

Envy Labs  
& Code School

Florida Advanced Manufacturing  
Research Center

Full Sail  
University

Nurturing  
Technology



# BUSINESS<sup>®</sup>

SEPTEMBER 2014

## Art of URBANISM

*Craig Ustler: Painting  
Orlando's Future*

## PARKER BROTHERS CONCEPTS

*Dream Big...  
Build Bigger*



ALSO INSIDE:  
**FLTREP**





# Art of URBANISM

[ By Eric Wright ]

## *Craig Ustler: Painting Orlando's Future*

"If to do was as easy as wanting to do," to paraphrase Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, "modest chapels would be cathedrals and poor men's cottages princes' palaces." The English bard recognized that turning an idea, or an ideal, into a viable result is far more challenging than the simple dreamer assumes. But for some, like Craig Ustler, it is the challenge of what can or should be that excites their imagination.

While economic observers are saying the central Florida development market is starting to show the first signs of spring, after years of winter recession, Ustler's group has been far from dormant. They have not only built several celebrated projects during the last decade, but he is laying the groundwork for ventures that could change the culture and the economic DNA, not to mention the skyline, of downtown Orlando. ►







The magic Ustler worked by joining with others to turn the aging downtown neighborhood of Thornton Park into a trendy mix of residential condos, offices, restaurants and retail shops, established a reputation for understanding the new migration back into urban areas. In addition, seeing the need for gathering places that make city life distinctive and attractive, he and his partners started Urban Life Management Restaurant Group. The company owns and operates Citrus restaurant in the Uptown District, is affiliated with Cityfish in Thornton Park and is involved in the restaurant that will occupy the former HUE Restaurant space, which will be known as Soco.

## The Means to an End

Both sides of Ustler's family were in the real estate business, and initially, development was what he thought he wanted to do. "That meant you went out and built things; it was interesting to me and I'm project-oriented," Ustler explained.

"But coupled with that, I always had an affinity for cities; I suppose it

was my experience traveling as I grew up. That fostered an interest in complex or urban development versus suburban types of real estate development," he added. "Typically, real estate development meant you take land and put it into production to increase the value. That, in and of itself, had no allure for me. What was and is engaging is community building, neighborhood building and ultimately, city building. Development is a tool that I use to accomplish that objective. For me, the end game is good neighborhoods and good places, creating spaces where people and businesses want to be."

Ustler grew up in College Park and always liked Thornton and Delany Park and that is where he got started renovating and building houses, his first forays into development. "That was more interesting than just building track homes; there was a context that I found appealing and intellectually stimulating."

For Ustler the "eureka" moment that set his trajectory came when he switched his major from civil engineering to urban economics, as a sophomore at the University of Florida. "I realized I was entrepreneurial and wanted to major in cities," for which there was no major at the time. Soon he found himself traveling to a "New Urbanism" symposium in Seaside, Fla. He recalled, "I was inspired by that and on the drive back to Gainesville, I decided that what they presented was an understanding of a better way to build. It was a movement at that point – cutting edge. Today it is the norm."

## The New Urbanization

One might wonder, why is there a magnetic attraction, particularly among Millennials, to urban living?

"Children have a natural inclination to not do what their parents have done, and their parents wanted the stucco house, on a lot, in a subdivision," Ustler shared. "This generation sees the world differently. For them it is about efficiency or convenience, where time is this great commodity they cherish, and basically, urban life is simply more efficient. What they want is to be able to easily commute to work, preferably by walking, riding a bike or public transport, and to have multiple options for interaction with their friends over coffee or beer and tech stuff.

"I would like to think it is driven by ideals; that people finally got the memo. But for the most part, I don't think so; it is more intuitive. The urban environment



simply produces, by its nature, a more interesting and engaging set of options in work, food, art and entertainment.”

By the mid-90s, reinventing the city was more than a concept; it was a trend. Encouraged by this shift, Ustler believed Orlando was the “appropriate sized pond” to return to after graduate school and a stint in the Urban Land Institute in DC. He could see the city’s potential and as a third generation resident, he had deep roots.

From remodeling existing houses, to building duplexes, to larger more ambitious projects, Ustler’s reputation and experience continued to grow. Successes mounted in Thornton, College and Delany Parks, and he was enjoying the experience. Soon a project like Thornton Park Central presented itself. “No one had done downtown mixed use condos for some time, so I asked, ‘Why not me?’ I thought I knew what the neighborhood wanted and if it didn’t work, I was still young and employable,” he said laughing.

## Envisioning the Villages

“We built on our collective experience, but it was purely entrepreneurial. It was not only successful; Thornton Park Central became iconic.” It is that kind of iconic success that attracts even bigger opportunities, where there was more land and more control of how the targeted area was developed. This led to Uptown, presenting the prospect for more midsized urban development, a “hybrid-urbanism,” as Ustler called it. Then, “recession happened.”

Ustler’s team filled their buildings, but pondered what they would do until the skies parted and the economy began to move. It was then that Ustler decided he wanted to work on “large meaningful projects that could change the trajectory of the city.”

The magnum opus of his team’s creativity and innovation became Health Village, centered around Florida Hospital and the Creative Village downtown focusing on technology and urban education.

Health Village began as a Request for Proposal (RFP) for an apartment complex adjacent to the hospital. Ustler’s approach was different: “We told them, ‘We are neighborhood builders and if you want to make this more than a collection of buildings, something that will add value and be an urban brand for economic development and quality of life, we’re your folks.’”

Florida Hospital understood that to recruit and to retain the young skilled staff they needed, who were migrating to other urban areas like Portland and Seattle, would require an out-of-the-box approach, which ultimately they adopted. Building a community, which focused on health and wellness, is now attracting national attention.

The other anchor or hub around which communities of the 21st century are built, besides healthcare, is education. “Mayor Dyer understood that when the new Amway Center was completed there would be some 60-plus acres left vacant and he needed an answer for what that could be,” Ustler said. “A taskforce came up with a Tech Village concept, which became Creative Village, with the idea of clustering new high tech creative industries and universities in an urban village environment, in what could become an economic engine.”

Public/private partnerships of that type were not in Ustler’s wheelhouse. But when he was approached by Jeff Brock about the social and city building opportunities it presented, along with the impact it could have on the historic Parramore district, his interest was piqued.

Ustler is viewed as ideally suited to lead such an effort, as the area has been so good to both sides of his family for generations and few have his grasp of urban development. “If you view real estate, not just as a business, but as an opportunity to make the city better, while changing

## Creative Village

The Creative Village will transform the former site of the Amway Arena into a 68-acre mixed-use, transit-oriented, urban infill neighborhood that will be home to leading higher education providers; high-tech, digital media and creative companies; and a diverse mix of students, employees and residents. Creative Village fosters a “live, work, learn and play” lifestyle in the heart of downtown Orlando while bringing exciting opportunities to the Parramore area.

When complete, a public/private partnership between Orlando and Creative Village Development, LLC will include:

- 900,000-1,000,000 sq. ft. of office/creative space
- 300,000-500,000 sq. ft. of higher education space
- 25,000 sq. ft. of K-12 education space
- 1,200-1,500 residential units
- 125,000-150,000 sq. ft. of retail/commercial space
- 150-200 hotel rooms

the economic fortunes of downtown Orlando, it was a blank canvas. There was a sort of, ‘If you believe it, prove it.’ Then I had to ask, ‘Can I get my head around this, can I build a team, can I get the mayor, UCF and others to get on board?’” So far, he has.

Though he views Creative Village as a 20-year project, it is the type of legacy he wants to help the city achieve. ■