

urban peak's motherhip

A first-of-its-kind campus supporting youth experiencing homelessness from shelter to independence



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project details



Year of Completion: **2024**

Address: **1630 S Acoma Street, Denver, CO**

New Market Tax Credits: **Capital Peak Partners**

Total Construction Cost: **\$26.85 million**

Gross Building Area (GBA): **66,578 sf**

Managing Organization: **Urban Peak**

Developer: **BlueLine Development, Inc.**

Architect: **Shopworks Architecture**

General Contractor: **Deneuve Construction**

Landscape Architect: **Flow Design Collaborative**

introduction

This paper describes the innovative and timely conditions that facilitated the realization of **The Mothership** as a first-of-its-kind campus, meeting youth with the tailored and dignified supports they need and deserve on their journey toward self-sufficiency.



In July 2024, Urban Peak opened a state-of-the-art program in Denver, Colorado—affectionately called *The Mothership*—to meet the diverse and dynamic needs of local youth experiencing homelessness. The building reflects the organization’s vision of a more strengths-based and developmentally appropriate program for youth moving toward independent living. Progressive levels of transitional living spaces with integrated services allow youth to transfer quickly from emergency shelter into a more intimate and stable environment with peer and staff support. The Mothership team searched but was unable to find a similar model in the country upon which to base their planning—highlighting the need to pioneer this work.

who is urban peak?

Urban Peak began as a grassroots effort to address a growing number of youth experiencing homelessness on the streets of Denver. The organization began as a daytime drop-in center and in 1998 opened Colorado's first and only licensed shelter for youth experiencing homelessness. Today, Urban Peak provides youth ages 12 to 24 with 24/7 emergency shelter, day services 365 days a year, long-term housing, strengths-based case management, medical and behavioral health services, education and employment supports, food, clothing, and creative therapeutic outlets. Annually, the organization serves around 1,100 unique area youth with a team of 90 dedicated and experienced staff members. At the helm since 2017, Christina Carlson serves as the organization's CEO, undaunted visionary, and relentless champion of Urban Peak's mission and youth. Unsurprisingly, Christina and her team played a critical role in manifesting this monumental idea into existence.



The more time I spent in design, the more I knew the system was irrevocably broken.

