

Crichton Place opens, adding another chapter to Assemi story

 fresnobee.com/2014/07/01/4005991/crichton-place-opens-adding-another.html

The_Fresno_Bee

Crichton Place, at San Joaquin and L streets in Fresno, is Granville's new downtown development. It will have a grand opening July 1.

MARK CROSSE — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

A ribbon-cutting was scheduled in Fresno's Uptown on Tuesday, but it turned into a reflection on democracy.

About 50 people gathered mid-morning at the corner of L and San Joaquin streets to formally open Crichton Place, a 28-unit townhome project built by Granville Homes.

Granville President Darius Assemi thanked neighborhood activists, city officials and the growing legions who believe in downtown revitalization. He even made light of Topic A for everyone not in the shade.

"What's the temperature -- 101?" Assemi said. "Well, it's a beautiful 101."

Then the power players cut a ceremonial ribbon. Crichton Place -- 1,423-square-foot, two-story homes with 2 1/2 baths and two-car garages -- is in business.

But this event was more than the typical group thumbs-up for shiny new buildings. This was public confirmation of what's apparent to anyone who spends Thursdays in the City Council chamber -- Fresno isn't sure what to think about Assemi and Granville Homes.

City Manager Bruce Rudd got this line of thought going.

Sometimes City Hall loves Assemi, Rudd said, and sometimes it doesn't.

"This is one of those cases where we love everything he does for downtown," Rudd said with a smile.

It's a safe bet most in the audience knew the back story.

Granville Homes and an Assemi family full of developers seem to be doing big things everywhere. They're turning the former Running Horse fiasco in west Fresno into an almond ranch that's to be the springboard to a housing project. They're building a huge master-planned community west of Highway 99. They're planning a series of schools tied to the health care industry.

In the smaller footprint of Uptown, north of Fulton Mall, they've been building almost nonstop for a decade.

Crichton Place, like the bigger projects, divided people into the "love Assemi" or the "hate Assemi" camp. The fate of two old houses on the site, the way City Hall handles building permits and heated debate on state environmental law stirred the pot. Complex litigation continues to poison relationships.

Granville, for better or for worse, plowed through it all. City officials and humanitarians have tried for decades to transform the demoralizing decay in the L-San Joaquin area without resorting solely to government funds. The powerful Assemis put talk aside and did it.

Becky Foore-Hayden, a resident of the nearby Lowell Neighborhood, said she wished the two old homes could have been saved. To lose them is sad, she said, but "to gain this is phenomenal."

Don Simmons, also a neighbor and among the city's most active preservationists, said Fresno must do more to protect its architectural past. But, he added, Crichton Place will be a valuable effort to "renew life" in the neighborhood.

Several speakers echoed Rudd, saying they don't always agree with Granville. Several speakers said Assemi is the Mick Jagger of downtown revitalization -- the comparison having something to do with charisma.

A poster with before-and-after photos of the northeast corner of L and San Joaquin sat next to the speakers podium.

"Drive by this place at night," said Roz Clark, head of Fresno's Neighborhood Watch. "It's fabulous."

The columnist can be reached at (559) 441-6272 or ghostetter@fresnobee.com. Read his City Beat blog at fresnobee.com/city-beat.