

# RETROFITTING

URBAN DESIGN SOLUTIONS *for* REDESIGNING SUBURBS

# SUBURBIA

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## Chapter 8

# Mall Case Study: Belmar, Lakewood, Colorado

“Enrich Your Life, Not Your Lawn” in Lakewood’s New Downtown

**Name of project:** Belmar (3.3 million sq. ft.)

**Location:** near Denver in Lakewood, Colorado

**Year constructed:** 2001 to 2012 (projected year of completion)

**Planning and urban design:** Elkus Manfredi Architects, Ltd., and Civitas, Inc.

**Architects:** Elkus Manfredi Architects, Van Meter Williams Pollack, and others

**Lead developer:** Continuum Partners, LLC

**Residential developers:** McStain Neighborhoods, Trammell Crow, Sunburst Design LLC, and Harvard Communities

**What it replaces:** Villa Italia (1.2 million-sq.-ft. enclosed regional mall)

**Size of site:** 104 acres

**Key features:** twenty-three walkable urban blocks, publicly owned streets, LEED-certified buildings, and sustainable site design



**Figure 8-1** Teller Street in the commercial core of Belmar.

## SUMMARY

Belmar is an example of exemplary sustainable urbanism, having overcome many of the inherent limitations and challenges in retrofitting regional malls. It is providing a dense, varied urban place that is beginning to function as a downtown for a large, sprawling suburb that never had one. Lakewood, Colorado, a collection of residential subdivisions just to the west of Denver, has grown into the state's fourth-largest municipality with over 140,000 residents. Working closely with the city, the developers of Belmar converted a 104-acre site that formerly held an enclosed mall in a sea of parking, accessible only by car, into a mixed-use, walkable destination with nearly triple the built area, which combines shopping, residences, and office and civic uses on twenty-three urban-scaled streets and blocks. It contains a richly programmed, interconnected series of public spaces for civic uses. Also significant is the project's commitment to sustainable development and green building. New buildings are LEED certified, site drainage is carefully handled, demolition materials were recycled, one building was adaptively reused, a 1.8-mega-watt rooftop solar array is in construction, and there is even a wind farm in one parking lot.

A diverse range of household types and tastes are accommodated in the project's 1,300 housing units in the form of rentals over retail, townhouses, loft condominiums, and zero-lot-line houses. The architecture avoids "cutesy" gingerbread in favor of durable materials and simple detailing. Designed by several architects, the mixed-use buildings at the core of the project are mostly built with masonry cladding in a style dubbed "American Mercantile." The purely residential buildings at the edge are wood construction and employ more color. The variations read as authentic to the history and climate of Denver.

The privately held development company plans long-term ownership of the highly complex project, employing carefully controlled, but flexible, oversight. Both the city and the developer were willing to forego short-term income for long-term value. The positive effects of the retrofit are extending into the neighboring blocks and corridors, bolstered by Lakewood's commitment to infilling and urbanizing.

The primary retrofitting strategies are as follows:

- Scraping and rebuilding of a dead mall greyfield superblock into a new mixed-use downtown by dividing the site with public streets that connect with adjacent streets to form discrete urban blocks.
- Blocks developed in phases where the mix of uses on each is subject to adjustment over time, while the street matrix is fixed.
- A continuous network of streets and open spaces within which avant-garde arts programming occurs to enliven the atmosphere and enrich the experience of going "downtown."

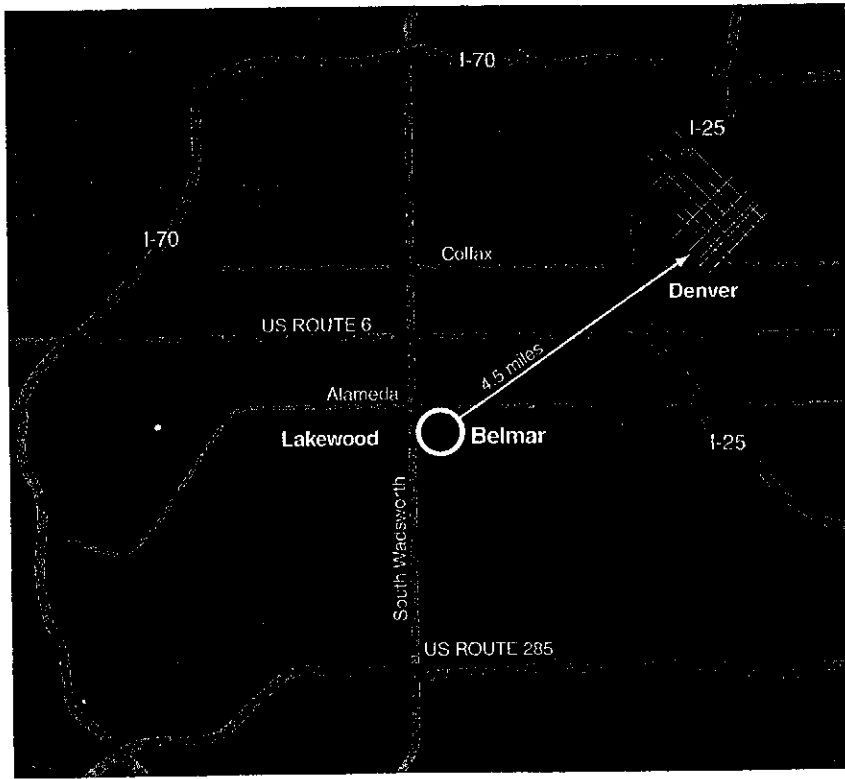


Figure 8-2 Location map.

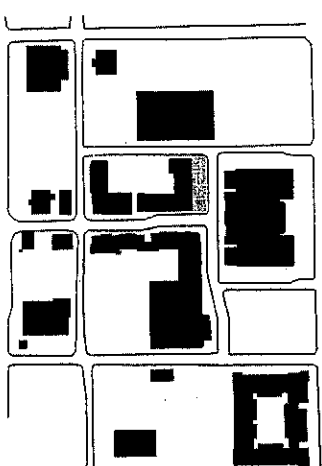
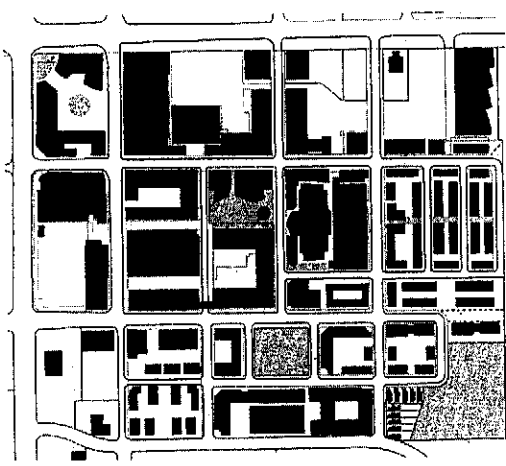
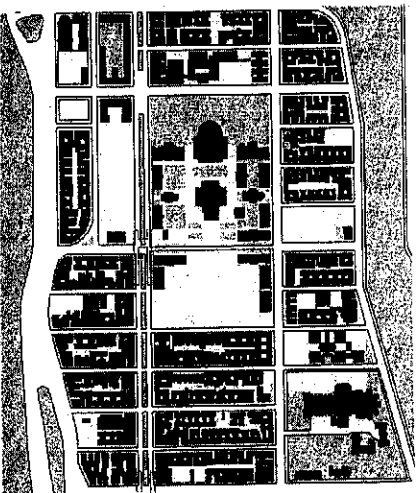
Beginning in 2001, Belmar has been under construction on a 104-acre site in the spread-out suburb of Lakewood (population in 2000: 144,000; area: 42.9 square miles), in Jefferson County, directly to the southwest of downtown Denver. (See Figure 8-2 and Color Plates 34 to 40.) The name derives from the 750-acre Belmar Estate, which the land was part of before the construction of the Villa Italia mall in 1966. The thirteen separate subdivisions that joined to form Lakewood were incorporated into a city in 1969, in a defensive maneuver to avoid annexation into the city of Denver, then under a school busing order. As this history suggests, Lakewood had a fairly homogenous demographic profile of primarily white, middle- and working-class residents, fearful of

diversity and change. Since 1969 the demographics have diversified somewhat as the suburb has grown and attracted younger Hispanic residents to its east side, while many white residents have aged in place. Lakewood is hoping to attract new residents to span the gap. City Manager Mike Rock says, "We're heavy on the over-sixty and the under-six and we're light in the middle, and we want to change that."<sup>2</sup>

