

**Communities By Design**, a  
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education  
organization, in cooperation with the  
**City of Redwood City**,  
is pleased to present:

# The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



## UNDERSTANDING CIVIC ART: The Urban Design of “Everything Else”

2005-06 SEASON: FORUM #3  
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2005  
LITTLE FOX THEATER  
2209 BROADWAY  
REDWOOD CITY  
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On December 7, 2005, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit “Communities By Design” hosted the third presentation of the 2005-2006 season of the Forum, with a presentation by **Greg Tung**. Mr. Tung – who is Principal of Freedman, Tung & Bottomley (FTB) in San Francisco – spoke about “Understanding Civic Art: The Urban Design of ‘Everything Else’.”

To understand the place and importance of civic art, it is essential to note the difference between civic art and public art - two terms commonly intermixed. Mr. Tung explained that public art is simply art within itself, independent of its context. The job of civic art, on the other hand, is to blend beauty and meaning with function - objectives that are not mutually exclusive. The thing about civic art that sets it apart is that it is an artistic approach to creating the built environment, in a way that helps foster feelings of identify and belonging. Civic art is a key component of helping a city form and identify itself.

### HISTORY

The renaissance era drew from Roman writer Vitruvius’ ten books on architecture that defined a new visual language and implanted innovative ideas of civic art. Post WWII society forgot the lessons of enlightened Rome and focused strictly on functionality and efficiency. This “freeway society” was

“An exclusive focus on density and land use has not resulted in cohesive communities.”

– Greg Tung

typically void of any civic beauty; we've since learned the hard way that we don't have to choose between meaning and function. The history of civic art allows us to select from the best of the old and the new while deleting the errors of the past.

## **CONTEXT**

The public realm is something that needs to be embedded in the public form. It is the responsibility of civic art to bring out information regarding the place where the art resides. Civic art helps us structure the public spaces we are trying to create; it also speaks of the generosity of the area. To avoid creating "island" art pieces, civic art must be woven into both its context and to other surrounding pieces. Mr. Tung strongly asserts that the value of the whole in civic art should be greater than the sum of all its parts.

"Streets are the settings and shapers of civic life."  
- Greg Tung

## **INFRASTRUCTURE**

Roads, bridges, and underpasses are often treated as a city's "plumbing" but are truly missed opportunities for civic art. These structures are viewed as prohibitive communal investments; therefore we miss our chance to exploit their potential. Bridges can be beautiful landmarks that make a city recognizable and overpasses can be treated like bridges. Bridges may house sculpture-like details that give them additional meaning. Even industrial areas have rich canvasses for civic art where local artist can contribute to the city form.

## **LANDMARKS**

Historically civic art was a given and acted as focal points, tying the city together. These focal points include landmarks like clock towers or entry gates that conveyed a sense of orientation and space. Stonehenge is an early example of civic art that incorporated ritual, meaning, and a general way of life to the form of the space. Since the invention of a widely dominating middle class, we must ask ourselves, what symbols we want to represent a modern democratic society.

Landmark features are important tools for identifying a district structure. The role of a landmark varies; they may act as centers, edges, gateways or flankers. Landmarks build on the symbolism of shapes, architectural forms, colors, textures, and meanings that already exist. An effective approach to landmark design is to consider them "an architectural short story," narrating a brief history about the town. Ambiguous structures posing as landmarks do more harm than good, as they tend to lose meaning and respect. Landmarks can be especially useful where small growing towns are beginning to blend into larger metropolis areas. Redwood City itself provides an example of how creating a sequence of repeating landmarks along Hamilton Street unifies the area and marks the entrance of the city.

## **CASE STUDIES**

### ***Phoenix, Arizona***

The challenge in Phoenix was to visually unite big box retail, office buildings, hotels, the convention center and the street environment on a minimal budget. First and foremost, the negative image of the area needed to be changed. The approach taken was to create a processional downtown avenue by taking prototypes from Rome. Mr. Tung saw it necessary to heal the proportions of the area by widening the pedestrian zone so that the vehicular corridor would appear smaller. Materials and successful architectural style were pulled from the art deco and pueblo style already existing in Phoenix. The dramatic lighting system also acted as art pieces to bridge the adjacent skyscrapers and the human realm.

### ***Cathedral City, California***

Cathedral City is a town that lies on a strip corridor adjacent to Palm Springs. Although it exists in a resort valley, the town was rundown and was experiencing considerable disinvestment. FTB

designed a high-desert boulevard treatment, with design guidelines and a clock tower, that helped the downtown begin to have an identity and life of its own.

### ***Mountain View, California***

Castro Street in Mountain View prior to 1986 was by no means an active location. Pieces of the streetscape had only a utilitarian identity with no outstanding elements. The objective for this improvement project was to support the downtown life and strengthen its character. Individual pieces of street furniture were fit into a larger context. This was done by creating multi-use structures with planters, benches, and trashcans that also acted as sectionals. These structures were then repeated throughout the downtown for a multi-function but united look.

### **PALETTE**

Pieces of civic art should be recognizable as belonging to a given space even when taken out of their origin. Materials strengthen the character of space through color, texture, and details. Kevin Lynch believed in “thematic units” which apply form to an object but do not decorate just for decorations sake. Santa Barbara has been successful in establishing thematic units like red tile roofs and white stucco walls. Boston’s brick buildings and narrow windows are also sets of recognizable character of units. Policy is vital to civic art so that the desired palette for a city is written into the general plan allowing streetscapes to support the integrity of a given area.

### **SUMMARY**

Mr. Tung wrapped the Forum up by reinstating the essential aspects of effective civic art. He reminded the audience that the whole of civic art should be greater than the sum of its parts. Civic art should also tell a story about where it resides. Although these narratives tell of the past, we must not design there. Within the stories themes should surface - after thorough investigation - and be inserted into the fabric of the city. Lastly, spending money on vertical elements is worth the expense because they are like lightening rods to draw people in from a distance. Tung believes that planting a small seed for the future makes a huge difference because it sets a higher standard for the next generations.