



Civic affairs

By Gerry Klein

Bold visionary sets sights on city

COMMENTARY

Michael Arth doesn't shy from self promotion. The artist, urban designer and developer even went so far as to make a movie about himself.

But Arth is also something of a prophet and if he gets his way he will be creating a promised land on the very edge of Saskatoon.

The Florida developer is the creator of a concept in urban design he calls the New Pedestrianism, based on the notion that building living environments primarily for the automobile has been destructive for humanity.

He is working on a new neighbourhood, which could be built near Furdale in Corman Park, that would instead have pedestrians as the main focus. Homes would be built facing a pedestrian park while cars would be restricted to streets running along the backside of the homes.

If it proceeds, the village would be designed in such a way that people living there would be within walking distance of retail, professional and recreational services, but would still be able to drive into the city for employment.

The idea is to create an environment where people can walk out their front door into a park where they can meet with neighbours and commute to amenities without having to use or compete with cars.

In a world in which the car is king, and in a city where brutal winter weather can clear the streets of all the most hearty, Arth's vision of a 1920s-

style village with picket fences and tree-lined boulevards might seem to be more dream than possibility.

But Arth has already taken an even more fantastic dream and turned it to reality. In 2001 he left his home in California for a slum in one of the oldest communities in Florida. He bought up a handful of inner-city properties just off the main course in DeLand and converted an area that had been known as Crack Alley into what is now the Historic Garden District.

The area had been home to the homeless and a place where prostitutes plied their trade in broad daylight, while drug addicts harassed citizens, occupied vacant buildings and burned down the homes of people who pushed back.

According to reports in the Orlando Sentinel, Arth hired some of those same homeless people to clean the streets, plant trees and convert the homes he bought from very willing sellers or that had been taken over by the city, and within a couple years gentrified the neighbourhood.

In the process, he worked to convert the area into its pre-automobile glory and address the ills he believed the car had brought to the neighbourhood. As Mike Lafferty, a columnist with the Sentinel put it, "Out went the crack dealers and in came the renters."

But the development didn't reach the heights of pedestrianism Arth was looking for. And it didn't solve the problems of the homelessness. So he went back to the drawing board and designed a truly pedestrian village that could be used not only to house but also help the homeless.

Before he could see that dream come to fruition, however, the U.S. economy stalled, then took a dive.

That's where Saskatoon comes in.

Saskatoon's thriving economy and rapid growth is the perfect Petri dish to try grow a village that could be unique in the world.

Glen Grismer, Corman Park's planning director, was well aware of Arth's philosophy. Not only does he teach the tenets of new pedestrianism to his University of Saskatchewan students, Grismer has met Arth and finds him to be an "innovative thinker and dynamic personality," he told me recently.

When a property owner came to him to discuss developing a unique sort of neighbourhood, Grismer put him in contact with the Florida developer. Arth came to Saskatoon to check out the possibilities, and will be back in October.

Although neither Arth nor Grismer would say who the property owner is, Arth pointed out he has about 1,400 acres on the very edge of the city, surrounded by golf courses. It is tailor-made to become the world's first true pedestrian village, designed and built from scratch.

The idea of such a community fits in nicely with concepts Saskatoon planners have already adopted in the city's newest neighbourhoods, according to Lorne Sully, manager of the planning department.

For example, Hampton Village, Willow Grove and Rosewood are all communities designed on the village concept, where services will be within walking distance and there will be a village square, he said.

Arth's idea of designing the neighbourhood so cars would be kept to the back of the homes is simply taking the notion one step further.

The idea of reducing the presence of automobiles allows the design of the neighbourhood to be more open and ultimately better for the individuals living there and for the environment, Sully said.

Grismer is quick to point out that Corman Park has neither received a proposal for the development nor is it looking for one. But none of the challenges to the proposal posed by Saskatoon's climate or layout would be insurmountable, he said.

Ultimately its success or failure will hinge on whether Saskatoon people are ready to try something unique.

Arth will be in Saskatoon on Oct. 14 when his movie, *New Urban Cowboy: the Labors of Michael E. Arth*, premieres at the Broadway Theatre. He is to be introduced by renowned Saskatoon-based author Yann Martel.

It will be interesting to see if his ideas are as attractive to potential residents as they are to professional planners.

Arth, who has already drawn up some plans for the neighbourhood, believes the project will proceed if it gets the OK from civic leaders, either in the RM or by Saskatoon's council if the land is annexed by the city.

It will also depend on whether people step forward with ideas on how they would like to see this neighbourhood — one that could become a model for development around the world — should proceed.