Visions are Easy

While the academic life is rooted in precedent more often than prescience, the life of the visionary is a constant delight. Take those poor scholars in the humanities. When you think about it, all that scribbling is mostly about someone else’s creative work. The poor souls are condemned to a mere second-hand illumination, like drinking lukewarm coffee, smoking discarded cigarettes or holding Leonardo’s coat. You can just hear Leo saying, “Grab this will you while I think up something fresh for you to write about.”

Baseball season always reminds me of the Yogi Berra, “Predictions are difficult, especially when they are about the future.” But this is about visions, not predictions, and here’s the important difference. Visions are easy because they are promises not predictions. Visions are the full color winds of desire made so vivid and real they can come true. Visions tap deeply into the palpably possible and give touch to the intangible.

Kitty, CATS and Claws

In this morning’s movie of the mind, Mayor Kitty is driving her D12-CAT at the corner of the butterfly-parking garage, and in the background is a replay of former Mayor Ruth taking out the tank-trap fountain at Broadway and Willamette. These hard hatted women are stepping up to reclaim a park block, to assist the Farmers’ and Saturday Market and create a new downtown square. Behind them are councilors Taylor, Bettman, Solomon and Ortiz driving giant-clawed backhoes, whose prehensile teeth are grinding down the place’s parking past. The real Eugene Skinner, not the bronze shrimp on the log, launches a cheer up through the dust over his donation! But where are all the men?

They hover nearby with their fingers in the air, waiting for leadership. Aroused by the heavy machinery, they nevertheless still wear the debilitating fear of downtown open spaces on their faces. They feel that lingering malady of the downtown mall and hunker before the reality of the social service squeeze that continues to diminish the potential of our public life. They badly need a trip to Portland and a visit to Jamison Park in the Pearl - or any other city, where they have been knocked down downtown, but have found a way to get back up again. LODO in downtown Denver comes to mind. 16th St. there is a great street.

The Three Phases of a Vision

There are typically three visionary stages. In the first stage, the vision is personal and held close for private viewing. Its language is a bit uncivilized. Let loose, it is mostly thought ridiculous and annoying. It gets and takes its inevitable first potshots from the predictably pragmatic.
A shared vision, however, that taps what Eudora Welty called, “a deep and running vein,” begins to have a life of its own. In this second stage, many minds begin to grind away at what earlier seemed insuperable.

Finally the vision passes into the “well, duh! phase,” becomes the conventional wisdom, and in its own good time joins our everyday world.

The old S.P. train station in Springfield is a case in point. When I proposed in 1984 that it be moved to the town entrance at 2nd and So. A St., to be remodeled as Springfield’s Chamber of Commerce and used as a tourist information center, the possibility faced a ponderous inertia to say the least. The RG editorialized twice against the practicality of the project. But the possibility touched people in the right spot and after several years of remarkable civic effort it was done.

When I pointed out in 1994, as the City of Eugene’s lead urban design consultant for the South Bank Study, that it made no long-term sense to have an EWEB maintenance facility and equipment storage yard on the city’s principal downtown riverfront site, it was irritating and upsetting indeed. EWEB had just concluded a yearlong master planning process for their property, which concluded that everything was to stay together where it was. I had looked deeply into their future for the place and couldn’t see it. Now, twelve years later we are only a year or two away from EWEB’s move to their new site and the beginning of a new downtown riverfront.

Stage three takes time and visions have their own clock. It is inevitable that the habitat for the automobile on the N. Park Block will be destroyed by imagination and common sense. Charlie Porter will one day look down (or up depending on you past dealings with him) on a restored Millrace, running up Ferry St. and through the new portal under the tracks to the riverfront. The proposed new stoplight at 8th and Mill will transform into a needed overpass. Well, duh!

The visionary’s job, unlike scholarship or good journalism, pays poorly, of course. Some would say about what it is worth. But you get to rise each day, sweep the precedential and pessimistic table clean, and imagine – at a minimum to keep your certification – “three impossible things before breakfast.” You get to wear, if only for a moment, Leonardo’s tattered coat. It helps of course to be on PERS.

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