

Happy, Healthy Pueblo

Downtown Colorado Workshop + Audit Report

New evidence from psychology, behavioural economics, neuroscience and public health shows that our cities influence the way we move, feel and behave. There's also a strong relationship between urban resilience, land economics and happiness in cities. When designed well, dense, connected, walkable, mixed-use places can foster health and happiness while also supporting economic growth and keeping taxes low.

How can community leaders apply the evidence on wellbeing to urban design in their own downtowns? In Colorado, we started with happiness.

In September, 2016, participants at the Vibrant Colorado Downtowns conference gathered for a workshop at which they explored the happiness-design connection—and then put that knowledge to work auditing part of downtown Pueblo.

First, participants were introduced to a new framework for incorporating wellbeing evidence into placemaking and community design. Working in teams, they combined the evidence with their own aspirations to produce local happy design principles for Pueblo.

Participants then used these principles to audit a challenging local site. Analyzing the site for its potential to boost healthy and happiness, participants proposed various actions in programming, design and policy, as well as metrics for measuring the success of their suggested interventions over time.

Finally, we came back together as a group to discuss action ideas and their implications for Pueblo and elsewhere. While this was meant as an educational exercise rather than a comprehensive site audit, participants' thoughtful work is worth sharing.

Audit site

We sought a site that exhibited a strong potential to generate high tax and job revenue/acre, while contributing to a stronger, healthier Downtown Pueblo. The City of Pueblo and Joe Minicozzi with his team at Urban3 analyzed tax revenue/acre in the Pueblo area. The analysis identified two city blocks with strong tax productivity potential, and robust links with downtown job and retail districts.

The audit site sits between the historic Arkansas Riverwalk, the Pueblo Plaza Ice Arena and the El Pueblo History Museum. Specifically, it consists of the two blocks bound by North Greenwood and South Grande, to the East and West, and West Second St. and Victoria Ave to the North and South, respectively. The northern block is currently occupied by Rush's Pueblo Lumber. Part of the southern block is used by Pueblo's innovative Arts Alliance.

The location of the site and its adjacencies render the site a “missing link” with the potential to connect two key downtown core areas (the Riverwalk and the civic precincts of the History Museum and the Ice Arena). Due to the high network connectivity and surrounding destination assets, the site offers potential to compound the downtown’s destination “magnet” potential, boosting pedestrian traffic, safety, sociability and economic growth at the same time.



From principles to action

The first step in the happy, healthy place audit involves creating a set of high-level principles to guide the audit process and actions inspired by these principles. After exploring evidence on the connection between wellbeing and place and considering their experiences in city-building in Colorado, participants worked in teams to create their own wellbeing principles. Then they applied these principles to the audit site.

Participants envisioned Pueblo as a place for unexpected encounters, a place for creative exchange and a place of sharing.

What follows are seven wellbeing principles for Colorado Downtowns, followed by the actions these teams presented for the Downtown Pueblo site.



City Centre Drive and Grand Ave. view to south



City Centre Drive and Grand Ave. view to west



S. Elizabeth St. and N. Victoria Ave view to north

Wellbeing Principle: Ease

Cities should be clean, safe and accessible for everyone.

Suggested actions

Address walkability issues including: sidewalk inconsistencies, lack of shade, excessive roads widths and inconsistencies in street lighting. Create midblock crossings and connect pathways to historic Riverwalk.

Allow for the development of active alleys and local businesses and provide services that draw people to the space at all hours of the day.

Relax parking regulations to increase walkability.

Suggested measures of success (Metrics)

Survey pedestrians on perceived trustworthiness of people in the area.

Chart reduction in number of vacant lots over time.



Wellbeing Principle: Resilience

Cities should encourage inclusive diversity in design and use.

Suggested actions

Boost the tax base and bring life around and into the blocks throughout the day and evening by mixing new residential with artsy businesses. Expand on the Art Alliance with artisans, galleries, shops and restaurants, while removing lot fences to boost internal circulation.

Metrics

Measure pedestrian activity over an 18-hour day.

Track the change in residential population.

Happy City Lab analysis

Participants correctly noted that Pueblo would benefit from greater downtown residential component. Indeed, if the area was complemented with new services including grocery shopping, it would be an ideal environment for healthy urban living.

At the same time we are not convinced that Pueblo can support an influx of new arts and artisans in the downtown. New residents are best served by, and more likely to spend on, day-to-day services.



Wellbeing Principle: Equity

Cities should provide for the benefit of all people.

Suggested actions

The city should address existing inequality through land use change that boosts mobility and affordability. This would include a suite of strategies, such as the provision of amenities for people of all ages such as daycare and low income housing which will reduce transportation costs for residents.

