

**Downtown Baton Rouge:**

Strengthening Quality of Place through Community Planning and Urban Design

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Louisiana Economic Development Certification Course Paper

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#### **Introduction**

In the Marketing and Attraction Course of the Louisiana Economic Development Certification Program, the subject of Quality of Life was covered and emphasized as an important component of business attraction and site selection. Quality of Life is directly related to ideals such as the cost of living, access to public services, crime levels, etc., and is an indicator of the general well-being of a society. Perhaps one of the most important elements that contribute to Quality of Life, and the element that is most relative to my professional work at the Downtown Development District (DDD) of Baton Rouge is Quality of Place.

Quality of Life is more comprehensive and involves many elements that contribute to the general well-being of a society. Quality of Place is mostly specific to the built environment of a location and the unique cultural and social characteristics that one associates with it, such as the buildings, people, and the visible presence of daily activity.

In the case of Downtown Baton Rouge, many years of strategic community planning and implementation in the revitalization of Downtown Baton Rouge is laying a foundation based on quality urban design, making downtown an increasingly attractive community with a strong Quality of Place.

This paper will study the built, cultural, and social environment of Downtown Baton Rouge from an urban design and planning perspective, focusing on improving Quality of Place and the steps taken to improve the economic attractiveness of Downtown Baton Rouge by the Downtown Development District. While Quality of Place may not often be claimed as the most critical element of Quality of Life, this paper will explore the impact of a strong Quality of Place and the importance of this element as it relates to the revitalization of downtown Baton Rouge.

### **Quality of Place**

What is Quality of Place and what is its importance in economic development? One simple way of realizing Quality of Place is by examining the built or natural environment and the social/cultural aspects of a town, area, or even region. Not only can Quality of Place be measured or perceived through the design and architectural styles of a location, but also through practical ideas such as walkability, street-life, the quality and frequency of community events and public spaces. It is a unique character possessed by a place that defines it and makes it attractive.

Quality of Place can be improved (or worsened) through elements of urban design, and there is often a great deal of planning needed to ensure that the development of a location is done in a way that will improve a location's Quality of Place; leading to a more attractive environment for businesses and residents.

Buildings are often the most visible and pronounced elements of urban design. Buildings form walls along streets and define spaces. The design and architectural styles found at a location can create a sense of place that can be pleasant or repulsive to prospects for recruitment.

Great public spaces – or the spaces where communities come together - are also very important in improving Quality of Place. Quality public spaces, particularly greenspaces or parks make life

in modern cities possible, offering a connection to nature and other forms of human or social interaction through community events and recreation.

Even streets can be a powerful aspect of Quality of Place through urban design. Streets connect other elements of the urban realm and can even be considered spaces themselves. I can think of no better example of a strong Quality of Place than that found in Paris, France. What if Paris did not have the Champs-Elysees or the small, intimate pedestrian streets in the arts districts? Even the patterns of the street network can define a place and establish uniqueness.

Transportation systems and the ease of travel by car, bike, foot or public transportation can shape a city's character and livability. Roads, rails, bicycle infrastructure, and pedestrian networks together form the circulation system of a city. The quality and character of places is often based on a balance of these systems, and can make them either friendly or hostile to the public and business sectors. Places that are generally perceived as attractive from a Quality of Place stand point usually offer ways to get around and experience the elements that give it a sense of place.

### **The Revitalization of Downtown Baton Rouge**

Not very long ago, Baton Rouge was just another Southern city whose downtown had fallen victim to suburban sprawl and a declining population. Throughout the 70's and 80's, the heart of the city was better known for empty storefronts and vacant buildings than it was for new restaurants and shops. Many of our city's oldest and most valued cultural treasures were mostly abandoned or in a state of disrepair. And downtown's signature corridor, Third Street, became a ghost town—completely void of any signs of life—after dusk and on the weekends. But today, Louisiana's capital city is nationally and internationally recognized as a destination where people come from all over the world to live, work, and play. Now home to more than \$2.5 billion in

public and private sector investments since 1987, more than 60 new restaurants, 11 cultural attractions, numerous parades, festivals, and concerts; Downtown Baton Rouge is more vibrant than ever. This progress is a direct result of the strong, steady leadership provided by the board and staff of the Downtown Development District (DDD) and public/private sector champions in the community over the last 27 years.

