

SOLID ROCK: A GIRLS' CAMP LIKE NO OTHER

Orlando[®]

The City's Magazine

URBAN RETHINKER

CRAIG USTLER'S VISION OF PEOPLE AND PLACE

\$3.95 NOVEMBER 2012



orlandomagazine.com

PLUS

Actress
Brit Marling's
rising star

Fantastic 5
Joseph Hayes'
culinary standouts



Craig Ustler stands at the former Amway Arena site, where workers are clearing the way for Creative Village.

PEOPLE... PLACE... POSSIBILITIES

The vision that Craig Ustler and his team have for Creative Village has its roots in the Orlando native's belief that community matters.

BY BRAD KUHN

The tanned man in tennis togs can't stand the suspense. For weeks, he and the regulars at the Orlando Tennis Center have been breathing the dust of demolition crews pulverizing the remains of the imploded Amway Arena, recycling that will literally pave the way for the 68-acre Creative Village to be built on the site over the next 15 years.

Togs and his friends have heard that once the machines finish picking the arena carcass, they'll turn their destructive jaws on the tennis center—a mainstay of the local racquet set since 1931.

"Could I read your mind?" Togs calls to a dapper man in a pressed dress shirt and tie walking on the other side of the fence who has the look of someone who would know. "Is it coming our way?"

"It is," says Tie Guy, continuing on his way. "But not for awhile."

Togs doesn't know it, but he's just heard the word from the horse's mouth. It takes a village to build a village—in this case a development team including Banc of America Community Development Corp.; architect Tim Baker of Baker Barrios; the City of Orlando; Ustler Development; and Brooke Myers, president of Emerge Real Estate Ventures, LLC.

NORMA LOPEZ MOLINA



a village for those who dance in brainstorm

and delight in the rainbows that follow

The guy in the tie is Craig Ustler, the 43-year-old developer in charge of turning that big hole in the ground and the surrounding real estate into a \$1.1 billion supercollider of digital collaboration to make even Richard Florida—the urban theorist credited with coining the term “creative class”—sit up and take notice.

Over the next 15 years, Ustler plans to build up to 1.2 million square feet of office/creative studio space, 500,000 square feet of higher-education space, 25,000 square feet of K-12 education space, 1,500 residential units, 150,000 square feet of retail/commercial space and 225 hotel rooms.

Backers are calling it the largest public transit-oriented development in Central Florida, significantly expanding the presence of insti-

tutions of higher learning like the University of Central Florida and Valencia College in downtown Orlando. Creative Village will also be the largest LEED-certified neighborhood development in the state, meaning a heavy emphasis on energy efficiency and environmental-friendly design.

It sounds almost too good to be true—except that when Craig Ustler says something is going to happen, it usually does.

It was Ustler, for instance, who managed to finagle construction financing for the \$30 million GAI Building at Summerlin Avenue and South Street during a commercial credit drought that halted all other private projects in the city's core.

He's also the guy most often credited, along with real estate broker Phil Rampy, for kick-

starting a downtown housing boom in 2001, with the opening of Thornton Park Central, a mixed-use condo development at Summerlin and Central Boulevard.

From an outpost at 801 N. Orange Ave., Ustler and his father, Tom, have been making their mark throughout downtown Orlando. They are currently working on a 230-unit apartment building targeted at healthcare workers as part of Florida Hospital's Health Village. And they recently announced plans for a 135-room hotel at Colonial Drive and Orange Avenue.

But this story is about more than Ustler. It's also about the thousands of people who will learn, earn and yearn for authentic lives in a neighborhood that doesn't exist yet. It's about a little bookstore that was perfect, except for

NORMA LOPEZ MOLINA

Orlando skyline. “When he was designing his restaurants (HUE, Cityfish and Citrus), he studied the business right down to what kinds of napkins they put on the table.”

Ustler wanted an independent bookstore at Thornton Park Central—a trendy gathering place to exchange ideas over coffee and wine. A disciple of New Urbanism, Ustler even had the perfect name for his book boîte. He called it Urban Think! And it was good. Except for the book part.