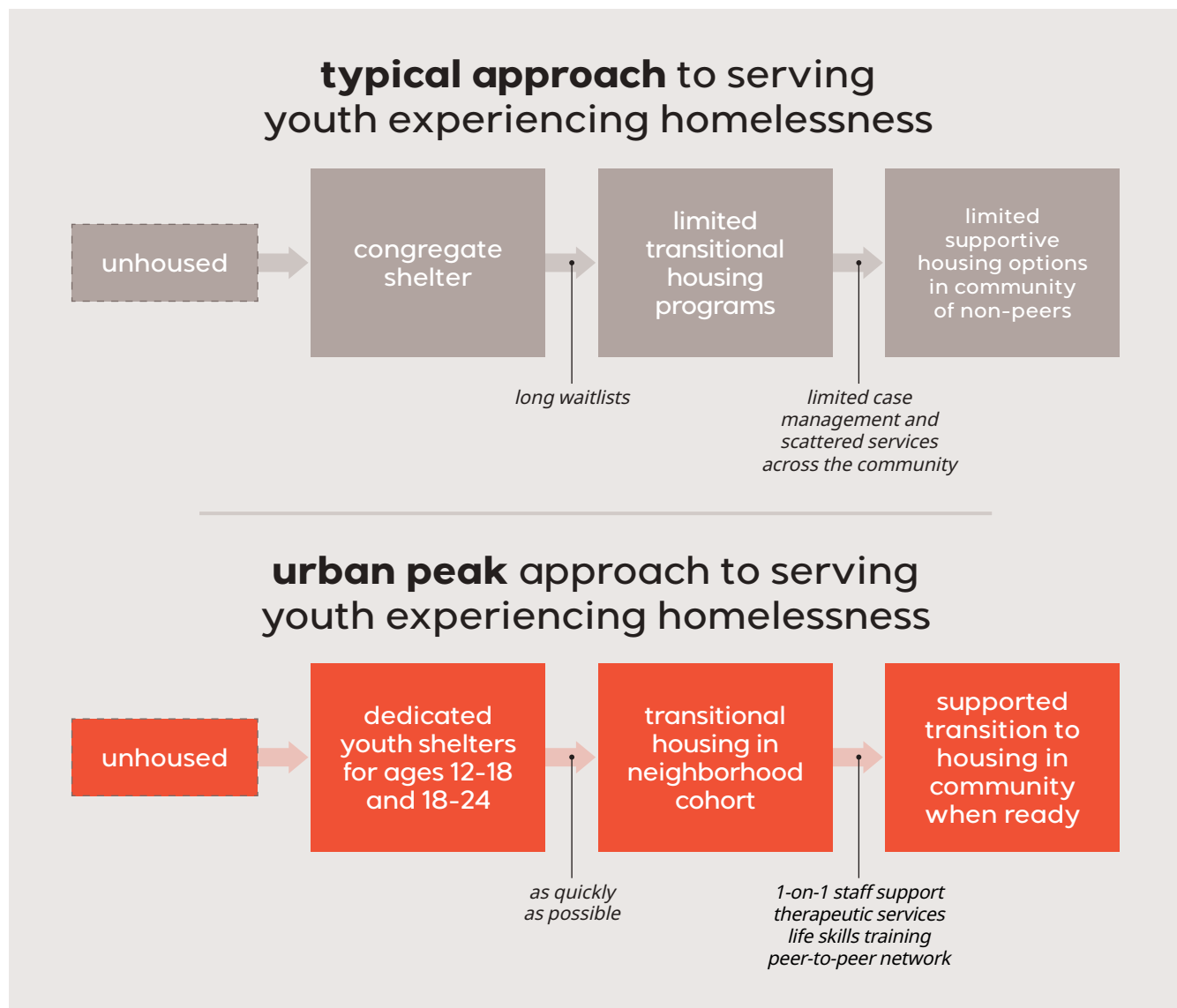
– Christina Carlson, CEO of Urban Peak

why do something different?

Conversations about redeveloping Urban Peak's aging shelter began in 2015, over nine years before the doors of the building finally opened to the public. Initially, the goal was to update the previous shelter with a fresh coat of paint and a new HVAC system, but Urban Peak quickly concluded that so much more was needed. So, the team started imagining a more comprehensive solution – a complete redesign of the shelter plus affordable housing units via a more traditional Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) process. (One of the inspirations for this initial vision was Denver's Delores Project-Arroyo Village, which opened in 2019 with a 60-bed shelter for women, transgender, and gender nonconforming youth plus affordable supportive and workforce housing).

However, upon closer examination, Urban Peak's leadership deeply questioned whether the traditional LIHTC model was an appropriate approach for housing for youth experiencing homelessness who were simultaneously undergoing major developmental growth alongside complex personal circumstances, often with few social supports. For Urban Peak, the LIHTC approach was too rigid for the needs of their clients—young people who, when provided with an adequate support system, demonstrated incredible resilience and potential for growth beyond their current circumstances. In addition, the Urban Peak team questioned whether permanent supportive housing, which is envisioned to support the long-term needs of community members with the most complex and enduring vulnerabilities, was the ideal environment for youth transitioning into adulthood and likely living on their own for the first time.

In a typical approach to serving youth experiencing homelessness, youth can spend long periods in a congregate shelter with limited, if any, access to transitional housing programs. Intensive case management is limited, and services are often scattered across the community, making them difficult to access. A transition from shelter into housing often means that youth are living in supportive housing with a community of adults, many of whom have a history of chronic homelessness.



Related to the shelter, the Urban Peak team knew that this intervention, while essential and lifesaving when needed, is not a long-term solution and that youth in shelter needed to be transitioned to safe and stable housing as quickly as possible. Further, they felt strongly about creating a separate and tailored shelter environment for Urban Peak's under 18 clientele whose development and legal independence are in a different place than the clientele over 18.

So, Urban Peak and their partners committed to the risky and unclear path of creating a flexible, responsive, and developmentally appropriate service approach and space to better serve youth. In doing so, Urban Peak accepted that this uncharted building and programming typology would not fit traditional funding and financing mechanisms and would require that they fundraise every dollar. Prioritizing the health and well-being of their youth over ease and expediency, the team set their sights on bringing this dynamic idea to life.

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Let's gamble and do something we think is right.

