

**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

## USING THE DARK ARTS OF DEVELOPMENT TO CREATE GREAT PLACES: A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE



2005-06 SEASON: FORUM #4  
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 4, 2006  
LITTLE FOX THEATER  
2209 BROADWAY  
REDWOOD CITY  
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On January 4, 2006, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit "Communities By Design" hosted the fourth presentation of the 2005-2006 Forum season, with a presentation by John Anderson. Mr. Anderson – who is Vice President of Planning & Design for New Urban Builders in Chico – spoke about "Using the Dark Arts of Development to Create Great Places: A Practitioner's Guide."

Mr. Anderson opened his colorful and oftentimes irreverent presentation by confessing that before he became interested in traditional neighborhood design (TND), he helped create the Mall of America.

Mr. Anderson attributes his change of heart to a conversation he had with an architect friend who implored him to leave the mall development industry before he could do any more "damage" to our communities, and encouraged him to read James Howard Kunstler's "The Geography of Nowhere," a book which decries the proliferation of sprawling, auto-oriented development patterns.

Following this turning point in his career, Mr. Anderson went on to build successful and innovative neighborhoods in northern California as part of a development company called "New Urban Builders." Using several case studies, Mr. Anderson shared some of the lessons he learned from doing New Urbanist style development and explained some of the challenges of trying to change city regulations in order to incorporate traditional neighborhood design into private development projects.

## **The Doe Mill Neighborhood - Chico, California**

The Doe Mill Neighborhood is a 20-acre, higher density single-family project in southeast Chico that incorporates narrow streets, rear-facing garages and alleyways to create a traditional neighborhood.

Mr. Anderson began Doe Mill project in 2000 after he and his business partner, Tom DiGiovanni, began noticing that the older, often smaller “fixer-upper” homes in downtown Chico were selling for more than new homes being built on the City’s periphery. The older homes had more character and curb appeal than the newer, “cookie-cutter,” garage-dominated, standard suburban style houses that were being built. Mr. Anderson wondered why new neighborhoods with more character and a more traditional neighborhood design were not being built, and vowed to do something about it.

To do this, Mr. Anderson and his partner had to take on the City of Chico’s development standards. According to Mr. Anderson, it’s the development standards, not the General Plan, which ultimately dictate how a city looks and functions. The City of Chico’s General Plan is a visionary document that encourages the pattern of traditional neighborhood development featured at Doe Mill. However, as is the case with many cities, the vision put forth in the General Plan was never translated into a revised set of development standards.

Mr. Anderson and Mr. DiGiovanni refused to let Chico’s development standards “water down” their plan for Doe Mill. Instead, they fought with the City almost a year and a half to convince them that the project’s departures from development standards would not compromise the City’s ability to provide services and infrastructure at Doe Mill. One battle in particular that they had to fight was to convince the fire department that Doe Mill’s narrow, 26-foot streets could still accommodate the City’s fire trucks.

Another obstacle they had to overcome related to where to locate the utility boxes. Local utility companies are in the habit of locating utility boxes in front of the homes that they serve, so that utility workers can easily access them. Recognizing that these boxes degraded the neighborhood aesthetic and the pedestrian environment, Mr. Anderson and Mr. DiGiovanni were able to convince the City and the utility company to place all dry utilities in the rear of the lot, next to the garage, with access off of the alley.

Mr. Anderson conceded that they did lose some of their battles. For example, Doe Mill has several bungalow courts, which, at 23 units/acre, are some of the densest areas of the project. Even though most of the current households in these courts only own one car, the City required them to provide two parking spaces per unit – as stipulated by the development standards.

## **Creativity in Site Design**

Through some creative architecture and site design, New Urban Builders was able to design single-family homes with front porches on narrow lots, each with private side yards (and side porches), and garages accessed by rear alleys. The active side of the house faces the side yard, which functions much as a typical backyard might function in a typical development. But with the side yard design, New Urban Builders did not want to have the wall of the house that faces the neighbor’s side yard be one long, blank wall without any windows. So they designed it in such a way so that each house grants a five-foot use easement to the neighboring lot, which allows windows to be placed along the passive side of the house (the windows must be at least six feet above the finished floor to preserve the privacy of the active side yard next door).

Mr. Anderson also underscored how higher density development requires a higher design standard to be successful. For example, rather than just putting trim on the front part of the houses, all of the homes in Doe Mill have trim that wraps all the way around the homes. Paying attention to little design details like these is one of the things that helps differentiate Doe Mill from the typical suburban-style development that is being built elsewhere in the region.

### **Parkview Neighborhood - Redding, California**

Mr. Anderson reminded the audience that private developers shoulder substantial risks undertaking new development projects, and those ventures do not always work out. Following the success of their residential infill project in the Parkview Neighborhood in Redding, the City of Redding asked New Urban Builders to design a mixed-use project on Parkview Avenue, across from the Redding City Hall.

The community was supportive of the project and the redevelopment agency owned a portion of the site. But when an agreement could not be worked out between the redevelopment agency and the owner of another portion of the site, the deal fell through. New Urban Builders withdrew from the project and lost all of the money (\$40,000) they had invested in the project.

According to Mr. Anderson, the uncertainty inherent in projects such as Parkview Avenue is the rule, not the exception, in the development industry. Obtaining entitlements is often the most risky part of a developer's business. And yet, some in the public sector have come to expect that developers will "walk into dark places" without hesitation.

### **One Possible Solution – The TND Zone**

To eliminate some of the uncertainty developers face, Mr. Anderson and New Urban Builders are proposing an amendment to the Chico Municipal Code. They are advocating for the creation of a "TND Zone" to reduce the number of unknowns and to make it easier for developers to build traditional neighborhood development without having to repeat all of the battles New Urban Builders had to fight when they did Doe Mill.