

Place Maker

PLANNING WITH PERSONALITY, BENNETT PEJI BRINGS HEART TO THE CITY

BY LIZ ARMSTRONG

+ PHOTO BY FRANCIS GEORGE

Master planning, as we know it, is designed to pave over miscellany. However, San Diego-based graphic and environmental designer and district planner Bennett Peji, who's also a commissioner of arts and culture for the city, is dedicated to fusing disparate elements into nice, neat packages that maintain a rich sense of personality.

Born into an itinerant family that traveled from Manila, Philippines, to several neighborhoods in San Diego, he attended a different school almost each year until sixth grade, which conditioned him to "thrive on change and be a creative thinker," says Peji. "Sociologists may call it 'having a high tolerance for ambiguity.' Businesses may call it 'design thinking' or 'innovative thinking.' Either way, I have little fear of the unknown and seek remarkable new experiences and solutions every day."

Peji's exposure to a fantastic array of cultures is evident in his projects which include: Hewlett-Packard's product interface and packaging designs, New Americans Museum branding and signage, and product design, store design and branding for a line of Italian accessories for the Chinese market. But he says his passion and specialty is district branding, work that produces a portfolio best viewed from the sidewalk.

Currently he's working on developing citywide branding for Carlsbad and downtown Rancho Bernardo, downtown National City and the Asian Pacific Historic District in downtown San Diego. It's a process that helps

A specialist in district branding, architectural graphics and design, Bennett Peji serves as commissioner of arts and culture for the City of San Diego as well as having been the master plan consultant for the Filipino Village Development in National City, Calif. His eclectic studio is located in San Diego's Gaslamp.

communities establish a foundation that, among other things, "creates a distinct and authentic sense of place," reads his design ethos, "helps restore the pride of local culture and history," "stimulates economic development" and "cultivates community interaction."

In sincere pursuit of authenticity, Peji sets up workshops for residents and property and business owners to help design and refine a project at its inception. He'll ask about the location's heritage and how to best connect that past to the community's vision of its future, or how this vision "integrates into the fabric of the city at large," he says.

This tuning-in process has garnered a lot of attention; over the last few years he's given more than 42 presentations in cities from Sao Paulo to Santa Fe about reframing what may, from a distance, look like hodge-podge, smoothing out the differences to create a coherent, solid, vibrant environment.

Peji says he's influenced by a range of creative media: spoken word, poetry, opera, modern dance, folk and public art, stage productions and neighborhood festivals. "Each one broadens my perspective and deepens my desire to provide solutions that connect to audiences on an emotional level." ▮

For more information on Bennett Peji Design, visit pejidesign.com or call 619/238-4555.