The developer, Continuum Partners, is a relatively small, local, privately held development company run by Mark Falcone. Continuum had ambitious plans for the project from its inception. As Continuum Principal and Chief Development Officer Tom Gougeon insists, "It's *not* a shopping center imitating the form of a downtown."<sup>3</sup> It is a new downtown that, once seeded and nurtured, will have the necessary urban structure in place to grow and change over time. Continuum cut its teeth on 16 Market Square, an adaptive reuse project in the now-popular LoDo warehouse district of Denver and was recently tapped to develop the new transit district around Denver's historic Union Station.

The master plan for Belmar is a joint effort by Civitas and Elkus Manfredi Architects. Civitas is a Denver-based landscape architecture and urban design firm and Elkus Manfredi is a Boston-based firm that has developed considerable expertise and clout in the retail and mixed-use redevelopment market through their involvement in the planning and design of several recent successful projects, including CityPlace in West Palm Beach, Florida; The Grove in Los Angeles; and Americana at Brand in Glendale, California. In construction is Westwood Station in Westwood, Massachusetts (see Chapter 11).

When build-out is complete around 2012, the 1.2 million-square-foot mall will ultimately be replaced by 3.3 million square feet of new construction. Almost half of the new building area is reserved for residential use: 1,300 apartments, condominiums, townhouses,



**Morningside Heights, 1915**

**Belmar, 2015**

**Winter Park Village, 2015**

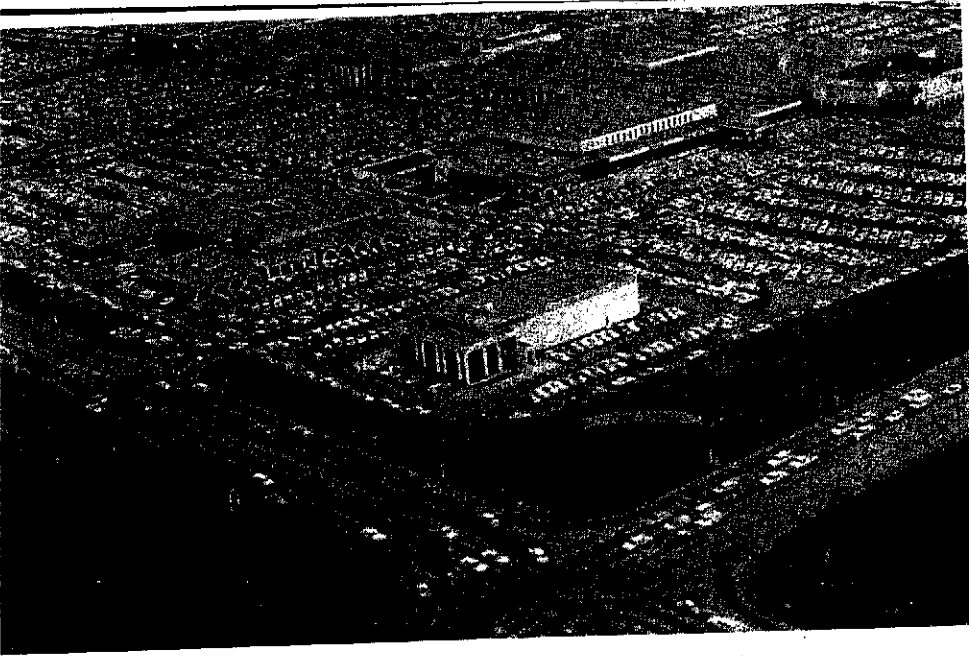
**Figure 8-3** Comparison of rapidly built districts, spaced a century apart: Morningside Heights in New York City, Belmar, and Winter Park Village in Florida. To accommodate large floor plates, such as for a grocery store, parking decks, and a multiplex cinema, the building footprints at Belmar are larger than in Morningside Heights; however, the scale of blocks and streets and the degree of enclosure and definition of open spaces is similar. In contrast, the mall retrofit at Winter Park Village near Orlando, sited on a similarly sized parcel, is ringed with fields of parking, disappointingly similar to the mall condition that preceded it and eroding the integrity of the new blocks and streets.

and zero-lot-line homes. The remaining half is split 55/45 between retail and office use. The site plan of the new Belmar includes 9 acres of open space, including a 2.2-acre park occupying a central block in the southern residential area and a 1.2-acre public plaza in the heart of the commercial district. One hundred four acres is a large piece of land to redevelop all at once into an urban district. In comparison, Battery Park City in New York, a huge undertaking, is 92 acres. As the diagram illustrates, Morningside Heights in Manhattan between 110th Street and 125th Street is roughly the same size as Belmar, and was initially built out in about the same amount of time—a rapid fifteen-year process from pastures to densely built city blocks. (See Figure 8-3.)

The area of Jefferson County that is now Lakewood was once rural farmland, subdivided into the quarter-section (160-acre) homesteads bounded with arterial roads that shape so much of the built landscape of the American West. The first residential subdivision in the area, called “Lakewood,” was platted

in 1889. On the large parcel at the increasingly busy corner of South Wadsworth and West Alameda—a broad arterial that at one time was a formal City Beautiful boulevard connecting Denver to scenic Red Rocks—the Villa Italia was constructed and opened in 1966. (See Figure 8-4.) In researching dead and dying malls, we have found that each mall had a superlative statistic attached to it: the first/largest open-air/enclosed/two-story mall built west/east of the Mississippi/Rockies/Chicago. Villa Italia is no exception. Upon opening, it was advertised as “the largest enclosed mall west of Chicago,” a title it did not hold for long.

Villa Italia was fabulously successful and much beloved, a setting for high school proms and civic events such as the yearly Italian Festival. In the 1970s, the mall was a key component in the economic viability of the newly formed city of Lakewood. In the early 1990s it was still going strong, in revenue if not in reputation. It had become a teen hangout, purportedly drawing in a rough crowd from outside Lakewood while providing as much as 50% of the city’s



**Figure 8-4** Villa Italia, an enclosed regional mall, was built on a super-block at the busy corner of South Wadsworth and West Alameda in 1966. The 104-acre site has been retrofitted into Belmar, comprised of twenty-three urban blocks and 3.3 million square feet of new, mixed-use construction—shops, offices, and 1,300 residential units of varied types.

tax base.<sup>4</sup> But just a few short years later the economic engine had broken down. Promised improvements such as a multiscreen cinema were not materializing, while in the retail industry department stores were being consolidated and anchors closed.

In the vicious do-or-die cycle of keeping a regional mall viable, it was time for a substantial makeover or the introduction of a new paradigm. Which would it be: renovated mall, power center, lifestyle mall, or new downtown? A 1998 article in the *Denver Business Journal* quoted a retail broker saying the site would “be a good community center or power center site.”<sup>5</sup> Similar sentiments had been expressed about another failed mall site in the Denver suburbs, which became CityCenter Englewood—part big box, part civic center, part TOD at a new light-rail station (see Chapter 6). The mayor, Steve Burkholder, appointed a citizens’ advisory committee to strategize improvements to the mall. In an article in *Governing* magazine, Christopher Swope describes the process by which the committee gradually—and with much reluctance—came to the

conclusion that what they really cared about were the social and civic activities more than the mall itself.<sup>6</sup> Municipal officials in Lakewood decided to forego the lure of quick revenue returns and rejected the big-box power center option (after all, in a suburban city of over 42 square miles there are numerous other suitable sites for big-box retailers). Instead, the mayor and chief planner, Frank Lane, working with the highly active and informed citizens’ advisory committee, actively searched for a redevelopment partner interested in pursuing a longer-term strategy of creating a downtown for a suburban city that had never had one. The recognition that they now wanted a downtown not unlike the LoDo district in Denver or downtown Boulder was quite a shock to those for whom the mall had been an inoculation against having to go into the city. The extent of the shift in their thinking about both their own identity and the form of a downtown is revealed by the 1998 Lakewood Town Center, including a city hall, library, and cultural center, built across Wadsworth Boulevard from Belmar. The public buildings sit behind a new strip mall facing vast parking lots.