Since its inception in 1987, the DDD has become a powerful agent of change in Louisiana's capital city and today it continues fulfilling its mission to "revitalize the downtown area as a major focal point of Baton Rouge's identity." Over the past two decades, the DDD has spearheaded several major master planning initiatives aimed at transforming the face of downtown and redefining the area as a destination for residential and commercial development. Drawing upon the passion and creativity of national consultants, local planners, public officials, community leaders and stakeholders, neighborhood groups and private philanthropists, redevelopment plans have addressed every aspect of life in the community. The DDD positioned itself at the forefront of implementation efforts ensuring that these plans didn't just sit on the shelf, but actually became reality.

## **Creating Quality of Place in Downtown Baton Rouge**

### ***Progressive Energy***

In working toward creating a strong Quality of Place in downtown Baton Rouge, the DDD puts major emphasis on, and sees great importance in sustaining momentum. Investors as well as the public must be constantly reminded that positive change is taking place. As a strategy to foster a progressive energy, the DDD aggressively markets any successes for downtown through social media, email list communication, press releases, and essentially any media that will assist in

getting the word out about downtown. This increases and sustains awareness of the progress in downtown Baton Rouge. Visitors and residents feel that they are part of the progress and it is contagious. You begin to have an environment where everyone is moving forward together with excitement, and coupled with other socially and culturally progressive initiatives such as alternative transportation and living local, there is a general feeling that things are improving.

### ***Entertainment***

The Downtown Baton Rouge Arts & Entertainment District was formed in 2008 to provide a means for growth and development through arts and entertainment-related activities. The goal was to create a district that has a unique sense of place through a balance of arts and entertainment that is a positive reflection of Baton Rouge. In the heart of the Arts & Entertainment District you will find the Shaw Center for the Arts, a partnership between the State of Louisiana and the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, where you can watch a ballet, attend an art exhibit, or have sushi on the top floor overlooking the Mississippi River. In addition to the Shaw Center, Downtown is home to many local art galleries, and a handful of annual arts festivals such as, Live After Five, The Art Melt and Fest for All. Focused on Third Street, the Arts and Entertainment District offers many restaurants, bars, and music venues. Any weekend night provides a unique experience of music and culture, and an ambiance that makes for great memories for visitors.

The vision of the Arts and Entertainment District was to provide a sense of place that rivaled many of the other great entertainment districts across the country such as Sixth Street in Austin or Beale Street in Memphis. The energy on Third Street contributes greatly to the Quality of Place that visitors and residents experience in downtown Baton Rouge.

### ***Reclaiming Cultural Assets through Historic Preservation***

At the beginning of concentrated efforts to redevelop downtown Baton Rouge, early master plans recommended reclaiming existing cultural assets in the downtown area. Often identified as a major contributor to Quality of Place, historic buildings and monuments can have a great effect on the architectural significance of a place. Many of downtown's oldest and most valued cultural treasures such as the Old State Capitol, Old Governor's Mansion, and Historic Heidelberg Hotel were mostly abandoned or in a state of disrepair. One of the first orders of business was to rally supporters behind these important buildings. In short, many meetings and fundraisers took place between dedicated individuals that recognized the significance of the buildings among others in the downtown area. Today these buildings stand as icons in the city skyline, giving downtown a unique character and sense of place.

Another important layer to this movement toward historic preservation was emphasis on the redevelopment of downtown's historic neighborhoods – Spanish Town and Beauregard Town. The Restoration Renaissance was a branded program spearheaded by the DDD to encourage desired investment in these areas. Renovation projects were toured by parading citizens during planned events that showcased the development potential of these neighborhoods. Historic preservation incentives such as tax credits were marketed to potential investors, and it did not take long for these neighborhoods to experience a complete turnaround. Today, property values are stable and each neighborhood has its own special character that draws visitors, new residents, and investment; contributing to not only the sense of place in the neighborhoods themselves but to the overall Quality of Place found in downtown Baton Rouge.