– Christina Carlson, CEO of Urban Peak



conditions for change

The dynamism of this project reflects a confluence of the right people doing the right work at the right time—more specifically, a team of relentless dreamers in Denver, Colorado, seeking to surround local youth experiencing homelessness with the supports and care they need and deserve. A series of critical conditions lent themselves to making this innovative, and by some measures audacious, project a reality:

condition 1. urban peak's **long-standing reputation** in the community doing critical work

Urban Peak has been serving local youth experiencing homelessness for over 35 years. As such, the organization is an established and trusted community leader in youth services. The first major donation toward this project came from a community member who, seeking to innovate similar services, recognized that the work was already being led by Urban Peak. After several conversations with Christina Carlson, she decided to join forces with Urban Peak, investing her resources in The Mothership and contributing her vision as a board member. By many accounts, this initial investment and show of faith in the organization and vision is what kick started The Mothership project. Urban Peak was also intentional about deep engagement with the local neighborhood and greater community throughout the process to engender continued goodwill and community.



*A lot of the magic happened
when we threw out convention.*

– Chad Holtzinger, President of Shopworks Architecture

condition 2. a **development team** willing to invest time and share risk

A degree of risk is inherent for all parties on all development projects. However, once the team committed to abandoning traditional development models and charting an increased investment of time (workshopping ideas) was met by a decreased promise of return (either conceptually or financially). Christina recounts looking at the developer (Christian Pritchett) and saying that maybe they would never get paid, to which he quipped that a quarter of deals never get paid – a demonstration of the deep commitment shared by the operator (Urban Peak), developer (BlueLine), architect (Shopworks), and contractor (Deneuve Construction).

The project's yearslong design process was described as ongoing iteration and testing—throwing ideas at the wall, throwing ideas out, and starting again—all toward a campus that would support trajectories of dignity and possibility for Urban Peak youth. This pursuit required nothing less than a total commitment to patience and humility by all parties involved.

condition 3.

the relentless, “naive optimism” of urban peak’s leadership supported by an exceptionally capable team and a dedicated board

Christina is often cited as the critical catalyst of this project – determined, undaunted, and persuasive. According to her, she didn’t know better than not to try and was fortunate to have a forward-thinking and courageous board at her back willing to commit resources to what was then a convincing, but entirely theoretical, idea. Chance favors the prepared mind, and she was uniquely capable of recognizing and seizing the opportunities that presented themselves. Urban Peak’s seasoned and dedicated team was also an undeniably vital component of The Mothership’s success, with Cassandra Contreras (the then Director of Operations) managing the project with an unyielding attention to detail and focus that propelled the project forward.

condition 4.

pandemic funds and a growing awareness around homelessness need and best practice response

“The gift of COVID for The Mothership,” as described by the team, was that the COVID-19 pandemic shone a light on the negative impacts of congregate shelter and, for the first time in history, relegated funds for the creation of new non-congregate options. As the team had already been grappling with a largescale, non-cogregate design for years, they were read to hit the ground running once early funds were committed. In 2022, \$3 million in federal funding was secured by Congresswoman Diana DeGette (CO-01) to construct the shelter with an additional \$400,000 in federal funding to continue services during construction. Later investments of \$3.8 million came from the state of Colorado and \$16.8 million from the city of Denver’s voter-approved RISE bond program. The project also fundraised \$11 million in private capital through the New Market federal tax credit program and \$4 million in private donations. The ability to articulate The Mothership’s innovative operational and physical approach to serving youth experiencing homelessness was key to securing funding.

condition 5.

a commitment to dignified design, promoting a trauma-informed design approach and early end user engagement

In 2015, Urban Peak decided to partner with Shopworks Architecture, a Denver-based architectural firm with expertise in affordable housing and shelter design. Around that time, Shopworks began exploring the concept of trauma-informed design with research partners from the University of Denver’s Center for Housing and Homelessness Research (“CHHR”). Together, Shopworks and CHHR carried out a trauma-informed design assessment, interviewing over 70 youth and staff across the organization’s various programs to understand their needs and desires for the new building. Grounded in the expert input of Urban Peak’s youth and staff and guided by the evidence-based principles of trauma-informed design, (which Shopworks later reframed as Dignified Design), the earliest iterations of The Mothership were directly informed by the unique realities and emerging needs of the community and work.



dynamic design

The **Mothership** is a four-story building in the Overland neighborhood of Denver, co-locating shelter, transitional housing, support services, and the organization's administrative offices.