Metrics

Change in property/sales tax revenue/acre.

Vehicle miles traveled.

Happy City Lab analysis

Urban development typologies such as those seen in exurban areas such as Pueblo West may appear to be affordable, but they force residents into much higher transportation expenditures, so that combined housing and transportation costs put families in a heightened state of vulnerability. It makes sense for HUD and other agencies interested in affordability to invest in connected, mixed-use, walkable areas such as Downtown Pueblo. This site may present opportunities for mixing uses as well as housing typologies to attract seniors and others interested in walkable lifestyles.



Wellbeing Principle: Sociable

Cities should be inviting, safe, calm and fun.

Suggested actions

Allow for diverse use of spaces by encouraging mixed-use developments that include services and entertainment including a movie theatre, grocery store, distillery, brewery and restaurants. Provide a variety of attractions for people of all ages and cultures to enjoy.

Metrics

Increase in revenue from property taxes.

Happy City Lab analysis

Research has shown that streets with a high number of opportunities and attractions per block attract and hold more pedestrians, making them safer, healthier, more social, and of much higher value for retailers. Complexity is good for wellbeing, and good for local GDP growth.



Wellbeing Principle: Health

Cities should promote highly active, “good-humored” lifestyles.

Suggested actions

A public/private partnership to spur mixed use development that would foster a socially and physically healthy community. This should be driven by a combination of artists, property owners and entrepreneurs. Elements could include a long-term commercial development, hotel, grocery store, housing.

Metrics

Survey residents on commute network/distance to work places.



Happy City Lab analysis

This group’s principle, while appearing to be whimsical, actually reflects key evidence on the relationship between place, emotions and health. Walking is associated with both health and mood benefits. Meanwhile, our studies have shown that comfortable, walkable places actually create feelings of ease and positive emotions, as well as stronger feelings of trust in strangers.

Participants are right to intuit that, given current moribund levels of interest, it may require an infusion of public investment to draw more private capital to this district. At the same time, County tax structure could be revisited to encourage owners of underperforming downtown land to turn their assets towards a higher use.



Wellbeing Principle: Meaning + Belonging
Cities should promote perceived ownership
of flexible, safe and accessible spaces.

Suggested actions

Create a more complete community through increasing diversity of job opportunities downtown. New, mixed-use development may include residential units, small retail, a grocery store, a community center and a park.

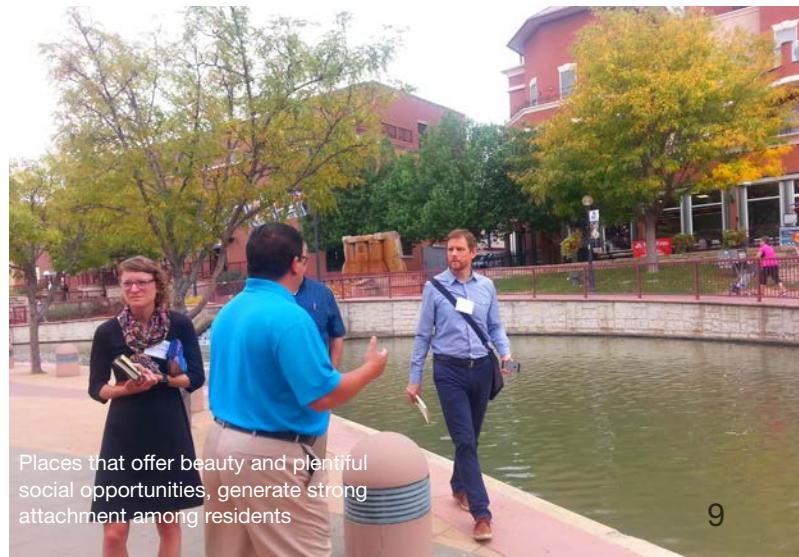
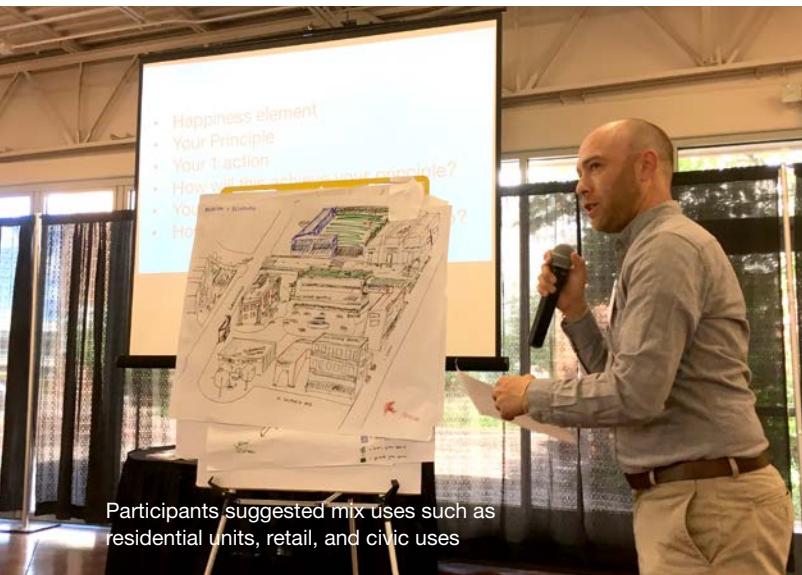
Work with the lumber yard to create community work spaces or cooperatives.

