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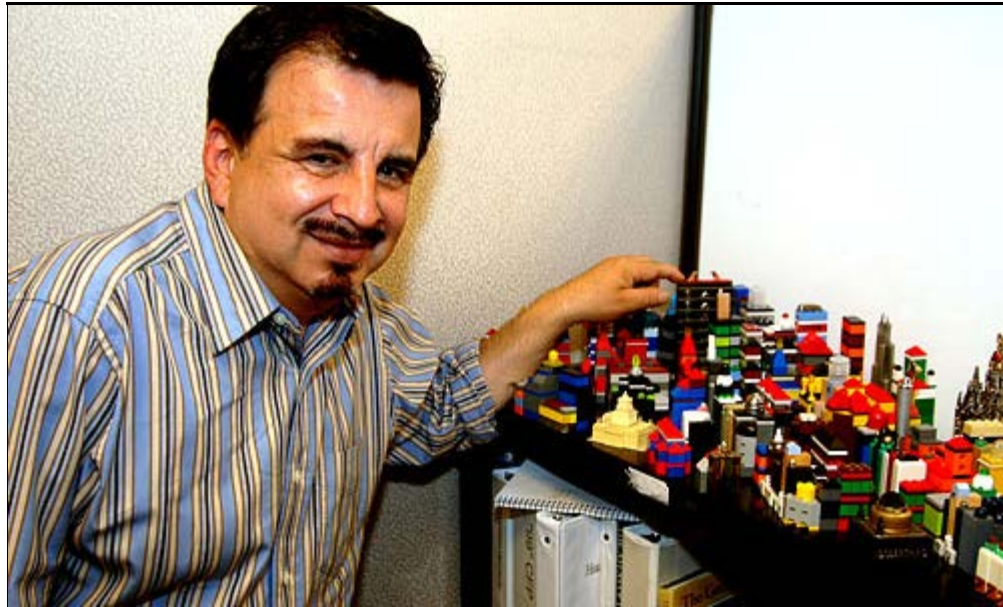
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James Rojas, a transportation planning manager, takes his interactive planning exhibit on the road and to the people. *Photo by Ned Racine.*

The World is a Workshop for Transportation Planner James Rojas

- **Going Global: [James Rojas at the United Nations World Urban Forum](#)**

By Michael D. White
Staff Writer

(April 15, 2010) Inspiration can be found in many places including, it seems, in a pile of stuff that looks like the debris at the bottom of a little boy's toy chest.

Multicolored wood blocks and dowels of all sizes and shapes, Lego blocks, bottle caps, the occasional "missing" rocket ship part or wooden train track, plastic animals, miniature cars - all-in-all, a veritable jumble of possibilities. Or at least that's how Metro Transportation Planning Manager James Rojas sees it.

"The stuff is beautiful," said Rojas. How and, perhaps more to the point, why? "Because there are infinite possibilities in using various day-to-day materials that people are familiar with to get them involved in the process of planning the communities they live in."

A 13-year employee with Metro, Rojas has worked as a community volunteer around the country gaining both national and international acclaim and drawn considerable press coverage for devising a genuinely unique way to stimulate an interest on the part of ordinary citizens in the somewhat arcane task of urban planning.

Several years ago, he came up with the idea of having people –

housewives and community activists, business executives, teachers, and professionals – gather in a workshop setting to discuss ideas and sit down together at a table and, in effect, tap into their inner Disney by utilizing the “jumble” to create a mock-up of their model urban community.

They map out everything from the location of streets, parks, bridges, pedestrian walkways and transit lines to shopping malls, recreational facilities, plazas, theatres and residential districts.

Rojas calls it “Place It.”

His interactive planning art was featured at the United Nations World Habitat Forum 5 in March held in Brazil.

“People become very enthused when they feel they are taking part in creating the positive environment they want to live in,” said Rojas, an L.A. native and U.S. Army veteran who holds a master’s degree in city planning from MIT in Boston.

An artist by both inclination and training, Rojas is well-known in Los Angeles design community having founded the LATino Urban Forum, a non-profit group that “informs and engages” citizens in the urban planning process, and Gallery 727, located in the downtown Arts District.

Los Angeles “is the perfect region to utilize this type of approach because it’s, probably, the most culturally and ethnically diverse area in the entire country,” he said. “The diversity lends itself to a multiplicity of ideas that simply wouldn’t be available in a more homogeneous region. The fact that there are so many people here from so many different places is a genuine advantage.”

The process, he said, is about the “pride that can be had in feeling that we own the communities we live and work in.”

The whole “Place It” idea, said Rojas, “is about giving people the chance to place themselves in the future and set a goal to strive for in a comfortable environment that energizes them about taking an active role in the well-being of their own communities.

Urban planning “should be more than just boring charts, complicated maps and contentious meetings,” he said. “This puts people in the equation.”