About the name, Christina joked that this was *"the MOTHER of all projects"* and one that would eat her whole. With a total of 136 beds (expandable to 180 beds if needed), The Mothership tripled the organization's former shelter capacity and expanded services to support minors as young as 12 as well as older youth ages 21 to 24 who could not be served overnight at the previous shelter. Filling a glaring gap between shelter and independent housing, The Mothership also provides long-term, transitional housing organized across six distinct neighborhoods for cohorts experiencing similar circumstances and learning similar skills. Within the building, a range of accessible wrap-around services attend to the distinctive needs and interests of each resident.

The unique nature of The Mothership's design cannot be overstated. There is simply nothing like it in the ecosystem of housing and homeless services for youth, offering an opportunity to immediately access shelter and transition as quickly as possible into dorm-style neighborhood suites. Once situated in a neighborhood, youth are embedded in a community of peers where they can practice critical life skills that will prepare them for independent living. Everything youth need is onsite, from shelter and meals to case management and healthcare.

building overview

ground floor

The ground floor of the building houses two distinct shelters: “My Place” with 20 beds for minors (ages 12-18) and “Mary’s Place” with 32 beds for young adults (ages 18-24). Each shelter has its own separate community room with kitchen amenities and case management offices where they can meet with staff. A medical clinic offers comfortable access to healthcare professionals and services that are not easily accessible to youth experiencing homelessness in the community. Providing meals throughout the day, a commercial kitchen and spacious community room (“The Commons”) serve youth of the shelter program as well as residents of the upper-floor neighborhoods. Two enclosed and private courtyards offer secure access to a basketball court, garden beds, and comfortable seating.

second & third floors

The second and third floors house six distinct neighborhoods with a total of 84 beds, each with their own shared living and dining areas, laundry facilities, bathrooms, and case management space. The neighborhoods are designed to create tailored cohorts of care for the residents. For example, one neighborhood may be dedicated to serving young parents while others focus on substance misuse recovery, youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, or independent living for youth working or going to school. Ranging from five to nine rooms (with two beds per room), different neighborhood sizes promote flexible programming should cohort needs change over time. This neighborhood approach to housing formerly youth experiencing homelessness is, to our knowledge, the first of its kind in the country.

fourth floor

The Wellbeing Center on the fourth floor contains a technology lab, visual arts center, fully equipped music studio, comfortable case management and counseling rooms, large community meeting spaces for classes and trainings, and two outdoor terraces with stunning views of the city and mountains. Flexibility in the design allows Urban Peak to provide a range of services attending to the mental, physical, social, and spiritual health and wellbeing of the community. Urban Peak’s administrative offices are also centrally located on the fourth floor of The Mothership, promoting collaboration and coordination across programs and enriching an overall sense of cohesion across the team.



distinctive features

The design of the entire campus follows best practices in trauma-informed design toward an atmosphere of dignity. It prioritizes the safety and comfort of youth and staff alike and promotes ample opportunities for people to connect and exercise choice. The distinctive features of Dignified Design employed across The Mothership include the following:



creating a warm, welcoming first impression

The trauma-informed design assessment revealed that the approach to the previous shelter was anything but clear and inviting. Youth described mustering up the courage to approach a warehouse-looking building through a gathering of youth out front only to enter a space full of people where they couldn't always discern clients from staff. At The Mothership, youth now have a difference experience; they approach a cheery building toward a clear single point of entry past several windows, which offer glimpses into the front lobby. Upon entering the building, first-time clientele, longtime residents, visitors, donors, and staff are greeted by a sunny, open front desk staffed 24/7 with someone who can direct them to the appropriate program, resident, or staff member. Residents of the neighborhoods proceed directly to the elevators or stairwell where they can securely access their floor.

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It is so calm! We have experienced a culture shift overnight! Staff and youth are so different. It's wild.

