

## **The Story of O(maha) Nebraska City Gets a Makeover: Cow Town to Urban Hip**

*By Bret Schulte*

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I arrive at the Omaha airport and briefly think of that sad old aphorism, "You can never go home again."

Perhaps it's for the best. After all, I was raised in a place not so much looked over as overlooked, home to about 740,000 people but geographically so nondescript that in a song titled "Omaha," the Counting Crows simply describe it as "somewhere in Middle America."

Within minutes I'm making the short trip downtown on Abbott Drive, which I remember as a shabby highway bordered by a scrap yard, the overgrown banks of the Missouri River and acres of post-industrial wasteland. Except this isn't it.

This Abbott Drive is a lushly landscaped boulevard with sculptural towers standing like sentinels and art deco lampposts lighting the way. To the left is the new Gallup University campus, which appeared so quickly on the riverbank that it's like a corporate Atlantis washed ashore; farther down the river are scenic walkways, a marina and a restaurant; on the horizon is the First National Bank tower, a glass-and-granite composite stretching 635 feet into the sky.

This is home? Omaha today is something I never saw, or felt, or even suspected in my youth: cool.

Along with the shiny high rises and swanky waterfront developments are a \$90 million performing arts center, currently under construction; an ever-expanding bohemian district known as the Old Market; and a convention center and arena so large it looks as if Omaha borrowed it from another city. In the financial world, hardly a day goes by without mention of Warren Buffett, "the Oracle of Omaha" and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, one of Omaha's five Fortune 500 companies.

Then there's the "Omaha sound." Indie rock bands like Bright Eyes, starring boy wonder Conor Oberst; old-school New Wave rockers the Faint; and emo pioneers Cursive scored the town a headline on the cover of July's Spin magazine, which dubbed it "America's new indie-rock capital."

Suddenly, Omaha has a sound. A reputation. Status even. And it's starting to look the part.

In a series of public-private partnerships, the city has poured more than \$2 billion into an ambitious urban-planning program that includes parks, trails and boardwalks, as well as a revitalization of the downtown corporate presence and residential living.

Omaha's facelift is aimed not just at beautification but also at attraction. Potential tourists are being courted with rare abandon by Omaha's typically stolid, cautious leadership.

The mayor's office, the chamber of commerce and the convention and visitors bureau have launched the city's first-ever fully coordinated PR campaign, ditching the meaty slogan "Omaha: Rare, Well Done" for something sleeker and sexier.

It's not even a slogan. It's an exclamation.

"O!"

"We know from talking to people that when visitors come to Omaha they're always surprised," says Mayor Mike Fahey. "I think there is a sense of pride being from Omaha. This is what we're trying to capture with the 'O!' campaign."

Omaha is also trying to capture the attention of those folks who might snub Omaha, whose response to the sincere enthusiasm of the "O!" campaign would be a deflated "oh," who would never think of the American hinterlands as a source of fine dining, historic districts and thriving urban landscapes.

In reality, many Midwestern cities fit the bill – St. Louis and Kansas City, Mo., among them. But while those cities receive millions of visitors each year, Omaha remains relatively undiscovered country.

Increasingly, it's country worth seeing.

The \$290 million Qwest Center opened along the waterfront in September and already is attracting top-grossing acts like Cher, Fleetwood Mac and Matchbox Twenty. Just south is the Old Market, about a dozen square blocks of cobblestone streets and closely huddled historic buildings. With a multitude of restaurants, taverns and clubs, the Old Market is the heart of Omaha's artistic and cultural life, much of which revolves around food.

Omaha is no longer the cow town of yore, but steak still rules these parts. The famous (and expensive) local brand -- imaginatively labeled Omaha Steaks – is proudly advertised on every meat-bearing menu in town. In the Old Market, the premier steakhouse is Omaha Prime, which has long taunted my willpower and wallet. Both are slim, but at \$25 to \$40 an entree, the wallet is unrelenting.

Instead, I browse stores replete with retro velour sofas and neon Schlitz signs; upscale clothiers that sell black turtlenecks at New York prices; a niche shop laden with obscure objects from the former Eastern Bloc; and the Antiquarian Bookstore, owned by a man who hasn't worn socks since the Reagan administration – and where I once stumbled upon a first edition of Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" for \$3.

Magically, the wallet produced.

Perhaps the district's most venerable institution is Homer's Music, the retailer of choice for Omaha's growing population of urban hipsters – more and more of whom are filling up the area's loft apartments.

Already the nostalgia-fueled denizens are riding around downtown in green-and-white public buses, restored originals from the 1950s.

The price of a trip down memory lane: 25 cents.

The money, the public-private partnerships, the iconic "O!" and the sudden, almost jarring, construction boom are as much about local self-esteem as they are about corralling visitors. Midwestern cities, as with those of the East Coast, are acutely aware of one another. Omaha feels Kansas City's superior shopping just as it felt, until recently, Des Moines's superior skyline.

One of Omaha's most significant efforts at self-improvement (and bragging rights) came with the Lied Jungle, constructed in the early 1990s as part of its long-established Henry Doorly Zoo. Today, the zoo is the state's No. 1 tourist attraction. This has been accomplished by collecting that which is most coveted by zoos: the rare, the elusive, the profitable "world's largest" (well, at least according to the zoo).

The famed Lied Jungle is the world's largest indoor rain forest, where monkeys rope between the flora of South America and Africa. Nearby is the recently completed Desert Dome, the world's largest indoor desert, which happens to be kept under the world's largest "glazed geodesic dome." The two-story structure contains a sandfall, a hummingbird canyon, live pumas and a monolith rock that is --you'll never guess – the world's largest. Directly beneath the desert dome? The world's largest indoor nocturnal exhibit.

