

A Charrette Participant's Perspective

by Kerry Roscoe

Summary

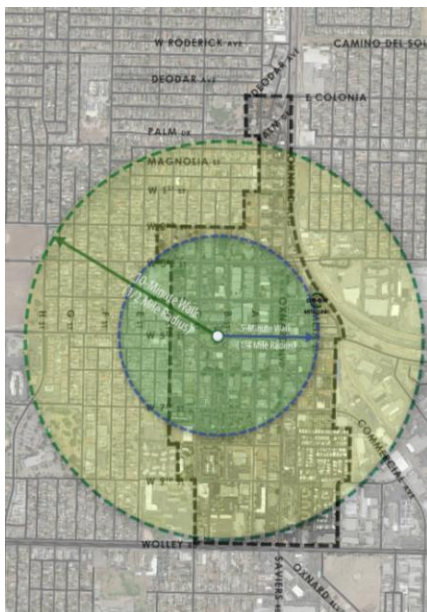


The tenets of livable communities are being embraced in Ventura County. The California chapter of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) California Chapter conducted a 5 day charrette on Downtown Oxnard that culminated in a well received presentation to the City Council on Tuesday, February 2. Mayor Tim Flynn said he was “electrified” by the proposals.

Prompted by the forced sale of properties that were part of the former Redevelopment Agency, the City of Oxnard, at the urging of Dao Doan, applied and was selected for the *one* pro-bono charrette the CNU does each year. CNU brought a team of architects, urban planners, economists, utility and infrastructure specialists, landscape architects, and several local professionals whose focus was:

- Listening to public input
- Assessing the assets and deficits in the current cityscape
- Creating a vision of what Downtown Oxnard could become consistent with economy, environment and the need for social equity.

CNU presented an introduction and overview; conducted interviews with dozens of downtown stakeholders; interfaced with city management; led a walking tour of the area; showed films that illustrated successful implementation of similar plans; and integrated community input from several sessions into their concluding presentation. On a daily basis they were adjusting drawings as input and ideas percolated, and displayed the concepts in a Monday evening “pin-up.”

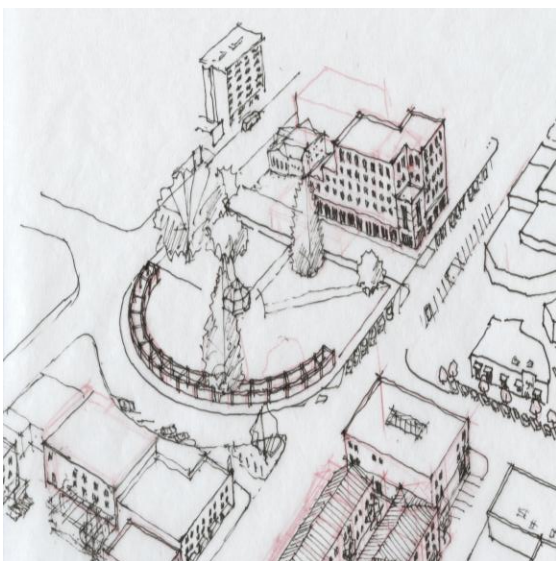
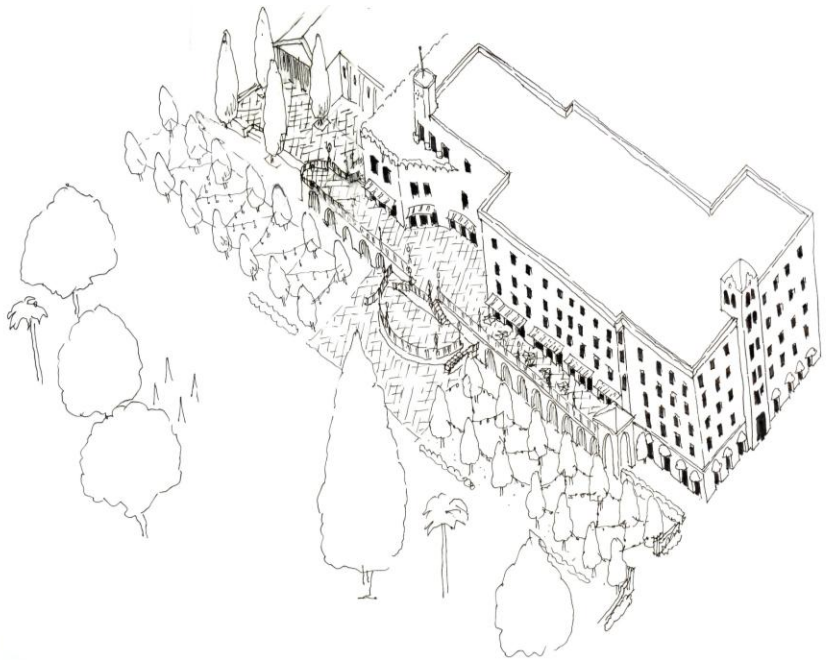