– Christina Carlson, CEO of Urban Peak



MARY'S PLACE

In Honor Of
Jamie Van Leeuwen



promoting safety and privacy in shelter

Recognizing the need to balance density and capacity with safety and dignity, the shelter features individual dorms with no more than eight beds per room. From centralized admin desks in both shelters, staff have clear sightlines and cameras across the space and visual access into each dorm as needed. Each sleeping area is designed with a personal nightlight, outlet, and shelf as well as lockable locker where clientele can securely store their belongings next to them while they sleep. Further, the two shelters (one for minors 12-18 and the other for young adults 18-24) feature separate living spaces, each with a comfortable TV area, kitchenette, laundry, varied seating, and private meeting space for intake and case management. The design of the dorms is a precursor to the feel of the dorm-style rooms in the above neighborhoods to which shelter youth will eventually transition.





fostering connection via neighborhoods

Six distinct neighborhoods are designed with a range of five to nine dormrooms, each intended to be occupied by two roommates for a total of 84 neighborhood beds. The residents of each neighborhood share living and dining areas, laundry facilities, bathrooms, and meeting space to facilitate onsite service support. Staffing of the neighborhoods is tailored to each group's needs and interests, with cohorts ranging from pregnant and parenting youth to substance misuse and recovery to intellectual and developmental disabilities. These conditions are intended to instill a sense of ownership, pride of place, and personal responsibility, in which youth are accountable to one another and the greater community within a supportive environment. Each neighborhood is designed with a different color palette to create a distinct and personalized feel. Additionally, every neighborhood has its own secure entrance and bike storage that can only be accessed by those residents.

In 2025, youth reached positive, permanent housing outcomes three times faster than before The Mothership.

Engagement with education, employment, and permanent housing services occurred 47% faster than before the Mothership.¹



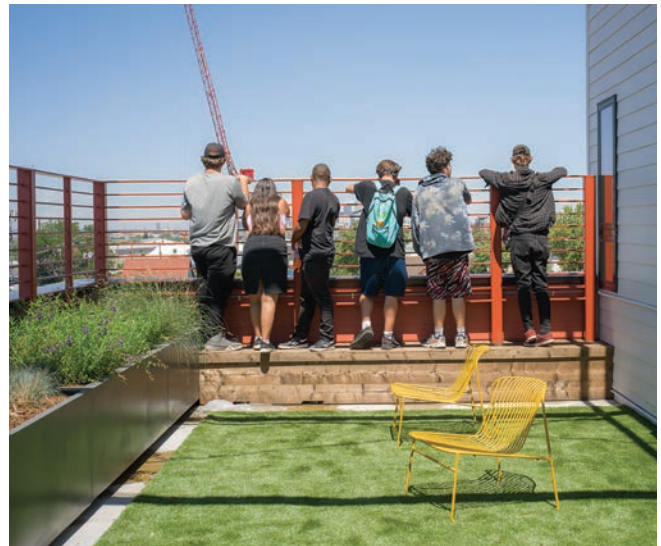
¹ 2025 report completed by third-party evaluation firm QREM.



offering diverse spaces of purpose

The building offers a range of secure spaces where youth can be active and social, relaxed and reflective—where they can create, connect, be productive or just be. Larger gathering areas employ the principle of ‘nested layers,’ creating more intimate clusters of seating, nooks and sidling spaces where individuals can participate along the edge, and flexible options that can be shifted and shaped to meet people’s needs. Custom spaces in the Wellbeing Center support purposeful gathering, such as the art studio with sinks and ample storage, the music studio with additional soundproofing elements, and the medical clinic where youth can conveniently access care onsite. In these ways, the design responded to end user feedback about the previous shelter in which every space was “too multipurpose,” resulting in a lack of stability and care communicated by the building itself and a sense of dis-ease for shelter youth and staff.

Outdoor access was noted by the youth as especially important for promoting a sense of familiarity and freedom, assembly and connection. The design offers a range of outdoor spaces, including bench swings and shade structures where youth can engage in restful, contemplative activities as well as an enclosed basketball court and garden beds where youth can release energy. A large mural welcomes people into the main courtyard and anchors The Mothership in the iconic imagery of the city, state, and region.





balancing **natural materials** and **charismatic features**

A range of natural materials and charismatic features are employed throughout the building—in every dorm, common area, staff office, and circulation space—to provide a generous and balanced multisensory experience. The building has an exposed glue-laminated structure (i.e., wood columns and beams) and wood materials throughout, including built-in casework, plywood ceilings, natural tongue-and-groove wainscoting, and plywood signage. Distinctive design elements throughout the building—employed via paint color, wallpaper, light fixtures, and furniture—communicate a sense of character and support wayfinding and attachment to place. In doing so, the design seeks to promote regulation of the body's stress response system through elements of nature and wonder.

