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## A VISIT TO SOUTH MAIN PLACE, BUENA VISTA, COLORADO

One of the late summer events coordinated by the CNU- Colorado Chapter Organizing Committee, was a tour to South Main Place, an exciting new urbanist project with unique attributes in Buena Vista, Colorado. On August 2, 2008, the developers Katie Selby Urban and Jed Selby graciously hosted a walking tour and provided lunch for a group of approximately twenty-five architects, landscape architects, and planners. *The Colorado Urbanist* expresses sincere gratitude to Katie and Jed. The following is a series of articles about the event. The first is a summary by John Olson, who was very helpful in organizing this event; and his interview with Katie. Next follows two reflection essays by two participants, Scott Schigur and Ronnie Pelusio. We hope these essays will encourage you to attend our future events and contribute to *The Colorado Urbanist* with your thoughts.

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### A SUMMARY: SOUTH MAIN TOUR

**John Olson,**  
Treasurer, CNU-Colorado  
Urban Designer, Thomas - Thomas  
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The tour to South Main Place began at the offices of South Main, Inc. in downtown Buena Vista, where participants followed hosts Jed Selby and Katie Selby Urban to the project site. The knowledgeable hosts spent the day explaining the different facets and aspects of the project to the group. Katie graciously opened her South Main home for a lunch and brief presentation, which concluded the day's events.

While South Main officially sits on 41 acres, the young and ambitious brother and sister team have purchased additional blocks of land including parcels along the existing Main Street in downtown Buena Vista. South Main is situated along the headwaters of the Arkansas River and surrounded by thousands of acres of preserved open space across the river. According to Katie, the headwaters of the Arkansas River attract 600,000 visitors each year who visit the beautiful setting to enjoy whitewater rafting, kayaking, and fishing.

An all-star cast of architects and new urbanist designers were involved in the creation of South Main including Victor Dover, Steve Mouzon, Peter Swift, Allison Ramsey Architects, Opticos (Architects), and Kenny Craft and Minet Mahoney. Currently, Craft and Mahoney serve as architects for South Main Development Company, which streamlines the architectural process and makes the costs to the consumer more economical. In addition, in January 2008 the team started their own construction company for the South Main project to further save costs. In the past, buyers purchased lots with the intention of construction within two years. Now consumers can actually purchase lots with immediate access to architectural and construction services reducing the total time and cost required.

As with many new urbanist communities, charrettes were held at the beginning of the process. Organizers achieved a high level of public participation through advertising in local newspapers and news stations. The meetings helped formulate a vision and gave opposition a chance to articulate their concerns. Certain parameters of the project were established at this time with public officials in attendance in order to minimize later conflict. In initial charrettes, local Longmont Civil Engineer, Peter Swift laid out the street types and asked for the City to sign off on the street design to mitigate future surprises.

Sustainability is a major aspect of new urbanist communities with a focus on pedestrian circulation and



*Katie Selby Urban and Jed Selby on porch stairs of a building on South Main Street.*



*The group at the Buzz Boulevard, a boulevard with 10 foot wide one-way couplets.*



*Katie Selby Urban and Jed Selby*



*A rendering of the South Main Place and its surroundings prepared by Dover, Kohl, and Partners. The riverside park and the South Main Street with its view to the courthouse tower are among the important elements of the plan. The improvements along the Arkansas River including the trails, a bridge, a riverside restaurant, and viewing terraces; are valuable amenities for the residents and create a memorable place. The breathtaking views of the Collegiate Peaks to the west are well-expressed by this drawing.*

creating community. This is definitely true with South Main. Not only will residents of South Main be able to easily walk to the retail and live/work options in their immediate neighborhood, they will also be just a short walk away from supporting downtown businesses. South Main structures are also sustainable and are all required to meet “Built Green” standards. According to Katie, the architecture is timeless, and the homes will not seem dated in the future. Many of the goals and objectives of South Main will blend into the existing fabric of downtown Buena Vista. Development on the newly purchased land between current South Main site and downtown Buena Vista will add to the fabric.

