

On My Mind

4/22/05

Asked for comments, this past week, on the idea of using part of the governor's "white elephant" (that is, the La Fiesta Mall) as a junior/senior high school, and thinking again of how inappropriate that setting was for use as classrooms - be they community college or public school - it suddenly occurred to me what that space would be good for. The idea came while thinking about how La Fiesta was designed, trying to understand what the original planners must have been thinking about.</P>

If one recalls how it looked in its prime - with fountains, and twisting canals, and quirky, whimsical art here and there, like the dolphins jumping up out of the concrete, and the extensive landscaping with blooming flowers and color everywhere, the conclusion is inescapable. The traffic wasn't supposed to be orderly, logical, but rather, random. The intent was to make it a visually-pleasing, visually interesting, place to visit.</P>

Like an art gallery. Or a museum. La Fiesta Mall would be an ideal place to put that catch-all building - museum plus historic preservation office plus arts council - currently (and inappropriately, in my opinion) planned for the flood-prone Garapan wetlands area. Its former shops could easily be converted into art gallery showrooms, or museum exhibit space, with relatively little re-modelling. There'd be ample room for work space and for storage (in La Fiesta I, for example) for all the museum's and the HPO's artifacts. And ample room for exhibits - it wouldn't be necessary to take down one exhibit in order to mount another - for either the museum or the arts council. Instead, there would be lots of room for permanent exhibits, for exhibits of individual artists, themes, eras.</P>

La Fiesta could also accommodate the performing arts. There already is a large outdoor amphitheater setting. One of the larger places, such as the former Tony Roma's, could be converted into another performance area. The entire mall, in other words, could become a combination arts/historical institute - a center for the performing and visual arts as well as historical museum. There might even be room for natural history displays.... And there'd be room for all the administrative offices as well.</P>

Admittedly, art galleries, museums, usually do organize their exhibits in some kind of pattern, but the order doesn't have to be rigid. Exploration, wandering, random sorties into one exhibit room or another are all typical - and often encouraged - modes of behavior in such settings. For this, La Fiesta is ideal. And the random whimsical art already there, the visual attractiveness of the place - as originally designed - fits right in with that kind of use.</P>

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With so much space - if all three buildings were used - there'd also be room for some nice cafes or restaurants, where people could come in and rest their feet and have a snack - to think about what they'd seen, or collect the energy to see some more - at any time of day, not only between 7 a.m. and 10 a.m., or 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., or after 6 p.m., hours that many restaurants keep. And there'd be room for museum shops, for individual artists' show rooms, for selling handicrafts and art supplies and other related items. In fact, wouldn't it be wonderful to also have one of those

multi-museum shops that sell replicas from a number of major art and history museums - not only from the U.S., but from museums throughout the world!</P>

Such an offering would appeal to those Japanese tourists who, according to a recent Marianas Visitors Bureau poll, were disappointed with shopping choices on Saipan, saying they could find much of the same merchandise back in Japan. But items from the Smithsonian museums, from the various fine arts museums in major U.S. cities, from art and history museums in countries around the world, are not found in Japan, and would be a real drawing card for shoppers not only from Japan, but for tourists everywhere in Asia. The same would be true of handicrafts, not just from Micronesia, but from Asian countries, or South America, or Australia and South Pacific islands. The availability of such items could add a whole new dimension to the attractiveness of the CNMI as a tourist destination.</P>

To establish and maintain a quality image appropriate to such an undertaking - rather than one of kitsch and cheap tourist junk such as the crushed coral and resin souvenirs currently found not only in the Duty Free Shops but all over island - would require oversight from a knowledgeable board with the good taste to judge wisely, and with full, absolute, authority to screen and monitor candidates for space in the mall so that galleries, exhibits, restaurants, shops, and offices all were true to the concept of a highly reputable world-class arts institute.</P>

No poker parlors would be allowed. No porn shops or massage parlors. No 99 cents, or \$3 stores. McDonald's might be ok, but only if no yellow arch dominated the scene.</P>

