

Plan Migration



The Ducks are down. The Ducks are up – way up sometimes, and those other ducks are heading south for their winter rest. In the meantime, the W. Broadway Downtown Plan has joined the fall migration.

“Housing, housing, housing,” said the mayor in a recent KOPT debate, “and a park, but the park needs the housing around it to...” and I forget her exact quote, but it had to do with keeping 24-hour eyes on the new public space across from the library to possess it and keep it safe.

Those of us following the unfolding of the W. Broadway discussion were surprised to hear her quoting Councilor Bettman, who has been criticizing the downtown strategy because it didn’t have enough “housing, housing, housing.” But it just shows how good things evolve, how understanding can unfold and how difficult it is to keep sensible development from becoming embodied in the body politic. Thankfully we are finally moving away from a false contest between the Queen of Ice Cream and the Queen of the Night.

Look, there is movement in the skies. “Nature is porous. Mind is fluid,” said the poet, even if the wings of change do beat slowly. Everyone is now talking about a park or open space of some kind across from the Eugene Public Library. I first wrote about this last March (EW 3/29) in an article about “Library Square.” But I was thinking about two proposals for this area from my fall 1999 graduate design studio, one by Ryan Carlson and the other by Lisa Mitcheltree.

“Tree’s” scheme put a new Willamette Repertory Theater on the Sear’s Lake site. The new 350-seat theater then combined with the library and Atrium buildings (and new construction north of the alley where the Music Gormet is now dining on the Internet) to transform the Diamond parking lot into a sparkling new urban public square.

Ryan’s scheme was all housing, housing, housing, wrapped around the parking lot that lost its “ing” on the way to becoming a befountained green. And around the built edges of his park he put an arcade – because it does rain in Eugene - full of all those good services that bring a public space to life. Looking down from above were the scores of roof gardens and balconies that put eyes down on the park and on to South Hills.

I made these students do more than just pretend to study parking on this block, which is why I actually know something about the situation here and react negatively when I hear someone say they’ll just pay the price and put a couple of levels underground. Remember when the New York architects came to town to design the Hult and made the same claims.

“Trust us,” they said. “We know what we’re doing. We put tunnels under rivers where we come from.” They’d put all the parking underground. That’s not how things turned out, of course, because the designers discovered, as it seems we must constantly rediscover, that Eugene sits on a river terrace with groundwater about 13’ down. Nature is porous and so are some uncluttered minds when it comes to underground parking.

If we can get to it, we should be reaching toward some level of sustainability with regard to parking and other forms of transportation in our W. Broadway planning.

Did you know: It takes four times as much parking for retail and commercial uses as it does for housing. As a practical matter, it will take 50,000 sq. ft. of parking for a 50,000 sq. ft. grocery store or cinema, which is why they are usually located where this much space is available and can be provided free.

A “Half Foods” store of 25,000 sq. ft. as proposed by the WBAC, would still require 25,000 sq. ft. of parking – about 65 cars – for just this one use. We have around 80 under the library.

Now, I know this will sound harsh and right out of the “reality based community,” but I think that one reason – not the only reason - you’re not seeing a tangible, physical design to vote on this time is that a retail, retail, retail, parking, parking, parking, scheme here is physically hard to shoe-horn in the available space and that you might not like what you see, especially if you are hoping to have anything remotely resembling public space left over.

Not true, you say? Prove it, I say, and as a patriotic Eugenean, even though I think that a retail surge here is at least moderately delusional, I’ll write you a check for my share.



And did you know that when Betty Taylor first proposed using urban renewal funds for the library she was told that’s not what they were for. We have Betty to thank for her imagination, persistence and precedent. What better community investment than this kind of cultural asset? What better form of magnet for our downtown? I can’t personally get very excited about the possibility of owning another parking garage.

Hark and you will hear the increased quacking of plan migration. Here come those ducks again for one or two more rounds. Here come those minds still turning, turning, turning, their work not quite yet done. Alas, here comes a flying “V” for vote before its time.



We’re getting there, flap, flap, flap, but our community and council ducks are not yet in a row.