hangar 2's unique place in Denver history, as the first structure built at Lowry Air Force Base, ultimately moved the team to save and repurpose it into a new gathering place for the community.

Vostrejs, who lives in Lowry, was immediately intrigued by Hartman's vision, but the property still had to be purchased from the Wings Museum. In 2009, after extensive negotiations, it finally was under contract, opening the door to inter-



Cynthia Kemper
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trying to accomplish," said Vostrejs. "We were also worried about how to blend a monstrous airplane hangar with something we were calling the Lowry Dining District."

The design firm needed to know how to create restaurant spaces within stand-alone structures that look like they naturally belonged, he said. "The last thing we wanted at that site was generic retail, something phony like miniature hangars, or a traditional retail strip mall. We also needed the architecture to integrate with a heavy industrial look."

The Vision

The vision may sound simple, but its execution was anything but. Turning this odd, one-off site into something that carves new ground, while meeting the needs of Lowry's modern lifestyle, meant creating a mixed-use space with a diversity of uses compatible with the area's culture. Most importantly, they wanted it to be something special, with amenities the community desired – a "third place" beyond home and work.

view design teams. Semple Brown was chosen as master planner, signaling the beginning of an eight-year saga that continues today as the project perpetually evolves and improves.

"We were looking for a design team that could understand our vision for what we were



Image of Hangars 1 and 2 with surrounding Lowry Air Force Base taken in 1962. Image courtesy Wings Over the Rockies Museum

Extensive input from residents indicated that a strong restaurant component, private "incubator" office space, health club and Montessori School were at the top of the community's list.

But, before the master plan could come to fruition, a number of barriers needed to be overcome. Funding the project during a severe recession, getting the repurposing plan approved by the Denver Landmark Commission, securing the Lowry

Redevelopment Authority's blessing, finding a mix of uses that required limited parking and code issues were all front and center as the team began the exploratory process. The multitude of required permits and approvals required consent from eight different community groups and governmental agencies.

"The financial issue was also huge," said Hartman. "Our initial financing was done through equity. After we determined that the mas-



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Development Spotlight

sive hangar was the perfect space for indoor storage rental, we secured a loan from First Bank and a \$2 million Denver Urban Renewal Authority grant. In 2012, we converted the nonhistoric loading dock into a beer garden for further cash flow.”

Breaking New Ground

The project was designed to be a dining destination with added amenities for the neighborhood. Its target market – 40-somethings with one or two children, middle-aged parents and empty nesters – wanted to see a selection of nice restaurants nearby, which was something that was lacking in Lowry.

Today, the space houses five full-service restaurants (including the Lowry Beer Garden, Café Mercato, Bubu, North County and Masterpiece Kitchen), a Montessori school, two fitness studios, coffee shop, beer garden, community incubator offices, recycling center and a storage facility.

Larimer Associates, an investor in four of the restaurants, chose all local, chef-driven dining venues to offer the neighborhood a diversity of high-quality options. To support this mix of uses, a number of precedents were established.

Stand-alone buildings vs. strip mall retail. While constructing generic core-and-shell space offers greater flexibility for retail and restaurant uses, Hartman and Vostrejs chose to develop intimate, purpose-built buildings with outdoor patios designed for restaurants only.

“The buildings at Hangar 2 were purposely designed by Semple Brown to be small, four-sided stand-alone structures,” said Vostrejs. “I cannot think of another retail project where this has been done. We



Photo courtesy David Lauer Photography

Views into the site and transparency into restaurants and patios activate the space and encourage interest and interaction.

approached our spaces as restaurant developers not retail developers; we wanted buildings with smaller footprints for quiet, adult dining.”

Progressive design approach. To create a draw and ample mass needed to become a center of community activity, a number of thoughtful, progressive design moves were employed.

“The site’s food service was designed to be small, local and diverse – a collection of restaurants curated to appeal specifically to the Lowry community,” said Project Architect Schmidt, who was on the

Lowry Design Review Board at the time. “To establish a sense of welcome, the structures needed to ‘hold the corner’ while providing visibility into the site to draw people in.”

Designed with an industrial, modernist aesthetic and simple details, the buildings’ cost-effective materials mirror the existing military hangar and brick wings. Transparency into the restaurants and patios activates the area and encourages interaction.

“We wanted to avoid drawing attention to the structures themselves as Hangar 2 is less about the

buildings and more about drawing the inside out,” he said.

Nonoriginal, first-floor office windows within the Hangar’s brick wing buildings were transformed into new retail storefronts. Awning-covered entry doors activate public sidewalks while providing a strong streetscape connection between the historic hangar and detached restaurant buildings.

Inviting, cohesive environment. The project, in essence, was about mak-

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Hangar 2

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ing a "place" out of a parking lot, said Schmidt. Thus, to create a walkable, bikeable environment where neighbors hang out, the streetscape and landscaping became especially important.

Nearly everything about the site was "hard," so planters were used to create a soft buffer between people and the hard surfaces. Spaces between buildings also allow the project to be more pedestrian friendly, while colorful banners enliven the space.

Sympathetic development.

While a lot of retail developments have a limited focus on the specific needs of the surrounding community, Hangar 2 was about fulfilling the neighbors' desires and putting the residents first. The designers refer to this as "sympathetic development." Decisions about the site plan layout (culturally, socially and contextually), mix of uses, look and feel of the buildings, and the selection of restaurants are direct results of citizen input.

Beyond Sustainability

The most important precedents are the project's advancements in sustainability. The immense roof hosts the nation's largest building-integrated solar photovoltaic installation on a historic landmark. As Denver's first community-owned solar garden, this 1,638-panel, 400-kilowatt solar array was integrated into the building's curved roof by community solar pioneer Clean Energy Collective.

"We've turned this drafty old hanger into a symbol of Denver's innovation in renew-



Photo courtesy David Lauer Photography

Hangar 2's industrial, modernist aesthetic was designed with cost-effective materials to mirror the existing military Hangar.

able energy and commitment to sustainable design," said Hartman, who designed the array to meet Denver's Landmark Preservation Commission's stringent requirements. "It's now a solar-powered, energy-efficient landmark."

As an Xcel Energy Solar Rewards Community, the Denver/Lowry Solar Array serves 150 to 200 Xcel Energy customers. The project also uses 50 percent less energy than a new building of the same size through extensive energy-efficiency strategies like superinsulation, daylighting, natural ventilation, motion-controlled lighting and sophisticated HVAC systems. It also boasts Lowry's first electric vehicle charging station (free to the public) and hosts the Lowry Recycling Center.

Results and Recognition

"Hangar 2 is a vessel," said Schmidt. "I'm delighted this project has turned into such

an appreciated amenity – a fun, local place to go with your family, on foot, bike or car. It fills a void."

The Hangar opened to the public in 2011, the Lowry Beer Garden in 2013, and the remaining restaurants throughout 2015 and 2016 as the project was recognized with numerous accolades, including the Mayor's Design Award in 2011, a community preservation award in 2013 and the Urban Land Institute's Innovation Award in 2015.

"We still don't consider this project complete – it's a work in progress," said Hartman. "We will continue to refine the site over time. We're trying to create something that gives Lowry a sense of identity. An epicenter. An icon. Eventually, we want to get to a place where people who want a picture of something that's iconic about Lowry will take a photo of Hangar 2." ▲

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