“We were more of a ‘think’ store than a bookstore,” says former manager Jim Cresciti, who was there almost from the beginning and turned over the keys when it closed in 2008, succumbing to the one-two punch of big-box volume retailers and the evolution of electronic books that were both cheaper and more readily available than ink on paper.

When Urban Think! closed, a lot of retailers expressed interest in the space. Five Guys, the hamburger chain, was mentioned. But Ustler refused to let go of his dream of using that space as a neighborhood thought spot.

He formed a nonprofit and invited the community for what developers and architects would call a “charette”—an intense brainstorming—of alternative uses consistent with his original vision. The result was Urban ReThink, a shared workspace leased to creative types seeking an affordable base of operations for their various business endeavors. On any given day, you might find a web designer working beside a copy editor, while a consultant takes a meeting in the small conference room that can be rented by the hour. At night, the space still moonlights as a gathering place, hosting speakers and writers, musicians and thinkers of all stripes.

BARRY KIRSCH



PEOPLE... PLACE... POSSIBILITIES

A sign near the front door introduces the store and its mission conversationally, as if the space were speaking to passers-by: “Let’s Think About Work & Progress.” Inside, a 10-foot yellow rendering of a child’s crayon self-portrait on the east wall proclaims “The Audacity of Play.”

With an annual budget just under \$250,000, and a mission of supporting art, community and children’s literacy, Urban ReThink is a serious business, albeit one that doesn’t take itself too seriously.

The space can already claim an impressive list of accomplishments—from the launch of the Page 15 children’s literacy initiative and indie publisher Burrow Press, to The Corridor Project, a community-wide outdoor art installation. There’s also The Spork, a nifty local purveyor of nutritious “happy food.”

What does Ustler, an admitted control freak, make of all this?

He’s practically giddy.

“I’m very happy with Urban ReThink,” he says. “I think it’s been great for the neighborhood and great for the community.”

Julia Young, executive director of the Urban Think! Foundation, says Ustler, in addition to being their landlord, serves on the board and has personally donated more than 10 percent of the foundation’s revenue. He frequently emails articles and ideas but, for the most part, has honored his commitment to “let it go and let it grow.”

“He understands that creativity has to happen organically,” Young says of Ustler. “You can’t just buy it and put it in and plug it in.”

Left and below: Urban ReThink, once stocked with books, has become a gathering place for ideas. On this and succeeding pages: Some of the slogans that adorn the construction fences at the Creative Village site.

NEW VISION FOR PARRAMORE

A mile and a half west of Urban ReThink sits the Creative Village site, with colorful slogan-filled banners strung along a chainlink fence hiding the land clearing and demolition behind it. One message, in particular, gives a hint of what's to come: "A village for those who color outside the lines."

Across the street lies Orlando's Parramore neighborhood. Although they are so close, it's hard to imagine two areas with less in common. While Creative Village is touted as a place of hope and progress, Parramore has languished as a legacy of poverty and oppression.

According to the most recent Census data, about 2,000 children live in Parramore, which encompasses 1.4 square miles. Almost all are of African-American or Haitian ancestry, and 73 percent live below the poverty line. More than 90 percent of high school-age students from this neighborhood read below grade level. With most families lacking the basics of food, clothing and shelter, children's education has not been a priority for some time.

It's not a pretty picture. Not like the gleaming tomorrowland envisioned by Tim Baker and the design team at Baker Barrios. Civic boosters fall all over themselves at the idea of a downtown jobs magnet—a state-of-the-art fantasy of the creative class, with their heads so full of job-generating knowledge you can hear their craniums creak with the effort to contain it all.

Too often, though, such urban utopias don't turn out well for the people who lived there before the big money moved in. Displacement, it seems, is the price of progress. Although Par-

ramore's population is predominantly black, it has been poverty, more than race, that has defined the community since desegregation. More than 80 percent of Parramore residents rent, and the median household income is just over \$13,000—roughly a third of the take-home pay for residents on the other side of the aptly-named Division Avenue, the line of demarcation between Parramore and the central business district.

The challenge is not lost on Ustler. "What you have here is a collision between a neighborhood with deep roots and a government that built a big parking lot with a basketball arena in the middle," Ustler says.