Gougeon says that although Lakewood had recently made these investments in civic buildings next door, “They weren’t organized in any fashion that creates a sense of community or identity.”<sup>7</sup> The Villa Italia site offered Lakewood the chance to make up for that lost opportunity and Continuum was selected as the developer. Market research demonstrated that the site was still viable for regional retail, possessing a large, relatively affluent, underserved population nearby and excellent visibility from still-busy arterial roads. Initial plans to phase demolition and keep viable parts of the mall in operation were nixed when the mall lost three of four department store anchors in quick succession. The fourth anchor, owned by the May

Company, proved uncooperative with the redevelopment plans and unwilling to give up its lease on a building less than fifteen years old. In the end a negotiated settlement was reached when the city initiated eminent domain proceedings. Continuum was forced into an accelerated building schedule, though still phased over ten years.

In retrospect, Continuum feels that the accelerated schedule was a blessing in disguise. The need to demolish and build lent tremendous momentum to the process and seems to have fueled its success. We agree. There is a substantial risk that too much of a piecemeal, incremental approach to such a major restructuring of the fabric will stall out at a "good enough" stage, as at Winter Park Village, before sufficient transformation to create real urbanism and long-term value has been achieved.

Even so, because the first phase's buildings lacked visibility from Wadsworth Boulevard, it was difficult to establish an identity for the site and interest in sales and leasing when it opened in 2004. The new mixed-use buildings were on centrally located blocks, not on the periphery. Instead of seeing the new streetscapes, passersby saw mounds of raw aggregate, recycled from demolition materials and waiting for reuse.

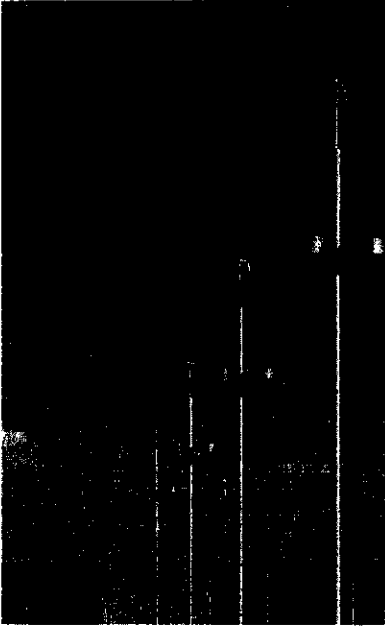
Despite the initial inauspicious views of the project, it is selling well. Just as the city hoped, the success of Belmar is lifting neighboring boats: surrounding property values are up and reinvestment is occurring. The city is proactively preparing to accommodate the new growth with corridor vision plans and rezoning in place for Alameda Avenue, where Belmar sits, and along Colfax to the north where an old rail corridor is being rejuvenated for transit.<sup>8</sup> At the terminus of the rail corridor is the Denver Federal Center, which was the largest federal employment center outside Washington, DC (and the place of employment of many Lakewood residents). It is now closing down and Lakewood has annexed all 700 acres.

## "GREENING": FINDING THE FUNDING FOR SUSTAINABLE URBANISM

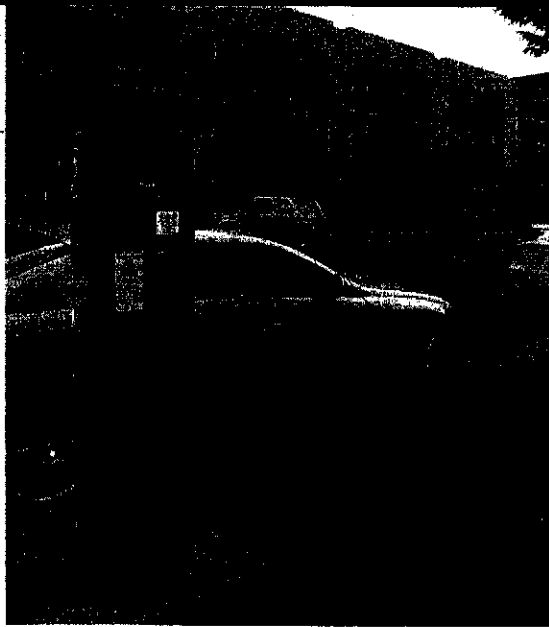
The total development costs for Belmar are expected to be \$750 million—a very large sum of money for a small, private development company to manage. How did they do it? In fact, Continuum is part of the Pioneer Companies, a group of development partnerships run by Falcone's family from a base in New York State, who provided internal equity for much of the project. However, Continuum was able to raise \$320 million in funding through two innovative sources: a public improvement fee (PIF) negotiated with the city of Lakewood and green bonds awarded by a federal government program.

About \$165 million, or more than one-fifth of the total development costs, was spent on public improvements to the greyfield site before redevelopment: property acquisitions, environmental cleanup, asbestos removal, utilities installations, and drainage control. Continuum paid 25% of these up-front costs and financed the rest through bonds. Lakewood's city council and redevelopment authority then passed a resolution in 2001 permitting Continuum to charge a 2.5-cent public improvement fee or PIF—a sales tax that remits to the developer rather than to public coffers—to pay off the bonds. The city also waived one cent of its two-cent sales tax at Belmar to provide additional aid in paying off the debt and reduce the burden on customers. The discount will continue for twenty-five years or until the debt is paid off. This arrangement put the sales tax at Belmar on a par with most city sales taxes in the area.<sup>9</sup> At existing sales figures, city officials expect payoff to occur ten years early.

Finding funding for predevelopment costs is crucial because these costs are the burden of redeveloping greyfield and brownfield sites, versus building in exurban greenfield conditions. As Gougeon admits,



**Figure 8-5** A small urban wind farm, funded with national green bonds, graces one of the few surface parking lots at Belmar.



**Figure 8-6** Street parking meters were installed at Belmar from the beginning, and parking in the garages is free, to encourage higher turnover of on-street spaces for those running short errands. Belmar's meters were Lakewood's first.

"It was certainly different from buying 100 acres of cornfield."<sup>10</sup> Sustainable urbanism is dependent upon building on these types of sites but finding the funding can still be very difficult.