Re-use and sustainable practices at South Main include the recycling and grinding of excess wood and drywall to be used for mulch. The site also has an abundance of large boulders which have been used in several ways including the creative approach to flatten the central park along the Arkansas River. Boulders have also been broken down and used for the road base for the site as well.

The kayak park in South Main, which is of course a central focus of a community created by professional kayakers, includes three kayak surf waves and a great river pedestrian trail. State funded grants were given to South Main, Inc. for the rehabilitation of the riverfront. The team took great advantage of the grants and helped mold a once forgotten and neglected piece of riverfront into fantastic amenity for Buena Vista. During the tour, it was obvious that these natural settings are certainly utilized by neighborhood and surrounding residents. Future plans for the riverfront park include Eddyline Restaurant and Brewery, which officially broke ground on the first of November. The restaurant will include walk-out views of a whitewater wave feature. Future plans include an artificial rock climbing wall along the river as well as an additional surf wave.

Careful planning went into South Main’s street design. Terminated vistas in South Main include the courthouse tower in downtown Buena Vista, the natural beauty of the Arkansas River Valley and, of course, the Collegiate



**John:** *Did the initial development dream include the mixed-use, pedestrian friendly environment that we see before us today? If so, how were you introduced to the new urbanism?*

**Katie:** Initially, the inspiration was the river park. But as environmentalists, we weren't about to just build another development. Jed and I went to Boulder to do research and found Suburban Nation in the CU library. Then, at a friend's house later that evening, someone told us about Prospect New Town. So we drove out there having no idea what to expect, and the interesting thing we noticed later was that one of our initial responses was to look at each other and wonder why we were driving rather than walking. We got out and explored Prospect on foot.

We made it over to the information office and asked the woman there who the developer was. She reluctantly gave us his number, and as soon as we told him what we were up to, he told us not to go anywhere and he'd be right there. At that moment, Kiki Wallace became our New Urbanist mentor and advisor. He helped us over the next several months choose our urban designer, Dover, Kohl and Partners. He also was an extremely valuable resource for a number of key decisions we would make over the next year or so and in general, helped lead us in the right direction on decisions from architectural review to engineering.

**John:** *What are some of the civic amenities in South Main that makes this neighborhood unique?*

**Katie:** The main civic amenity that makes South Main unique is the ~3 acre river corridor that we donated to the town as a permanent public park. It used to be private, overgrown and inaccessible and now is a beautiful public river park with trails, kayaking surf waves, interpretive signs, a tile outdoor living room, a grass square that holds an ice skating rink in winter, etc. All this park space is either within or immediately adjacent to and interconnected with South Main.

**John:** *For South Main, why was traditional architecture chosen? How big of a role did Steve Mouzon play in the architectural design of South Main?*

**Katie:** Traditional architecture was chosen in South Main because we believe that it is timeless and proven. It was the way we could ensure that what is built is loved for generations, which is a key aspect of sustainability. Loved places are protected, which is important given that buildings use an enormous amount of resources to be built. It was also a way that we could be sure that so many homes and businesses of varying types and sizes would work well together in close proximity.

Dover, Kohl and Partners did our initial development standards, which defined in general our architecture. Steve

Mouzon did our architectural reviews for a period of time and helped us define more specifically what the 'South Main style' is. Kenny Craft now does our architectural reviews and designs architecture in-house, along with Minette Mahoney. We have very few reviews now that most buildings are designed in-house, which has made the process of getting built at South Main much easier for our customers.

**John:** *With the beautiful setting Buena Vista is blessed with, has there been any consideration of introducing rental cottages or some sort of seasonal lodging?*

**Katie:** We are launching the South Main Vacation Rentals program as we speak and there will be homes available for rent in 2009. Our website will have all the information on this program.

**John:** *With the arid climate of Buena Vista, were there any considerations by the developers or the City to utilize low water-use plant material rather than bluegrass between the curbs and sidewalks?*

**Katie:** Yes, we tried to use lower water plants or grass for our tree planting strips. Unfortunately, the town felt strongly that bluegrass was the only way to go and that it recovers from droughts better than other grasses and plants in their experience. In the approval process of a neighborhood such as South Main, you win some and you lose some. This one, we lost.

