the story of the past, present, and future of salt lake city’s rio grande depot district
the story of the past, present, and future of salt lake city’s rio grande depot district
To Salt Lake City—
past, present, and future
I like to see a man proud of the place in which he lives. I like to see a man live so that his place will be proud of him.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

foreword

introduction

conclusion
everybody has a story
the **people** of the rio grande depot district

the story of home
**housing** in the rio grande depot district

telling the story
the **public process** of our research
A year ago, the “engaged learning” and the possibilities of the Honors Think Tank were largely abstractions, as yet ungrounded in practical experience. But the Honors Think Tank proved to be even better than we had imagined. It provided a team of fourteen honors students and three faculty mentors with a chance for a transformative educational experience. In the end it reflected exponentially what they gave to it. So where did it begin?

The Honors Think Tank began with the notion that an honors program at a research university ought to provide students with significant experience not only in research, but also—and equally as important—in collaboration. This emphasis on the experience of collaboration reflected our belief that it might stimulate students who are accustomed to success at school because of their own effective efforts, or by what they do themselves, to consider what more they might do if they worked effectively with others. We knew that it might teach them about their own strengths or even weaknesses and most certainly about working with others who were different from themselves. It did both. Indeed, the Think Tank as a pedagogy was greedy and required of all its participants enormous energy and generosity. It asked for their best thinking and effort: to coordinate their own efforts with those of a team, to compromise, to fully engage with others and with material that was new to them.

The topic for the first Think Tank was the city, yet only two of the fourteen students on the first Honors Think Tank came out of urban planning as a discipline. The others came to this subject raw and fresh, much like we do in the real world when we come together as members of communities to take on public problems that we share. This multidisciplinary team was composed of diverse members who came from as far away as North Carolina or as nearby as Lehi, Utah. Important to
what these students would learn, these differences strengthened their research, their analysis, and their experience in general. Conflict that arose naturally from the intersection of diverging viewpoints or worldviews challenged conclusions reached too easily and encouraged them to refine their arguments and their presentations.

When we proposed the Honors Think Tank, it sounded like a pretty far-out idea, but worth trying. It proved, instead, that it was a sound and productive method for stimulating intellectual, social, and emotional growth in students. Addressing their needs as whole persons, the Think Tank asked them to do their finest academic work—research, thinking, writing, and presenting—as individuals and as members of teams. It asked them to cooperate, to share their success and their mistakes, and to learn from both.

In the end, when the members of the Honors Think Tank presented their work, first at the Intermodal Hub and then at the Vibrant Downtown conference, they were stars. Representing the best the University of Utah has to offer this community—their work, of which they had every right to be extremely proud—showed them what they were capable of, what they might contribute, and how good it would feel when they did. As director of the Honors Program, I could not be more proud. These young persons are the hope of the future. I believe the Honors Think Tank helped them see what they might do with their lives to evoke social change.

Dr. Martha Sonntag Bradley
Director
Honors Program
University of Utah
The 2004_05 Honors Think Tank began on a hot August day at the top of Ensign Peak, a promontory at the northern end of the Salt Lake Valley notable both for its geo-physical attributes and for its role in the valley’s history of European settlement. The peak rises more than 1000 feet above the valley floor, it juts out prominently from an arm of the Wasatch Range, and its summit is devoid of vegetation. For these reasons, it was the perfect location from which the first Mormon settlers could, on only their third day in the valley, oversee their new home and begin the process of laying out the basic dimensions of their community (Hilton & Hilton, 2004).
Ensign Peak seemed an appropriate place to begin a year-long experimental collaborative research class focused on downtown Salt Lake City. Downtown’s layout is clearly visible from the top of the peak, and while the degree of risk confronting the Think Tank was not comparable to that faced by nineteenth century pioneers, we were nevertheless embarking on something uncertain with an undetermined outcome. A bit of the “pioneer spirit” seemed apt.

The objectives of the first semester of the Think Tank were to create a common lexicon and geography about downtown and to begin understanding some of the ways in which the downtown built environment influences its social and economic dimensions. The first objective focused on an element of the Think Tank concept that is—like many such features—both a strength and a challenge. Think Tanks are, by definition, interdisciplinary gatherings. The 17 members of our group—14 students and 3 instructors—represented a broad range of disciplines: anthropology, communications, economics, English, history, international studies, Japanese, law, political science, psychology, and urban planning. With such a divergent series of perspectives, communication within the group depended upon developing a common understanding of language and meaning. Instrumental to that development were the discussions facilitated by the many guests who visited the class (see sidebar, pages 5-6).

The Think Tank’s introduction to social, economic, and architectural interactions came via James Howard Kunstler’s Geography of Nowhere (1993) and Jane Jacobs’ The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961). From these texts, the group derived two fundamental concepts—diversity and integration—that were to drive the content and group dynamic for the rest of the year. Initially, the group looked at the two
ideas, not in their customary modes of social justice, but in understanding how downtown environments work or, many times, don’t work. In this context, diversity refers to the range of variety in the built environment; specifically, what kinds of buildings and uses inhabit a given space. Jacobs’ thesis is that the greater the diversity in buildings and use types, the greater the diversity of people accessing those buildings and uses. The other concept, integration, refers to how those buildings and uses interact in the public realm of city sidewalks, parks, and plazas. When a wide range of diverse buildings and uses are well integrated, so the theory goes, the use and vitality of the public realm is enhanced.