“Announcing” Downtown visually with signage, lighting and landscaping at entry points would let visitors know they had arrived, and “showing” them Downtown with significant buildings at main intersections would draw them in.

Once downtown, Plaza Park should be the focus. The plan envisions an “art hub.” To reinforce connection to the park, north side street parking would be eliminated and the space currently occupied by the Social Security building would be filled with a multi-story mixed use structure, enhanced by a possible restaurant and a set-back 2nd level terrace overlooking the plaza that could be used as a “community stage” for public events. The street level would offer retail shops on the east end, and the west end would accommodate exhibit space for the city-owned permanent art collection. This space would connect to the Carnegie Art Museum via a sculpture garden and a terrace extending south from the museum. A community room would be included in the building and residential units would fill the upper floors.

A series of buildings ringing the park would include a boutique hotel and restaurant to the south and residential units to the west. Much needed mixed use and small housing units would be built south and east of the park at the corner of 5th & B streets (that could include live/work spaces for artists to further support the art hub).



The City was urged to clarify development standards for a predictable permit process: scale the process proportionate to the size of the project, make permitting easy for projects that conform with the adopted ideas and difficult if those that don't, simplify entitlement requirements, and coordinate every increment of private and public investment. They also suggested integrating the Property Based Improvement District (PBID) and the Oxnard Downtown Management District (ODMD) with design review departments.

CNU recommended leveraging the \$6 million plus in redevelopment funds, using it as “seed money” for matching grants on projects that would encourage further development.

There are numerous things besides completing the in-fill that the City and businesses could do, even before the “big” projects happen:



- Remove paint from storefronts to reveal original, unique brick.
- Change mirrored storefront windows to clear glass to attract passers-by, adding awnings for sun control and atmosphere.
- Highlight intersections with community art projects reflecting the diverse cultures of the community.
- Upgrade street lighting and signage to improve safety and help drivers find parking.



As an additional benefit, the suggestions proffered in the plan were supported by economic data and successful trials of similar concepts in other cities. Many could be implemented on a low-cost, reversible test basis.

The CNU team members received praise from the public on their receptivity to ideas and feedback, and in turn they lauded city staff for their openness and positive involvement in the process. Much credit was given to Kymberly Horner, Oxnard’s new Economic Development Director, for her support and enthusiasm.



CNU’s final recommendations will be sent to the city shortly. The team reiterated that these should not be “set in stone,” but be a standard which serves as a guide that can be adapted as factors change over time.



On a Personal Note



Downtown *must* offer something that The Collection does not. I applaud CNU implementing the concept of an “art hub” downtown. It attracts young and diverse people, creating a vibrancy the downtown needs to draw more residents and investment. While the city has little control of the sale of the redevelopment properties, it can, through the permit & approval process, influence what is built there. Ensuring that the development of the Social Security lot includes

space supporting this “art hub” and community activity is essential.

Many cities require developers to contribute funds or set aside space in support of the community. The City of Oxnard should do so with the Social Security lot plans, making donated space for a community room and permanent art collection exhibit space a requirement of development. It would be a major step toward the “art hub” and the City would be leveraging an asset it already has, the Carnegie Art Museum and its art collection, in support of the overall plan.

Finally, I want to share something recent that demonstrates how effective the arts can be in revitalization. The Carnegie opened the CAM Studio Gallery in the Stoll Building next door as an interactive art space with a series of artists there creating art in the public eye and displaying their works. People come in to watch and talk with the artist. Our first artists, Huicho (Luis Peña) and Brittany McGinley, have become so involved with downtown that they have leased a space for a studio & gallery just across from the Carnegie and are “rehab-ing” it for a spring opening. They are the young generation investing in Downtown Oxnard. Others will, too.



Photo by KPR



Kerry Roscoe is a Carnegie Art Museum Cornerstones board member

***Special note: Our thanks to the CNU-CA charrette team for providing the pictures and illustration for this article.**