### ***Culture of Entrepreneurship***

Downtown has seen a recent flux in young entrepreneurs, most less than 40 years old, who are

really stepping up to bring a variety of local businesses downtown. Factors that have attracted entrepreneurship to downtown are access to support services such as business incubators and shared work spaces, potential business relationships with other entrepreneurs and likeminded young professionals, and the opportunity to feel a sense of ownership in the revitalization of an area. "Their energy and entrepreneurial spirit are driving success and innovation along Third Street and throughout the heart of the city," says Davis Rhorer- Executive Director of the Downtown Development District. In total, there are more than two dozen startups and small businesses downtown that are owned and operated by young entrepreneurs. Two of the most recent additions include Red Six Media, an advertising agency that originated at LSU and is now moving to Third Street; and Springboard Baton Rouge, a collaborative workspace for local entrepreneurs that recently opened on the second floor of the Kress Building. This exciting spirit of youthful entrepreneurship is an indicator of the success of past and current place-making initiatives. An environment that cultivates entrepreneurship can contribute to an area's Quality of Place through the concentration of grassroots local brands visible in the public realm and also through the positive and motivated attitudes of the people.

### ***Urban Lifestyle***

The urban lifestyle offers a wide variety of types of housing and large numbers of people living closely together due to higher density housing, which is often characterized by taller buildings. When it comes to Baton Rouge, there is really no other opportunity to live the urban lifestyle outside of the downtown area, as Baton Rouge is mostly sprawling and suburban in character. Other areas of the city may offer multi-family housing, entertainment options, and job centers, but they are not often geographically close enough to allow a resident to walk or even bike

between them. In downtown Baton Rouge, it is possible to work in a highrise, see the doctor, visit a library, and buy groceries all within walking distance.

Young professionals and the creative class seek a lifestyle where they have walkable access to their jobs, transportation, entertainment, recreation, and shopping. The urban lifestyle offers a faster pace environment where there is easy access to essential services, but also a social vibe that offers a unique blend of music, the arts, and progressiveness.

### ***Recreation and Quality Public Spaces***

Another strong contributor to a strong Quality of Place is the level of amenities that promote an active lifestyle. Parks, greenways, and other recreation options such as boating and indoor health facilities encourage 24 hour activity and good health. The simple presence of many people running, biking, or enjoying event-related or even passive recreation can contribute to the character of a location and its sense of place. The Downtown Development District has spent the last few years focusing on creating and improving recreational options in downtown Baton Rouge through the Central Green initiative as a strategy to strengthen the Quality of Place and start to associate the downtown with this active quality. The Central Green initiative focuses on three major greening projects, which are now underway or complete including:

*North Boulevard Town Square* - a spectacular multi-million development completed in March of 2012 that's transformed a disjointed sector of Downtown Baton Rouge into a lively town center where the city's cultural and civic attractions come together for all to enjoy. Featuring more than an acre of open green space, innovative water features that help naturally cool the landscape, and a multitude of high-tech amenities, the area can be used for both active and passive recreation. Café style seating, benches, game tables and free wi-fi allow for individual work, personal

reflection, or spontaneous group gatherings. Meanwhile, the Town Square media beacon features a complete state-of-the-art video and sound system, which draws visitors to weekly-programmed events such as movie nights, live concerts, fitness classes, and more.

Over 150 public events take place in the square every year. Visitors and residents alike have praised its design and usefulness, while businesses in the surrounding area have already begun experiencing an increase in sales—some as much as 40 percent. The Town Square has not only served the practical purpose of improving accessibility, adding green space, and making Downtown Baton Rouge more attractive, but it has also served a higher purpose in bringing people together from all walks of life and helping to strengthen the diverse social fabric of our community.

*Galvez Stage and Crest Sculpture*- Located in the heart of the Downtown Arts & Entertainment District, this signature landmark and corresponding landscape serves as an iconic symbol of the progress in Downtown Baton Rouge. The stainless steel 50' tall sculpture stands proudly between the Old State Capitol and City Hall Building, commanding the attention of visitors and contributing to the body of memorable architecture found downtown.

