



Larry Burke

Bown Crossing's commercial zone uses Smart Growth concepts to create a pedestrian-friendly environment.

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by Jan Higgenbotham

You are certain you have been here before. The doors to the shops are precisely the color you remember. Even the faces of the people and the whiff of the air seem recognizable. The place feels comfortable and safe. It feels like home. What generates this sense of experience with a place? What is it about a place that makes recognition more than déjà vu? Are there universal elements of “place” that sooth our souls regardless of our backgrounds, age or culture? Is it something that never goes away, never changes and continues to sustain us? Is it sustainable itself? By implementing New Urbanist concepts, Boise’s Bown Crossing has captured the essence of place. By tapping into our collective memory of more compact urban spaces, the development supports sustainable growth and discourages sprawl.

New Urbanism favors narrow interconnected streets, open spaces, consistent compact blocks, buildings with the textures and colors of the landscape and neighborhoods designed to facilitate walking and biking, with short transit distances to work, shopping and recreation. New Urbanism



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In 1879, Joseph and Temperance Bown used Table Rock sandstone to build a two-story cupola "block house." Today the historic Bown House fronts Riverside School.

recalls a time when people lived closer to work and when a neighborly sense of place promoted well-being and pride. Community was important to Joseph and Temperance Bown when they built their farm home on the now Bown Crossing site southeast of Boise in 1879. In keeping with the popular Italianate architecture of the time, the house features a low-pitched roof and a blocky, rectangular shape with a square cupola on top. Quite opulent in comparison to the tents in which most families lived at the time, the Bown's home was built of darker-colored local sandstone from the Boise foothills on the front and lighter-colored, more common stone on the sides. Boise had



Idaho Airships, Inc.

Bown Way connects Parkcenter Boulevard to Boise Avenue. Bown Crossing, opened in 2006, is a 36-acre tribute to New Urbanism with its compact mix of restaurants, shops, offices, townhouses and patio homes.

advanced from a mining and fur trading area to a farm community by the time the Bowns built their home on farmland far from the town center. In 1893, the Bowns sold their farm to W.T. Booth and moved to a farm to the west. It was a peaceful rural existence punctuated with quail hunting and swimming in the river. As time progressed, Boise became Idaho's center of government and industry. Changes in the nature of work affected how people traveled, where people lived and most importantly, how they interacted with and experienced their community. Functioning in the early 1900s as an employment and shopping core for the region, Boise featured a tight network of narrow streets, small building parcels and compact residential neighborhoods surrounding downtown. In time, the automobile not only became the symbol of prosperity, but also the primary mode of transportation. By the 1970s, Boise had developed an incoherent pattern of roadways leading to cul-de-sacs and disconnected streets, all designed to lessen the impact of

car traffic in far-reaching neighborhoods of strangers. Suburban housing developments began to sprawl in all directions.

Boise was coming of age as an urban community about the time Peter O'Neill took a job with Boise Cascade in 1965. Having served on both the policy advisory board for the National Association of Homebuilders and the Harvard-MIT Joint Center for Urban Studies, he described that time as a confluence of country business acumen with the need for more precisely skilled professionals to evaluate and plan Boise's growth needs. O'Neill longed to one day find the right place and time to put his passion and vision for urban design to work, a place where the natural environment had not already been muddled by poor planning and development. That place turned out to be along the Boise River known as the "wrong side of town," down in the "flood plain." By 1979, O'Neill had started River Run Development Company, the predecessor of his current company, OE LLC, which acquired much of the 125 acres running along the south side of the river and out toward the ranch lands east of Boise. Over time O'Neill completed the River Run Master Plan for the entire area. In the mid-1980s, O'Neill started the River Run and Spring Meadow developments along Parkcenter Boulevard. By the late 1980s Ivan Harris was ready to sell his ranch, including the old Bown site. That decade's difficult economy and the heavy development expenses of bringing the River Run Master Plan to reality left O'Neill unable to make the purchase. "We drank a lot of lemonade and coffee sitting on the back porch getting to know one another in those days," O'Neill laughed. Finally, with the financial backing of long-time Pennsylvania investor Robert Kopf, the final few pieces running along Parkcenter Boulevard, including the Bown site, were purchased to complete the plan.

The Bown parcel had been identified as a commercial park in the master plan because of its proximity to an anticipated future bridge across the Boise River near a convergence point between Boise Avenue and Parkcenter Boulevard. With their headquarters just a few miles down the street and a vision of southeast Boise's future growth projections, the Albertsons grocery chain aggressively pursued Kopf to purchase this parcel. Eventually they succeeded and purchased the Bown parcel with an eye toward making the site a destination supermarket for the area. In the late 1990s, OE LLC developed Surprise Valley on a major piece of the Ivan Harris land further south and west from Bown. The prevailing subdivision design at the time, encouraged by market demand and anxiety over car traffic, included widespread use of cul-de-sacs and small loop-roads. These roads disconnected neighborhoods, forcing local trips onto increasingly congested arterial roads. River Run Drive



