



Downtown Denver Partnership
Urban Exploration

2026 TAKEAWAYS

No city has reinvented itself more boldly – or more often – than Berlin. The city has transformed through visionary and high-quality design, progressive policies for livability, and grassroots action creating public spaces that are both practical and joyful. Our collective purpose in Berlin was to expand our sense of what is possible and carry home lessons that inspire the next chapter of city building and evolution in Downtown Denver.

Four learning lenses served as guides to the overarching content themes – and insights – of the program:

1 | Repairing the Seams of the City: analyzing how Berlin's planning and policy strategies address spatial fragmentation while cultivating connection.

Breakout Session and Plenary Topics:

- Large-scale development sites with focus on sustainability and quality of life
- Infill urban districts at transportation hubs
- Modular construction design towards cost effectiveness
- Community engagement towards a sense of belonging



2 | Leading with Design: treating design as a civic responsibility, not an afterthought.

Breakout Session and Plenary Topics:

- Urban Design and Architectural Tours
- Interaction with designers and civic leaders
- Public realm and park design innovation

3 | Housing at Scale: delivering housing at scale requires construction... and coordination, political will, and a commitment to livability.

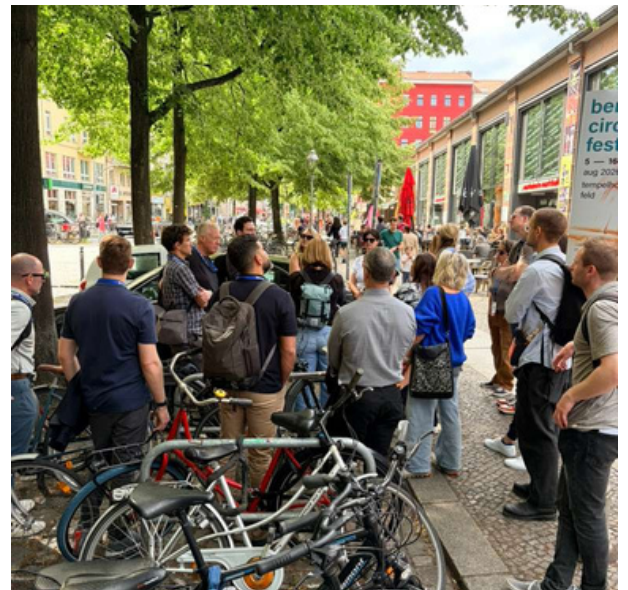
Breakout Session and Plenary Topics:

- Affordable housing strategies
- Childcare and family services
- Climate resilience

4 | Downtown as a Cultural Platform: art, music, performance, and memorialization are not add-ons – they are everyday experiences embedded in public space.

Breakout Session and Plenary Topics:

- Reconciling with past cultural harms
- Cultural infrastructure – art and placemaking
- Public space activation and safety



The following insights highlight new perspectives gained from hands-on experiences and site visits during the program. How might these insights shape our immediate next steps for Downtown Area Plan implementation? Read further to find out.

Vacancy is opportunity

From nightclubs to neighborhood playgrounds, Berlin showed us multiple examples of leveraging vacant space into opportunities to grow and support community needs. Fostering creative and playful industries in empty spaces can bring about temporary activation, and in some cases long-term solutions!

- Meaningful opportunities for growing culture, creativity and business can be nurtured in vacant spaces, like we saw in Holzmarkt 25 and ZK/U - two community-led projects that combined unconventional with unprecedented to create sustainable collaboration.
- Undeveloped and underutilized space is an opportunity for neighborhood-scale livability, interpretive story-telling, and green infill. In the case of Potsdamer Platz and Tempelhof Feld, the public sector worked with community voices to redevelop large districts at scale... with varying levels of success.

How does this connect to the Downtown Area Plan?

The DAP calls for the creation of an Art/Play Strategy, Focus Area actions, and repositioning vacant real estate. How can temporary and community-led initiatives be a first step towards long-term vibrancy in Downtown Denver? What might we need to remove in order to create?



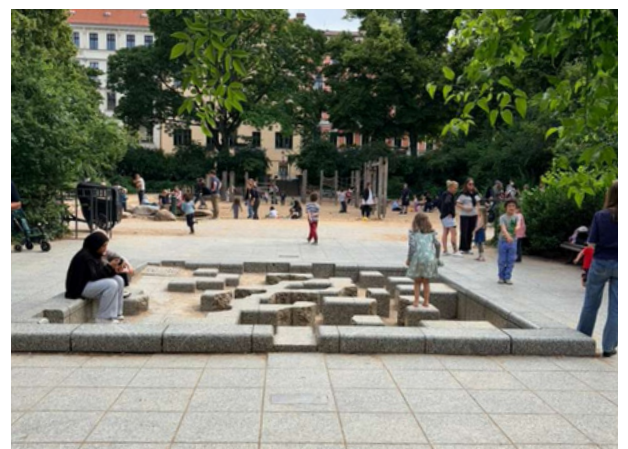
Don't let perfection stall progress

Through visionary design, progressive policy, and grassroots action, Berlin has created public spaces that are both practical and joyful, legible and boundary-pushing. In Berlin neighborhoods, innovation comes through a ritual of iteration and a knowledge that failure is an opportunity to learn and evolve.

- Decoupling “unconventional” from “unsafe” from a regulatory perspective is an important step towards building community trust and participation. Safety is essential, and unconventional ideas can spark reinvention and investment. Projects like Kiezblocks and the Flussbad show two examples of Berlin moving quickly from concept to pilot in order to make progress towards long-term priorities.
- Embracing a spirit of curiosity and iteration is often the cornerstone of building community trust. How can Downtown partners work together to identify restrictive policies and standards that limit flexibility and stymie activation, and build a ritual of iteration in our center city to reach long-term goals?

How does this connect to the Downtown Area Plan?

The DAP calls for governance policy actions such as creation of a Downtown Team, the role of a development corporation/DURA, childcare policy actions (2026), an Update to Downtown Design Guidelines (2027), and public event and activation policy outcomes. What are current challenges or obstacles to progressing near-term, iterative projects? What are opportunities to reward community initiative while working towards long-term goals or priorities?



People-first design makes density desirable

Berlin has transformed from a divided city into a network of complete neighborhoods. From large-scale investment in public parks to leveraging new tools to deliver modular housing at scale, program participants learned about amenities and services that make density feel livable, as well as practices to incorporate memorialization into the public realm that honor the past in our present and future spaces.

- Citizen-led initiatives are often more successful than projects without significant community engagement. In the case of the Kiezblocks initiative in the Graefkiez neighborhood, citizens worked together with city and transportation officials to create neighborhood streets that allowed access for all modes, but prioritized places to gather and space for people walking and biking
- Be cautious of putting too much emphasis on the purpose of an “entertainment district.” Instead, focus on people-first and neighborhood design that explores how art and culture move from add-ons to everyday anchors of downtown life, fueling vibrancy that lasts beyond business hours.
- A legible system is not necessarily perfect, but it is consistent. Evaluate Denver’s mobility system for consistent design, usability, and improved experience. Participate in Mile High Line next steps and advance downtown as the first “Complete Village” of the Mayor’s vision plan for this concept.

How does this connect to the Downtown Area Plan?

The DAP calls for several Focus area actions related to complete neighborhoods, including mobility policy outcomes like legible parking, reliable transit, intuitive and safe bikeways, and potential two-way street conversions. What are priority improvements for neighborhood livability that may not fit the standard approach, and why might they still be important to consider in focus areas of Downtown?



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