



Not All Neighborhood Development Projects Fuel Community Angst

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Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle

Not many huge construction projects go up quietly in dense commercial areas. But that's what happened with "You Got Mail," a mixed-use project in the heart of North Park.

There are big questions facing the future of urban planning in San Diego, and high-profile development battles going on throughout the city. And as always, there are countless projects of varying scope that'll have an effect on their neighborhoods and the city as a whole.

But not all projects generate community outrage, or get caught in a seemingly endless bureaucratic morasse. Here are three neighborhood projects that have flipped the normal development narrative. One moved forward without pissing off any neighbors. Another generated conflict, until those involved met and negotiated a mutually acceptable alternative. Another can be literally picked up and moved if the neighborhood changes or wants a change.

Here's a closer look at three such projects, selected without any scientific process. If there are other projects in your neighborhood you'd like to know a bit more about, contact me and we'll try to include it in a future post.

You Got Mail

It's not often a huge construction project goes up quietly in a densely populated commercial area.

But that's basically (<http://www.sdcitybeat.com/sandiego/article-11965-watch-this-space.html>) what happened with "You Got Mail," a mixed-use project in the heart of North Park incorporating and surrounding the abandoned Post Office at Grim Avenue and North Park Way.



(<http://voiceofsandiego.org/wp->

content/uploads/2013/08/PostOffice_172.jpg) Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle

It's being built by the architect-designers at Foundation for Form (<http://foundationforform.com/>), whose "You Are Here" project in Golden Hill was similarly built on top of the bones of an old, unkempt gas station on 25th Street, just before the Interstate-94 freeway.

"It's kind of our M.O.," said Craig Abenilla, one of the two principles in the company. "We think it's sustainable, because it's not using resources just to tear things down, but it's also commercial space that isn't mundane, which is hard to get."

The North Park project is still in construction, but it's already visibly arresting, with a large slanted design element springing from the Post Office to the top of the new structure's wood frame.

It'll include 33 market-rate rental apartment units, and the old Post Office will be converted into 5,000 square feet of commercial restaurant/retail space. The developers are still talking with tenants, but it could end up as a sort-of cooperative retail spot where multiple smaller tenants go in together.

The developers were able to get approval for their project relatively easy, because they took all existing land use regulations into account and aren't asking for any exceptions. They didn't need to appear before the North Park Planning Committee or anyone else to get a discretionary approval, because the project was designed to the existing land development code.

Abenilla said there were initial rumors that they were planning to tear down the Post Office, which scared some neighbors, but they invited Councilman Todd Gloria to look at the site and hear their plans, which helped alleviate concerns.

Abenilla's partner, Mike Burnett, said the main priority in planning the site was to respect the existing residential community by using an updated approach to the neighborhood's established courtyard-type housing stock.

And just as they've done with their Golden Hill projects, they're looking to use the courtyard to host special events in the ground level for the building's residents.

"It's really the next level of courtyard housing," Burnett said.

And part of creating the "dynamic open spaces" that they want to build means thinking about what people want, not what zoning allows.

"We don't look at zoning — that's reactive, not proactive," Burnett said. "We think what's best and makes the most sense for the neighborhood. We have step-backs that are much further than what's required in North Park, because we want to respect the people near us."

La Jolla Cottages

It's almost cute what passed for controversy in this town just before the sexual harassment scandal that took down Mayor Bob Filner broke.