Continuum was at the right place at the right time when it secured its green bonds. Belmar was one of four developments nationwide to qualify for these bonds under the American Jobs Creation Act of 2004. Under the program, selected developers who demonstrate energy-efficient construction were allowed to borrow money and not have to pay taxes on the interest. Belmar received \$200 million to fund the installation of a 1.8-megawatt rooftop photovoltaic system on the roofs of parking decks and lots, to harvest solar energy with the intention of providing up to 20% of the power supplied to the project, as well as for other energy-efficient improvements. Colorado senators and representatives are credited with helping Belmar qualify as one of the four chosen projects.<sup>11</sup>

The green bonds have been used, as mandated, to add sustainable design features to the project specifically intended to increase energy efficiency, such as a parking lot wind farm, photovoltaics, and evaporative cooling systems. (See Figure 8-5.) Belmar has also become a demonstration site for the Colorado Public Utilities' legislated mandate to increase renewable energy use statewide and is benefiting from generous rebates. Many of the buildings have been designed to meet LEED certification criteria; some of the buildings were entered in the program and achieved a LEED Silver rating. Passive sustainable site design strategies are also included in the project, like using high-albedo paving materials and harvesting and replanting vegetation from the site, including several large ponderosa pine trees in the plaza. Gougeon believes that LEED standards will become the standard building codes of the future, while an amalgam of LEED for Neighborhood Design and form-based codes will comprise zoning in the future. David Manfredi, principal of Elkus Manfredi and the lead designer of the master plan, credited some of the developer's and the city's commitment to green design to geography and the outdoor lifestyle of the West. "The commitment to green at Belmar when we were planning it ten years ago was greater than we see today at most of our projects on the East Coast."<sup>12</sup>

A third route to sustainable urbanism is via reduction in car trips and vehicle miles traveled. The mix of uses and tripled density at Belmar address this goal, as well as eight regional bus routes that now thread through Belmar's streets. In addition, Continuum built structured parking in the first phase (probably too much as it turns out, according to a parking audit performed by Continuum). In a reversal of conventional thinking, and in line with the theories of Donald Shoup, structured parking is free while on-street parking is metered as a short-term parking management tool, not a revenue source.<sup>13</sup> (See Figure 8-6.)



## Q & A with Lakewood City Manager Mike Rock

Q. What do you think of the suburbs?

A. Suburbs are uniformly boring.

Q. So how did you go about making the Villa Italia Mall retrofit not boring?

A. There was a joke going around about Lakewood, "Ten minutes from downtown, but why bother?" Things aren't easy to do, politically, in Lakewood. Even though we have done many cutting-edge things, we have to work very hard to convince a conservative, cautious community with some libertarian elements in it to let us do our job. The main thing we did with Belmar is we gave the community a place to brag about and a place to go. A place to take their friends on Friday night. We created a sense of pride for people to walk around and say, "Yeah, this is cool!"

Q. Do you think you achieved good public space at Belmar?

A. One of the things that will make Belmar age well is that there's always something new to look at, either because one business left and another came in or because something new just got built. Certainly The Lab is a very creative activity, but really one of the best public spaces is that plaza. Kids pushing the round ball that sits on the water, all the young people there on a Friday night sitting outside the pub, 'cause you can smoke outside. In the winter you have people skating. That's real—it's not an artificial dynamic like going to strictly a museum or a library.

Q. What role did the fine citizens of Lakewood play in the redevelopment process?

A. I think it's unfair and an abdication of responsibility when local governments simply turn to a citizens' group and say, "What do you want? What should we do?" Representative government says that at the end of the day it's really those elected officials and their staff who need to take that responsibility with appropriate participation. But you need to create venues for participation that are meaningful. It's not meaningful to ask a group of civilians to come up with the final determination of what the reuse of a mall is. But what it is appropriate to do is to use an iterative process to talk about the components that make a place interesting and livable. What do you want to preserve? What do you want to change?

Q. How did the public-private partnership with Continuum Partners come about?

A. City officials in Lakewood had a very broad concept. We wanted a more interesting urban space. And we were willing to forego revenue in order to create long-term value. We didn't issue a formal RFP [request for proposals]. Through a mutual friend, I had an informal lunch with Mark Falcone, of Continuum. The relationship evolved from there. Continuum was far in before there were any formal agreements with the city.

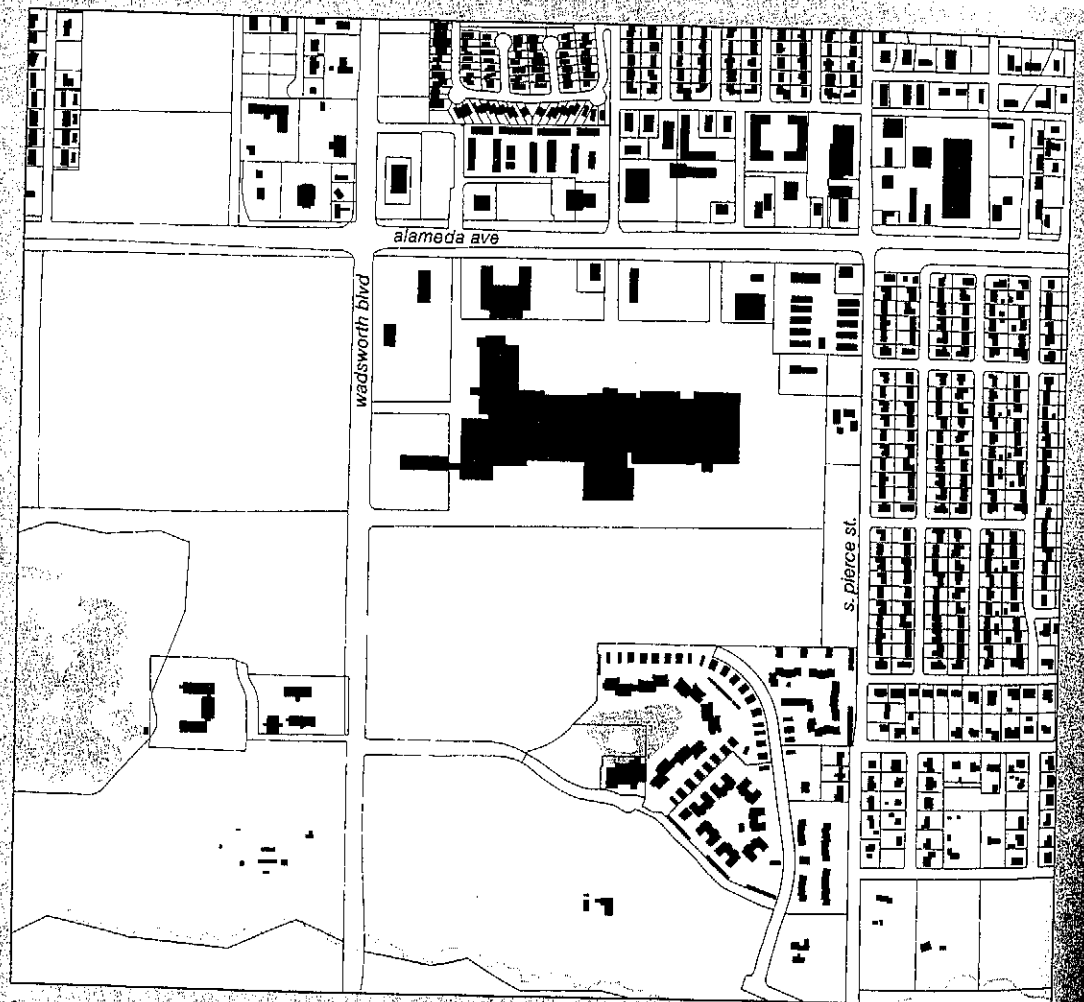
Q. How has the partnership worked out?

A. We feel lucky, but lucky by design.

Mike Rock was interviewed by June Williamson on August 7, 2007. He has lived in Belmar since the first apartments were completed, and he recently purchased a zero-lot-line townhouse there. He walks to work.

## MORPHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

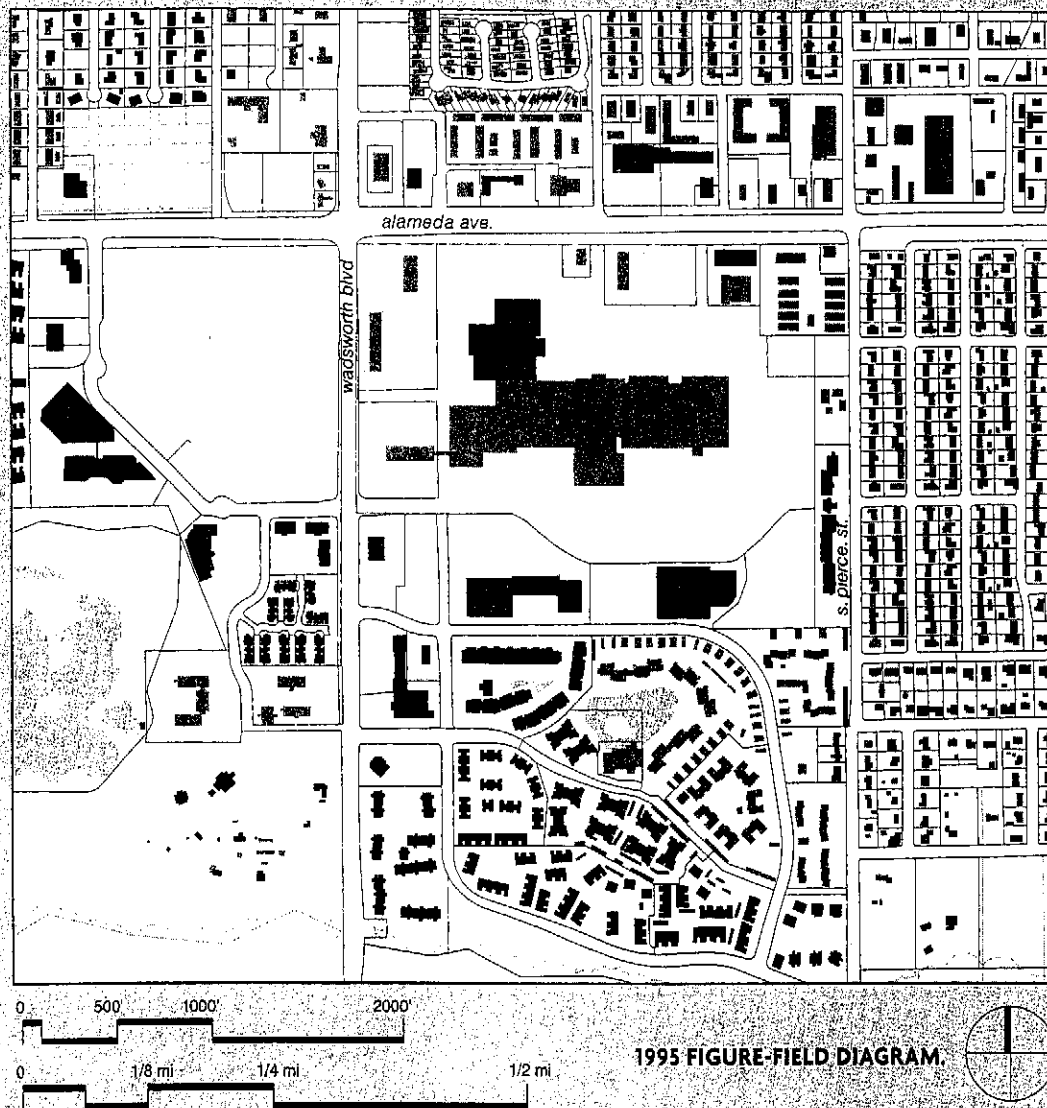
Urban morphology is the study of the physical form of cities. The following series of figure-field diagrams illustrate the morphological transformations over time, from 1975 to projected conditions in 2015, on a square-mile area that includes Belmar. One can see both how the preurban grid of the quarter-section (160-acre) divisions of the historic Public Land Survey System conditioned the suburban road and lot locations, and how buildings are sited in response to this grid. The new block structure of Belmar knits into the historic morphology, but is unable to challenge the dominance of the arterial road network. In the diagrams, one may read three types of suburban tissue: *static tissues*, or planned subdivisions (comprising much of Lakewood), *campus tissues*, such as apartment complexes and, of course, the shopping mall; and *elastic tissues*, the most transformable type, found on the arterial strips of Alameda and Wadsworth Boulevards.<sup>16</sup>



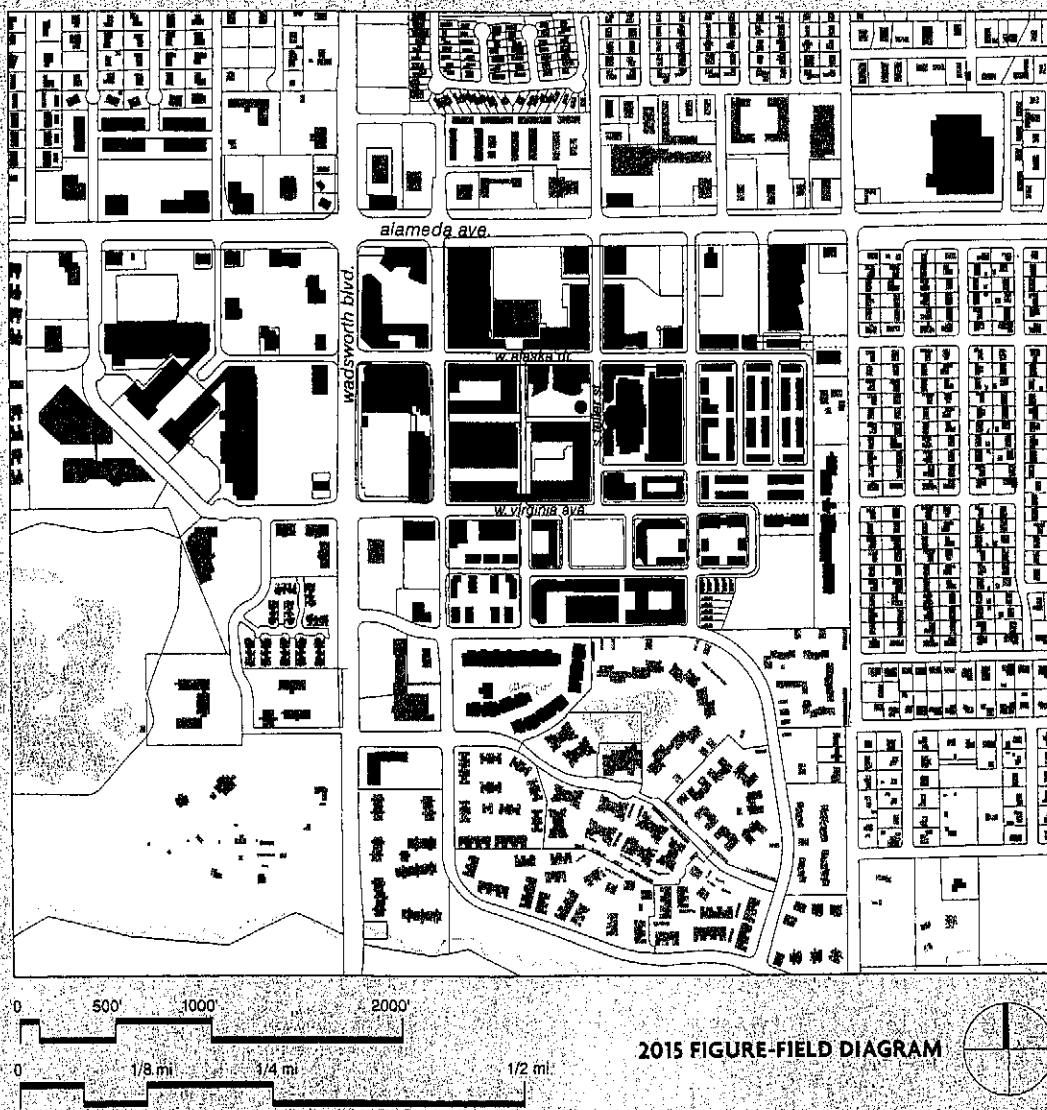
1975 FIGURE-FIELD DIAGRAM



**Figure 8-7** 1975 figure-field diagram. Villa Italia had been open and operating for nearly a decade. The outlines of the 750-acre private estate from which the mall site was carved can be clearly discerned, bounded on the northeast corner by Alameda Avenue and South Pierce Street. Also clearly readable are the quarter-section (160-acre) divisions of the historic Public Land Survey System. Portions of the estate had been developed already as clustered apartments, on sites south of Villa Italia, while an office complex was built west of Wadsworth on the site of the estate's original mansion, facing a man-made lake. In tune with zoning and planning practice of the time, these three new uses—residential, office, and retail—were segregated from one another. If the original estate was one large *campus*, it now had several smaller campuses embedded within it. To the north and east of Villa Italia are small-lot, single-family residential subdivisions. These constitute the *static* tissue of Lakewood. Along Alameda, a number of large to medium parcels were developed for commercial use and constitute *elastic* tissues. Historically, the main east-west strip in Lakewood is Colfax, a couple of miles north, with Wadsworth as a primary north-south connector. With the construction of Villa Italia, the action migrated south.



