

April 22, **2004** - Tucson Weekly – “Historic Design. A proposed downtown subdivision will feature echoes of the land’s archaeologically significant past.” By Dave Devine

For almost 2,500 years, people dug canals along the Santa Cruz River to transport water to nearby farm fields. Now, in a nod to the past, the historic path of some of those canals will carry pedestrian and automobile traffic. Last year, as part of the city of Tucson's downtown Rio Nuevo effort, the Rio Development Company proposed installing a subdivision with mixed uses along west Congress Street. After being selected by the city to develop the vacant, litter-strewn, 13-acre parcel in conjunction with four local builders, the company held a design charette to seek input on the project's layout.

One of those who attended the meeting was Jonathan Mabry of Desert Archeology, whose firm had previously looked at the site. Mabry informed the Rio Development Company that the site had archaeological significance, and that his company had discovered a migratory pit-house settlement dating back to 2100 B.C., along with 4,000-year-old pottery, indicating that the area is one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in the United States. They also uncovered evidence of corn being grown thousands of years ago as well as irrigation canals.

"We found lots of canals," Mabry says, "and in the area (of the proposed subdivision) 10 canals ranging from 2,500-years-old to the 19th century. They represent Tucson's agrarian history, when the Santa Cruz was a green oasis until a little over 100 years ago."

After sharing the information with Rio Development Company officials, Mabry indicated it would be neat to somehow honor that history by physically marking the alignment of at least some of the canals. The site planners at the charette, he says, lit up, as they became more excited about the possibilities. The result is a subdivision plan for the Menlo Park neighborhood project which is not typical of modern-day Tucson. With narrow, bending streets, wide sidewalks and seven small plazas, the design for the "Mercado District" is pedestrian-oriented, reflecting local urban planning from pre-railroad days, not the automobile era.

"The planners took constraints and made them opportunities," says Justin Dixon of Rio Development. "A big part of the plan was influenced by archeology. It made it about Tucson, and the plan turned out really great." Says planner Stefanos Polyzoides of the site: "It would have been easy to throw a grid over the whole thing, but there was something there before we were." Polyzoides summarizes the project this way: "It balances out the history of the place while addressing the neglect of the last 50 years."

Some of the streets and walkways will follow the routes of earlier irrigation canals, and the site plan uses landscaping and signage to reflect the area's past. It additionally spotlights the Convento building, which will be reconstructed nearby as part of the "Tucson Origins" project. The only straight north-south street in the subdivision, Avenida Del Convento, will provide a visual site line from Congress Street south through the property to the new "historic" structure. Along this same street will be ground floor retail shops, with dozens of apartments and condominiums above. Dixon hopes the businesses will be neighborhood- or locally based and expects the housing units to sell for \$100,000 and more.

Interest in the 102-lot, single-family residential portion of the development, Dixon says, has been phenomenal. In fact, it has been so great from current Menlo Park residents, people affiliated with the University of Arizona and others, that Dixon is a little worried about the level of anticipation, since the first homes won't be occupied until August 2005 at the earliest. Current foothills resident and local historian Ken Scoville is one of those hoping to buy a home in the Mercado District.

"I've always wanted to live someplace with that much history," he says. "The developer and home builders actually gave it some thought. That's groundbreaking in Tucson!"

The project's single-family homes, which Dixon indicates will look like those in Tucson's barrio, vary widely in size and price. A handful of 600- to 800-square-foot bungalows might go as low as \$80,000, but most of the units will be priced between \$150,000 and \$500,000. While those figures upset at least one participant at last week's Menlo Park Neighborhood Association monthly meeting, the board did unanimously support rezoning for the development.

In an interview prior to the meeting, Lillian Lopez-Grant from the neighborhood said she was pleased with the plan for the Mercado District, adding that she didn't care about the incorporation of the canal system into its design. Of more importance to her was the development of new housing and cleaning up the site. "Menlo Park is inundated with Section 8 (government-sponsored) housing that looks like crap," she told those at the neighborhood meeting. Saying she wanted her adult children to live in Menlo Park, Lopez-Grant predicted the homes in the Mercado District would be sold before being built.

"There's probably never been this much thought put into a 13-acre site," Dixon says, "but because people were brought into the process, the project is better off for it. Giving ourselves a back seat (in designing the plan) has really paid off."