Up next: a \$13.5 million gorilla habitat to be completed next year. Alas, it won't be the world's largest. Nevertheless, it will put Omaha at the forefront of gorilla conservation – in no small part because of the zoo's gorilla sperm bank. The world's largest.

Sharing the zoo's parking lot is Rosenblatt Stadium, which for the past 50-plus years has been the home of the NCAA College World Series. Every June, thousands of baseball fans from across the country meet to create a

temporary baseball utopia here, among them hordes of RV dwellers with a communal belief in beer and brats.

Equally expressive is the Joslyn Art Museum northwest of downtown. Constructed in 1931 with an exterior of Georgian pink marble, this art deco building is itself a work of art, reflecting the Plains influence of Frank Lloyd Wright. Inside are courtyards, fountains and gallerias created with 38 types of marble from around the world.

My favorite place in Omaha, the Joslyn holds a permanent collection of 10,000 works dating to antiquity. European and American paintings from the 19th and 20th centuries receive special interest; the Joslyn holdings include Monet, Renoir, Grant Wood and El Greco, among others.

Perhaps the greatest symbol of Omaha society rests just a few blocks from where I grew up: Boys Town, the most famous and revered institution in the state, if you don't count Husker football.

Opened in 1917 by Father Edward Flanagan, the famous home for troubled boys originated when Flanagan found that he was reaching many wayward men too late in life. Flanagan eventually moved his operation --founded on the idea that "there are no bad boys" -- to a large farm 10 miles west of town, where the boys grew their own food, learned employable trades and were taught the value of religious faith.

Omaha has long since caught up to Boys Town and moved well beyond, but the "village," situated on 900 acres, remains self-sufficient and operates its own fire department, police station, post office, two churches and two schools. Several hundred children live in "family-style" homes under the care of family-teacher couples, who must be married and pass a rigorous exam and training period.

Renamed Girls and Boys Town in 2000, the campus is open to visitors; who can tour its churches, gardens and attractive multimedia Hall of History.

Boys Town is a vestige of Omaha as I've always known it. A solid place. A place for families and good ol' American values and what some would say is the naive belief in essential human goodness. Omaha lacks the cynicism of the East Coast and for that reason will never be all that hip, despite the rock scene and the Old Market and the new skyscrapers. But that's fine. Omaha has its own identity, and in a distinctly Midwestern way, an unfaltering belief in the future.

I don't stay for long. But it's good to go home again.

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Details: Omaha

GETTING THERE: Most major airlines serve Omaha, though it can be difficult to find a direct flight from Washington. Midwest offers nonstop service from Reagan National; round-trip fares start at about \$250, with restrictions.

WHERE TO STAY: Sadly, Omaha lacks a truly local or iconic hotel. The Doubletree downtown (1616 Dodge St., 800-222- TREE, [www.doubletree.com](http://www.doubletree.com); from \$150 (double) is in a stately high-rise with glass elevators. Just a few miles up Dodge Street in Midtown is the Cornerstone Mansion Inn (140 N. 39th St., 888-883-7745, [www.cornerstonemansion.com](http://www.cornerstonemansion.com); from \$85), a popular bed-and-breakfast converted from the private residences of one of Omaha's most prominent families, the Offutts. It's a short drive from the Old Market, the Henry Doorly Zoo and the Joslyn Art Museum.

WHERE TO EAT: Gorat's Steak House (4917 Center St) is widely considered a cut above Omaha's many family-owned steak houses --a view endorsed by Warren Buffett, who often holds court in this financially sensible establishment. Two can eat for less than \$50 and choose from a wide range of pork or beef steak, chicken, Italian and seafood.

A close runner-up is Caniglia's Original Restaurant (1114 S. Seventh St.), owned by Omaha's first family of restaurateurs. This Italian steakhouse is among the region's best Entrees are \$10 to \$22.

For international tastes, the French Cafe (1017 Howard St.), in the Old Market, evokes the stylized feel of a Parisian film noir. Equally impeccable is the menu: curry-dusted scallops, roasted pork tenderloin, filet mignon and more. A couple would be lucky to leave only \$80 lighter.

WHAT TO DO: Omaha is at its best in June, during the NCAA College World Series, when an RV city rises from the Rosenblatt Stadium parking lot. Details: 402-444-4750, [www.cwsomaha.com](http://www.cwsomaha.com). Other attractions include:

- Old Market (402) 341-1877, [www.oldmarketomaha.com](http://www.oldmarketomaha.com)), home to restaurants and shops. The district runs from Harney to Jackson streets, and 10th to 13th streets.

- Henry Doorly Zoo (3701 S. 10th St., 402-733-8401, [www.omahazoo.com](http://www.omahazoo.com); \$9), Nebraska's No.1 tourist attraction. The zoo's live Wildlife Safari is open April through October; take 1-80 to Exit 426 between Omaha and Lincoln. Details: 402-944-9453.

- Joslyn Art Museum (2200 Dodge St., 402-342-3300, [www.joslyn.org](http://www.joslyn.org); \$6, free Saturdays 10 a.m.-noon), the state's largest museum and home to an impressive collection of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20th-century American and European art.

- Girls and Boys Town (137th and W Dodge Rd., 800-625-1400, [www.girlsandboystown.org](http://www.girlsandboystown.org); free), a National Historic Landmark where visitors can tour the Father Flanagan House, the Hall of History and the campus grounds.

INFORMATION: Greater Omaha Convention & Visitors Bureau, 866-YES-OMAHA, [www.visitomaha.com](http://www.visitomaha.com).

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