

Panel – The Suburban Downtown

Panelist:

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Good morning.

This morning, when I was listening to Robert Lang talk, there was a split second I thought he was going to take us through his entire book chapter by chapter. I hope we have time for questions and answers, because I am really looking forward to a discussion. All the presentation has been very interesting, and I hope we have lots of tough questions and pressing answers.

My name is Aseem Inam. And the title of my talk is "Suburban Core Revitalization." I am going to talk about a case study of a project that my firm, Moule & Polyzoides, is actually working on right now. And this will be an illustration of the kinds of issues that we deal with on the ground as planners who are hired by a suburban town to help revitalize their core.

Some issues that we face right away -- and these are -- this is just one example. And these issues come across in other projects as well. One issue is, I think, something that Robert referred to in his talk also where -- the city of Whittier is 12 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles. A lot of people who live there work in downtown Los Angeles, work for big high-tech firms. But they insist they are a small town. And so it's almost a choice that's made even though it's part of this really amazing global metropolitan region.

So one of the issues is of identity and what identity do people choose to pursue. The second identity is this notion of revitalizing the core and what do you pursue? Market demand or community consensus? Here's the problem. Both market demand and community consensus are mixed. They're sort of convenient simplistic devices people use. I will give you two quick examples and then maybe we can come back to this in the question-and-answer.

The notion of the market. The problem there

is how we perceive market demand, how market demand is measured, how it is judged. I will give you a very simple example of that. Less than 25 percent of the American population, less than 25 percent of American households, are what we call the traditional nuclear family: Mom, dad, three kids, dog, minivan, et cetera.

Yet most of the housing that is built in the U.S. is somehow, with that number in mind, not for the other 75 percent of single moms, single dads, bachelors, empty-nesters. I can go on and on. And so it's a very diverse housing market. Yet, a lot of people seem to perceive market demand as being traditional households.

Same thing with community consensus. There's no such thing as community. It's communities. It's much more messy and complicated. So trying to get, you know, like in retail, 90,000 people to agree on one thing is highly unrealistic. So I think one has to be much more sophisticated about dealing with these issues.

The third major issue is, why bother? Why even, when the edge is growing so fast -- and the previous speakers have given examples -- and, you know, whether it's strip malls, shopping centers, single-family housing on the edge, why even bother? What is the benefit of that? And that is a tough choice for me, especially in a city like Whittier with 90,000 people, not a lot of resources. Where do you invest those resources? So it's really a question of priorities.

And as consultant to the city, we realized that sometimes we had to help the city think that through. They have not necessarily thought it through, because, again, there are multiple state corridors with different points of view. And we had to help them do that.

So let me take you through this plan which is still in the last stage, and I will show you snippets of it. Our firm is very well known for -- and it's a very -- we try to bring these master plans and these specific plans that we do alive through vignettes of what this might look like, give people a flavor of the character of this place.

One of the first things we do is we spend a lot -- and I mean a lot -- of time understanding the area. An entire month. Our whole team spent an

entire month. And just very quick examples of analysis of the built fabric, sort of the built space, open space, civic uses, land uses, topography. But another part of this sort of understanding is a lot of public outreach. We met literally hundreds of people. And that's another thing I want to be very honest about. Is it difficult? Yes. Is it sometimes boring? Yes. Is it sometimes tedious? Yes. But it's necessary and it's worth it. There were days we were exhausted because we were meeting hundreds of people. But it was very valuable. It was necessary. It was very beneficial.

The other thing that we do is something called a sharette, which is about a week-long public design process which is completely open in a room like this, us and all of the sub consultants, transportation planners, economic development specialists, retail specialists, landscape architects. Everyone is working together. And it's open to the public. The public can come through, ask questions, argue. But decisions are made day by day about what to do, where.

So it's a very public planning process. It's open. And it's condensed. So what might take months and months takes really a few weeks to decide. So some decisions are made very quickly.

