

# Business & Personal Finance

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*"The great thing about Laura and Lois is they force you, and they ask you, to look at things a little bit differently."*

MATT WHITE, of Basin Street Properties, on designers Lois Fisher and Laura Hall



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

Lois Fisher, left, and Laura Hall of Fisher & Hall Urban Design worked with Basin Street Properties and the city of Petaluma to incorporate "New Urbanism" into the Basin Street Landing's design.

## What is New Urbanism?

A community design philosophy that favors the return of home development with traditional features such as prominent front porches, backyard garages, multiuse buildings, and multiuse development clustered near commercial service areas and transportation.

### PORTFOLIO

The "New Urbanism" projects that Lois Fisher and Laura Hall have helped design on the North Coast involved:



**Agilent campus**  
Helping redesign the former manufacturing facility in Rohnert Park into a mixed-use community.

**Central Petaluma Smart Code**  
Helped develop a design and building code for 400 acres in downtown Petaluma.

**Riverfront Plaza**  
Designed public space beside the mixed-use Basin Street Landing project in downtown Petaluma.

**Cotati Downtown Plan**  
Conducted public workshops, design development and drawings.

**San Quentin Reuse Design**  
Held public workshops to help create a reuse plan for the site in Marin County.

## WOMEN: Successful RP design could cement pair's reputation

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nesses and more than 500 homes.

Fisher and Hall know a successful design there in the coming years could cement their reputation as innovative thinkers. But they also know failure could set back the progress they've made.

The seeds of Fisher and Hall's partnership were planted in 1993 at a landscape architecture conference in Monterey.

Fisher, a 48-year-old Las Gatos native, was working for the Santa Rosa civil engineering firm Carlile Associates, which in 1996 became Carlile Macy.

Her job involved designing the layout of large, automobile-oriented subdivisions, but the task was taking a toll on her.

"I was getting paid to do what I hated. It was like I was dying inside," she said.

### Collision of values, goals

While she'd hoped to use her landscape architecture skills to bring features such as parks to such projects, she was finding those values colliding with the goals of developers and the objections of neighbors.

"I could see the pain that what I was doing was causing them," she said. "It was so clearly in violation of my inner purpose that I couldn't ignore it anymore."

So when Laura Hall, fresh from completing a master's degree program at UC Berkeley, spoke at the conference in Monterey about how suburban sprawl was fragmenting society, her message resonated with Fisher.

Hall's views were strongly influenced by the New Urbanist thinkers she'd studied at Berkeley. The movement, which has its roots in the 1960s but really took off in the early 1990s, advocated reining in sprawl and redeveloping urban areas to once again become places where people would enjoy living.

The rise of urban growth boundaries also forced developers to look inward for growth opportunities.

New Urbanists sought to create attractive, pedestrian-friendly, diverse environments that they felt more closely resembled how cities and towns had grown organically before World War II.

Fisher, liking what she heard, convinced Richard Carlile to hire Hall, and for two years, they tried to incorporate New Urbanist design principals into their work. After attending an intensive conference on the subject in New York, Fisher was convinced Carlile Associates should change course.

"That was the point of no return for me. So I became like a madwoman," Fisher said.

Like Fisher, Hall, 53, describes her study of New Urbanism as an experience that convinced her of its superiority to current planning methods.

"I wanted to just evangelize and convert everyone," she said.

Therein lies one of the core criticisms of the New Urbanists — that they are inflexible zealots.

There is little doubt that Fisher and Hall are passionate and think big. During a recent stroll around downtown Santa Rosa, they railed against the 1971 splitting of Old Courthouse Square. They advocated the undergrounding of Highway 101 to reunify the downtown with Railroad Square. And they lambasted massive buildings they say ignore pedestrians and sap an area of its vitality.

As quick as they can be to criticize designs they say don't work, they are also very positive about those that do. They love the Rosenberg Building, in part because of its retail on the ground floor, as well as the pedestrian-friendly Fourth Street.

One of the reasons the movement is gaining momentum in Sonoma County is that examples of this design are finally getting built, Fisher and Hall said. The Windsor Town Green Village project, which both women have been involved with through serving on the town's planning board, has given people a local example of New Urbanist design principles.

The project, developed by Orrin Thiesen, features two-story condominiums over ground-floor retail surrounding a town plaza. While the project's architecture has been both praised as innovative and criticized as cliché, Fisher and Hall say the debate it has stirred is healthy.

"Windsor is 99.9 percent suburban sprawl, but look at what those three little blocks have done," Hall said.

In addition to Windsor, Cotati and Petaluma also have New Urbanist projects. Cotati worked with Fisher and Hall to make its downtown more walkable, and Petaluma hired them to help implement a "form-based code" for 400 acres of the downtown.

### Form, design over use

In essence, a form-based code places a greater emphasis on the form and design of buildings than their uses. While traditional zoning separates buildings into certain areas based on their uses and restricts what can be done on the property, the idea behind form-based codes is to clearly outline what kinds of buildings developers should build, Hall explained.