To test some of these ideas, Think Tank students identified key locations in downtown Salt Lake City to compare several related land use measures with the level of observed sidewalk activity. The land use measures they used were the four key factors Jacobs cites as the generators of diversity: more than one primary function, small blocks, mixed-aged buildings, and high density development. To gauge whether an area had more than one primary function, the students mapped out land use types for their respective study areas, relying primarily on visual observation to establish use classifications. Although Salt Lake City is infamous for its large blocks, students measured block sizes using formal and informal mid-block cut-throughs, in addition to traditional city streets, thereby observing a wide variety of block sizes. The students determined building ages through county assessor information and density using census data.

To measure sidewalk activity, the students posted themselves at predetermined intersections and mid-block locations during a series of time periods that were selected to ensure broad coverage throughout the
day and over the course of a week. Armed with clip boards, the task was simply to count the number of pedestrians passing the specified point in the sidewalk during the observation period.

Although generalizing across all of the observations made by Think Tank members is difficult, several key themes emerged. First, Salt Lake City comes nowhere near the levels of use diversity or density of Manhattan, the environment where Jacobs made her observations. This prompted many in the group to cite Jacobs’ own admonition to be cautious about attempting to apply her theories to non-New York locations. Second, regardless of the location of observation, the highest levels of sidewalk use seemed tied to a specific special event in the downtown (the lighting of the Christmas lights on Temple Square) more than to any of the specific factors measured. Third, none of the places observed had consistent levels of sidewalk use across all, or even most, time periods. Last, there was some evidence that in places where there were significant building differences between two sides of a street, pedestrians tended to prefer the side with more doorways and smaller street frontages.

Inconclusive though the exercise proved to be, it did illustrate interactions of various kinds between built and social environments, and it provided source material for the final assignment of the first semester. For this exercise, each student was charged with developing a full research proposal that, if adopted, would provide the focus of the group’s activities for the remainder of the academic year. The resulting proposals ranged from a number of marketing related projects aimed at increasing downtown patronage to several land use development and planning schemes. In the end, the group settled on a compromise proposal, drafted using elements from several of the initial offerings. The resulting project
became known as the Hub.

The project’s name comes from the Intermodal Hub, a rail and bus station being built by Salt Lake City near 600 West and 200 South, in the southwest corner of the downtown area. When completed, the Intermodal Hub will serve as the major transfer point between the region’s light rail system, intercity and local bus service, and a new commuter rail line. The facility may also provide access to a future Bus Rapid Transit system that would serve communities in southern Davis County, an area on Salt Lake’s immediate northern border.

Recognizing the key role this facility will have on the future of the surrounding area, the Think Tank chose to engage in an intense analysis of the two block area immediately east of the Hub. The study area’s borders are 200 South, 400 South, 500 West, and 600 West (see map on page 8)—essentially the area between the transit facility and the current extant of recent downtown development. The district just east of these blocks, closer to the center of downtown, has seen significant small-scale redevelopment in recent years, changing it from being rather run-down and ignored to the beginnings of a “bohemian” trendy neighborhood. The area immediately to the north has had substantial large-scale redevelopment with the construction of The Gateway, an upscale two-million square foot residential, retail, and office project. Other projects either nearing completion or just over the horizon include a new luxury hotel two blocks east of the Intermodal Hub and a new campus for Brigham Young University, just east of The Gateway.
As outlined in the subsequent chapters of this report, the study area for the Think Tank project, though once vibrant, has for some decades been rather forsaken. The impacts of freight rail transportation, Interstate 15, industrial-based soil contamination, the decline in rail passenger transport, and the outward development pressures of suburban sprawl have resulted in the relative abandonment of this two-block area. With redevelopment already occurring on three sides, plus an anticipated 12,600 daily commuters flowing through it by 2030 (Utah Transit Authority, 2005), it is just a matter of time before reinvestment occurs on these two blocks as well. What is less clear is the type of investment that will occur, who will be served by the resulting development, and how the area’s streets, sidewalks, and other public areas will be designed. These were among the questions the Think Tank sought to address.

To articulate these questions and begin the process of answering them, the group divided into committees, each focused on one of four areas: history, ethnography, housing, and public process. The history committee, whose work is documented in chapter one of this report, sought to understand how past settlements on these two blocks inform their potential futures. Chapter two covers the work of the ethnography group, which conducted interviews of people who live, work, shop, and recreate in the area, seeking to understand how the area is currently used and the perceptions and aspirations of the people who use it. In chapter three, the housing committee addresses the special role housing policy plays in a downtown setting. That role is particularly accentuated in this location by the close proximity of several regional agencies serving the needs of homeless populations and a number of housing developments targeted to lower-income households. The final chapter reflects the work of
the “charrette group”—the committee charged with developing and hosting an open house to elicit public comment about the future of the study area. The report closes with a conclusion by Vicky Newman, one of my Think Tank co-instructors and one of the all-time best persons with whom to team teach.

The Think Tank used diversity and integration as structural elements to understand downtown Salt Lake City. But the concepts were also useful in understanding the dynamics of how the individuals of the Think Tank functioned as a group. As mentioned, the 17 members of the Think Tank represented an incredibly broad range of majors and disciplines. But of course, diversity goes far beyond the labels on degrees and majors; the life experiences and cultural influences of each member played a role in how we understood each other and the world. Finding ways of effectively integrating this diverse set of perspectives was as challenging as attempting to chart a course for two blocks of downtown—and just as rewarding.

One of the instructors’ meta-level objectives for the 2004_05 Think Tank was to encourage the students to leave the relative safety and security of typical academe and wrestle with problems, formulate questions, and take leadership roles in answering some of those questions. I am pleased and proud to say that the students succeeded in that task well beyond our wildest dreams.