Our starting point for Whittier was to not just obsess about what's wrong, not just to obsess on fixing things, but to look at assets, what's right, what works, what can be built off of. And one of the things we found is that Whittier has really quite a wonderful historic fabric. This area is called uptown, but it's really the downtown, for those of you that know Whittier. It's a historic retail core. It's about 100 years or more old. And it has some wonderful buildings, some wonderful patterns.

And so on the right-hand side you see some historic images. On the left-hand side, two computer models of before on top and after on the bottom. The point being is we sort of stitched things around this historic fabric, which is really to do with identity and assets.

Here's the plan. It's what we call an illustrative plan, which is, again, about what is a possible build-out of this area, which is about 200 acres, 35 city blocks, what this might look like in 20 years. And why do we do this kind of possible build-out is to judge the capacity of this area to absorb this kind of development, to judge what impact

might have on traffic and environmental for the EIR, the Environmental Impact Report, as well.

Now, this plan is based on what I call six catalytic strategies. The first is retail. And the retail, we are pursuing two things. One is the expanded general local retail. There's some very strong local retail which is performing below capacity. But second also we need more capacity by attracting more national brands.

The second thing is parking. And we find many places, many cities named that as one of those problems, not enough parking. It's interesting we found it true in Whittier. I found this true in other places I've worked. The problem is exactly the opposite. There's too much parking. People want parking at their doorstep. They aren't even willing to walk a few blocks. Again, it's about perception.

Now, the problem in Whittier very concretely is there's too much free parking. So land in the downtown which can be doubled up and would have a higher rate of return as retail or commercial, even residential, is just used as free parking. And the revenue potential is tremendous here. And as the retail picks up, as mixed use picks up, the parking revenue will pick up, which will help clean and maintain and secure this area.

So what we proposed was a series of parking garages lined with retail and residential uses so that people can park and then walk within sort of a two to three hundred feet radius.

The third catalytic strategy was to give greater housing choice. There's a lot of rental housing in this area, and we think proposing home ownership at different income levels would be very beneficial, including condominiums.

The fourth catalytic strategy that we are proposing is to bring in the churches as catalysts. And that's very sort of unique to Whittier. Whittier has a wonderful Quaker tradition of faith-based social services. And they own a lot of property. And we feel that a lot of that property can be developed into affordable housing and mixed use, et cetera. So really using those church properties, leveraging them into something more.

And the fifth strategy was Whittier College, which is where President Richard Nixon studied many

years ago. It is right next to this downtown. And we feel that they could be a much more active partner in investing in this area.

And the sixth and final strategy was this sense of identity, which is a big issue, that everybody is struggling and nobody has an answer. And we feel obviously the sense of identity comes from its history, the history of this place, which is really quite a wonderful history.

I am going to take you through very quickly some of the other aspects of this plan, starting with the landscaping. We do an entire landscape plan in a sort of uptown. Two things: One is small pocket parks. Like if you are going to introduce residential, as we are suggesting, it's very important to have not large parks where you have to drive to, but small pocket parks within walking distance for the residential. It will also help with the property values.

Another thing is the street trees. Street trees are very important. You can use landscaping to really give character to a place.

We did look at parking much more carefully. We studied it very carefully. We came up with a parking strategy of how the city and the local business improvement district can generate revenue through parking and to have parking rates which sort of rise as the density of the area rises. So start with modest parking rates -- right now, like I said, it's mostly all free -- and then ramp them up. There's some excellent work, as many of you know, done by Don Shoup out of UCLA on how you set parking rates and how you can leverage parking as a positive source of revenue and fulfill parking demand.

We look at streets, street sections. We get down not quite into the engineering, but really the details of how wide. And one of the reasons we pay so much attention to streets, we firmly believe that streets are the public route. That's where a lot of people spend their time just walking back and forth on the sidewalks, meeting people, sitting outside, et cetera. So streets are an important part of the public route.