**Figure 8-8** 1995 figure-field diagram. By 1995, a municipal office building had been built in Lakewood's planned civic campus (east of Wadsworth and north of the lake), and the city was far along in planning for the rest of the complex. Additional clustered apartment complexes were built, filling in the *campus tissue* to the south of Belmar. The roads in the new development form a winding, internalized loop, only minimally connected to the framing arterial roads, with no discernable block structure. The residential fabric remained almost wholly static and unchanged. The mall had grown a bit, with the addition of a new anchor and some big-box retailers on outparcels to the south. By this time there was an understanding that the mall might be entering a period of decline, although sales tax revenue was still strong.



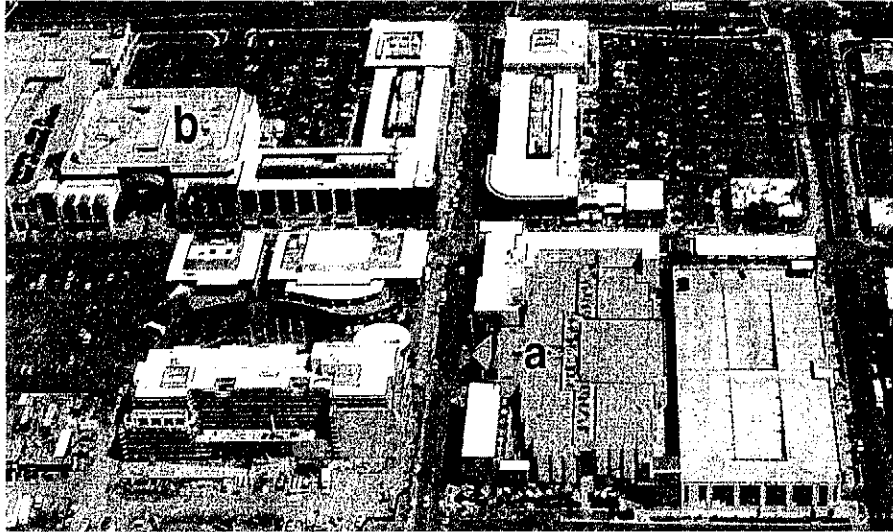
**Figure 8-9** 2015 figure-field diagram (projected). In 1998, the \$62 million Lakewood Town Center civic and commercial project was completed. The project includes a cultural arts center with a theater, a new public library, and city offices, as well as office space and nearly 300,000 square feet of grocery-anchored retail space, originally intended to complement the now-demolished mall. The civic center, while fairly dense, remains auto-oriented in design, with service loop roads designed to efficiently deposit cars into parking garages rather than streets and blocks.

Across Wadsworth, the mall site has been almost completely transformed. The only building remaining housed one of the anchor stores, located such that West Alaska Drive could comfortably pass in front of it. The street grid from surrounding blocks has been extended through the site to form twenty-three new urban-scaled blocks. The majority of the streets were deeded to the city as public ways. Continuum does not own the buffer parcels along South Pierce Street and was not able to continue the street grid all the way through, but this remains a possibility for the future.

**Figure 8-10** The Belmar Urban Apartments, designed by Van Meter Williams Pollack Architects, comprise sixty-six affordable family rental apartments, flats, and townhouses organized along a central pedestrian walk. A total of 1,300 new dwelling units, half for sale and half for rent, are planned for Belmar.



**Figure 8-11** Wrapped blocks: (a) in the “full wrap” the bulk of a multiplex cinema is concealed in the center of the block; (b) a “partial detached wrap” of retail liners embed a reused former department store building into the block.



Alaska Drive and Teller Street form the main retail intersection, the “100% corner” in retail-speak, of the new Belmar district. (See Color Plate 36.) Townhouses and zero-lot-line houses are located on the blocks closest to preexisting single-family homes. (See Figure 8-10.) Mid-rise apartments wrapped around parking decks—Texas donuts—are located to the south, adjacent to preexisting apartment blocks, whose tenants can now fairly easily reach the center of Belmar on foot. There are additional apartments, loft units, and condominiums above retail on the blocks closest to Teller and Alaska.

Uses with larger footprints—a Whole Foods grocery store and “mini boxes” of 10,000 to 40,000 square feet—are located on blocks adjacent to Wadsworth and Alameda. A hotel is planned for the Wadsworth and Alameda corner. Larger uses on more central blocks are wrapped, using various design strategies. There is the “full wrap,” seen on the theater block, where a sixteen-screen multiplex is completely concealed in the center of the block and lined with three mixed-use buildings and a parking garage. The wrappers are detached from the cinema, creating alleys for service, loading, and emergency egress. The garage itself has a liner strategy: the street-facing edge of the ground floor contains artists’ studios with plate glass windows. Then there is the “partial wrap, attached or detached.” The Whole Foods store, built to the standard of the chain’s “urban” format, has a partial attached wrap on the nonarterial sides, containing retail and office use. The reused department store building has a partial detached wrap, composed of adjacent buildings that meet the street, with a gap at the recessed entry to the store building, which has been opened up with new windows and a skylight.<sup>15</sup> (See Figure 8-11.)

In addition, there has been some new construction on Alameda. A Home Depot was built on Alameda one block east, which does not represent a change in typical suburban development practice, but more high-density mixed-use infill is expected at major intersections along the avenue, as encouraged by the Alameda Corridor Overlay District initiated by Lakewood, based on a vision plan by Dover Kohl & Partners.

## FROM BUNKERS TO STREETSCAPES: PUBLIC SPACE

A few miles from Belmar, going west on Alameda, is the Denver Federal Center. It is a forbidding place, with high security fences, guards, and, quite literally, bunkers; it is a place where a well-intentioned citizen cannot take a photograph without risk of being questioned and possibly detained by the federal police. In contrast, Belmar really is a public place. All of the buildings are owned and managed by Continuum or its associated entities, but the streets, sidewalks, and parks are owned by the city of Lakewood and are considered public space, with all the civil protections that status affords.

Retail tenants are a mix of national chains and locally owned stores and restaurants. Tom Gougeon says, "What we do is borrow the strength of those national retailers because we need them, because that's who dominates the U.S. retail world today. But we consciously make the decision that we're going to forgo some income and make a commitment to having a mix out there."<sup>16</sup> The need to have a strategy that purposely passes up revenue can be a hard pill for developers, property managers, and city officials to swallow. But it is the local shops that distinguish a new downtown (and old ones, for that

matter) and make it a destination. While critics decry the "malignification" of the city, we can be thankful for conscientious developers who strive to enliven the suburban mix.

In the classic gentrification cycle observed in older urban districts, low rents attract hip local boutiques and cafés to an area, and the independent building owners are happy to have them. At some point, if the businesses are successful and the area becomes popular, the owners, each seeking to cash in, are likely to independently decide to raise rents. This move often ends up displacing the local merchants that made the area hip and viable—thus undermining the factors that led to the increase in the properties' value in the first place. This cyclical process is happening in Walnut Creek, California, to the dismay of many of the funky retailers who helped lead the revival of the old Main Street and can no longer afford rising rents. A large single owner, however, can make the longer-term decision to subsidize local businesses for the good of the whole district, as has happened at Belmar (and Mashpee Commons; see Chapter 5).

