

# 1960

## Planning the Irvine Ranch begins

The Irvine Company shareholders June 20, 1960 approval of their offer to the University of a site for their new campus and to build a town around it resolved for each the years of uncertainty of what to do next. The University now knew where they would build their new campus. The Company's search for an identifiable vision of its future had sprung out of that \$32,000 planning study prepared by William Pereira known as the "A University Campus and Community Study."

Pereira's recommendation to build a "new town" on the Irvine Ranch provided the University with the rationale to locate the proposed campus at the Southern fringe of the area it was to serve. For the Company, however, it provided much more. Now it had a clear and positive vision of what it meant to "open up the ranch to development." It changed the prevailing image from the negatives of more suburban sprawl continuing its relentless molasses like intrusion onto the agricultural rich edges of the Los Angeles metropolitan area to the positive image of an idealized "new town" associated with the intellectual and cultural implant of a new university campus.

Pereira's "new town" idea had captured the imagination of more than the Company and University officials. He had also successfully secured resolutions from the Company's surrounding cities promising not to annex any of the Company's land within the proposed new town's boundaries. The importance of this can't be understated. The rapid suburban growth that had swept throughout California since the succession of World War II had turned most cities on the urban fringe into land gobbling competitors each in search of more property taxes and control over the lands just outside their borders.

This was particularly true of Santa Ana. Santa Ana had resisted expanding its borders for years and now found itself land locked by cities on all sides except for the undeveloped Irvine Ranch on its southern edge. Now suddenly Santa Ana was faced with the prospect that its one remaining path for expansion might be blocked by Pereira's new town proposal. But with the prospect of attracting a University of California campus at their doorstep all the cities passed non-annexations resolutions thus allowing the "new town" to be built. As we will see later Santa Ana thought they had a way around their promise of non-annexation of the lands surrounding the new campus despite the fact that protection had been an important consideration in the University's decision to locate on the Irvine Ranch.

Pereira used the same approach on the County of Orange and the various school districts that encompassed the Ranch and secured commitments for county road extensions and promises to allow a new "unified school district with boundaries coterminous with those of the proposed" community.

Would any of these vital commitments and resolutions of "hands off" been possible if the University prospect hadn't been available. I doubt it. As imaginative as was the "new town" proposal without the prospect of a new University of California campus next door it's highly questionable that Pereira could have secured the same hands off

assurances given the natural instincts of the surrounding cities desire to expand and school districts to protect what they had. In fact some three years later Santa Ana was to ignore their promise to not annex and launched an aborted attempt to secure for itself much of the northern part of the Irvine Ranch. A foray that was beat back only when the State of California protested based on the commitment that had been made in the spring of 1960.

But the same could be speculated about the chances of the University landing on the Irvine Ranch if it hadn't been for the attraction of growing up in concert with a "new town." Clearly the Irvine Ranch was at the extreme fringe of the area targeted by the Regents for a new campus.

Thus the University/Community vision became the one common beacon that both institutions set their respective sights on. A beacon an exciting and powerful vision both the University and Company had as we began our quest in September of 1960 to convert it from the "opportunity" that Pereira spoke of in his report when he wrote that "creating a whole new city which would completely and effectively meet all the needs of the University" and went on to claim that "A stimulating and healthy urban environment is in itself an important ingredient in the growth of a university." Heady stuff for a young staff and a new Irvine Company President, Charles Thomas, all recently recruited for the specific challenge of converting Pereira's vision into the brick and mortar of reality.

It will be 46 years this June since the Irvine Company shareholders approved the offer of 1000 acres to the University and committed to build a "new community" around it. I arrived less than three months later having been recruited from Northern California enticed by the opportunity to help plan and develop a piece of property three and one half times San Francisco, the city where I was practicing Architecture.

I was just shy of 34 years old, married and the father of a four year old daughter and two year old son. I had been working in Northern California since graduating from the University of California, Berkeley School of Architecture in 1951 and Masters degree in 1953. For a young architect/planner there could be no more exciting and challenging experience than the combination of the Irvine Company's commitment and Pereira's vision.

As difficult as was the journey leading up to the 1960 agreement with the University the commitment the Company had made was on the one hand extremely ambitious while on the other hand both vague and without benefit of an existing experienced organization ready to back it up. The Company had committed itself to build a city on 10 thousand acres of land surrounding the future campus. Land that was completely devoid of any public entitlement or infrastructure necessary to support any development let alone an entire city. Unsaid in the agreement, of course, was exactly what was the Company planning to do with the remaining 83,000 acres. A decision that needed to be made concurrent with the planning of the University city.

The reality was The Irvine Company was a farming and ranching company. It had little real estate development experience with the exception of occasionally either entering into long term ground leases with developers or selling a piece of land on the fringe of the Ranch. Even so, other than dealing with the intra-company squabble between Joan and the Foundation directors the actual agreement itself was relatively

straightforward. The question now was how should the Company proceed. Should it enter into a development agreement with an established real estate developer or attempt to put together its own organization and go it alone.

There's some evidence that early on the Board considered the two options, even interviewed some developers but quickly concluded that without a definitive master plan setting forth such basics as where roads, flood control channels, utilities and other infrastructure were to be built no meaningful business discussion could take place between the Company and any developer. In retrospect it was the right decision but knowing the appetite developers have for prime real estate the management must have been bombarded with suggestions that all the Company need do is turn its farm land over to some developer and sit back and count the dollars as they came in.

But the truth of the matter was that as experienced as the developers might have been in developing land for development they had no more experience or even notion on what it took to build "a new town" than did the inexperienced Irvine Company. And for that matter who did?

