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## Is That A Load-bearing French Fry?

**Wacky, wild, and cartoonish architectural design, although eerily reminiscent of the "gaudy, cheesy, and tacky" schemes of the 1950s and 60s, reinvigorates southern California cities with much-needed visual interest.**

By Rick Bishop, AICP  
Nov 10, 2003



Some folks (usually engineers) tell us that the best way to keep up with the new clothes fashions is not to keep up at all. Eventually those garish seventeen-inch wide orange and avocado green ties will come back into vogue. And when they do -- PRESTO! -- you're styling again.

As clothes fashions come full circle from decades past, so too are certain architectural styles. Designs that hark back to the 1950's and 1960's, an era of blatant consumerism and lack of architectural taste, are conspicuously returning to the landscape. Perhaps these new structures aren't as gaudy, cheesy, and tacky as their prior-generation counterparts, but it's clear that some of today's architects and planners are in retro mode. While the rotating 25-foot donut hasn't yet returned in all its sugar-coated glory, a new, somewhat understated creativity in architectural design has returned, indicating a change in perception by planners, developers and architects of how communities function, and how they should be presented to, and viewed by, the public.

With  
its  
golden  
arches

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### LATEST OP-EDS

#### [The Smart Sprawl Strategy](#)

By *Wally Siembab*

Aug 31, 2005

How do we retrofit America's sprawl to prepare for a post-oil world? In this week's Op-Ed Wally Siembab proposes a strategy of "smart sprawl" -- retrofitting suburbs of any density so that residents can shop, obtain services and work all within a mile or two of their home.

#### [The Sky Is Not Falling On Cities](#)

By *Carol Coletta*



*McDonald's in Downey, CA, built in 1953.*



*McDonald's in Stanton, CA, built in 1999.*



*Carl's Jr. restaurant in Anaheim, CA, built circa 2000.*

and stainless steel surfaces, one of the nation's oldest McDonald's restaurants, built in 1953 in Downey, California, was recently spared the wrecking ball and restored. While 1953 isn't really much older than the kid's meal languishing in the back of the warming tray, this building's unique architecture exemplifies a generation of structures from a strange era of design in southern California. In this post World War II period, both corporate and

Aug 25, 2005

Cities aren't in decline. The way population change is "measured" by the Census Bureau leaves much to be desired, writes Carol Coletta in this week's Op-Ed. But even if cities were in decline, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success. What is ironic about these estimates and the misleading story of decline that has been spun around them is the fact that cities no longer have to grow big to grow wealthy. For the first time, according to research from CEOs for Cities, a city's population is no longer tied to its economic success.

[From NIMBYs To DUDES: The Wacky World Of Plannerese](#)

By Ric Stephens

Jul 26, 2005

Ric Stephens has compiled a list of some of the wackiest -- yet at times quite realistic -- urban planning words, in a vocabulary he has dubbed 'Plannerese.' This week's Planetizen Op-Ed includes a selected glossary of the terms, in addition to 'A Modern Fairy Tale in Plannerese,' which looks at a typical planning issue through the humorous lens of planning jargon.

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*Downtown Brea, CA.*



*Mixed use area with lofts across the street in downtown Brea.*

legged. Building designs in the 1960's, 70's and 80's became as bland as fast food. Uniformity was in. The "planned community" established a popular new stronghold in southern California, and residents made a run for these conformed, prepackaged urban and suburban landscapes featuring the limited choices of a drive-thru. Developers bragged that projects would maintain consistent (read: boring) appearances, highlighting never-ending use of earthtones and tile roofs. Soon enough, the urban landscape and its buildings became the script idea for the movie "Groundhog Day," and often the only way to discern cities was by the changed color of the street signs within them.

independent entities integrated wild colors, brilliant signs, and Flinstonian kitsch. Buildings looked like cameras, hats, rocket ships, hot dogs and anything else that didn't look like a building.

During the ensuing 30 years, however, planners and architects, sensing the demise of the bellbottom, determined that kitsch architecture should also go straight-

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12:00 pm PDT, Aug 31

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[Community Development Corporation seeks Master Plan designer](#)

*East Market Street*

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06:00 pm PDT, Aug 25

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However, in the last few years, before mind-numbing architectural blandness can completely dull our visual taste buds, some creative designs can again be seen. New McDonald's restaurants in cities such as Hemet and Stanton have been constructed retro-style with full sized arches, a nod to their architectural ancestors. And, in an era when many projects look so bad that the City Council requires elaborate landscape plans to hide the proposed structures, the Stanton City Council approved a request to remove trees blocking view of the city's McDonald's building. In Anaheim, where millions have been spent to eliminate and/or redesign the tacky tourist-serving establishments long epitomizing the area around Disneyland, a newly-constructed fast food restaurant features cartoonish design elements complete with support posts that look like french fries. Notwithstanding the obvious practical issues that planners might face when reviewing such designs at the permit counter ("Uh, is this a load-bearing french fry?"), the building's appearance becomes the nadir for a debate on whether it 1) provides needed architectural whimsy to Orange County's ho-hum landscape, or 2) simply recreates, with today's flair, the same cheesy landscape of which the City has been trying to rid itself.

These new approaches are not limited to fast-food joints. The newly-constructed "Block" shopping center in Orange is a boldly-designed counterpart to its predecessor, "The City Mall," which died a slow death years ago, perhaps due to its less-than-inspiring design. Brea's amicable new downtown "Birch Street Promenade" is a testimony to diversity in design. Various architects have contributed to the block-long project, avoiding the uniformity common to many newer developments. Large, emblazoned neon signs conspicuously announce the presence of stadium-seating movie theatres, representing a significant shift from most jurisdictions where sign ordinances prefer countless small, unreadable signage. One building at the Promenade's west end features tall spires, curved walls, and circular skylights evocative of 1950's space-age design; a Brea Councilmember refers to the structure as the "Jetson's building." The buildings are fun to look at, and so is the entire downtown, evidenced by the throngs who browse, eat, and shop in the pedestrian-oriented area.

Fortunately, some small steps are being taken in southern California to offer alternatives to the uniform architecture that characterized the last thirty years. While it remains to

be seen whether a full-blown "Toontown" movement of architectural bad taste will inundate the mainstream urban environment (and, subsequently, our tolerance), it is refreshing to see that some structures are being designed to be seen again.

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*Rick Bishop, AICP, has over 20 years of intergovernmental planning experience in both the public and private sectors, and is the Executive Director of the Western Riverside Council of Governments (CA), which includes 15 local jurisdictions as member entities. The views expressed in this article are solely the author's, and do not reflect any policy of WRCOG or its member agencies.*

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