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June 2005 — COMMUNITY PLANNING | The New Urbanist Approach

Rio Nuevo: Reinventing Tucson

A major urban and cultural renewal project aims to restore the heart of this complex, multicultural city.

By Thomas Whittingslow



Cutting-edge infill projects like Barrio Metallico, by architect Rob Paulus, has pioneered a new market for urban housing in Tucson. The architect/developer is not trying to create a nuevo suburbia, but instead blend with houses in the existing industrial neighborhood. Photograph by Bradley Wheeler.

One-hundred years before the Mayflower landed on Plymouth Rock, Spanish explorers had staked their claim on Tucson — and these European pioneers are considered relative newcomers. By 1699, the mission San Xavier del Bac was near completion. In 2001, its baroque polychrome interior was painstakingly restored. The mission still stands, not as a relic but as a center of worship by the surrounding Tohono O'odham Nation.

People have been living in Tucson for more than 4,000 years, but at first

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glance one might think Tucson's urban plan was inspired by the 1950s suburbs of Los Angeles: Low-density urban sprawl, punctuated by strip malls, mobile home parks and prairie-style bungalows. Today there's a hint of a vertical skyline, and the backdrop of the Santa Catalina Mountains is spectacular.

Legislation leads to revitalization

In 1999, voters approved Proposition 400, which created a comprehensive revitalization and land use program called the Rio Nuevo Redevelopment District. An incremental tax program to leverage Federal and State grants was used to kick start the program. According to Project Director Gregory Sheklo, the vision is to create a vital city heart which will project and nurture Tucson's desert landscape and multicultural heritage, and fulfill a pent-up need for sophisticated urban housing. To encourage private participation, the city has employed a variety of incentives, refunding infrastructure costs, waiving building permit fees, and creating an Empowerment Zone. Ultimately, the redevelopment plan will cover more than five square miles of downtown and will produce 1,000 new housing units. The \$1 billion-plus plan calls for 47 different projects and attractions to be constructed over the next 10 to 15 years.

Methods and practices

What is radical about Rio Nuevo is that the plan superimposes and/or integrates New Urbanist principles with existing barrios or neighborhoods in a near-seamless fashion. It is like walking through a trompe l'oeil, where the eye is fooled by meticulously articulated Sonoran row houses blended with modest courtyard bungalows, occupied by original Hispanic owners. It is on one of these alleys, secluded behind a slab of rusted iron, that renowned architect Rick Joy has his minimalist studio-residence. The fascia is the same color and texture as the corrugated fencing used on the affordable housing down the street.



The proposed University of Arizona Science and Entertainment Center, spanning the I-10 Freeway in downtown Tucson, will become one of the most visible icons of the massive downtown redevelopment program.

The centerpiece, and most visible icon of the Rio Nuevo Project, will be the University of Arizona Science Center — a world-class education and entertainment complex expected to attract more than 400,000 visitors a year. The city has committed \$20 million to assist in the center's design and construction. This dazzling theme structure will literally bridge Interstate 10 and the Santa Cruz River.

Blending residential

Rio Development designed a high-density residential Barrio in the middle of a working-class neighborhood.

The first residential site offered for bid was a 14-acre parcel at the southern end of the planned Science Center, just south of downtown. The surrounding working-class neighborhood, known as Menlo Park, sprang up after Tucson's

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World War II building boom. A sprinkling of adobe structures from the late 1800s still stand among the neatly kept smaller homes. Even more astonishing, archeologists have unearthed a migratory pit house settlement dating back to 4,000 B.C. The recent uncovering of archaic period pottery fragments and identification of irrigation canals for growing corn indicate that this site may be the oldest continuously inhabited place in the United States.

The visionaries

The father-and-son team of Gerald and Justin Dixon are sophisticated world travelers, architectural fanatics and art buffs. As developers, the Dixons have headed up residential projects in both Southern Arizona and Mexico. When Justin heard that the first 14 acres for the residential component was up for bid, he developed a radical plan based on the principles he had learned from working with New Urbanist Andres Duany, famous for such projects as Winsor and Seaside, Fla., from the movie "The Truman Show." "Earlier urban renewal projects were about reinventing Tucson. Our project is about re-establishing what we lost in earlier attempts," Dixon says.

The team members were brought together by mutual attraction and passion for the project. Tom Wuelpern, James Gray, and Dante Archangeli were experienced in building sophisticated infill projects and small enclaves of rammed-earth houses with a distinctive Tucson flair.

Other major players, such as Pasadena land planner Stefanos Polyzoides and Oscar Machado of the University of Miami, are well-known New Urbanists with international reputations. Following a meticulous review by the city of Tucson, the Sonoran Institute and representatives of the Menlo Park neighborhood unanimously approved Dixon's newly-formed team, Rio Development, LLC, to design and build the project.

Like a master weaver, young Dixon drew threads from existing neighborhoods, Tucson's past, and the desert itself. A portion of the budget has been set aside for commissioning public art, native seed collection and further archeological studies. Once Dixon had completed his rough conceptual design, the father-and-son team chose Stefanos Polyzoides of Moule & Polyzoides in Pasadena, to complete the final plan.

The new neighborhood is on an irregular grid. Project architect Paul Weiner, of Design Build Collaborative, wrote the architectural code for the master plan. One unique feature stands out: The central roadway, a angles to the southeast through the project, will follow 2,500-year-old irrigation canals — the oldest known in North America. "We determined that we should go back in time — prehistoric, pre-railroad, post-World War II — and look at the development patterns in Tucson," Weiner says.

The streetscape comes alive

The final plan is identifiably early Tucson and reflects diverse, mixed-use neighborhoods with small blocks, intricate streetscapes and tiny neighborhood plazas. Based upon traditional Mexican and European design elements, the project consists of 90 residential units built around three common plazas.

Typical of many New Urbanist communities, several of the structures will be designed to accommodate first-floor retail or office space. Pricing is expected to range from \$80,000 to \$300,000 for 14 bungalow units; \$150,000 to \$500,000 for 100 adobe, rammed-earth single-family homes, and \$150,000 to \$750,000 for condominiums and loft apartments: The median price for Tucson housing in 2004 was \$225,000. Dixon hopes that 10 percent of the

units will qualify as affordable housing, which in Tucson ranges between \$78,000 and \$110,000; however, he admits that this may require some creative subsidizing by both the developer and the city.

What is extraordinary about The Mercado at Menlo Park is that Rio Development has designed a high-density residential enclave in the middle of an existing working-class neighborhood without creating any visual distinctions — no berms, walls, or barriers. Despite significant differences in prospective homeowners' income, the new community shares the name "Menlo Park" and features a significant central feature — a traditional mercado — hence the name, "The Mercado District of Menlo Park."

According to Stefanos Polyzoides, best known in Tucson for his work on an award-winning project called Civano, "The Mercado District of Menlo Park will end up with national importance." When Justin Dixon was asked what he hoped posterity would say about the Mercado District, he replied, "I hope that they will just remember it as Tucson."

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