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Bown Crossing recalls the Italianate style of the original 1879 farmhouse. This 2006 Bown Crossing architectural showpiece mixes Italianate, Art Deco and International styles.

in River Run and Surprise Way in Surprise Valley provide examples of collector roads gathering traffic from the adjacent cul-de-sacs and circle drives. During this era, homes had at least two- and usually three-door garages facing the street. Neighborhood centers consisting of swimming pools, tennis courts and community halls were dedicated to resident use only and were often closed on nights and weekends. However, O'Neill had a different picture in mind for the old Bown farmstead. Inspired by Congress for the New Urbanism principles, he bought the Bown Crossing property back from Albertsons. With the help of citizens who wanted more school sites in southeast Boise, O'Neill traded some land to the school district to build Riverside



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Riverside Elementary School serves families in Bown Crossing and other east Boise neighborhoods. The school uses the Bown House as living museum to teach pioneer history.

School. The district's land acquisition included the Bown House, which was preserved and used for educational purposes. The final step to replacing an Albertsons supermarket as the area's traffic-generating anchor came when the City of Boise agreed to purchase part of the land for a future library site.

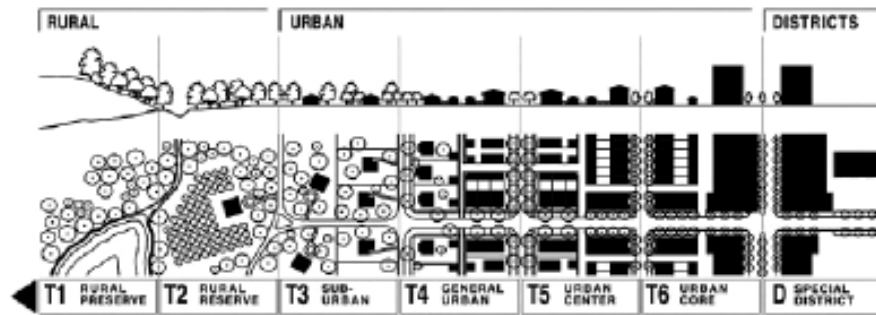
O'Neill envisioned the human need to replicate what we remember from childhood, the homes of our past. These are the places that recall the meaning and value of myths, something quite different from a neighborhood grocery store. Until the late 1990s, however, O'Neill described the planning process in Boise as encouraging simple lot and block "corn field" subdivisions. Zoning required wide collector streets and setbacks from the major arterials running traffic to and from the homes of the neighborhoods. "For some reason, bigger was seen as better," said O'Neill about home design. "There didn't seem to be an understanding that discretionary home buyers want various living situations that just have to be nice." At that time, smaller

building parcels and homes were almost always of lower quality. He wanted Bown to be the new gold standard where everyone wanted to live, work and play, even though many of the homes and building sites were small.

By 1993, the City of Boise had hired Hal Simmons, now the planning director for the Planning and Zoning Department. One of his first projects was to update and rewrite the Boise Comprehensive Plan. Adopted in 1997, it was refined one year later by the addition of the pedestrian commercial zone, which became the foundation of mixed-use urban design in Boise. O'Neill, working with Simmons, was one of the first to utilize the new zone. At Bown Crossing, the zoning allows for office, residential and retail mixed uses. Convenient access to daily tasks minimizes traffic congestion and reduces visual clutter. Buildings correspond to the street on a pedestrian scale. Parking goes to the side and rear of the buildings. Derek O'Neill, Peter's son and president of O'Neill Enterprises, worked with the city and highway district to improve Bown Crossing's original plan. The southeast neighborhoods along Boise Avenue were joined with those of Parkcenter and Warm Springs Boulevards. Other concerns, such as moving and maintaining two irrigation arterials (thus mitigating risks of building below the elevation of the New York Canal), utilizing the land near the Riverside School as a transition zone between mixed-use commercial and residential development and providing right-of-way for the future East Parkcenter Bridge, were also addressed in a collaborative way. In the end, the City of Boise helped establish a prime example of New Urbanism in its approach to this commercial infill. Simmons called it a "fantastic model" that "benefits everyone within a mile or two."

In 1995, when *Newsweek* first reported on the Congress for the New Urbanism, journalist Jerry Alder seemed to anticipate Bown Crossing when he described several ways to fix the suburbs. Small lawns, street landscaping, pedestrian access to shopping, corner stores, skinny streets, gridded streets, hidden garages, varied housing types, a buffer of open space, small parking lots, low street lighting, a neighborhood center: these and other New Urbanist characteristics give Bown its sense of place. The development also receives high marks for its consistency with the city's Comprehensive Plan. It attempts to protect waterways and vegetation. It mixes residences with two- and three-story commercial buildings. Narrow streets now join previously disconnected but contiguous neighborhoods. Low-light street lamps recall the era of streetcar suburb. Trees add shade and texture, and sidewalks separate pedestrians from the bustle of cars. Bown Crossing also earned kudos for dispensing with street-clogging cul-de-sacs. Derek O'Neill said 33 percent of the 36-acre Bown Crossing site is open space that features connecting