The leasing group at Belmar came up with a strategic plan for enlivening the mix; they identified and targeted successful independent businesses in the Denver area that they would like to have at Belmar and devised attractive leasing agreements to entice them to come. For example, Falcone invited the chef of a popular local Mexican restaurant to relocate to Belmar. When the chef demurred because he couldn't afford it, Continuum invested in the restaurant in order to make it possible. In addition, Continuum created Block 7, a row of 500- to 1,000-square-foot studios and galleries on Saulsbury Street that rent for a discounted rate of \$350 to \$400 a month. The small studios function as a ground-level liner, activating the façade of the structured parking deck for the sixteen-screen cinema located on the

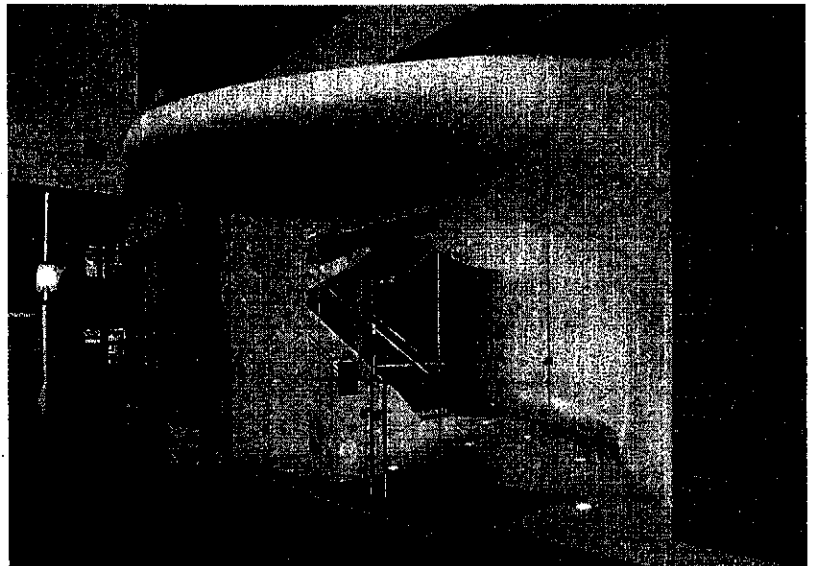
opposite side of the block. Block 7, combined with The Lab, has made Belmar a must-visit stop on the Colorado contemporary art circuit. (See Figure 8-12 and Color Plates 38 and 40.)

The Laboratory of Arts and Ideas opened in a storefront in 2004. It was originally intended to be an outpost of the Denver Art Museum, run by a museum curator, but it soon took on independent status (subsidized by Continuum) with an ambitious mission to fertilize avant-garde art and culture in the suburbs. (See Figure 8-13.) Director Adam Lerner organized The Lab as a kind of think tank, where discussions, lectures, and publications are as important as exhibitions, to make a "kind of public forum to create an intellectual and cultural community" in, and on, the suburbs.<sup>17</sup>

How "public" are Belmar's open spaces? Are they providing Lakewood's inhabitants with the variety of social and civic functions that they hoped for in their downtown? We believe so and credit the design of the streets as well as programming and design of the skating rink/plaza and town green. The new public streets at Belmar have a right-of-way of seventy-five feet with generously wide sidewalks, leaving only thirty-four feet for the roadway, too narrow by Lakewood street standards. Lakewood worked hard with the local fire district to change the standards for Belmar. The skinny streets slow traffic, improving safety for pedestrians. They allow good visibility across streets, aiding the retail's viability. And, perhaps most importantly to the project's long-term sustainability, in conjunction with the three- to five-story buildings, they create the



**Figure 8-12** In Block 7, working artists occupy small studios with glazed storefront, lining a parking garage. At eight o'clock on a Monday evening in summer, many of the artists can be seen at work in their studios, visible to passersby. A style article in the *Denver Post* weighed in on Belmar a few years after completion of the first phase, proclaiming, "The food is getting tastier, the art is getting artsy-er."



**Figure 8-13** In 2006, The Laboratory of Arts and Ideas at Belmar, a nonprofit contemporary art space, inaugurated an 11,500-square-foot facility. The interior space, designed by Belzberg Architects, contrasts with its host building, with a protruding, amoeba-like canopy, part of the "Arae Wall," a precision-milled parametric form that twists through the space.



**Figure 8-14** Belmar hosts the annual Italian Festival, a tradition retained and expanded from Villa Italia days, which draws huge crowds to the streets.

sense of a beautifully outfitted outdoor public room with the kind of spatial intimacy that is conducive to social interaction and community building. These well-proportioned streets were rigorously detailed. Says Gougeon, "A great deal of thought went into the relationship between the street and the sidewalk. No detail was too small, from custom designed light fixtures to tree grates to manhole covers."<sup>18</sup>

One memorable design feature that makes Belmar streets distinctive is a custom-fabricated stainless steel cable over-the-road lighting system reminiscent of those often found in narrow European streets, where buildings are tall in proportion to the street width. These systems are relatively rare, except on festival occasions, in the United States. "If you see a photo with that lighting system, people will say, 'Oh, that's Belmar, that's Lakewood,'" Gougeon says.<sup>19</sup> The fire marshal was not very happy about the overhead lighting and we found it bordering on making the streetscape overly busy. At night it compresses the space of the street, increasing its

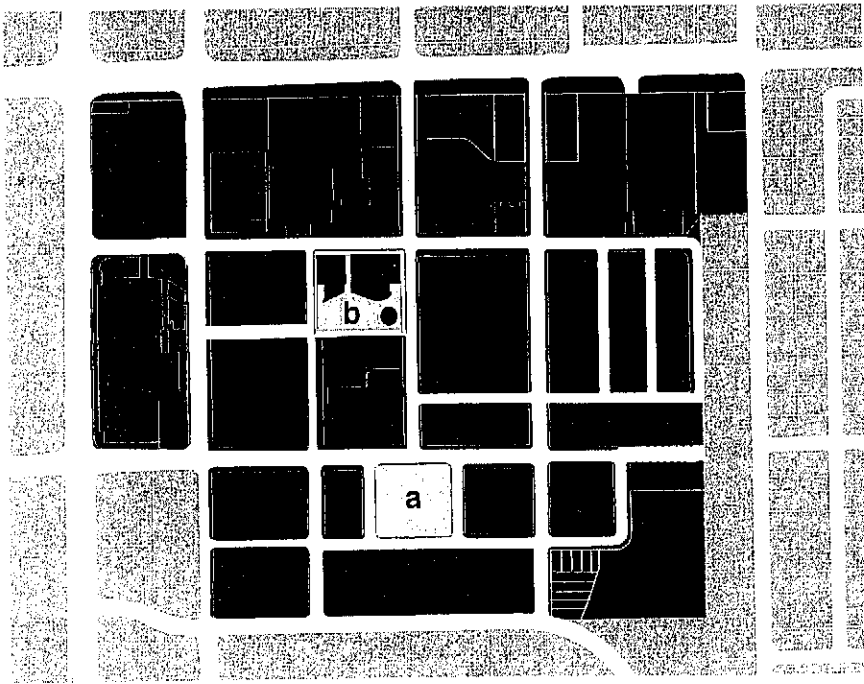
sense of intimacy and centrality. But by day we felt its vertical subdivision of the space interfered with the well-established spatial dialogue between buildings facing each other. However, it is expressive of the high level of care given to the design of the public realm at Belmar. We were glad not to find the mistakes so common in poorly planned lifestyle centers, where sidewalks often incorporate inappropriate steps and ramps because the streets have been improperly graded and coordinated with retail pad elevations. The streetscape at Belmar is both welcoming and intelligently, thoroughly designed.

The programming of the public spaces by Continuum and Lakewood is multilayered, complex, and expensive. It is a far cry from the feel-good mall programming of the past—runway "fashion" shows and Santas at Christmas—conceived with the single-minded purpose of drumming up sales. Belmar has a yearly Italian Festival that draws crowds of up to 10,000 (see Figure 8-14), a weekly farmer's market, and contemporary art lectures





**Figure 8-15** The 2.2-acre green at Belmar, occupying a full block and located on axis with Teller, the main north-south street, is a quiet place.



