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## A Vision for Downtown Orinda

By Andrea A. Firth



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Peter Hasselman (standing) and Bill Simpson (blue shirt) presented their outlines at the Orinda Rotray luncheon last week Photo Andy Scheck

"There could be some really exciting things going on in downtown Orinda," states Peter Hasselman, an architect and urban designer who has lived in Orinda for over thirty years. "You need a vision," adds his friend Bill Simpson, also a longtime resident and a local architect, as he flips through Hasselman's colorful sketches depicting what the sliver of land occupied by Orinda Village and the Crossroads might look like with some "re-vision."

Together the two architects have created a vision for Orinda's downtown district that has a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly European vibe filled with people and commerce. The design incorporates simple streetscape elements like plantings, additional seating, and improved lighting and signage along with more grand components such as the creation of large public plazas and cascading waterfalls, a pair of pedestrian bridges traversing Highway 24, and a transportation center and mixed-use development at the BART station.

Hasselman and Simpson were an ideal pairing to transform the ideas for a revitalized Orinda into tangible images. Hasselman has years of experience and numerous awards for the planning and design of urban developments in the United States and abroad. He has a prolific gift for drawing images that project a sense of movement and life, and he sees change as part of a natural evolution for Orinda. "The nature of cities is that they change," states Hasselman. "It's important to value and enhance the beautiful elements of the city and not get hung up on the older, decaying bits that have nothing to recommend," he adds, liberally infusing words like recycle, modify, and rebuild as he discusses their approach.

Simpson, who helped lead the way for incorporation and served as the chairman of Orinda's first Planning Commission, has no fear of change either, in fact, he has been thinking about the revitalization of Orinda's downtowns for over 25 years. "I took the members of Orinda's first City Council and Planning Commission over to Mill Valley to show them what Orinda could look like, and they liked it back then," smiles Simpson.

Both men support the work of the City's Planning Process Review Task Force in revising guidelines related to downtown revitalization, but Simpson acknowledges that change will not come about through new ordinances. They have found that most people are visual learners-they need a picture to go with the words. "If there is a vision of what the city could be, something people could see, this might attract a different kind of developer to Orinda,"explains Hasselman.

Hasselman and Simpson have begun to share their vision for the future of Orinda more widely. At a recent meeting of the Orinda Rotary Club, Hasselman narrated a slide presentation of his sketches for revitalizing Orinda's business district, identifying the opportunities and solutions available to address the City's current problems. According to Hasselman, one of Orinda's key drawbacks is the limited amount of public space which results in a linear, boring central business district. "My rough calculation shows that 80% of the downtown space is devoted

