

Downtown grows in ... Windsor?

- John King

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We Bay Area types who live in the lower eight think we know Sonoma County. It's vineyards and forested hills, old town squares, back-roads funk with a Green Party flair.

So the last thing I expected to see on my first visit to downtown Windsor -- a town of 25,000 in northern Sonoma -- was a brightly colored cross between an old West stage set and Disneyland's Main Street U.S.A.

But I am glad I went because Windsor proves that traditional suburbs are a lot more flexible than outsiders give them credit for. It's time to discard the notion that one size fits all, that there should be a single-family home for every single family. Even in bedroom communities where subdivisions cloak the landscape, residents are eager to see a dash of old-fashioned urbanity added to the mix.

Or, in the case of Windsor, three-story buildings where people happily pay more than \$300,000 to live above a shop across from the town square.

"It's a little bit of urban sensibility in the country," says Michael Powell, who owns a candy store in the bottom of one building and a condominium on top of another. "This sounds really cliched, but it's what you wish a city was like."

For those of you who haven't visited Windsor -- in other words, pretty much everyone south of Santa Rosa -- it's the last stop before Healdsburg on Highway 101. Most people live east of the roadway in a gray sprawl of tract after tract after tract, with most of the homes built since 1985.

During the past two years, though, what has sprouted west of Highway 101 is startling. Not only is there a new 4-acre town green -- built with city redevelopment funds -- but empty lots are filling in and up.

"I'm having a ball -- I can do pretty much whatever I want," says Orrin Thiessen, 57, a developer who lives in rural Sonoma and has finished six buildings in central Windsor, with three more going up and a dozen more on the way. He happily admits to mimicking long-gone local landmarks: "If I see a photograph of a historic building I like, I figure, let's copy it. It adds a lot of interest."

We're talking stuccoed whimsy at a grand scale, saccharine or sweet, depending on your point of view. But here's what's important: It has struck a cord with people who want something a little different with their suburban lifestyle.

All 42 condominiums built so far have sold, and the next batch of nine is already reserved at prices averaging \$375,000. Besides Powell's Sweet Shoppe, commercial space along the green includes a children's bookstore, a jewelry shop and a lunch spot where a pie-shaped slab of risotto is \$3.25.

This isn't the artificial urbanity you find at Bay Street in Emeryville or San Jose's Santana Row. No matter how well executed those projects might be -- and Santana Row is the sincerest form of flattery -- they're not rooted in reality. They're development schemes that exist for the convenience of retail chains.

Downtown Windsor, by contrast, has all the quirks and loose ends of a community trying hard to center itself.

The town green, for instance, isn't the crisp, proper square that anchors Healdsburg or the town of Sonoma. It tumbles west, switching from grass to bare earth -- and from a manicured landscape to the unruly grandeur of a stand of aged oak trees.

This summer the town green will host farmers' markets two nights a week and movies at dusk on a third. It's also where residents do business, not just in the whimsical world that Thiessen built but also in the decidedly unphotogenic City Hall and library on the north side of the green.

Another difference from the mass-produced Main Streets popping up elsewhere: All the retailers here are independent, local people who see a (profitable) way to fill in their community's needs.

Powell's Sweet Shoppe is a perfect example of something that seems like a throwback but also understands the way we live now. It has a Scharffenberger dark chocolate bar at \$4.99 and background music ranging from Bow Wow Wow's "I Want Candy" to "Big Rock Candy Mountain" by Burl Ives. But it also carries the basics, including peppermint sticks of daunting size.

It would be tempting to dismiss Windsor as an aberration, a success story as idiosyncratic as Sonoma itself. But the push for richer downtowns is seen throughout the county.

The best example is Petaluma.

Unlike Windsor, the southernmost big city in Sonoma already has a regional image; it's where "American Graffiti" was filmed, with a historic downtown that once served as the North Bay's crossroads. It's also well known in planning circles as the first city in the United States to impose systematic growth controls.

That was in 1972. Now Petaluma has another first -- a so-called SmartCode for 400 acres of downtown that dispenses with technicalities and simply spells out how various blocks should look.

The emphasis on form rather than function means that as long as developers follow a basic set of rules (the height of buildings, how they face the street, etc.), they need approvals only from the city's design review board, bypassing the planning commission and City Council.

This approach also leaves developers free to respond to what people want. And just like in Windsor, they want what small downtowns once provided naturally: a lively jumble of activities, each piece gaining energy from its neighbor.

Along the river, three stories of commercial space and apartments open this spring, across the street from where construction is about to begin on a multiplex that includes a restored century-old brick warehouse. Directly across the river, several hundred more units of housing are being discussed.

"It's all about choice and allowing for market diversity," says Lois Fisher of Fisher & Hall Urban Design, the Santa Rosa consultants who worked on Petaluma's code. "For decades, (suburban) people haven't had the choice to live in a clean, fresh environment that happens to be downtown."

Isn't it interesting? While San Francisco and other central Bay Area cities seem stifled, with everyone quarreling over growth and trying to dictate every facet of every project in advance, communities on the edge are finding innovative ways to change the debate and move it forward.

The beauty of what's happening in Petaluma and Windsor does not come from the historic veneers but from the new life underneath. That's why they're models to emulate -- even if you need to find them first.