prioritizing access to natural light

In recognition of demonstrated research tying daylight to circadian rhythms and mental and physical health outcomes, the design of the building prioritized access to natural light. The mere presence of light is in stark contrast to the previous shelter, which staff and youth often described as “dark and musty” with “hidden corners”. To ensure that natural light flowed through as many interior spaces of the building as possible, including The Commons and every single neighborhood bedroom, a large light core was prioritized in the design.





taking care of staff

The staff are deeply committed to the youth at Urban Peak. However, Urban Peak's previous staff spaces were not able to adequately care for them in return, with team members reporting that they didn't have anywhere to go when they needed to take a break or regroup from the realities of the work. In one interview, a staff member shared that they would "cry in their car" when they needed to process a hard moment at work. Thus, extra attention was given to ensure that staff had ample, comfortable spaces to connect with youth, consult with colleagues, carry out the responsibilities of their respective roles, and care for themselves. An office suite on the fourth floor houses open workstations as well as private offices for confidential conversations, comfortable collaboration space, a dedicated staff kitchen, and private bathrooms. An additional staff breakroom on the first floor provides easy access to a kitchen and quiet space for shelter staff. Soundproofing was prioritized in all staff spaces to support confidentiality and comfort.

conclusion



The physical environment—both natural and built—plays a central role in our day-to-day experiences, wielding significant influence over our sense of safety, comfort, community, and control. Thanks to the support of the entire Denver community, Urban Peak is now able to offer local youth experiencing homelessness immediate shelter and transitional housing that communicate care through intentionally designed environments alongside heartfelt human interactions (the latter of which Urban Peak has been delivering for years). As Mayor Mike Johnston shared at the grand opening of The Mothership, “This is exactly the kind of work the city is proud to do: Meeting young people where they’re at and giving them the best possible chance to get back on their feet.”

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The Mothership is what love looks like in a physical form.

– Denver Mayor Mike Johnston

Of course, these impacts warrant ongoing study to understand how the building continues to be used and experienced by youth and staff. This is research that Urban Peak and their partners remain committed to, not only for the benefit of this community but for others doing this important work. As such, we welcome inquiry about this project and look forward to ongoing discussions about dignified housing solutions—for youth and all members of our community.

photo captions

cover, The Commons community room off The Lighthouse dining room with Urban Peak youth

table of **contents**, community members sharing salon services with Urban Peak youth

p1, front exterior of The Mothership

p2, members of the project team at The Mothership's Grand Opening in July 2024: Chad Holtzinger, Shopworks Architecture; Christian Pritchett, BlueLine Development, Inc.; David Garabed, Deneuve Construction; Mayor Mike Johnston, City of Denver; David Jennings, Urban Peak Board; Christina Carlson, Urban Peak; Dick Thomas, Urban Peak Board; Cassandra Contreras, Urban Peak

p5, Urban Peak youth in the private courtyard

p8, fourth-floor terrace with overhead solar panel structure

p9, aerial view of fourth-floor terrace and overhead solar panel structure on the south side of the building

p10, front exterior of The Mothership lit up in the evening

p11, ground floor front desk with Urban Peak youth and staff

p12, emergency shelter dorm with 8 beds

p13, Urban Peak staff at the emergency shelter desk

p14, neighborhood corridor and two distinct neighborhood shared kitchen-living spaces

p15, neighborhood shared kitchen-living space with Urban Peak youth

p16, clockwise from top left: art studio and terrace in the Well-being Center, medical clinic, classroom

p17, Urban Peak youth in the private courtyard

p18, The Commons community room off The Lighthouse dining room

p19, light core over The Lighthouse dining room with Urban Peak youth and staff

p21, staff office suite, clockwise from top left: open workstations across from private offices and meeting rooms, staff lounge and collaboration space

p22, The Mothership along the South Broadway corridor south of Downtown Denver

Urban Peak



urbanpeak.org

SWARC
shopworksarc.com

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Whitepaper Design: Broz (www.brozknows.com)

Photography: Matthew Staver Photography (www.matthewstaver.com)