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Tuesday, June 9, 2009

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Five postcards from Emeryville, where there's more to the landscape than weekend traffic jams outside Ikea.

Build homes, insert parks

If all you know of Emeryville is the view from Interstate 80 (chunky towers, chain-store retail) or San Pablo Avenue (chunky clutter, lying low), nothing prepares you for the green extravaganza that starts at the north end of Doyle Street.

It's three blocks of lavish delight, cloaked with cottonwoods and strawberry trees and bunchgrass 5 feet tall. There's a concrete lane for bicycles and a decomposed granite one for strollers. New homes frame the scene with front porches, not driveways.

Less than 2 years old, the landscape already feels far more exotic than what you usually encounter in an urban park. It's also clever: The bike path and walkway together form a vehicle-ready fire lane - with the bunchgrass between them no obstacle to fire engines.

"In other cities you couldn't do that," said Gary Strang, whose GLS Landscape Architecture designed the blocks within a larger greenway plan by Roma Design Group. "Emeryville has always been a very pragmatic place ... once you establish that you're competent, they let you do what you want to do."

All that's missing? Neon

So there I stood on Halleck Street, which begins and ends before you know it alongside Interstate 80, starting at a burst of pure cutting-edge fun.

Four rows of steep townhomes line up perpendicular to the street - windows popping out here and there, cedar planks on one facade and galvanized metal on another, a color palette that puts a rainbow to shame.

And get this: The other buildings on the block are a brick warehouse and a concrete warehouse that's now lofts. This is part of Emeryville's Historic Industrial District. But Blue Star Corner, designed by David Baker + Partners for Holliday Development, doesn't clash. It brings the story up to date.

"We're comfortable with variety. Not everything needs to have a certain look," said Deborah Diamond, who is managing the update of the General Plan for this city of 10,000 nestled near the Bay Bridge. "In a lot of places, the context becomes so important in doing anything. In Emeryville, that's not the case."

Let a dozen styles bloom.

The past, paper-thin

How to describe the collision of old and new at 1401 Park Ave.?

Imagine a Hummer wearing a doily.

The complex called Icon Apartments includes the front wall of the small factory that once occupied the site. But the scrap of history is overwhelmed by what bulges up in the rear: five clumsy floors clad in stucco and glass and, adding insult to injury, papier-mache-thin masonry.

This is what can happen in a city where the word "landmark" never appears in the draft general plan. Instead, the three-page section on "cultural resources" includes an obligatory tip of the hat to "several areas and structures with local historical and/or architectural merit which characterize the City's heritage."

The approach is a refreshing contrast to Berkeley and San Francisco, where landmark status can be conferred on anything with four walls and a past. But it also can lead to haphazard demolitions of anything too small for a developer's big plans - or, as is the case here, a collision that makes you cringe.

Forbidding yet fragrant

When Pixar made noises about building its corporate campus here in the late 1990s, Emeryville leaders snapped to attention. No wonder. Who wouldn't want the nation's hippest animator to call their city home?

When Pixar also said it wanted to erect an exterior fence for security purposes, politicians said "how high?" The answer: 8 feet of black metal, with hedge roses added for thorny ambience.

That wouldn't keep out Carl Fredrickson, the protagonist of Pixar's latest film, "Up," who uses helium balloons to float his home to South America. But it sure blocks the view from the building across the street - City Hall!

So much for animating the corner of Park Avenue and Hollis Street.

On the bright side: Pixar is adding a building at the corner, with subterranean piles now being throbbled into place. In the process, Pixar will widen the sidewalk along Hollis and, across from City Hall, add a small plaza with three oak trees.

Hey, it's a start.

Striking a balance ... so far

On Horton Street, I passed the Emeryville Artists' Cooperative, sturdy brick structures from the 1920s that now serve as live-work studios.

Coming out the door: Jeff Margolin, a ceramist walking his dog. He's been in the building since the early '80s.

"I moved here because I wanted to live in a warehouse district, and all the freedom that came with that," he recalled. "Aside from the traffic congestion, I don't care how things look."

Margolin has the right idea.

Today's city is robust enough that it can stand up for itself, rather than letting developers call the shots. A good cross section of older buildings needs to be preserved. So does a *social* cross section - the easygoing environment where small businesses and free spirits can find a nook.

At the same time, decisionmakers shouldn't kowtow to critics who, whether or not they admit it, dream of a soft-focus suburbia by the bay. The creativity found at Blue Star Corner or the greenway is what gives this place its distinct spark.

This landscape is changing fast, with scars on full display. But as long as there's room for the unexpected, Emeryville will do just fine.

Information about the Emeryville General Plan is available at links.sfgate.com/ZHHW.

Place appears on Tuesdays. E-mail John King at jking@sfchronicle.com.

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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