

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

Tales of Transformation: From Vision to Reality



2006-07 SEASON: FORUM #8
WEDNESDAY, MAY 2, 2007
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On May 2, 2007, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit "Communities By Design" hosted its final Forum of the 2006-2007 season. This lecture was the 30th since the series began in 2003. The presentation was given by Redwood City's own Susan Moeller,

Redevelopment Manager of Redwood City. Ms. Moeller unfolded her inspiring journey in a presentation entitled *Tales of Transformation: From Vision to Reality*. Her heroic efforts in Cathedral City helped transform a bereft desert city into a lively walkable place complete with a central downtown, civic center, grand boulevard, central retail and housing, and a reputable entertainment destination point. Revitalizing Redwood City is her current success story and Redwood City will receive the prestigious Charter Award for exemplary urban design at the upcoming 2007 Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) conference in Philadelphia.

Ms. Moeller's positive energy and Pollyanna-type approach to city redevelopment has helped transform cities from the inside out. She claims that having no formal background in planning and refusing to admit she's an expert have given her a leg up, because she "didn't know what couldn't be done" and therefore she wouldn't let obstacles stop her progress. Her presentation outlined four "laws" that helped guide her through the extraordinary transformation of Cathedral and Redwood Cities.

Cathedral Law

Not ironically, Ms. Moeller was inspired by what she calls *The Cathedral Law* when she saw the potential to revitalize Cathedral City, which at the time was known as a city that got Palm Springs' undesirable leftovers. Susan Moeller defines *The Cathedral Law* as intense community participation. Historically, the erection of a cathedral took an entire village more

than a lifetime to build. Everyone had a role, a stake in the process, and each person knew that they could make a difference. Building a “cathedral” requires patience and political will; lessons Moeller learned as Cathedral City was metamorphosed into a place with a soul.

The heart of Cathedral City is now a plaza in a civic center where a uniquely beautiful fountain steals the show. The “Fountain of Life” installation was a process that truly paralleled the cathedral metaphor involving the children of the city. Fountain artist Jennifer Johnson would ask students as they passed by from the local elementary school for their input as she constructed the water feature, she also asked that they keep guard while she was away for the weekend, thus insuring the children felt they had a real stake in the project. Beyond visual interest, Ms. Moeller asserts, downtown plazas also need a sense of enclosure, plenty of sittable surfaces, food vendors, and easy, central accessibility.

“It’s about loving what you do and sharing that passion. Remember, we all make a difference.”

- Susan Moeller

Rebuilding Cathedral City first involved the behemoth two year task of literally changing state legislation so that any city in California can now take over a part of a state highway to make it a more pedestrian oriented boulevard. Susan Moeller worked with Freedman Tung & Bottomley to tame Highway 111, which bisected Cathedral City, to slow traffic and create a pleasant pedestrian-focused downtown. The new downtown took advantage of its Hollywood heritage, rooting the area as an authentic desert destination. The local theater and adjacent museum has been named after Mary Pickford, the first female Hollywood executive and Academy Award winner.

Grand Vision Law

According to Ms. Moeller, *The Grand Vision Law* states that good projects really aren’t projects but *places* - authentic, big, bold, compelling places that are more than just pretty renderings. “It is the policy of the City of Redwood City that in the design of public and private projects, high priority be given to creating comfortable, enjoyable, and aesthetically pleasing public spaces.” This policy, coined the “Nice Places Policy,” ensures that pleasant and inviting places are created especially where flexible spontaneous situations are fostered. Ms. Moeller reflected on the way that her and her Cathedral City colleagues learned that nice places need restrooms. Cathedral City’s fountain had just opened and so many families were using it as a water play feature that kids would literally be knocking on City Hall’s doors in bathing suits and towels—dripping wet—asking to use their restroom.

A key project that helped jumpstart the revitalization of Redwood City was the Fox-Montalvo partnership that revived the historic Fox Theater and Little Fox Theater. In the first year of operation, there were more than 150 shows at the Little Fox Theater and more than 250 shows in 2004. Ms. Moeller stressed the importance of having entertainment be a part of downtown vitality. In Cathedral City, an IMAX theater was brought in as an anchor entertainment draw. Getting commitments from IMAX Theaters and the Fox Montalvo partnership were examples of where “thinking big” was successful - the *Grand Vision Law* in action!

Commitment Law

Cathedral City Council members were so committed to their vision of the “Fountain of Life” that despite misinformed media criticism, they continued with the installation process that was later hailed by a local paper as “idiosyncratic in a world of franchises.” Ms. Moeller also maintained a determined commitment to the vision when an entire mobile home park full of senior citizens was condemned to make room for the revitalization process. Her resolution

to transform Cathedral City, as well as good luck and good timing, allowed for full compensation for every mobile home (some residents even made a profit from the relocation).

The law of attraction is a major component of *The Commitment Law* - both Cathedral and Redwood Cities were able to get big commitments from those who were inspired by the good things that were happening. Actor Tom Selleck and his brother Bob appeared on the cover of *Palm Springs Life* after helping bring private investors to Cathedral City. Enthusiasm for civic improvements can spread like wild fire. "It can't just be one person. Share your passion so that everyone is an opportunity broker," says Moeller.

Managing From the Middle

Ms. Moeller relayed some of the most important lessons learned from her experiences at Cathedral and Redwood City. "Always", she says, "keep Council informed regularly of acquisitions, ensure objectivity of appraisals, and have realistic time projections."

*"I encourage the City Council to dream audaciously."
- Susan Moeller*

It is also important to keep the vision fresh and have many "keepers" of the vision. For example, there are currently two part-time maintenance staff working on the City Hall grounds in Cathedral City. Each experienced the transformation first hand and now takes extreme pride in their job; because of that sense of ownership, the Civic Center site is kept pristine and beautiful.

Other keys, to success, according to Ms. Moeller: Surround yourself with good people, and get the best possible consultants, as they can help perpetuate the vision.

Celebration Law

Once the groundwork of transformation has been laid, it's important to celebrate with the community. *The Celebration Law* is the final law of Susan Moeller's four important secrets to success. Programmed events like outdoor concerts, fiestas, and opening ceremonies celebrate progress and keep the spirit alive. After all, Ms. Moeller asserts, "Cities are never done. They're like people, they always evolve... [and] affirmation reinforces the vision and honors the process and the end result."