*Repentance Park* - The comprehensive reconfiguration of Repentance Park was an 8 year journey that culminated with a rededication and opening in 2013. Conceived in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, a vision for the new park emerged as a key recommendation of the Riverfront Master Plan with the aim of reconnecting downtown to the river by establishing a revitalized and connective urban core.

This \$3.5 million project restores to prominence a large public park within the new Central Green of downtown Baton Rouge. Planning, funding, and implementation efforts were spearheaded by the Downtown Development District (DDD).

The site is in an area where a series of mid-twentieth century urban renewal projects had severed connections within the city street network and isolated major civic and cultural destinations surrounding the area. Repentance Park re-forges those relationships and establishes an evocative and active public space downtown with a new orientation to the majestic Mississippi River.

*Downtown Greenway-* The Downtown Greenway is a 2.75-mile pedestrian and cycling corridor that will feature lighting, landscaping, signage, and public art. By connecting greenspaces and cultural attractions over a large geographic area, the greenway expands the boundaries of downtown and unites the area with its surrounding inner-city neighborhoods and destination parks. This will connect thousands of residents who live along the greenway and have a visual impact on more than 100,000 people who will soon experience artistic gateways as they enter downtown Baton Rouge every day. This unique project will also transform undesirable spaces, such as areas underneath the interstate overpass, into inviting places that stimulate the senses with visual and performing arts. With the primary goal of sparking investment and redevelopment in blighted areas along the multi-use corridor, the greenway project also incorporates a public art program that will focus on the authentic history, folklore, traditions, and cultural resources of the region. The Downtown Greenway consists of four different phases with varying costs and amenities. The total project cost is estimated to be between \$7.6 million and \$13 million. Phase One of the Downtown Greenway will start construction in early 2016.

Many direct and indirect impacts from Downtown Baton Rouge's Central Green initiative are still being realized. Soon, thousands of citizens will have access to numerous greenways and open spaces in and around the downtown area. In the meantime, this comprehensive greening initiative has already sparked significant interest and excitement from downtown's private sector partners. Over the last five years, they have invested more than \$500 million in new development projects throughout the downtown area, and the Downtown Development District expects those investments to continue growing far into the future.

### **Success**

A large part of what makes downtown Baton Rouge what it is today to the community is its Quality of Place. To many people in the community, downtown is a place to visit and do business that has a unique sense of place comprised of a culmination of many elements that are starting to come together in a big way; enhancing our ability to attract major corporations. IBM is a great example of a company that is traditionally found in cities with a strong Quality of Place such as San Francisco, Austin, and Mexico City. Downtown Baton Rouge has been validated by IBM as a progressive environment, desirable to top employees and corporate brands. IBM is a real marker of achievement for a downtown that was on the brink of collapse and was able to be resurrected by elements directly related to a strong Quality of Place.

The simple presence of IBM in the downtown community supports an air of success that is recognized by other prospective companies, and even the presence of strong corporate brands such as IBM contributes to the Quality of Place found in downtown Baton Rouge through the perception of economic health. "IBM coming to Baton Rouge is a beacon to the digital media world of what Baton Rouge can offer. It is one thing to say that we can recruit small game developers, and we want those, but we could recruit 10 of these type companies and it would not

send the shock waves that something like IBM coming to town, and not just coming to town, but having such a major presence”, says Baton Rouge Area Chamber’s Jared Smith who serves as Director of Business Development for East Baton Rouge Parish.

## **Conclusion**

The energy and sense of progress in Downtown Baton Rouge cannot be created simply through incentives and marketing alone. Quality of Place comes from the physical, social, and economic environment offered by a place and cannot be created overnight. Ongoing efforts of strategic community plan implementation are creating a unique blend of elements that influence the public perception of downtown and its effectiveness in business attraction.

Economic Development is a complex discipline with a profusion of tools available to attract business, but many of these tools are trumped by other powers of attraction such as general Quality of Life and the ability of a community to attract and retain a young workforce. These factors, although not easily secured, must lay a solid foundation for development before most companies, visitors and residents will seriously consider a community. An environment is being created in Downtown Baton Rouge through urban design and planning in order to improve Quality of Place and make downtown an attractive force in the state, region and beyond.