

# Roadside Redux

## Retro Ice Cream Shop Serves Up Joy and Delight to Community

By Sarah Goldblatt, AIA



Thomas Fankhanel



Union Station Neighborhood Company

Above: The oversized cream can designed by Ted Schultz, AIA, LEED AP, peers over the top of the former Olinger Mortuary building at the downtown skyline and pedestrian bridges that complete the link to the Highland neighborhood.

Opposite page: Crowds gather at dusk on a summer evening in the plaza that surrounds the lofty Little Man Ice Cream can. The striped awnings and large window openings that wrap the building create an intimate scale at the pedestrian level.

Right: The practical issue of fitting rectangular ice cream freezers and equipment in a 14-ft. diameter space was among the challenges that Schultz faced in the design process.

For years, Denver-based developer Paul Tamburello had a recurring dream that didn't fit into any of the archetypal dream themes of falling, flying or being chased. No, his dream was far more fantastic and fun! It involved a perfectly proportioned, bigger-than-life, vintage dairy can from which he could dispense his favorite flavors of home-made ice cream. Family stories of his mother's Depression-era childhood working and living in an ice-cream store in Chicago and his affinity for roadside architecture fueled his imagination. Plus he just loved ice cream. As a young adult Tamburello and his friends often tinkered with the classic ice cream flavors and invented new ones like strawberry with crushed Oreos®.

However, the question lingered: when to shift his dream into reality? In 2007, as he completed the first phase of the adaptive reuse of the Olinger Mortuary property on 16th Street between Boulder and West 30th Avenue in Denver, he contemplated how to use a small triangular site where the angled downtown streets and the Highland grid collide, leaving an odd-shaped parcel of land. He looked at the burgeoning neighborhood, the adjacent pedestrian corridor and park and instinctively



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knew this was the place to realize his dream of opening an ice cream shop.

The question shifted from when to how?

Architect Ted Schultz, AIA, LEED AP, regional office manager with CTA Architects Engineers in Denver, had collaborated with Tamburello on a number of successful projects in the Highland neighborhood that involved innovative juxtapositions of old and new. But when Tamburello presented his vision for an ice cream shop within an oversized cream can, Schultz admits that he was nervous at first and wondered, “Is this going to be appropriate in the city? It is too kitschy?”

Schultz consulted his copy of Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi’s seminal book *Learning from Las Vegas* and determined that “we were making a duck ... there was no question what side of the line we were on.” The term “duck” was coined by Venturi and Scott Brown to describe buildings that are often literal, albeit distorted, representations to communicate what they are selling. In other words, the building becomes the sign. This genre of architecture peaked between the World Wars when automobile ownership and highways were expanding at a rapid rate and attracting motorists was paramount.

Schultz looked at the series of pedestrian bridges linking 16th Street from downtown Denver to the proposed site and was intrigued by the potential reinterpretation of roadside retail. He began to see the project as “an opportunity to make people really happy, excited and to provide some unexpected joy and delight.” His enthusiasm was only slightly tempered by the practical considerations: How tall should it be? What diameter? How do you get rectangular ice cream freezers efficiently in a round room? And ultimately, how do you build it cost effectively? The project evolved into an exercise in research.

While Schultz and project manager Jeff Belsick meticulously transposed the proportions and details of a vintage cream can that they had serendipitously found on a client’s front porch into a two-dimensional, habitable space on paper, Tom Hewitson, general manager of Miramar Construction, was charged with bringing it to life. The team agreed that the design and execution had to be precise. Hewitson explains, “It had to look authentic and proportionally correct or the whole image would have fallen apart.” They discovered, after contacting silo manufacturers in the Midwest and a firm out of Seattle that builds amusement park rides, that a 14-foot-diameter, 28-foot-tall cream can is not an off-the-shelf item. Schultz’s hope that the structure could be “shipped out here in pieces like a big pipe” turned out to be unrealistic.

With pre-fabrication out of the question, they turned to local steel fabricators to do the skeleton and sheathing. Most wouldn’t touch the project, but Western Steel and Boiler Co accepted the challenge. They worked closely with Hewitson to maintain the prescribed building curvature by developing a gauge to guide the steel frame construction. Six 18-foot-tall columns comprise the vertical structure and 2-inch flat stock on metal studs provide the substrate for the 4-by-8-foot, 16-gauge steel sheets that were tightly strapped and carefully welded to the circular structure to avoid any oil-canning.