A big project. But one with huge potential. The CNMI could use the CIP funds that were going to build the museum/arts complex in Garapan to re-model La Fiesta, probably at considerable savings. Those savings could then be applied to building a school that was designed for use as a school, rather than trying to adapt a site so totally unsuited for school use. Can you imagine, for example, the many windowless classrooms students would be forced to use at La Fiesta? Nor does La Fiesta have room for athletics - for a baseball field or a track, or basketball courts.</P>

Yes, tourists would have to be bussed to La Fiesta. But they are already bussed everywhere else. Perhaps this is the point at which consideration might finally be given to allowing locals on those busses as well - at least if they wanted to go to the art/history museum complex.....</P>

And yes, it's a radical idea. But at least it would preserve what had been the mall's original intent. It would make use of, take full advantage of, all the money, and all the labor, that has gone into its landscaping. (And if its generating plant - which allegedly is the most efficient on island - were also preserved, as it should be, that would take full advantage of the expertise and expense that went into its design as well.) It would bring a desirable form of development to the northern end of the island. It would preserve and maintain the complex, rather than degrading and destroying it. </P>

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This past week has been observed as Environmental Awareness Week, culminating in a second

showing of the Division of Environmental Quality's "Environmental Expo" as well as award ceremonies at the weekly Thursday night street market. The Expo, with more than 20 booths, featured everything from a live brown tree snake and a miniature dry litter waste piggery to demonstrations by the CUC Laboratory and CRM's Marine Monitoring Program - an impressive array of problems and solutions in the environmental arena - each staffed by helpful, enthusiastic agency representatives eagerly explaining their displays to all within earshot. Earlier in the week, the Expo had been set up at the Chamolinian Cultural Village site, specifically for student attendees.</P>

In addition to being, of itself, a fascinating and informative event that one wishes could clone itself on a regular basis, so that more people could take advantage of the good ideas on composting, for instance, could learn about the efforts being made to monitor and protect our environment, could find ways to participate in agency programs, there was another aspect of the Expo that was noteworthy as well. In contrast to a time in the past, now there is a strong sense of collaboration, of working together, of cooperation, among the several agencies that deal with environmental concerns - a welcome and very refreshing change!</P>

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Short takes:

- The Saipan Tribune's Friday issue gives some pretty extensive coverage to the personnel spending of the Fourteenth Commonwealth Legislature and its members, beginning on the front page. A great story, rich in information, and most useful and appropriate as the CNMI budget continues to be debated, as election time nears. Congratulations to reporter Liberty Dones for collecting all the data, and to the editor for providing the support to put it all together!</P>

- The Marianas Variety's Friday front page features a worthy story of another sort: the failure of the Paseo de Marianas as a tourist attraction. The story ends with a tenant comment, "I think the problem is the government did not plan this pedestrian mall properly." To which I would add, "Amen, brother!"</P>

- It took a while before the press finally explained why the CUC Board's discussion of hiring a new director was being led by acting chair Herman P. Sablan instead of chair Francisco Q. Guerrero, and in the absence of the present director, Lorraine Babauta. Turns out both were off-island. MPLA fired its commissioner while she was off-island. CUC, apparently, was trying to do the same. Is it catching?</P>

- Still on the subject of the proposed new director/consultant to CUC, how could anyone in his or her right mind claim that there are people in the CNMI whose credentials match those of Abe Malae? Where is the person who holds masters' degrees in civil engineering, public works administration and general science/physical chemistry, who has been as successful a utilities director, who has held as influential a position as CEO of a development bank, as has Malae?</P>

- Catty comment of the week: With Chuck Jordan reportedly due to resign from his post as the governor's CIP coordinator in order to join the architectural firm of RIM Architects, and RIM

allegedly involved (or about to be) in the design of the proposed art/museum complex in Garapan, could that be considered a conflict of interest?</P>