April 24, **2008** - Tucson Weekly – “Economic Divide. In the westside Menlo Park neighborhood, new development and an old neighborhood combine”

By Cameron Jones

Robert Villaseñor sits on his front porch soaking up the Saturday afternoon sunshine beneath a wooden sign that reads "Casa de Villaseñor." He averts his gaze from the newspaper and shakes his head. "What's strange is that they are building half-million-dollar homes in this neighborhood," Villaseñor says while glancing down his street toward the mixed-use development being constructed on Tucson's westside as part of Rio Nuevo. "I just wonder if they're going to be able to sell them. Are people who can afford it going to want to live here?" Villaseñor is not knocking his neighborhood—he loves it and has lived there for 55 years. He's just curious to find out how the high-end development will mesh with the working-class neighborhood in which he grew up.

Located just west of downtown, the Menlo Park neighborhood was formally created in the 1920s, although the area is considered the birthplace of Tucson and has a history dating back thousands of years. The new development, called the Mercado District of Menlo Park, is being constructed on land just south of Congress Street. The site was first inhabited more than 2,500 years ago, and the streets will follow an ancient canal system, according to the development's Web site. The area was also home to Spanish colonists, and a compound was built on the site in the 1700s. The design emphasizes creative architecture to maximize space and aims to be pedestrian-friendly with courtyards, plazas and walkways. It will be connected to the surrounding area by a modern streetcar system that will go through downtown, up Fourth Avenue and east on University Boulevard.

The project looks great on paper, but there are some concerns that the recent slowdown in the housing market, along with the subprime mortgage crisis, could have a negative effect on construction. However, Tom Wuelpern, the president of Rammed Earth Development, one of the developers building homes in the Mercado District, says he does not believe the crunch will negatively impact the development. "All of our buyers are very stable, and I do not feel the mortgage crisis is affecting us or them at all," he said, adding that while tract subdivisions may have elevated prices during the heated market, the developers of the Mercado District did not. One thing is for sure: The ambitious project will dramatically change the surrounding neighborhood.

Sandra Garcia grew up in the area, just on the other side of Sentinel Peak, and has been living in Menlo Park for 12 years. She loves the serenity of the neighborhood and the fact that families stay in the area for generations. She compared the neighborhood to a family.

Sitting in her living room surrounded by sympathy cards—her mother recently passed away—she recalls the rich history of the neighborhood and nearby downtown.

"Downtown was neat; it was beautiful when I was a kid," she said. "It was the place to be, they had wonderful, wonderful and elegant stores, but all that's gone."

Making downtown Tucson relevant again is the ultimate goal of the Rio Nuevo project, and Garcia thinks the Mercado District is a step in the right direction. "I think it'll be nice; a lot of people can visit it. There are going to be little mercados and stores there, little bakeries and things like that. It's going to be a nice place to visit."

Not everyone agrees. Villaseñor thinks the development may leave the old neighborhood on the outside looking in. "I see it, potentially, as two separate communities," he said. "There will be this little elitist community in the middle of all of us working-class Joes. I would hope it doesn't turn out that way, but that's just the way I see it."

According to the real estate Web site zillow.com, the median value of a home in the existing Menlo Park neighborhood is \$156,500, while the homes already constructed in the Mercado District range in price from \$400,000 to \$750,000.

Gene Einfrank, one of the pioneer residents of the new development, doesn't disagree with Villaseñor's assertion that there are going to be differences between residents of the development and the old neighborhood. "There's an economic divide, pure and simple. You have that in many, many cities. But I think it's all in how the community deals with it, how the community finds their similarities," Einfrank said. "There's a lot to be said about diversity, not just cultural, or from a religious standpoint, but also economic diversity. "There are people who have much more money than we do--we're middle-class--and there are people who have much less money, but when I look at people, it's really their character. ... I think it has to do with how neighbors interact with each other, and hopefully we can get involved in the neighborhood association here and get to know our council member and get to know everybody."

