

Alison Novak - The Capital of Silicon Valley Catches Up with Technology

I propose to examine the potential of an American city, hugely transformed by the growth of the technology sector, to incorporate elements from the New Century Cities projects as a means to cementing its own identity, narrowing the digital divide, and producing face-to-face jobs.

The City of San Jose is aggressively pursuing a combination of strategies framed around the city as the creative cultural center of Silicon Valley. With over 100 start-up technology firms and several established companies, Downtown San Jose is an attractive locus for software companies that rely on creative destruction, venture capital, and high quality of life in attraction of employees. The soon-to-be tenth largest city in the nation, San Jose is one of few cities in which there is no racial or ethnic majority. Despite attracting a number of technology companies, and perhaps due in part to its high diversity, Downtown San Jose struggles to present a visible identity that marks it as a creative technology center. Even Adobe Systems, one of the only technology companies in the Bay Area to expand during the dot-com bust (broke ground and completed the third office tower for the 1 million square foot corporate headquarters) has been allowed minimal signage. Furthermore, as the City's Office of Economic Development pursues recruitment of technology companies, the City's Redevelopment Agency works to fill the city blocks left blank by 1970s urban renewal, primarily with retail and residential. The recruitment of retailers and retail developers, along with the severe housing shortage faced by the entire area, has erupted in a local battle for a living wage requirement to be imposed on future developers.

I would like to suggest that San Jose is positioned to incorporate elements of the New Century Cities projects as a means to answering some of the city's biggest questions: What is our identity? How can we continue to grow as a multicultural community and bridge the digital divide? What incentives can we offer to technology firms, educational institutions, and residential developers to assist us in fulfilling our goals of increasing population density, creating a more sustainable jobs-housing balance, enlivening the downtown, and creating more face-to-face jobs (i.e. high skill jobs that are more likely to pay well and not be easily replaced by off-shoring or computers)?

My inquiry into the New Century Cities will concern the following main points, all directed at answering "San Jose's questions" (note: I may need to focus on one or two of the below):

- Are there cultural differences in the presentation of technology between the New Century Cities? Is there a project that would be more culturally relevant for San Jose? To what extent should San Jose's cultural make-up be reflected in the implementation of certain design/technology elements?
- How is the private sector involved in projects that were initiated by the public sector? What incentives have been offered for development?
- What streetscape elements, particularly signage, façade and public spaces, would translate well to San Jose? (Keeping in mind that San Jose is contemplating a signage code change to allow companies a more pronounced branding opportunity on office

towers, the historic preservation community is aggressive and sensitive to new construction, and there has been a concerted effort to revive the public spaces over the last several years.

- Does the presentation of technology in the New Century Cities projects presuppose that workers and residents have a certain amount of technological capital? Could the environment provide a learning opportunity for a person without a personal computer or other such device? Do the New Century Cities projects increase or decrease the digital divide?

Finally, I would like to envision ways in which a New Century City San Jose might provide useful information for the original projects and other cities looking to implement a similar program of development. In particular, I would like to compare the “in-fill” approach that would be required in San Jose, to the massive mixed-use projects plunked down in former industrial areas (as are most of the original New Century City projects). I would also like to compare the “edges” of the projects and how they affect access for low income residents and visitors. My end goal is to imagine how San Jose might provide direction for a “model” New Century City.

[Note: I’m contemplating reducing and focusing my “New Century Cities” questions. Anyone who is pursuing a similar topic or question and would like to share resources please let me know.]