



Zoning Tomorrow

By Ben Amato

“It’s what we leave behind that defines. Children, friends, community, memories and monuments give testament to one’s voyage through life.”

“That is a nice philosophy, Theo, but what does that have to do with us?” Shay was irritable. He was tired of just sitting, even though this was the first hour of the annual meeting of the urban development zoning board. “We are here to approve garages, driveways and swimming pools.”

“We are here to plan the future,” Theo snapped back, nervously pacing the room. “We direct the building and design of thousands of projects. Entire neighborhoods are being reformed, renovated and re-established under our hands.”

“Yes, yes. I know all that,” Shay waved his hand towards the strutting commissioner. “We also rule on variances, like my brother-in-law’s dormer.” Shay glanced in the direction of the other nine members of the city’s counsel while he gave a short, gruff laugh.

Four men at the table offered soft nervous laughter. Four others sat as uncomfortably as Shay did.

“I propose greatness,” Theo continued. “I have come up with a grand plan!”

“Commissioner Theo Martin, we are here today, and for the next two weeks, to approve or disapprove 4,214 building requests.” Mayor Billing’s glare stopped Theo mid-stride. “Please pursue greatness on your own time and not during the already endless hours we have to spend on this counsel.”

“Mayor, this can be the most important two weeks of our lives. I have a proposal that will mean that every decision we make here will be an enduring monument to our vision, our city’s greatness and the eternal legacy of our people.”

“Theo, we have been meeting like this for the last five years.” Shay said, in his sarcastically flat, dead voice. “What makes this year different?”

“Vision,” Theo replied. “A new horizon and I am going to open your eyes to it. We need a broader perspective. There’s a bigger picture, a wider canvas we can aspire to. Let’s shape this city into something so grand it can be seen throughout the land, the planet, the stars.”

“And what shape will that be, Commissioner Martin?” Mayor Billings was definitely tired of where Theo’s aria was going.

“A face. Our face. Let’s build this city into a face so large, passengers on stratojets can look down and see the features of their brother looking up at them. Let’s zone the buildings, the projects, the parks and even the street lighting to create a face, two miles wide, able to be seen and recognized from hundreds of miles away. I want the face of our city to greet the people in the space stations during each orbit.”

“Commissioner Martin, do we have to do this today?” the mayor dryly said.

“We have to begin. Let’s start with a small, big step. From today on, view each project not as case number, building code or variance issue,” Theo shot a quick look towards Shay. “By approving certain projects, making adjusts in others and relocating a few dozen more, we can begin to make subtle changes. In time our city’s skyscrapers, homes and highways will project not just the spirit of our civilization, but our face.”

“Theo, a face? We can’t approve or deny legitimate cases to just to draw a happy face. They’ll think we have gone insane.” A politician always thinks about the next election.

“They think we are insane already, Mr. Mayor. Look, the point is that we have the power to create a monument so massive, a memorial so encompassing that thousands of years from now, our creation, our city, our concept will be remembered.”

“And we can do all this during this next two week?” Shay sarcastically asked.

“Theo, I am exhausted already and that’s from just listening to you.”

“It’s the broader view we must take, not only in scope but in time. This will take dozens of years, decades of adjustments and refinements involving subtle changes in zoning and procedures. Each year, a new feature will come into focus; this year we can alter the north side of the city to create an eyebrow, next year we can begin on midtown, to fashion a nose. The year after a cheek.”

“And the point is?” the mayor inquired.

“Definition. A statement of what we are. Civilizations bloom and flourish, only to be reduced to dust, relics and legends. Every people ever to have walked this planet share this common fate. They are born, grow to brilliance and then die. We have within our power to shape this city into a face, so massive and enduring that we make our city immortal, calling out eons and eons hence, long after the last of our people have gone.”

Someday, archeologists will sweep away the sands of time, peer into their distant past, which is our fleeting present, and see the broader view we have taken. They will look upon our city and see a smiling face peering back at them.”

“So your grand plan is to turn our city into a smiley face? Besides the voters believing we are crazy, what will these descendants decide about us when they uncover our grinning ruins?”

“That we were a people who saw beyond our horizons, beyond the mortal shell that marks our existence. Our city will live on because throughout time, our face will peer into the future, forever looking outward, upward.”

“So we will be a people remembered for our egos, our self-obsessed image? Sorry Theo, I don’t want to be remembered for having a head swelled that big,” Shay chuckled.

“It’s not our egos that will be seen, but our humility.” Theo looked at the faces of the other counsel commissioners. He had them totally confused.

“We will speak out to those who come after us that all things pass. All life is born, grows and dies. Let us be remembered for having known that it is what we leave behind that defines us. Let them see our face so they will learn that they too are destined to rise to greatness and then pass on.”

“Commissioner Martin, you certainly have a grand scheme but today there are 600 applications in front of us,” the mayor said, yanking the discussion back into the here and now. “We will let the future wait and handle what we can today.”

Commissioner Theo Martin slowly returned to his seat but his face displayed no anger or frustration. There was a greater vision he was seeing, one of calm reflection and eventual success.

The first annual meeting of the urban development zoning board recommenced.

“Miller, can you please pry your face away from the window and help us with the checklist.” The mission commander’s voice made no effort to hide its discomfort. “You’ve been staring since we went into orbit.”

“I still can’t believe we made it, sir. And tomorrow we’ll be on the surface.”

“Only if you do your job and quit being a tourist.”

“Yes sir, just give me a minute, there’s a feature coming up I’ve just got to see.”

Mission Commander Gordon gave the bulkhead a gentle push and weightlessly floated back to the docking terminal. He glanced back to astronaut Miller, slowly shaking his head.

One hundred and fifty miles below the orbiting spacecraft, the Martian surface slowly turned. With growing excitement, eyes wide with wonder, Miller first picked out the features on the horizon; the low hills, the small central rise, the steep slopes descending from the chin.

“The face,” Miller muttered to himself. “On the third day we get to visit it in the crawler. I can’t wait. I can’t wait.”

With a sigh, Astronaut Miller pushed himself away from the window of Explorer 4, NASA’s first manned mission to Mars.



NASA Image 035A72 of the Martian surface, taken by the Viking 1 Orbiter, July, 1976, with an enlargement of one section