

CNU CHARTER AWARDS

2007 CONGRESS FOR THE NEW URBANISM



BLOCK, STREET, AND BUILDING

SITE:

A reclaimed courthouse square and three adjacent blocks of streets in a suburb midway between San Francisco and San Jose.

PROGRAM:

The removal of a courthouse addition to create a new, half-acre public square, done in conjunction with the pedestrian-friendly redesign of three streets to serve new cinemas, restaurants, shops, and a theater.



COURTHOUSE SQUARE

THEATRE WAY AND BROADWAY STREETSCAPE
REDWOOD CITY, CALIFORNIA

IN THE EARLY 20th CENTURY, the half-acre square at the heart of Redwood City served as the community's ceremonial and functional gathering place — watched over by a Beaux Arts courthouse and later an atmospheric movie palace facing it. Yet by 1939, county officials coping with the lingering Great Depression and a swelling suburban population thought the square the logical place for a courthouse expansion. The somber Art Deco structure, complete with WPA bas-reliefs, became an architectural landmark in its own right.

With its key public space gone, however, the downtown began to languish as a gathering place. Even as surrounding farms gave way to sprawl and later to the riches of Silicon Valley, downtown Redwood City slid into dereliction, an island of government offices along deserted sidewalks.

In 2006, partially at the prodding of entrepreneurs who had rediscovered downtown, the city broke ground on a strategy for transforming its heart by reactivating the public spaces around the courthouse. The plan's centerpiece is a rediscovered courthouse plaza with three blocks of thoughtful new streetscapes enveloping it and a reinvigorated mix of uses: cinemas, shops, restaurants, performance space, a marketplace, and a museum.

Creating the new plaza required "a modest yet bold move on behalf of urbanism," in the words of juror Vince Graham. Demolition of the 1939 courthouse annex was undertaken with the understanding that restoring the city's 1858 urban fabric—a classic American tableau of civics and commerce—offered more to the collective memory than any individual building. A restored courthouse portico and the renovated Fox Theatre (now a live performance venue) create a grand backdrop to the square, where a long fountain and two low market pavilions add interest at ground level.

Designers Freedman Tung & Bottomley also carefully coordinated three blocks of new streets along and approaching the square, each serving a different purpose. In front of the new cineplex, a boulevard-style access road allows drivers to drop off moviegoers and creates a low-speed road edge for crowds spilling out after movies. Between the square and the Fox Theatre, the street takes on a ceremonial character with a generous sidewalk and a row of Canary Island palms. Alongside the cinema is Theatre Way, a street tailor-made for outdoor dining: a 23'-wide dining terrace lined with custom torchieres steps down to a low-speed travel way with angled parking serving shops.

While jurors wrestled with whether, in the use of torchieres and other additions to the public realm, the designers opted for too much rather than too little, they appreciated the thoroughness of their vision and the project's obvious contribution to renewed civic life in Redwood City, evident in everything from retail occupancy to new festivals and farmers' markets on the plaza.



Owner City of Redwood City Urban Design and Custom Features Design Freedman Tung & Bottomley Architect of Record Rempel Architects: FMG Architects
Landscape Architect SFE Design, Inc. Civil Engineer Mark Thomas & Co., Inc. Lighting Design Architectural Lighting Design: Horton Lees Brogden Lighting Design, Inc.
Civil and Hydromechanical Engineering Carlile Macy Structural Engineer OLMM Consulting Engineers Mechanical, Plumbing, and Electrical Engineer Peter Kogan Associates
General Contractor Wentz Group; DPR Construction, Inc. Structural Engineer Kevin Donahue Electrical Design Redwood City Electric