Now we get into sort of the nitty-gritty of the plan, which is what sort of the city really wants to know, which is the code. What is going to make this a legal and enforceable document? And this is

something of a form-based code that is very well known in urbanism. Moule & Polyzoides is, in fact, one of the pioneers of form-based codes. We have been doing this for many, many years. And I can tell you from inside the office, this is something that's constantly evolving. A lot of people hear "form-based codes," they hear "new urbanism," they think of it as a very rigid approach, and I can tell you we have constant debates and arguments within the office of how to make these things more effective, more flexible.

And just to tell you how the zones are established, in the form-based code, it's more character, which means building height, intensity of development based on what exists. So it's been a building up of these assets that I mentioned earlier.

Final form-based code is we investigate and identify certain building types, everything from single-family houses to commercial block and mixed-use office buildings. We classify the zones -- in this case, everything from uptown core to edge -- and what kind of building types will be allowed, what kinds of uses. We do get into land uses.

We specify setback, height limits, even parking, landscape. It's quite detailed. It's a long process, and there's a lot of discussion with city staff, with planning commissions, with city councils. So it really evolves. It's not just something that's imposed at one shot.

Here's an example of building types. Accessory dwellings, which are called granny flats in some areas. And the city asked us specifically to come up with architectural style guidelines. They were very unhappy with the kind of development, the kind of architecture that had been done in this historic area for the last 20 years, and they wanted to raise the standards. And that's always very tough when you set architectural style guidelines. The good news is we have architects in our office and we work for developers too, so we sort of know a little bit of both sides of the fence.

This was also a very long and tough process. How do you come up with style guidelines which are flexible, yet raise the quality of design overall for those developers who might just want to do bare minimum kind of work?

This is an example of one style we talked about, is Main Street commercial. We go into a fair

amount of detail, things like base, primary walls, kind of what are the major elements that make up each site? And we give examples. We give lots of examples. We do computer models, we give examples that people can go to and look at in terms of what we mean by architectural styles.

And finally this is another section that, you know, obviously, the city is very concerned about, and that's the implementation section. And we get into quite a bit of depth. We identify in this kind of diagram some of the key catalytic projects that will help kick-start this plan. In this case, it was building of new parking garages, it was landscaping, it was introducing more parks, et cetera, sort of the public investment that was needed to attract private sector investment.

And then the table which only identifies these projects, but phase by phase, and we get into cost estimates as well.

And we get into infrastructure, water supply, sewage, what kind of infrastructure investment will be needed to support this development over the next 20 years. So we tried to be very up front, you know, put these numbers out so we can discuss and debate them.

So some concluding thoughts on this process so far. There's sort of this notion of to know an area or city you have to be living there. I would like to argue there are some benefits of being, quote/unquote, an outsider. You have a fresh perspective on things. It was very fascinating when we do these projects how many things we bring to the table that our people didn't know about their own city, whether it's the history of the city, whether it's demographics, how diverse it really actually is. A lot of people don't know that. But also some very wonderful things, so it's what I call sort of introducing a community to itself through this planning process.

Second, it's obviously a very up-and-down process, the public planning process. The challenge for us, we realized, was we were the ones who were supposed to keep the momentum going even when things were not going so well, there were disagreements, and also maintain the focus on what we were trying to achieve. There were obviously a lot of issues involved in doing a plan like this, and so we had to really kind of take a lot of initiative and bring people back to sort of the initial questions.

And last, we did find -- it's a bit of a cliché about leadership, but -- somebody does have to take the lead, because these are tough decisions to be made, and very often what we find is what we can do as consultants is help shape this process through which leadership can emerge. And the most wonderful thing I can tell you about the leadership in this planning process is the leadership has literally emerged through the community. On our advice, they have created a coalition of all these different interest groups to really sort of shepherd this planning process through. And these community groups are taking a very active role, so we remain very optimistic about this.

Thank you.
(Applause.)