72 growing closer



Congress for the New Urbanism

Disciples of the New Urbanism strive for neighborhood densities that maximize consumer choice. This transect diagram shows the type of street, landscaping and building that fits each environment, from the low-density rural to high-density urban.

pathways to the town square, neighborhood streets and the Greenbelt. Garages and the majority of parking remain behind buildings or tucked into the front exterior of homes. Condominiums, townhomes, patio homes, loft apartments and custom homes combine to offer a mix of living opportunities in a diverse price range of \$217,000 to \$1.3 million. Some of the residents work in the shops, restaurants and businesses in Bown Crossing. Others commute to work on bicycle, while retirees enjoy close access to the biking and hiking trails of Boise.

Even though the recent completion of the East Parkcenter Bridge improved the connectivity of Bown Crossing to outlying biking and walking paths, connections to public transit—the freeway, airport and across town—remain limited by access through adjacent neighborhoods along Boise Avenue and Parkcenter Boulevard. This disconnection with outlying transportation options affects the ability of residents and merchants within Bown Crossing to reduce their reliance on vehicle travel. On the other hand, Urban Land Institute research indicates that residents in compact developments like Bown travel 20-40 percent fewer miles compared to low-density developments and 60 percent less than urban neighborhoods.

The primary difference from other neighborhood centers developed in Boise is the town square. Bown residents can enjoy outdoor music, family night out, patio dining, block parties and a farmer's market right in the center of town. The new town center also reflects its heritage through its



Aaron Catt

Pouring foundations for the Riverwalk subdivision at Bown Crossing, the project's final residential phase, 2010. Homes are expected to start at \$218,000.

architecture. The Bown family designed their farm home in the Italianate motif popular at the turn of the 20th century. Aaron Catt, of O2 Marketing Group located from Bown Crossing, describes O'Neill's design as incorporating this era quite well into Bown Crossing. An almost identical replica of the soffit of the Bown House is reflected in the commercial building housing a Mexican restaurant at the corner of Bown Way and Riverwalk Drive. The use of sandstone exteriors and exterior colors reminiscent of the Bown House have become part of the community, and street names like Bown Way, Abigail Way, Herbert Drive, Temperance Way and Rookery Lane preserve the memory of the Bown family and their time. Integrated into the Italianate architecture, O'Neill added similar aspects of California Bungalow and Craftsman design to unite texture and interest into the overall look of Bown Crossing. Tying the old with the new, O'Neill designed the town square to center on a view of the cupola of the Bown House.



Condominiums are among the mix of residential choices for residents in Bown Crossing.

According to Derek O’Neill, they conducted a combination of 72 public and neighborhood meetings during the planning and development process of Bown Crossing. During these meetings, neighbors and the city discussed concerns about connecting walking paths between Bown and existing neighborhoods to the east and north. The Ada County Highway District wanted a major connector between Parkcenter Boulevard and Boise Avenue to cross at Holcomb Road. O’Neill applied the outcomes of these discussions to the final version of the development. The highway district eventually discovered that a connector road twice as long as the one there now was not only cost-prohibitive, but it also would certainly disrupt the quaint nature of the current

town square feeling of place. The new connector would not be the 'skinny' street that became the backbone of commerce and neighborly communion along its edges.

One of the amenities mentioned on several occasions by city officials and neighbors alike was the inclusion of a branch library at the site. Internal market studies conducted by O'Neill years before showed that libraries greatly enhance the well being of community inhabitants and fit well with New Urbanism design standards. While the city owns the land dedicated for a library at Bown Crossing, the first bond election necessary to raise funds to build the structures failed and the project is now on hold until funding is available.

New Urbanism place-making concepts—narrow streets, a variety of housing choices, hidden garages, protected waterways and connected neighborhoods—found a welcome home in Bown Crossing. Subsequent communities at 36th and Hill Road and the next phases of Harris Ranch look to the Bown model for reassurance and process modeling. In Peter O'Neill's mind, though, the key to designing New Urbanism communities is to focus on the right mix of uses. Using this approach, Bown Crossing benefitted the surrounding neighborhood, the city and everyone involved, while providing a local example to other developers of a New Urbanism design that works. Bown Crossing captured the essence of how place enhances the human experience by tapping into our collective memory. The Bown House provides a reminder of design tested by time. The partnership formed with the City of Boise and the citizens of the surrounding neighborhoods enhanced the outcomes for everyone as demonstrated by busy streets, a commercial center and owner-occupied homes at Bown Crossing, something of a novelty for communities built in the mid-2000s. The capability of O'Neill Enterprises to risk updating their successful designs in River Run, Spring Meadows and Surprise Valley to accommodate New Urbanism concepts in Bown Crossing, and rejecting sprawl, speaks of their desire to move Boise toward designs established when people and not automobiles drove the creation of communities with a sense of "place."

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