He seems genuinely committed to making sure that the Parramore community is more than a passive observer to the economic benefits of Creative Village. And the Nap Ford Community School looms large in that plan.

PATHWAY TO PROGRESS

Across the street from where Togs plays tennis is a tightly packed collection of portable buildings. The Nap Ford Community School, the pride of Parramore, was founded in 2001, about the time Ustler was opening Urban Think!.

A charter school serving 153 children, Pre-K through Grade 5, the Nap Ford school was the first to serve the neighborhood in more than 30 years. An "A" school that slid to an "F" in 2011 after funding cuts, it was in danger of losing its charter before the Creative Village team stepped in.

Brooke Myers, project manager for Creative Village, works out of Ustler's office and serves on the school's board of directors. Myers and Ustler

Below: Brooke Myers (right), project manager for Creative Village, talks with Jennifer Porter-Smith, principal of Nap Ford Community School.



a village for those who see the success of Orlando

focused on the jobs of tomorrow



The massive Creative Village, shown in a rendering looking south from Colonial Drive, would cover 68 acres.

helped Principal Jennifer Porter-Smith raise the \$170,000 she needed to extend the school day an extra hour—a change that Porter-Smith credits with raising the school's FCAT performance back to an "A" within a year. Page 15, the literacy nonprofit backed by Ustler, relocated from Urban ReThink to the nearby Orlando Recreation Center to help out.

As Togs shuffles off dejectedly to break the bad news to his tennis partners, Ustler gestures expansively toward the recreation center, and talks about returning Livingston Street to its original alignment, creating a main street from the proposed SunRail station to Orange Blossom Trail, right through the tennis center.

A renovated rec center will anchor the larger

Nap Ford school, which will be expanded through high school and will accommodate 600 students. The school will be to Creative Village what Urban ReThink is to Thornton Park. Ustler sees it as a feeder school where students are groomed to matriculate from high school to Valencia College to the University of Central Florida—all to be represented in Creative Village—and emerge ready to cross Livingston into the land of opportunity on the north side of the street. North of Livingston is where Bank of America will build 2,000 housing units, most of them at an affordable price. North of Livingston is the corporate campus, where digital commerce will fly through the air like invisible Frisbees, carried on the high-tech hopes of the community and kept aloft by investors with capital, catering to young, fast-

growing tech companies.

Pipe dream? Perhaps. But the Nap Ford school outperformed the state in science last year. And if Ustler's experience with Urban Think! has taught him anything, it's that people, not planners, have the final say in how their neighborhood turns out.

BLOOD AND BONE

If Craig Ustler seems more blasé than most developers when it comes to making a buck, it's because he's never been without it.

As far as money goes, Ustler was twice blessed. His mother, Kay, is the daughter of citrus baron Jerry Chicone. His father, Tom, came from a prominent foliage family. Both families transitioned naturally into the real estate business as their land became more valuable for develop-

ment than agriculture. Real estate, you might say, is in his blood.

Having worked in and around development from an early age, it was practically a given that he would follow his father into the family's growing real estate business. Ustler worked summers as a surveyor platting subdivisions in the palmetto scrub and piney woods of east Orange County, and learned construction management from family friend and mentor Jim Pugh.

In the 1980s, turning bogs into bungalows seemed like a developer's divine right. It wasn't until graduate school, when he attended a workshop on an emerging trend called "New Urbanism," that Ustler experienced the Damascus Road conversion that would make him a disciple of urban renewal, condo living and car-optional, walkable communities.

NORMA LOPEZ MOLINA

BAKER BARRIOS ARCHITECTS, BAKERBARRIOS.COM

A series of banners illustrates the future at the Creative Village site.



a village for those who see Downtown Orlando as a launch pad for innovation

Below: Ustler built the GAI Building during the darkest days of the economic downturn.

Ustler grew up in College Park in the 1970s, about a five-iron away from the Orlando Country Club. His Camelot and Sherwood Forest were the woods between his neighborhood and the Parkwood Plaza on John Young Parkway. It was a “Leave it to Beaver” time of “free range” parenting, when it was common for kids to pedal off on their bikes in the morning to play in the woods until nightfall.

