

# How Art, Culture, and Community Drove Transit Oriented Development in Santa Fe

Michael Seman, September 19, 2011



Imagine you're planning a Transit Oriented Development project for your city. Your first step is to decline a plan to construct a multi-million dollar mixed-use project; next, you involve more than 6,000 residents in the planning process; then you intentionally lease your anchor sites at below-market rents to an arts-based teen center, a contemporary arts organization, a Hispanic cultural center, and a farmers market.

Crazy, right?

In Santa Fe, New Mexico, this makes perfect sense. The success of the 50-acre, \$137 million The Railyard is the proof.

"It's the kind of approach no real estate developer in their right mind would do," concedes Steve Robinson, president of the Santa Fe Railyard Community Corporation, the non-profit association overseeing the leasing and management of the project. Almost entirely devoid of the usual mix of lofts, corporate eateries, and national retail typically considered mandatory for economic development, little about the planning process behind The Railyard resembles how TOD takes place in most cities.

Originally a rail stop built in the late 1800s, The Santa Fe Railyard served as a real gathering place for residents and an important community asset for much of its history. But, passenger rail's importance in the Southwest declined through the 20th century and by the early 1980s the location was a ghost of its former self. Rail service had all but stopped and commuter rail service linking the city to Albuquerque was decades away. While the Railyard fell into disrepair, Santa Fe was experiencing a boom in growth. Local planning efforts eventually increased and in 1985, the city announced its desire to redevelop the Railyard.

A wide variety of proposals rolled in over the next several years. One in particular caused alarm. The Catellus Development Corporation, a real estate and development outfit created by the railroad company that owned the site, submitted an ambitious plan that would require the total destruction of existing structures. Fueled by preservation concerns and a collective desire for the property to become more than just another commercialized tourist destination, residents quickly organized and became active participants in the planning process. City officials rejected the Catellus plan, and with the public behind them, moved forward with purchasing the land outright in 1995. The next 13 years saw government representatives, non-profits, and over 6,000 members of the community contributing to a truly community-based master plan. The lengthy process was not without controversy, but Robinson says it "was crafted in the hope that many Santa Fe-ans would stay invested in the Railyard becoming a true community asset, attracting residents from all background, ages, and interests."

The final plan stipulated that arts and culture play a role in the project by including an arts corridor. "Santa Fe has always been infused with artistic life," Robinson says. "We wondered, how could this new Railyard redevelopment nourish that in a different way?" By dedicating anchor spaces to popular community-based arts organizations and leveraging industrial zoning that permits angular, post-modern buildings with high ceilings and open spaces attractive to galleries—a rarity in the historically preserved adobe landscape of Santa Fe—planners helped develop a thriving arts nexus in the city.

"I'm not sure we started out to be a contemporary arts node, but that's how it ended up," says Richard Czoski, executive director of the SFRCC. The "node" works in concert with other arts attractions throughout the city, providing a boost to its established cultural economy. The arts corridor also combines with The Railyard's predominantly local retail, performance center, stunning 10-acre park, and public cultural events programming to create spill-over buzz for adjacent properties. And as Robinson is quick to point out, any measure of The Railyard's success should include its ability to draw the young, highly-skilled worker demographic that's been historically difficult to retain in Santa Fe.

The Santa Fe Railyard is once again a popular gathering place for the community and a vital commuter rail station. The project simultaneously embraces the art and culture permeating the city while using it as a catalyst for community and economic development. Ultimately, Robinson attributes this success to the thousands involved in the planning process who knew that "the most livable urban places are those which grow organically in response to local desires and needs."