Thomas Hewitson



Michael Tamburello



Michael Tamburello

**Top:** 4- by-8-foot metal sheets were welded, then temporarily strapped to the steel substrate to avoid oil-canning. Contractor Tom Hewitson of Miramar Construction developed a gauge or template to maintain the desired circumference as the steel was erected.

**Center:** The giant cream can top awaits a test fit on the body of the building. The cap was executed with exacting precision to match the proportion and details of a vintage cream can.

**Bottom:** The cap — with its “weathered” patina — waits on a flatbed trailer to assume its own landmark status in the Highland neighborhood. Historically, cable cars rattled past this site at the turn-of-the-century and were later replaced by streetcars.



Jeffrey Belnick

As the building started to take shape, passerbys couldn't resist asking what was being built. Hewitson liked to tease rapt onlookers and often responded that the structure was "a grain silo, or water storage tank." When the window openings were cut in, he would say it was "a shark tank." Once the cap was placed atop the cylinder at the grand opening, the form was unmistakable.

It was the 14-foot-wide, 10-foot-high cap, replete with handles, rivets and banding, that represented the project's true labor of love. Not only did the cap contain challenging compound curves, Tamburello wanted the option to switch out the cream can top in the winter to transform the building into a soup can with a ladle. Ultimately the top was constructed to be convertible and contains an "eyelet" that allows a crane to lift off the 6,000-pound cap. Without a place to store the summer cap, the ladle idea has yet to come to fruition.

What has occurred is the successful insertion of an urban oasis filled with the delight of discovery and a new entry in the neighborhood's collective memory.

**Above:** The 6,000-pound cap was hoisted atop the cream can as part of the Little Man Ice Cream Grand Opening celebration. The architect designed the cap to be removable to allow the cream can to be transformed into a soup can with a ladle in the winter.

**Below:** A tangle of precisely curved steel tubes, pipe and bar stock comprise the cap structure.



Michael Tamburello

### LITTLE MAN ICE CREAM SHOP

**Architect** Ted Schultz, AIA, LEED AP,  
CTA Architects Engineers, Denver

**Location** Highland Neighborhood, Denver

**Construction Cost** Approximately \$200,000

**Scope** 182-square-foot ice cream store

**Purpose** Walk-up ice cream parlor in lower Highland neighborhood designed to resemble a vintage cream can

**Completion Date** July 4, 2008

**Owner** Paul Tamburello

**Contractor** Tom Hewitson, Miramar Construction, Denver

**Electrical Engineer** Brian Kazin, P.E.,  
Kazin & Associates, Lone Tree, Colo.

**Structural Engineer** Cody Bohall, P.E., Studio 8.18  
Engineering, Denver

**Interior Design** Owner

**Landscape Design** CTA Architects Engineers, Denver

**Awards and Recognition** Mayors 2008 Design Award

#### Other Notable Projects

-Root Down Restaurant, Denver

-Mayors 2009 Design Award

-Comedy Works South, Greenwood Village, Colo.

-Olinger Complex, Denver - redevelopment of former  
mortuary into restaurants, retail and office

-Mayors 2007 Design Award

-Historic Denver 2007 Community Preservation Award

Belsick describes the building “as a social piece as opposed to a simple destination.” Schultz and his team carefully sited the building to be slightly offset from the 16th Street axis to establish an outdoor plaza bounded by the former Olinger buildings — and punctuated by the cream can. The orientation engages pedestrians on the sidewalk, allows for movable seating and accommodates long lines of patrons in the summer. And while the sheer scale of the building dominates the initial experience, the smaller details are revealed over time. These include the Streamline Moderne red vinyl stools that wrap around the structure, the ribbing on the stainless steel counters, and the colorful striped awnings. The hand-made nature of the building extends to the finish that has been carefully painted to recall a weathered cream can with a slightly worn label.

Although surprisingly hidden from view from most vantage points, the top of the cream can becomes visible just over the crest of Tejon Street and provides a visual connection to the downtown skyline. Myriad other subtle references link the cream can to the neighborhood’s history, one marked by consistent change. For all its whimsy, the Little Man Ice Cream Can may possess that elusive, enduring quality of being able to create humorous relief from our hectic daily lives and respite from the once sublime act of travel. It achieves the intent of roadside architecture, perhaps only in reverse. ■

Below: The neon Olinger sign glances over at its new neighbor whose presence enlivens a once-empty corner lot in the lower Highland neighborhood.

