

Mark Arax: Blackstone is the boulevard of broken dreams

By
MarkArax

My youngest son, Jake, wants to know why I sometimes take Blackstone Avenue to and fro when another route would make more sense.

“Who built this mess, Dad?”

“This beautiful mess?” I echo.

He’s 16, and city planning has become an idea for him, inchoate though it is.

“How did Blackstone happen?” he asks.

“I’m not sure. But it was an act of commitment.”

We make a game of counting the billboards and signs. You take the billboards, and I’ll take the signs. We go a couple of blocks, fast-food bedlam, before our eyes give out. On the northeast corner of Blackstone and Shaw avenues, a white wattage flash startles the night. Billboard or sign, who can say?

One of my old high school buddies, who left years ago, argues that all you need to know about Fresno can be gleaned in a single Blackstone drive. No place with even a modicum of self-worth would allow such a disgrace, much less right down its spine. I venture it’s more complicated than that — and more simple. I doubt that anyone in City Hall actually planned on disfiguring Fresno this way. The boulevard more or less developed, downtown to river, a century of progress, without any countervailing force ever saying “No.” In the process, its belief only got replicated.

One recent summer, on our way out of town to get my old baseball mitt fixed in Ada, Ohio, where it had been made, I challenged Jake to find a main street in America that rivaled Blackstone for the manner in which its desecration was able to hang on long enough that it actually became interesting. We drove across the high desert of Nevada, the badlands of South Dakota, the corn fields of Iowa, wildfires and heat storms chasing us, and only on the road back, as we came upon Lincoln, Nebraska, did we find such a boulevard.

I used to think of Blackstone’s assault as a hammering that seeped into my subconscious, a disquiet not easy to pin down. Now I feel sorry for all that it tries to be and cannot. Its tatters appear only more visible now in the beating brought down by the Bust. On the way to the bookstore, Jake and I join the cars, brake lights missing, as they cruise up Blackstone to Edwards. The whole town from here seems a light bulb short. The Radi Shack. The Chin Buffet. Two liquor stores bark for customers from opposite sides of the street, one shouting LIQ and the other shouting UOR.

If Jake’s school work allows it, I plan on taking him this Thursday to City Hall, where an answer to his question about Blackstone might just be found in the discussion of the 2035 General Plan. I’ll urge him to pay close attention to the councilman who represents our part of town. Listen as he tosses around the Libertarian notion that a plan such as this — directing the city inward, checking the consumption of sprawl, making developers pay for the real cost of growth — is a shackle on the desires of free man.

On the way up the steps, I might explain to Jake that one of the more remarkable public meetings I’ve ever witnessed, concerning this same general plan, took place more than two and a half years ago. That night, in these packed chambers, old Hmong women and young Latinas, people from parts of town scarcely heard from, triumphed over the developers. At least for a day, the city council voted the way of the people, endorsing a plan that went further than any previous plan in its attempt to slow the cratering of our city.

I'll explain to my son that a city's general plan, at best, is a philosophical document. That the real document — the one that lays down the actual incentives and disincentives to create a new model of growth — is yet to come. That these two documents together will mean everything or nothing depending on whether future city councils choose to follow or ignore them. That a developer's work at subverting the commonweal is never done, and our city's disdain for general plans is what led to Operation Rezone and the overbuilding of the Bust.

And then we'll sit down, hear the discussion and watch these men take their vote. Will they find the mettle and vote "Yes"? Or will they vote not to vote and delay a process that needn't be delayed any more?

I suspect, in that moment, Jake will learn something about Fresno that will never change for him. I suspect what he learns will help him decide his future. To stay or leave? He has a vote, too.

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