Einfrank--sitting in his courtyard with water running down a large outdoor fountain as a breeze blows through wind chimes above his head--expresses nothing but satisfaction over his decision to move into a development that is still more a dream than reality at this point. With a new house that runs on solar power and no backyard to water, he is pleased that his family is leaving a smaller footprint on the environment than they did at their previous home in the Sam Hughes neighborhood. He also expresses optimism that once more people move in, and everyone starts interacting on a daily basis, Menlo Park, old and new, will become one neighborhood. "I think the surrounding neighborhood is charming. I accept my neighbors. I accept the diversity of the area, and I hope they accept us."

September 16, **2010** Tucson Weekly— excerpts from "A Streetcar Named Development" by Dave Devine and Molly McKasson

Mayor Bob Walkup proudly announced in February that Tucson had received sufficient federal funds to likely ensure the implementation of a modern streetcar line. RTA money and those federal funds will cover most of the cost of the 4-mile, almost \$200 million streetcar project. Cato Institute panned the initiative as "It's a Disneyland toy which doesn't attract new development." Local backers, including westside Councilwoman Regina Romero, are confident that the streetcar will help revitalize property along its route.

At Granada Avenue and Congress Street, the (planned) streetcar route swings south, passing the federal courthouse and the mostly vacant land west of the Tucson Convention Center.

One development idea for this empty land reportedly comes from the Phoenix firm OTB Destination. They have proposed using city-owned property south of Congress Street, where the supposedly temporary Greyhound bus station is now located, to build a high-end outlet mall.

Continuing west on Cushing Street, the streetcar will skirt under Interstate 10 and cross the Santa Cruz River. Its route then passes what was once the site of the proposed Rio Nuevo museum district.

Despite the sorry state of affairs in what was the museum district, the streetcar might still hold the key to several developments on the west side of the river.

Adjacent to the proposed streetcar tracks and situated south of Congress Street is Jerry Dixon's Mercado District of Menlo Park. Under development since 2004 and now including 26 homes, this subdivision will be complemented shortly with the opening of a shopping mercado containing 18 locally owned small businesses.

Next door, Dixon is planning the 14-acre Gadsden development—through which the streetcar will loop. This land was acquired by Dixon from the city in 2008, and under a development agreement for the property, he will either pay approximately \$3 million for the streetcar tracks to be installed in the area or reimburse City Hall for the work.

There are other potential snags in Dixon's plans for the land south of Cushing Street. These include a possible property-ownership dispute between the city and the Rio Nuevo Multipurpose Facilities District Board, as well as a reported \$7 million monetary disagreement between the UA and City Hall concerning the land once slated for the UA Science Center.

What happens to the hole in the ground, though, is the critical hurdle, according to Dixon.

"I'm a businessman, and I can't lease space (in most of my other proposed projects) with that big hole in the ground," he says.

Dixon indicates that if City Hall doesn't make a decision on this issue by the end of the year, he'll pull the plug on all of his proposals, with the exception of the development along Congress Street.

At this point, though, the city hasn't even determined how much it might cost to fill the hole.

Despite Dixon's threat, he's confident that the streetcar will be transformative for Tucson. He made a substantial amount of money in Phoenix, he says, by selling property three blocks from the light-rail line and calls the Tucson project "a game-changer."

July 26, **2014** – Tucson Weekly - More Than 17,000 Tucsonans Ride Streetcar on Opening Day -
By James Hudson

Tucson's Modern Streetcar opening day launch on Friday, July 25, saw over 17,000 passengers hop on board the much-anticipated transit system, according to the City of Tucson and the Regional Transportation Authority. 107-degree weather didn't slow down locals as eight Sun Link cars continuously took crowds of all ages down its 3.9-mile path from Friday at 10:00 a.m. until 2:00 a.m. early Saturday morning. Tucson City Manager Ricard Miranda declared the launch a "historic day for the City of Tucson."

Sun Link Project Manager Shellie Ginn said, "The Sun Link streetcar system had a great first day of service. We were able to provide a comfortable, cool ride for thousands of people and the streetcars were consistently overflowing with passengers." The cars were so full that many Sun Tran buses were used to accommodate the overflow.

As ridership slowed later into the evening, eight cars were reduced to six along the Sun Link route, which connects West Side of downtown from Mercado San Agustin to the lively heart of downtown on Congress St. and Broadway Blvd; the historical, cultural soul of Tucson, Fourth Avenue; and the University of Arizona campus.