

But This is Chico: Chico's future looking better all the time

By STEVE BROWN

Article Launched: 09/01/2008 12:00:00 AM PDT

I wish I'd been in Chico 15 years ago, the last time its General Plan was being updated.

It would have been my first encounter with ideas — higher densities, mixed uses, pedestrian scale — that were beginning to challenge the prevailing suburban model. I hadn't yet heard about the new urbanism movement.

Back then, you might have called these ideas visionary. To make a case for a return to traditional townscapes took a leap of the imagination.

Nowadays, I'm making a point of dropping the words "visionary" and "vision" from my discussions about city planning. As it looks toward the future, Chico has essentially two choices: suburban business as usual, or new urbanism business as usual — or, more likely, a little of both.

In its early years, new urbanism was an example of thinking outside the box. But at this point, it has become its own box. I'm not disparaging the movement, just noting that its principles and practices have been clearly enunciated and Chicanos have had many opportunities to become familiar with them.

If you want visionary thinking, here are three examples from almost a century ago:

The French architect Le Corbusier, formerly known as Charles Eduoard Jenneret-Gris, proposed a city with 60 skyscrapers rising out of parkland. Versions of his schemes were carried out on a small scale,

most notably in high-rise housing projects that were supposed to replace slums.

Chicago architect Daniel Burnham came up with a plan to remake San Francisco. He devised a system of boulevards slashing through the city's existing grid. The avenues would converge on plazas adorned with monumental buildings. The most notable of these would be a civic center that would be built at the intersection of Market Street and an extension of the Golden Gate Park panhandle. "Make no little plans" was one of his favorite sayings

The only project inspired by Burnham the city carried out was the Beaux Arts-style city hall that still stands.

Frank Lloyd Wright, another Chicago architect, proposed cities with no centers. He even wrote a book called "The Disappearing City." He said everyone should live on an acre of land. The houses he built, with their simple horizontal lines, were designed to blend in with the surrounding countryside.

His vision came the closest to coming true. We call it suburbia.

By contrast, Chico's plans for the future seem rather prosaic. There's nothing wrong with that, but it would be an exaggeration to call them visionary.

Unless you are a no-growth advocate, Chico's future is looking better all the time. We are becoming more sensitive to how the city looks and are more likely to be outspoken about how it ought to look. In response, developers are proposing the kinds of projects that are worthy of this special place. Plans unveiled within the last two weeks for two projects — one across the street from DeGarmo Park the other east of the Doe Mill Neighborhood — may not entirely reflect the new urbanism sensibility,

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics®

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

but they will enhance the city's reputation for beauty, charm and gracious living, just as Meriam Park and a few other already-approved projects are bound to do.

Visionary or not, it's great to know that developers are getting the message that this is not some podunk town or dreary suburb. This is Chico.

Steve Brown is a copy editor at the Enterprise-Record. He can be reached at sbrown@chicoer.com. or 896-7773.

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

PrinterStitial[®] ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics[®]

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics[™]