**Figure 8-16** The 23-block structure of Belmar. The green (a) and plaza (b) occupy central locations around which buildings are organized.

and events at The Lab, which regularly attract weeknight audiences of more than one hundred, many traveling out from Denver into the 'burbs. And then there is "Lakewood on Parade," a yearly event that used to take place in a high school parking lot and now travels proudly down Teller Street to the green. As for street and sidewalk maintenance, city funds for streets are transferred to Continuum for higher-than-typical service. For example, snow at Belmar is removed rather than plowed to the curb.

The bocce courts provide an example of how all of this effort is encouraging the formation of community bonds. They were temporarily located on a not-yet-built lot as part of the Italian Festival celebrations. Belmar residents enjoyed them and formed a "Save the Bocce Courts" group. Continuum now plans to find a new location for the courts when the time comes to build on that space.<sup>20</sup>

The two most explicitly public spaces are the plaza and the green. Manfredi describes them as the anchors of the project, serving an analogous, if counter, role to those of the department store anchors of a conventional shopping mall. Together with the streets they define the open space system around which the entire precinct is planned. The plaza is located just off the intersection of the two main streets, Alaska and Teller, very much in the center of the downtown. The green culminates the axis of Teller Street and serves as a gateway to the project for those arriving by bus. A quiet and leafy park, it provides a local focal place for passive recreation by the immediate residents. (See Figures 8-15 and 8-16.)

The plaza, on the other hand, is intended to attract a larger public and, according to Manfredi, provide opportunities for informal gathering

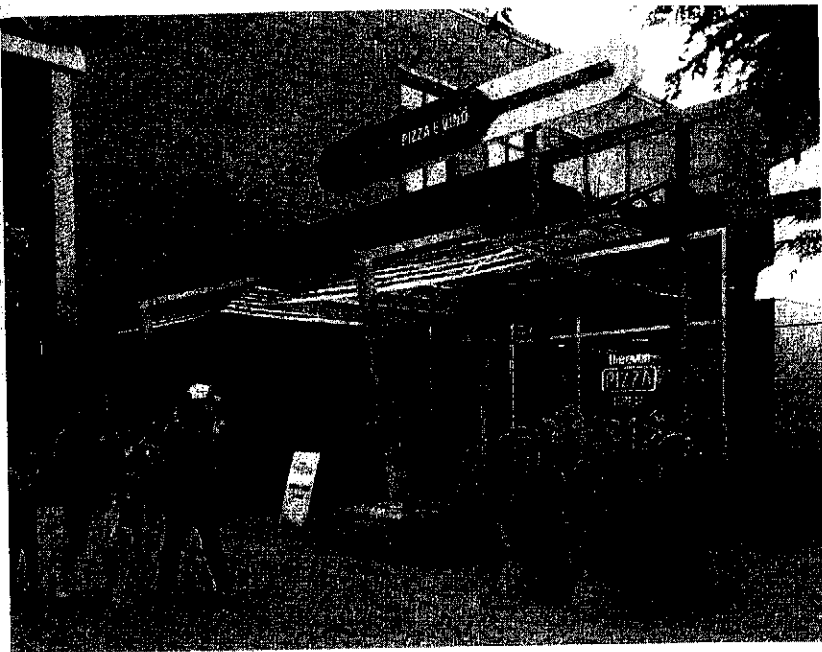
absent the desire or need to shop.<sup>21</sup> The design brings together several elements in an attempt to populate the place with multiple audiences. The building to the north of the site was deliberately programmed with social activities to reinforce the plaza, including a bowling alley and bar. There is outdoor restaurant seating and a water feature with a huge, 15,000-pound granite ball suspended on a thin film of water that is especially compelling to children eager to engage with it. Clusters of mature pine trees were replanted here from elsewhere in the site. Civitas landscape architect Craig Vickers talks of how they were composed spatially, along with other features of the plaza, for a fluid, laid-back effect.<sup>22</sup> The dominant feature is an oval plaza surrounded by sculptural poles suspending strings of lights over the space. In the winter, the oval converts to an ice-skating rink. (See Color Plate 37.)

The designers and developer all say they agonized over the location, program, and configuration of the 1.2-acre plaza and continue to brainstorm about programming options and other adjustments. Manfredi worked on the renovation of Rockefeller Center's iconic (and profitable) ice rink but worried about repeating what could be considered a cliché. After consideration of a variety of alternatives, the team was not convinced that any other use would keep the plaza lively and welcoming through the winter months and focused on making it work. Rather than throw up an oppressive canopy, the designers adjusted the height of the building to the south so that it would provide adequate winter shade to keep the ice from melting in Colorado's bright winter sun. The rink has indeed proved immensely popular and worthy of the care brought to its design.

## NEW USES/NEW USERS

The advertising tagline for Belmar residential real estate reads, "Enrich your life, not your lawn." According to landscape architect Vickers, "Belmar is full of ideas intended to almost *train* suburban people in urban thinking... how to understand it and how to look for what to enjoy here." For additional training, Lakewood offers a Civics 101 class at city hall across the way. So what exactly might it mean to train suburbanites in urban thinking? Gougeon is explicit about one possible meaning. Belmar is the one place in Lakewood where two vastly different demographic groups—Spanish speakers in the transitional east side neighborhoods and more Anglo and educated residents from the west side—can come together. These groups go to different churches, and their children attend different schools, but Gougeon believes that Belmar is a place where they "actually do have something in common." He feels a social obligation, as well as a commercial imperative, to make it so.

And what about the new residents who are actually living at Belmar? One new townhouse condo resident, Susan Mann, is an enthusiastic convert to the neighborhood. She "rarely needs a car except when she's doing business outside the area. And she recently got herself a Vespa scooter so she can tool around the neighborhood if she feels like it."<sup>23</sup> Tom and Janis Keating also live in a Belmar townhouse, which they love. But their grown son, Andrew, who lives with them and works in a Belmar restaurant, shrugs when asked whether Belmar is sufficiently cool. He says it is much better than the suburb they lived in before and it is great to be able to walk to work, but it doesn't really compare with LoDo in Denver.<sup>24</sup> (See Figure 8-17.)



**Figure 8-17** The Keatings hang out at The Oven, a highly regarded (nonchain) restaurant and wine bar on Teller Street where their son, Andrew, is a pizza cook. They are eager to talk about how thrilled they are with their new urban/suburban life and quickly list the reasons why: first, the urban experience; second, the proximity to Denver; third, the neighborhood (the fact that there is a neighborhood); fourth, they can park the car on Friday night and not touch it until Monday morning; and fifth, all the amenities are within walking distance.

There are some populations who are marginalized and unwelcome, such as the rowdy teenagers who used to have free rein in the mall; the public plaza at Belmar was purposely designed to be skateboard unfriendly. And the elderly “mall walkers” were none too happy to lose their 72-degree year-round exercise route. Another group that is discouraged from hanging out in the new downtown is panhandlers. In 2004, Lakewood launched a preemptive strike against them by passing a city ordinance against “aggressive panhandling” of the sort often found in areas dominated by suburban form, where panhandlers approach drivers at red lights or in parking lots.<sup>25</sup> Of course, the need to address the issue of panhandling and street

vendors at all through public ordinances can be read as a sign of increased urbanity: the owners of malls, where all space is privately owned, have a right to prohibit a much larger range of undesirable behaviors.

Belmar is well on its way to becoming a real, adaptable, changing-over-time downtown for Lakewood. The blocks that were completed at the time of this writing, in 2008, comprise one of the most impressive examples of instant urbanism we have seen. However, like most of the larger retrofits, the edges are still either unresolved or less successful. We are eager to follow progress there over the next several years (and decades) to observe the ongoing process of transformation.