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## Has the City Hit the Ball Out of the Park at Petco?

By LAWRENCE A. HERZOG

Monday, June 27, 2005 | An air of optimism floats over the ballpark/East Village in downtown San Diego these days. The Padres are in first place. The buzz among realtors, investors and politicians is that the baseball park has delivered a renaissance to the neighborhood north of J Street, just beyond reach of the Padres power hitters.

"We hoped to hit a home run, and we hit a grand slam," Peter Hall, President of the Center City Development Corporation told the local media recently. JMI Realty, the Padres development company, brags that it has brought \$593 million in development to the East Village, and, in the process, reinvented what was once "a blighted warehouse district."

JMI might like to label the former East Village as "blighted," but there are those who would point out that former warehouse districts all over the country have been revitalized successfully without sports stadiums. Soho and Tri-beca in New York City are the shining examples, and dozens of cities have followed suit -- from Minneapolis and Milwaukee to Portland and Seattle.

Still, San Diego (and the Padres) should be proud of having a downtown ballpark that encourages people to walk or to use mass transit.

But, let's not get too carried away with "grand slam" metaphors. If this is a baseball game, we are still in the early innings. There is much work to be done.

The ballpark has altered the destiny of East Village, no doubt about it. The district is teeming with new development. But before all the concrete dries on luxury towers and parking garages, before we build one more sports bar here, we need a reality check.

What will it take to create a lively street life just beyond the house that Petco built? Will cafes, pedestrians and a feeling of safety dominate on the streets, even when there is no ballgame? Will all of this new construction, when completed, cohere into a real neighborhood?

But getting investors into the East Village, however, is only the first step. This neighborhood needs an identity, one that goes beyond baseball games. And its future must be driven by a simple urban design principle -- make the public domain as exciting and alive as the private one.

This is a work in progress, so it's fair to withhold a final judgment for now. But there are a few urban design red flags lurking out here, just beyond the outfield.

First up: For Petco to be a "grand slam," one would think the immediate spaces around it should be pedestrian-friendly. That would start on J Street and loop around to

More troubling still: There is a noticeable absence of street-oriented land uses (open cafes, restaurants, markets, etc.) around here. On the three blocks of Seventh Avenue to the south of J Street, pedestrian-friendly designs are nowhere to be seen. The giant parking structure adjacent to

the Omni Hotel is not a welcoming streetscape element, nor is the façade of the Western Metals Building across the street.

To its credit, CCDC, the main planning agency in downtown, has begun to address "streetscape design" in its Community Plan Update. It calls for recognition of different kinds of pedestrian-oriented streets, such as Boulevards and Green Streets, and proposes to address the relationship between streetscapes and "building interface" in Neighborhood Design Guidelines and a Downtown Streetscape Design Manual. However, these are advisory features, and not legally enforceable at the moment.

So far, the emerging streetscape disappoints. Along J Street, we come upon "Park in the Park," the neighborhood green space that looks out over the ballpark. It is an admirable gesture, but it could do better. The entrance to the space is underwhelming, to say the least. You could easily pass right by without being drawn in.

Once inside, on non-game days, there are few activities to enliven the park. In design terms, this is a glaring omission. The most important catalysts for urban public places in cities are the activities that attract users to them: food kiosks, cafes, restaurants, musicians or other performers. Park in the Park needs to connect to the city. It needs more animation. Not everyone wants to come and simply stare down at an empty baseball park. One prominent architect working nearby confessed to me "I have to admit, I have not even visited Park in the Park. I am not a baseball fan."

Fences and walls leave a distinct imprint on pedestrians in the ballpark district. The neighborhood is becoming a place defined by hard edges, as if the main purpose of design is to frame that which is private -- the ballpark, the gated high rise residence, the parking garages -- from that which is public -- the street.

Just down J Street, at the corner of Sixth Avenue, is the much anticipated, new \$42 million dollar Solamar Hotel, a 235-room luxury inn. Thus far, there is virtually no connection between the inside of the hotel and the street, no sidewalk cafe, no open bar nor break in the building's edge that connects passersby with the interior.

Indeed, the hotel's gesture toward the outdoors occurs high above the street on the fourth floor "JBar," which is a lovely rooftop deck, and has a striking view of the ballpark. But, it also sends an unfortunate message: that the public space of the street is not so hip. Rather, what is hip is the privatized balcony.

As Mike Stepner, a professor at the New School of Architecture nearby says, "I don't have a problem with the fourth floor patio, as long as they embrace the street as well ... but they're not doing that."

If the Solamar Hotel were an isolated case, that would be one thing. But, in fact, this building appears to represent a pattern that is recreated as one moves across the landscape of the East Village near Petco. Many of the new towers rise abruptly from ground level. There are few transitional physical features that allow for a more gradual shift from the public space of the street to the private space of the luxury condo.

An example of a city where high-density, high-rise development is successfully combined with legally enforced streetscape design is Vancouver, Canada. Like San Diego, Vancouver's downtown sits in a spectacularly beautiful physical setting -- surrounded by water, with view corridors toward the mountains. Like San Diego, Vancouver's downtown population is booming -- from about 40,000 in 1986, to a projected 110,000 in the next few years.

Vancouver's downtown is dense with high-rise towers, but they cascade down gently toward a network of engaging streets that are packed with cafes, restaurants, stores and pedestrians.

Vancouver is proof that you can build up, but also generate exciting pedestrian scale neighborhoods. To do this, attention has to be paid to the design of the building as it touches the street (the "building interface") and also, to how it plays out in the space around it, the choreography of the land between the buildings -- parks, walkways, bridges, promenades, bodies of

water, trees and landscaping.

These cannot be mere afterthoughts that are cantilevered into the neighborhood once buildings are set in. The design of the buildings themselves must be made to enhance the public realm. As one Vancouver planning publication states, "the sidewalks must function as the effective living rooms of the neighborhoods."

If Seventh Avenue near Petco and J Street to the north are examples, the living room of East Village may be in trouble. Yes, it is still early, but there are just not enough indicators that people will feel welcome on these streets.

When Larry Beasley, the Director of the Vancouver Planning Department, came to San Diego last fall to speak, he told an audience that in Vancouver, the city defined a set of criteria they expected developers to follow -- which included designs that enhanced the public spaces around their buildings. "We told them do it this way or don't bother to talk with us," said Beasley.

The reaction of one San Diego developer in the audience might offer an indication of the culture of urban design here. "Isn't that socialism?" asked the developer, half joking, but half serious, too. "No, that's good urban planning," was Beasley's reply. "And," he added, "all of the developers are making a good profit in downtown Vancouver."

Here in San Diego, before the recent inner city boom, developers tended to expect the city to be grateful that they even want to invest in downtown.

But, now it may be time for a change.

"We need to study Vancouver, pick up that stuff whole cloth and bring it down here," says Stepler. "We can't operate under a system where we settle for a developer coming in and designing something, and we just say ok. We need to take the extra step that creates a better urban environment."

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