**John:** *When is the projected timeline for full build-out of the 41 acre site?*

**Katie:** It's really hard to say, especially with the current economic situation of our country. We're also in a small town and are trying to plan ahead for growth that will occur over a long period of time, so that it can be smart and well-planned. I've always told people that it would be fully built out anytime in the next 10-100 years.

**John:** *How do the demographics of South Main compare to the rest of Buena Vista? What is the cost differential in land value in South Main comparatively to the remainder of Buena Vista?*

**Katie:** South Main's homes are owned by a wide variety of people. We have the full spectrum from young singles and families to retirees. This generally corresponds to our local demographics. Also, about 50% of our houses here are second homes. My sense is that this corresponds with the rest of the market in our area. Lots and homes in South Main are somewhat more costly than the rest of town. This is, however, offset by the lower utilities in an energy-efficient home, as well as the reduced driving as compared to much of the suburban housing in our area. We've also refined our home designs to be efficient and well-designed so people can build smaller homes than they otherwise would have wanted. Our hope is also that people will continue to

recognize the unique amenities provided in South Main and the impact they have on quality of life.

We have also worked hard to get product in lower price ranges and our least expensive property is currently a condo for \$199,000. In the 200's, we have row houses, single-family cottages and a duplex for sale. We also have the full range of homes available with the most expensive worth over \$1 million.

**John:** *What have you learned from the process that you would do differently in the future?*

**Katie:** It's hard to say, as each step has taught us a lot and has been a part of the process. Maybe our first phase would have been smaller, but how we did it made sense because of the fact that the first phase had to include 40% of our infrastructure. In the beginning, it was hard to get going because we didn't have design or construction in-house. This made it challenging because we'd have to help a customer get architecture, get it reviewed and ready for bid. Then when the bid would come in, we had no control over pricing, which often came in high and occasionally stopped someone from moving forward. I don't think we could have integrated design and construction into our business sooner, but if we could have, it would have accelerated the build-out significantly.

**AN ESSAY:  
SOUTH MAIN  
OBSERVATIONS**

**Scott Schigur,**  
Senior Associate,  
Wolff-Lyon Architects



The morning of Saturday, August 2, 2008 was cool and calm. I rolled over in my sleeping bag and thought, "Life is good." After a night of camaraderie and camping, I was well-rested and ready for a day of touring and observing. The sun was beginning to warm the ground, and the scent of pinion pine was filling the air. I thought, "What a perfect day to visit the South Main development." Little did I know that this scenario, this feeling, was an apt parallel to the project. The day held so much promise, and as it follows, the sun is just beginning to rise for South Main. It has the beginnings of a great community.

Siblings, Katie Selby-Urban and Jed Selby teamed-up as development partners to create South Main. They saw the former Buena Vista city dump and its riverfront acreage as a development opportunity to create a world-class river park and a community that reflected their common interests.



*Selby Urban House terminating the vista from Swift Street.*

Both are avid recreationalists and strong environmentalists, and these qualities have guided their decisions from the project's inception.

Katie and Jed became interested in New Urbanism because it represented the potential to create a lasting community that would compliment and strengthen the existing Main Street district in Buena Vista, and also because it would provide the critical mass to support future businesses. They studied the New Urbanist paradigm and hired a team of experienced professionals to design and defend their dream. A week-long public charrette provided valuable community input and incidentally, it also provided a tremendous amount of needed public support. It has been more than three years since this project began, and now that homes are built and occupied and the river park has been established, the community is gaining momentum.

Design excellence has been an important criterion in the making of South Main. In order to design a walkable community, it was critical to carefully consider the street design. Peter Swift, a Longmont-based traffic engineer, was instrumental in convincing the City that a narrow street



*The group is at the riverfront park. The retaining wall created by large boulders provides a flat platform for the lawn of the park.*