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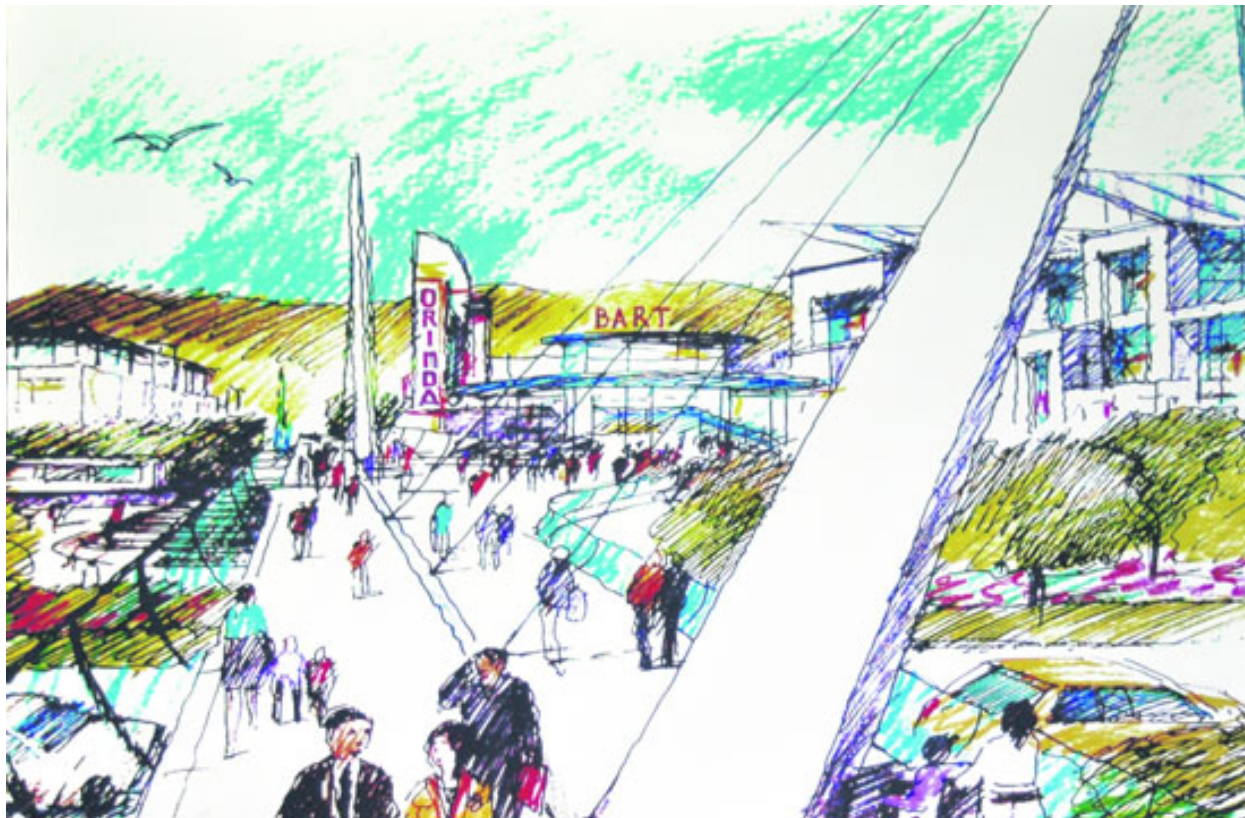
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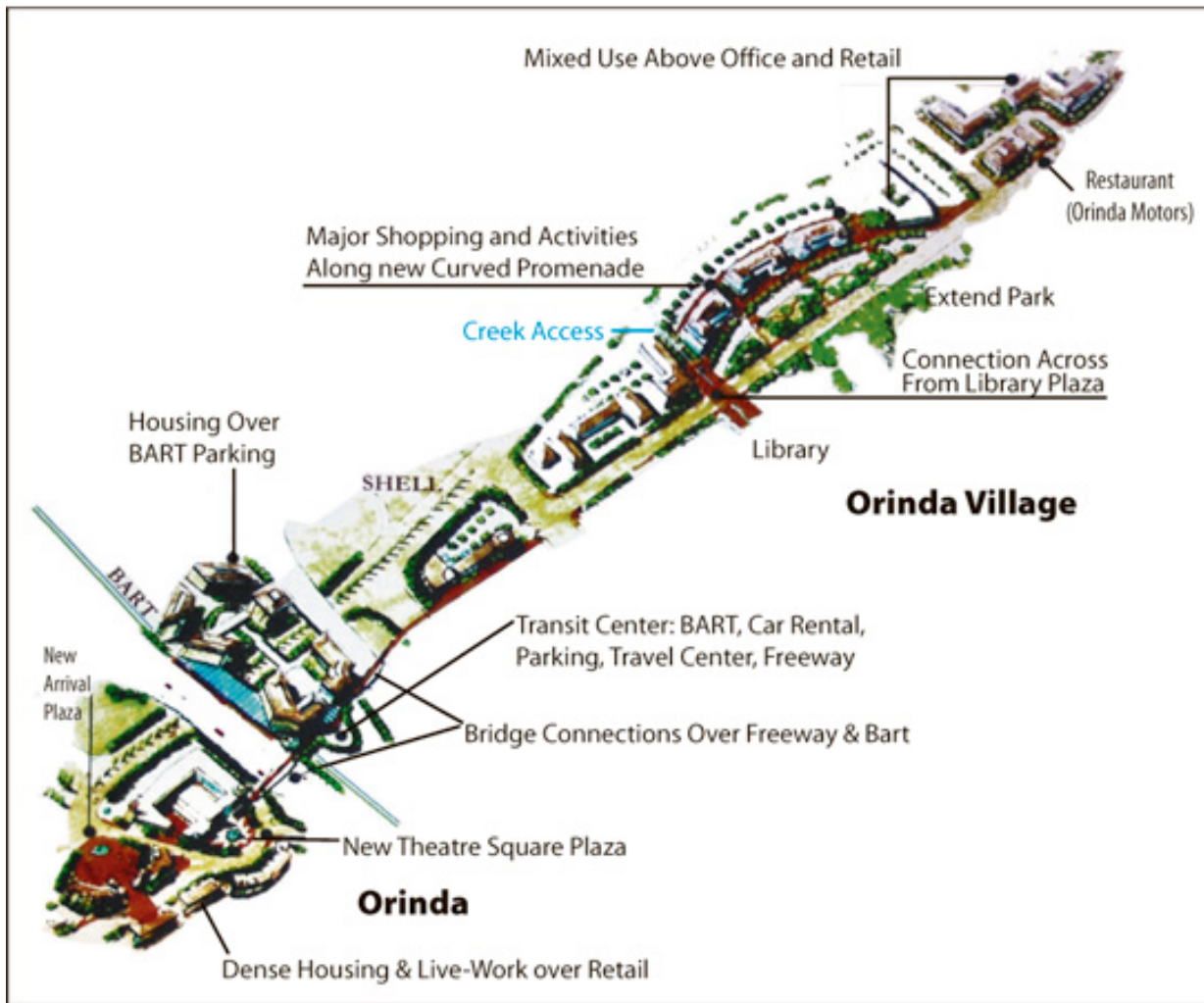
to streets and parking and that leaves just 20% of the land area for nice buildings, parks, arcades, and courtyards," states Hasselman who proposes creating several sunlit public spaces and a better parking system.

What to do about the transmission towers that are dotted through the downtown landscape or how high is too high for buildings, questions that have plagued recent discussions of downtown revitalization, do not faze the two visionaries who take a long-term outlook on the process. "I think technology will evolve over the next generation that will provide a solution to the transmission tower problem," says Hasselman. Simpson understands the concerns over building height and respects the impact on residential properties near downtown. However, both men see opportunities, not darkness, in allowing increased building height in some areas that could enable space for urban attributes such as additional parking, trellises, and roof gardens.

"The next generation will be interested in green architecture, the economy of energy, pedestrian access, environmental quality, and recreation [in the downtown spaces]," adds Hasselman. Creating a downtown that meets the needs and expectations of the next generation seems to be the primary goal of both men who are working to share their vision for Orinda with the community through public meetings throughout the year.



People walking on a pedestrian bridge between Orinda Theatre and Orinda Village



Peter Hasselman will present An architect's personal vision of Downtown Orinda for the next generation; Opportunities for sustainable growth at the Fall luncheon of the Orinda Chamber of Commerce on Friday, October 23rd from Noon to 1:30 p.m. at the Orinda Country Club. The cost is \$30. RSVP 925-254-3909 or <http://orindachamber.org/events.php#luncheon>.

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