



Marilyn J. Taylor

Large Inclusive Projects Make a Difference



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Top-down, large-scale urban regeneration efforts have catalysed the transformation of cities worldwide. By discussing the revival of a major train station in Denver, **Marilyn J. Taylor** shows how a blend of strong leadership with citizen involvement can amplify the impact of huge projects. Marilyn is an architect, leader in urban design and Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at the University of Pennsylvania.

After four decades of working with cities on large urban projects—from the transformation of Lower Manhattan from a financial quarter into a thriving mixed-use neighbourhood, to the revitalisation of neglected intercity rail stations from Washington D.C. to Boston—I have seen how these can have a huge impact. Therefore, I believe scale is an important factor in urban regeneration.

But as cities become more diverse and dynamic, large-scale urban projects should also be inclusive, to account for the diverse and changing needs of various user groups. This is especially so with the emergence of mixed-use “innovation districts” where institutions, companies and citizens come together to reap the benefits of being physically compact, transit accessible and technically wired.

The transformation of Denver Union Station into a mixed-use hub, a large-scale project I worked on for about 15 years, illustrates how partnership with citizens, driven by strong leadership from the government, can have an outsized and positive impact.

Denver—known as the Mile-High City for its elevation—sits where the prairie meets the Rocky Mountains. It is the capital of the western U.S. state of Colorado and houses 700,000 people within a larger Denver region of about 2.8 million residents.

The project I was involved in stemmed from the Denver citizens' willingness to shift from being car-oriented to transit-oriented, to reduce congestion, preserve clean air and ensure continued access to high quality of life.

However, in the project's earliest days, public transportation did not exist in a way that tied the region of 23 municipalities together. The residential and small towns to the west needed to be connected to the city centre through an integrated system of light rail, commuter rails and buses. The vision was to create convenient and quicker connections to the Amtrak intercity rail, Denver airport and skiing destinations in the nearby mountains.

The revitalisation of the then-moribund Denver Union Station was integral to this plan. But despite strong support from citizens and business leaders, the government-led

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initiative failed to take off several times due to the lack of federal funding for new transit programmes.

Believing in the immense potential of this project, a series of proactive Denver mayors threw their support behind it. One mayor, John Hickenlooper, owned a microbrewery near the Denver Union Station before he was elected in 2003. He worked to realise the community's vision for the revitalised station with an emphasis on collaboration—between the authorities and the people, as well as within the government. Mr Hickenlooper even went on to become Governor of Colorado in 2011, just in time to secure federal funding that, together with local public and private resources, allowed the project to move to implementation.

The project also succeeded due to an unprecedented level of coordination among the different municipalities. To realise the project, mayors in the 23 municipalities

had to convince citizens to vote in favour of a 0.5% sales tax. Every mayor was able to gain the citizens' support. The public money raised then became a catalyst for private investment—US\$488 million (S\$652 million) of public funds invested in transport brought in US\$1 billion (S\$1.3 billion) of private investments. This mixed-financing model saw the project through. With the rapid transformation of vacant land into a thriving neighbourhood, the increased property values and retail sales taxes exceeded projections, allowing the bonds to be paid off and refinanced earlier than planned.

Furthermore, five different governmental entities came together to form the Denver Union Station Project Authority to lead the project's design, construction and delivery. The Authority in turn worked closely with a master developer, forming a strong public-private partnership.

As the project progressed, Mr Hickenlooper and his team never lost sight of the citizens' needs and ensured that revitalisation would be relevant to the users. Beyond a regional transport hub, the Denver Union Station was developed as the heart of an active, mixed-use neighbourhood. The land around the station is no longer just a business district, it has become a useful part of the city. With a mix of public areas and private uses such as retail, entertainment and housing situated around the transit system, the district is now a place where people want to both work and play.

Mr Hickenlooper's approach is not unlike that of another leader I've worked with—Mayor Michael Nutter of Philadelphia. He is an activist who spent many hours out with his citizens, saying: "What is your vision? Let's make it happen together." His achievements (such as reactivating the formerly industrial Delaware River Waterfront and adding hundreds of miles of bike lanes to city streets) show the impact of strong leadership that takes into account the citizens.

Consider the potential of an inclusive approach to large-scale urban projects in places already known for strong and people-centric leadership. As long as city leaders keep up with the citizens' goals and needs, urban projects can be the catalysts for vibrant, mixed-use neighbourhoods that interweave 21st century businesses with a high quality of life for the people. 