REFLECTIONS ON EARLY IRVINE PLANNING

It will be forty-four years this September since I joined The Irvine Company as Architect Planner. Three months prior to my arrival the Company's board of directors had made a decision that would forever transform the Company, the historic Irvine Ranch and my career. They had agreed to give the University of California 1000 acres of prime Irvine farm land for their proposed new campus and to build a new town on 10,000 acres of the surrounding land.

Over the next five years both Company and University immersed themselves into the intense process of intellectually and philosophically deciding just what that new university campus and new town were to become and simultaneously prepare physical plans, install infrastructure and build the first buildings for the committed opening of campus and town in September of 1965. In retrospect the ultimate measure of what campus and town have become is more a consequence of the subjective community planning principles and design concepts we established and ultimately have held on to over these past forty-four years.

In the fall of 1960 we only knew we had promised to build a "new town." Our only guide was a report jointly authorized by the University and The Irvine Company was prepared in two phases by William Pereira, titled “A University Campus and Community Study.”

The first phase was completed in October of 1959 and concluded:
The development of a University Campus on Irvine land was “economically feasible,”
The recommended site “affords unique opportunities for development of an integrated University Community”,
And has the “support and cooperation from neighboring cities and governmental agencies.”

The second phase was completed in May of 1960 and had as its’ objectives:
“To prepare a refined University Community master plan which will serve as a framework for development and a basis for firm agreements between the University, the Irvine Company, County authorities, utility agencies and others concerning the placement of the new campus on lands of The Irvine Company.”

Pereira's brief reports coupled with his charismatic personal presence was the single most important stimulus all of us needed as we began the critical and long process of deciding just what constitutes a late twentieth century "town" to be located on the southern most edge of the fast growing and forever expanding Metropolitan "non" city of Los Angeles.

Pereira, like my youthful architectural and planning peers, was a card caring urban elite disdainful of the endless and monotonous suburban sprawl and automobile dominated society that had produced it. He lamented about the loss of the physical "sense of place" that characterized the idealized town of our past. His challenge to the Company was with the control of over 90,000 acres of land (more than three times the physical size of San Francisco) located in the fastest growing county in the United States we could do better than that. What he proposed was the Company build a "new town" around the new university campus. And by "new town" he was clear that he was not suggesting a west coast version of an East Coast Levitt town.

Irvine's new town was to have a town center located adjacent to the new campus, mixed use neighborhoods consisting of a variety of housing types, shopping, professional buildings, schools, parks and bike and pedestrian ways interlaced between and through the different neighborhoods. The new town was also to provide sites for industry and businesses offering jobs to those who lived there. And finally in recognition of the importance of self governance in creating a sense of community he proposed the new town ultimately become incorporated as a city with all the powers that go with such a designation.

Pereira suggested the ultimate size of the future city be 10,000 acres and hold an ultimate population of 100,000 residents. Why only 10,000 acres when the Company owned more than ten times that much land? Although his proposed plan doesn't suggest the reasoning his proposal served both the desire of the Company to contain the size of its commitment to the University and Pereira's desire to create more than an adjacent suburban sub-division. Thus the suggestion of a 100,000 population fit well with the extensive new town planning that was currently taking place in Great Britain in response to their new town planning act. The so called Mock I new towns that were being planned throughout Great Britain were to be limited to 100,000 residents. Thus Pereira could provide both Company and University with authoritative reasoning to support his suggestion.
The fact that before the decade had come to a close we proposed to significantly increase the size of the new town should not be interpreted as a repudiation of his original idea. Pereira’s original plan which is the basis of all that followed served the purpose for which it was intended. The Company was competing with other land owners in both LA and Orange County to attract the University to locate their new campus on their land. The University sought not only a 1000-acre site for the campus but some assurance that the adjacent land would be developed in a fashion compatible with protecting their interest. The University wasn’t clear on what that meant but based on experiences at existing campus they had made it clear that one of the considerations for selecting a location was the quality and character of the surrounding development.

Although Pereira’s suggestion of an adjacent new town went well beyond what the University contemplated, it was an unique and exciting idea. It transformed the original desire to create another campus in suburban south LA or northern Orange County into the here-to-fore unheard-heard of possibility of simultaneously creating a campus and a community. And for the Irvine Company with its 93,000 acres of land siting on the southern edge of the massive growth flowing out of Los Angeles it provided it with the two most important issues its management and Board of Directors had struggled with for three years. How to attract the University and how best to respond to the reality that the era of the Irvine Ranch as a ranch was coming to a close.

The fact that two documents totaling 76 pages and costing less than $100,000 could convince Company and University to commit to each other on such an enormous and unprecedented undertaking is testimony to the strength of a brilliant idea and the Irvine Company’s commitment to make it happen. A commitment that is as strong today some forty-four years later as it was when made in 1960.