

Seeing as...

Seeing as... is what designers do to imagine possibilities and to sort out priorities. Some for example saw the new I-5 Bridge as an opportunity to create a magnificent "Gateway to the Willamette Valley" and as an "Entrance to Eugene" on the south side of the river. Others saw it primarily as a highway overpass and as an important I-5 transportation link - and not as their business to create an eastern entrance to our university, the new arena or Eugene downtown.

Starting out with a wealth of potential "aboutness" (what something can and could and should be about) won't guarantee against stunted, shortsighted misdirected thinking. It won't mean everyone will agree on what should be done. But a poverty of imagination in the beginning will always guarantee a watered down result. Not stretching at the outset always leads to having to make do with much less at the end after all the inevitable cutbacks.

Take LCC over the Sear's hole downtown. (Please!) The project has solid community backing as it should. I predict the community will prove willing this time to swallow some of the imperfections of urban renewal financing (which we could try harder to mitigate and fix) and support this project. And so here we are again, directly back into a conversation about how we see downtown.

I didn't see downtown as returning as the new Walmart on Willamette or some new Oakway on Oak the last time we voted and some 70% agreed. Downtown returning as a primary retail center is a vision that has finally faded and is now decisively? dead. Quick, the wooden stake.

So how might we, could we, should we **see it as...**

I see downtown as an overlapping set of centers, financial, cultural, governmental, professional, urban living, food and entertainment... an important one of which is as an educational center with a new energy-expressive LCC building or complex across from the library at its heart. But, and here's where the "fallacy of too concrete an aboutness" comes in. Here, in two important ways.

One is seeing the LCC project as just itself instead of as a part of an education system downtown. For me that includes seeing the Network Charter School, a high school that wants to be and takes advantage of being downtown, as a necessary partner and an important player in a wider, richer downtown educational conception.

It includes expanding the U of O's educational programs in the Baker Center and a big need to bring Lariviere (the River) to the city in a much bigger way. It means having more young people playing a positive role downtown across from the library and on the park blocks behind 858 Pearl. It means bringing more of the 21,000 and growing student population in Eugene downtown to live in a young person's stimulating urban environment while they're with us.

The other is avoiding what I call “the lamb chop syndrome.” It comes from years of staring at student’s isolated site plans – isolated, irregular bordered plans with blank space (no context) all around them, leading to an excess of thinking only within a site and not connecting across boundaries.

This self-referentiality, this turning only inward, is natural to every complex project, and projects like LCC are hard enough to plan and finance all by themselves without being asked to solve – in this case – other surrounding city-building needs as well. (Cf. our disconnected Federal Courthouse)

The old Sears-Diamond Parking Lot site, however, has a “seeing as...” community history. Many have seen this site as including an important community space, a public open space or gathering space – a Library Square?– A Solar Square? – A Biodynamic Fountain Plaza? - across from the library. This would seem like a natural community college and public fit and a fitting return in exchange for the public investment involved.

I’m concerned that not including a significant public gathering space in the project will be one of those missed opportunities that we’ll regret and that it may turn off many of the people who might otherwise have held their noses about urban renewal.

If seeing as... has a natural partner in design, it’s AND. It makes designing much more difficult of course to see a bridge as a highway connector AND a gateway AND an entrance AND... But it’s the AND that brings about the richness in design. AND it’s the same with LCC AND educationß AND a public Library/College Square downtown.

As a former downtown businessman pointed out to me – quite politely some years ago in the era before Great Streets – when I tried to suggest that the redesign of 6th and 7th needed to be more than just a way to move the most cars through the city, he said, “Some of us just don’t see it that way, Jerry.”

And as I replied, equally politely I hope, “Some of us just can’t help it.”