Once the code is in place, it is easier for developers to get projects built because the public, through the code, has already articulated what kinds of buildings it wants in certain areas, she explained.

This removes some of the rancor from the political approvals process that "torments developers," Hall said.

But adopting a form-based code requires the community to agree on what everyone wants to see. Some say that is its primary limitation and could be why only a handful of California cities have embraced the new zoning and design codes.

"They have a very good model, but it's not a model that will work everywhere," said Matt White, president of Basin Street Properties, which is building a mixed-use project in downtown Petaluma called Basin Street Landing.

Fisher and Hall designed a riverfront plaza for the project, and that process went very well. But another project, a 400-unit mixed-use development about two miles from downtown, "blew up in my face," White said.

Neighbors came out against the project, and Fisher and Hall weren't able to convince them that the new design was worthwhile.

### Urbanism not applicable everywhere

The experience convinced White that urbanist designs can be implemented only in certain limited areas.

"The great thing about Laura and Lois is they force you, and they ask you, to look at things a little bit differently, and I think we need to look at things differently in the North Bay," White said. "The problem with it is that people are not just going to completely change their lifestyles and the way they live and work and shop overnight."

Ironically, New Urban designs also strike some people as too difficult to incorporate into existing urban environments.

Santa Rosa's City Council last year opted not to implement a form-based code, in part because members didn't feel there was a consensus in the community for one, said Wayne Goldberg, the city's planning director.

"In Santa Rosa, we have a history of a mix of architectural styles, and I have no sense that the community wants that to change," he said.

The Agilent site, however, has the obvious benefit of having only one owner.

Vacated by Agilent as the company consolidated operations at its Fountaingrove headquarters last year, the property is being purchased by Coddling Investments, a Santa Rosa developer of shopping centers.

Having one owner, few neighbors, and lots of open space to build on all make the project a good fit for New Urbanism, said Brad Baker, president of Coddling Enterprises.

Fisher and Hall agree.

"I see this as the beginning of the healing of suburbia," Fisher said.

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## DESIGNING WOMEN

Advocates of 'New Urbanism' Fisher, Hall see Agilent site as proving ground for philosophy

By KEVIN MCCALLUM

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Lois Fisher and Laura Hall have for years preached that "New Urbanist" design could help reduce Sonoma County's suburban sprawl, reinvigorate its downtowns, and reconnect people with their communities and each other.

Most of that time, the doubt they encountered made them feel like Sisyphus, the man in the Greek myth condemned by the gods to

ceaselessly roll a boulder up a mountain.

But now, 12 years after they first met and eight years after forming Fisher & Hall Urban Design, they feel their growth message is not only getting through to people, but is gaining the momentum it needs to become a revolution.

"To say it's very, very exciting seems like an understatement," Hall said. "It's like people are taking back the design of their towns."

"We've reached a tipping point," Fisher added.

The biggest sign yet of that change is their most recent project, the design work for Coddling Investments' redevelopment of the 200-acre former Agilent Tech-

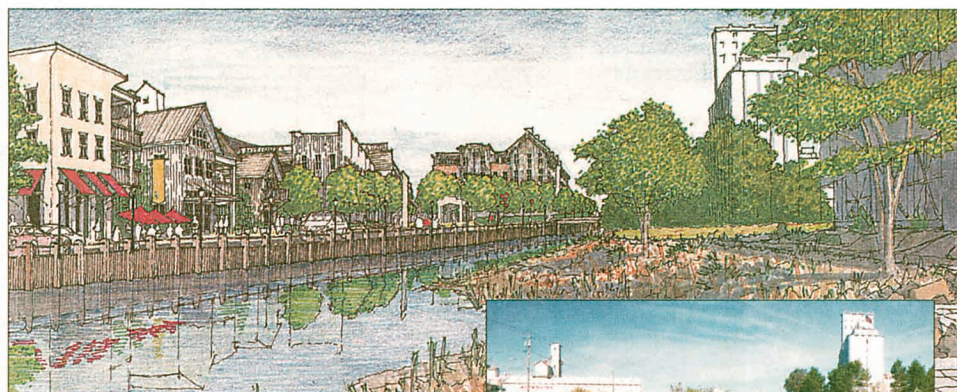
nologies site in southeast Rohnert Park.

It is the largest site of its kind in Sonoma County, and when completed would dwarf any other mixed-used project in the county.

Details of the project have yet to be revealed, as the design work is scheduled to begin this week. But the dimensions of the site make its redevelopment potential enormous.

About 175 acres of the site are slated for development, including existing buildings that contain 713,000 square feet of industrial and office space. Based on common housing densities, that site could accommodate dozens of new busi-

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NEW URBANISM IN PROGRESS: One of Fisher and Hall's latest projects is the revamping of the North River area of downtown Petaluma, shown above in an artist's rendering.

Sketch and photo by Fisher & Hall Urban Design