Back then, there were still stores downtown—Rutland’s, JCPenney and Behr’s shoe store, where owner and part-time tire pitchman Sam Behr famously promised he could “fit any human.”

Ustler liked College Park, although he couldn’t have told you exactly why at the time. He didn’t know about things like street grids,

small blocks, parks and trees—“bone structure” in the vernacular of New Urbanism—and amenities, such as shops, restaurants, hospitals and employers.

Talking with Ustler, you’ll notice that he hardly ever uses the word “building.” In his mind, buildings are essentially the same—although he prefers his to be green and LEED-certified, a dealmaker for the GAI Building. A good development, to him, is judged by how well the manmade elements “activate” people, drawing them in to earn, learn, live and love without the need for a car to connect these varied aspects of their lives.

He practices what he preaches, living downtown at the Sanctuary, a condo development in the heart of the Thornton Park neighborhood—

although intentionally not one he built.

“You don’t want to be the one all your neighbors call every time the lights go out,” he says.

Ustler’s practical and profitable application of New Urbanism has made him a hot commodity in the classroom. He regularly packs classes at Rollins College, where the next generation of would-be developers come to learn at the feet of the master, and he travels to places like Portland, Oregon, and Austin, Texas, to walk the streets and neighborhoods that have influenced his thinking.

He tries to spend a couple of weeks every two months in Manhattan, where he walks the streets like a human divining rod in search of new insights into how people and places mix naturally.

He and his partners have high hopes for Creative Village, and the powers that be are cheering them on. They have spent the last two years trying to figure out what they want it to be, and they’re about to start putting their plan into action.

Creative Village is by far the biggest project Ustler has ever worked on. His sweet spot has been midrise office and residential buildings in the \$30 million range. But he is quick to point out that construction will be spread out over 15 years, and his first project at Creative Village will be—what else—a midrise office building in the \$30 million range.

Nor is he putting all his eggs in one basket. In addition to the hotel and the project at Florida Hospital, he and his father are working on plans for more construction and rebranding of the neighborhood around their headquarters at 801 N. Orange—although he’s not quite ready to share details.

Ustler ultimately would like to be known for what he has accomplished throughout the community, and not for a single development. The sheer size of Creative Village, however, dictates that this is likely to be his crowning achievement.

It’s a daunting task. But Ustler is confident that Creative Village will ultimately succeed. He knows that a big part of that will depend on the wildcard of human interaction. Like Urban Think!, he has a vision of how he thinks things will turn out. But if his creation breaks free and begins to morph into something else, he knows what to do.

Let it go and let it grow. ☑

CREATIVE VISION

An urban planner’s dreamscape, Creative Village Orlando promises something for everyone.

- Like trains and mass transit? There will be a SunRail stop a block east at LYNX Central Station.
- Education? It’s got every level—from Kindergarten through Ph.D.
- Job creation? There will be 1.2 million square feet of office/creative space and a “capital accelerator” program to help entrepreneurs reach cruising speed.
- Walkability? Think small blocks and lots of bike and pedestrian amenities.
- Housing? There are 1,500 residential units planned, most of them affordable apartments.
- Sustainability? Creative Village will be the largest LEED-Neighborhood Development in Florida—starting with the recycling of the old arena.
- Community? An Ustler hallmark. Look for a food co-op, lots of green space, and hangouts like Thornton Park’s Urban ReThink—shape-shifting spaces that morph with the evolving persona of the neighborhood.
- Diversity? Ustler envisions the Nap Ford school expanded from its current enrollment of 153 students to 600, grades K-12, drawn from the surrounding Parramore community and placed on a path to prosperity through knowledge.

A utopian vision? No doubt. But one based on Ustler’s obsession with how people interact with places, a search that has taken him to most of the great cities of the world. He maintains a home in Manhattan and says he tries to spend 10 days there every two months, walking the streets and observing how people interact with their environment.

He has taken extensive notes on some of his favorite cities in the U. S. and has published brief summaries available at his company’s home page, ustler.net.

—Brad Kuhn



NORMA LOPEZ MOLINA