Metrics

Chart change in tax revenue/acre.

Happy City Lab analysis

This is the second group to proposed mixed-use development, although to meet a different wellbeing principle. In fact, mixed-use developments can simultaneously promote health and a stronger sense of belonging, if they are walkable as well as socially inclusive. Studies of American cities have shown that residents express the strongest attachment to place when their cities offer beauty, a welcome to all people, and plentiful social opportunities.



Wellbeing Principle: Joy

Cities should encourage adaptive re-use of space to maximize the joys of urban life.

Suggested actions

Create a more organized flow of building and space use. A suite of actions to this end would include:

- removing existing fences between buildings,
- opening up allies as pedestrian passageways,
- revitalizing business in vacant buildings,
- Increasing the amount of green open space available for community events such as an urban market, and
- remove or eliminate parking lots in front of buildings.

Metrics

Increase in property sales tax.

Happy City Lab analysis

This group focused on adaptive reuse of buildings and spaces to create more joyful experiences for space users. Surveys show that people feel a stronger sense of place attachment in historical buildings. If environmental factors such as asbestos can be mitigated, existing buildings on site may provide a robust foundation for new block fabric.

We would advise a cautious approach when considering adding new intra-block connections. A critical mass of pedestrian destination- and through-traffic is required to support local businesses and ensure that spaces feel social, fun and safe. It is advisable to ensure that existing sidewalks are populated before further diluting pedestrian traffic.



Re-development of buildings on site may provide a robust foundation for new block fabric.

Conclusions and next steps

We were thrilled to see that participants from various disciplines were able to translate evidence into actions for boosting wellbeing in Downtown Pueblo in such a short work session. To a large extent, their prescriptions for the site would have a strong, positive effect on health and happiness of future residents and visitors.

Key themes worth considering include the following:

Healthy streets: The streets around the audit site are unnecessarily and dangerously wide. Narrower and fewer lanes, combined with on-street parking and better pedestrian/cycling infrastructure, will encourage active mobility and access for all.

Mixed use: Several participant groups advocated for introduction of a greater mix of uses to the district. Mixed-use developments can simultaneously promote health and a stronger sense of belonging. Studies of American cities have shown that place attachment and GDP growth are strongest in places that offer beauty, a welcome to all people, and plentiful social opportunities.

Introduce residential: Downtown Pueblo needs more people. And with its amenities, it offers great potential as a place that can offer a healthy, walkable, social lifestyle, especially for seniors.

Adaptive reuse: People feel a stronger sense of place attachment in historical buildings. If environmental factors such as asbestos can be mitigated, existing buildings on site may provide a robust foundation for new block fabric.

Intra-block connections: We would advise a cautious approach when considering adding new routes and paths inside city blocks in this district. A critical mass of pedestrian destination- and through-traffic is required to support local businesses and ensure that spaces feel social, fun and safe. It's best to start by activating existing site edges.

Land base performance: The land on the audit site (and on several nearby sites) is failing to meet its potential in terms of jobs or tax revenue per acre.

This poor performance also influences community health and resilience, by discouraging entrepreneurial activity in the city's most walkable district. The City and County should collaborate on policy measures to encourage landholders to either seek best use, or sell their property to entities who will.

Our research suggests that pursuit of all of these theme areas would have a measurable effect on community wellbeing over the long term. Specifically, if all measures were pursued, we would predict positive change in:

- Active mobility, physical health and resulting health care costs
- Combined housing + transportation affordability
- Social connections, social support and trust
- Place attachment and local consumer spending
- Community safety
- Vehicle-related injury and death
- Job and tax density/acre

We look forward to further discussions on how various levels of government might work together with the business and development communities to pursue a healthier, happier, more resilient vision for Downtown Pueblo.

Charles Montgomery

Omar Dominguez

Chessa Adsit-Morris