For the most part towns and cities grow. They aren't built in the sense that some organization or entity starts with an idea, accumulates the necessary land and proceeds to plan and then build one. There are, of course, a few exceptions such as the atomic energy villages built during the war, coal mining and other remote industrial towns and government towns built either as part of an experiment or part of their attempt to concentrate government facilities into one defined area.

Other than a few experimental new towns our 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century towns, both small and large, have generally been pieced together over an extended period by an uncoordinated and unrelated collection of builders, real estate interests and settlers. The very existence and physical forms of our towns resulted from industrial or business movements (the industrial revolution spurred most of them), natural harbors, rail depots and favorable climate. And who built them? Most frequently they were built parcel by parcel by opportunists who like California's 49er's staking land claims in hopes of finding gold bought small pieces of farm land, dug wells or brought in water from some distant stream, divided their parcels into lots, laid out a street system and stuck a "for sale" sign out.

That's exactly how the Los Angeles region grew. First the Southern Pacific Railroad Company extended their tracks from the east coast to southern California. Then during the frigid winters they sold easterners on California's mild climate. That coupled with the discovery of gold in northern California the migration began.

As the demand for land increased so did its value. The farmers and ranchers of those days faced the same dilemma Irvine faced in the late '50's, how to divide the property into salable parcels. As distinguished from Irvine, however, most sold their holdings to land speculators who in turn subdivided it into smaller parcels, which they sold to land developers.

By 1960 this pattern had been repeated thousands of times. And with the growth of northern Orange County the managers of the Ranch were overwhelmed with offers by land developers and builders to buy a piece of the Ranch. But faced with a commitment to build a town and not just parcel the land up and sell them to the highest bidder the Company was faced with the dilemma of just how to proceed.

As I soon discovered upon arrival in September of 1960 the goal of building a “new town” while enticing for me as a young architect/planner coming to grips with its exact form and substance was our first and ultimately most important challenge. The Pereira plan was more vision than plan.

In this country there was little experience in building a town from scratch. U.S. planners were divided into two camps, public and private. Public planners worked for local government establishing the regulatory framework, which broadly guided the work of those in the private sector who actually constructed our built environment or land owners who wanted to parcellize their holdings and sell the pieces to the highest bidders. Private planners primarily worked for land developers and spent their careers interpreting the public planners regulations and laying out subdivisions. Because of the nature of the relatively small size of the land holdings most of their work-encompassed parcels well below 500 acres and virtually none came close to the scale of an entire city, small or large.

However, my profession was not devoid of town planning theories. And most of those theories were divided into the two major camps. Namely, those who saw cities as urban concentrations similar to our European experiences and those who advocated the development of low-density small communities separated from the existing central cities. By the early ‘60’s most of the later were working in the British Isles as part of their emerging new town movement. But the reality was other than theories there were few if any concrete examples we could research. At least any that fit our situation of being located in a fast and vast growing metropolitan area and to be located on a piece of property 3-times the size of San Francisco all of which was owned by one company.

As for the private development community with whom we must work they were of even less help. They had little or no theories about either urbanism or cities. After all, commercial and residential developers are in business to respond to opportunities. They are not interested in, or equipped for planning cities. Yet piece-by-piece that is just what they had been (and continue to) doing by default.

So the reality was (and is) there was little experience to call upon. We had to plan the city from scratch. We had to sort through all the theories and adopt the one we considered most appropriate for us. And we had to always remember that we would be operating within the tight constraints of our economic system, which meant that we would be limited more by what the prospective homeowner or new business wanted than planning theories no matter how much they might appeal to our own taste. A limitation I welcomed because it was the ultimate test against which all city-planning theories would be measured. We recognized from the start that while the ultimate reputation of the Irvine developments would be measured by the strength and sense of community they grew into their crucial initial success depended upon our ability to provide developments the public was willing to buy into.

But that wasn’t enough of a challenge. I also came with my own baggage. My own vision of a city was it was made up of more than its physical forms. And, for some the social forms were more important than the physical ones. That the more we could encourage and where possible provide the opportunity for the development of the social, educational, recreational, religious, political and neighborhood communities to overlay

our physical communities the greater the likelihood our developments would mature into the strong sense of place we all sought.

It is the creation and in some cases the emergence of those multiple overlapping communities that I'm attempting to chronicle. Why? Because unless one understands the full depth of what Irvine is they will assign its success solely to the fine architecture and surrounding landscaping. They both have played important roles in Irvine's quality image and our village designs have clearly created the physical sense of place we sought. But for those who visit Irvine their impression is often only limited to its obvious physical characteristics. In contrast, those who live in Irvine see their city in much more multidimensional terms. They brag about Irvine's schools, the quality of their police department, the citywide recreational programs, the growing reputation of UCI, the variety of religious institutions, the neighborhood associations get-togethers, the extent of the citywide bicycle trails, etc. However, they are also well aware of the fact their town is among the few in this country that has been built and planned from scratch and no one dares run for local office without vowing to preserve "their master plan" with its dedication to the city's vaunted "village system."

What I take pride in is that these options didn't just occur. We played a significant role in encouraging them and in the case of the school district and city boundaries in establishing them. Had we not early on arrived at a concept for our communities and pushed for the non-physical as well as the physical elements I believe Irvine would be a different place today. Pleasant. Beautiful. Successful. But hardly distinguishable from dozens of other subdivisions scattered throughout southern California.

And finally the role of the University in both the image and substance of Irvine needs to also be chronicled. City and University are clearly fiercely independent institutions. Yet one can't think of Irvine without associating it with the University and to a lesser but still important sense the reverse is also true. From the date of the agreement between Company and University there has been a continuous interaction between the two. Would the University have achieved its reputation and growth as fast had it been located in Yorba Linda or southeastern LA. County? No one can say for sure. But clearly the city of Irvine and the Irvine Company's reputation as a community builder would not have reached the status it has if the campus had not been located where it is.