WHAT MAKES NEWTOWNS UNIQUE?

They are unique because they are usually built by one organization over a relatively short period of time guided by a very precise plan. In contrast the vast majority of towns and cities emerge and grow in piecemeal fashion as the products of thousands of builders over a long period of time guided only by very broad publicly adopted and often changing Master Plans. The role of public Master Plans is to encourage orderly growth, coordinate and size the necessary infrastructure and designate where broad categories of land uses can be built. Rarely is there a specific guiding architectural or townscape concept for the entire town. Nor, in contrast to New Town developments, does a single organization oversee the planning, design, construction and marketing of all its parts.

So when the English, Soviet and Scandinavian New Towns were started shortly after World War II and a private company like Irvine announced its intention to build one on its vast acreage there was a great deal of professional and public interest focused on them. The town planning theories that have been debated by sociologist, planners and architects for years were suddenly going to be put to a test.

HOW IMPORTANT IS A SENSE OF COMMUNITY?

I don’t think we really know. We do know that true (versus sense of) community is very important. Our communities of family, church, work, profession, school and friends are all important to each of us. Our lives would be vacant without them. But the modern forms of communication and transportation together with the emergence of our vast metropolitan regional cities have virtually negated the physical community of the past with the exception of our micro-commercial and residential neighborhoods.

Today we planners talk about a “sense” of community since we have difficulty describing a real community. But our cities, large and small, are full of real communities only they are often not physically identifiable. And that’s what new town builders are attempting to bring to their developments. How important is it that in addition to our social communities we also have physically identifiable communities is a question worth studying.

Toward that end I am funding a study to be conducted by students in the School of Urban Design at the University of California, Irvine. I’ve asked them to attempt to determine if the strong physical communities we’ve created in Irvine reinforces and strengthens the social communities that also exist there. We’ll see.

As builders, though, we know that strong physical communities sell better than those which have less identity. Early in the planning of Irvine we used the popularity of Balboa and Lido Islands in Newport Bay as examples of the physical distinctiveness we wished for the villages we were creating in Irvine. Villages which have a mixture of housing types, parks, schools, shopping, jobs, etc. but designed with strong edges, entry ways and nodes (Kevin Lynch’s terms) throughout. We didn’t have the natural advantage of a bay of water surrounding our villages to distinguish one from the other but by the use of walls and landscaping we’ve been able to create the same sense of place that the islands enjoy.
WHAT EXACTLY DO YOU MEAN BY “SENSE OF PLACE?”

“Place” is a physical location. Community usually is not. Yet we often interchange “sense of place” for “sense of community” as though they were the same. Because we can see and feel “place” we can recognize one. The stronger the “sense of place” the more those who visit it recognize it. Irvine has become known for its’ well identified villages. Both those who live within them and those who visit them can identify them almost as well as the islands in Newport Bay. But they also have a strong “sense of community” which is not as easily identifiable to non-residents.

As architects and builders we mistakenly assume that the more identifiable the “place” the stronger the “community.” Thus we use the term “sense of community” because it looks like one. But in this modern world of e-mail, phones and personal transportation there may be little social exchange within any strongly designed place. By merging the two terms I believe we spend too little time on nurturing community building. In Irvine we spent as much time building the social community as the physical one.

Our marketing studies clearly show the importance of the combination of Irvine’s reputation for its community activities together with the strong physical “places” we’ve built. The buyer sees the “place” first and believes (hopes) “community” will follow.

IRVINE

ALMOST EVERY NEW TOWN HAS RUN INTO FINANCIAL PROBLEMS. IRVINE IS ONE OF THE FEW EXCEPTIONS. WHAT DID YOU DO DIFFERENTLY IN IRVINE?

There is a reason why developers contain their projects to much smaller sized projects than what is necessary to build a “town.” Real Estate development is very capital intensive. Therefore, developing any real estate project is always risky. Buying the land, planning the project, installing the infrastructure and then the buildings all take extensive time and money before a single sale is made. The larger the project the greater the risk. By their nature building a Town takes longer and as a result requires more up front capital than piece meal development. Then when you take into account the cyclical nature of our economy it’s no surprise to me that most New Town projects financially failed.

Fortunately the Irvine Ranch was located in Orange County, California. In the summer of 1960 when the Irvine Company announced its decision to build a New Town Orange County was listed as the fastest growing County in the United States. In contrast many of the other New Towns announced in the early 60’s were located in less than
strong market locations. Many never made it to the market before they ran into financial trouble. Others burned up all their capital only to come to the market just as the economy turned sour. Some, particularly the government sponsored New Towns, responded to the government’s low interest loans to build towns in locations that government planners wanted rather than where the market was willing to buy.

Despite our favorable location and the fact the Company owned the land free of debt we approached our early developments cautiously. We spent considerable time managing our up front infrastructure costs by only bringing the early developments to market in manageable pieces. Early on we were criticized for being too cautious. But in hindsight the lack of caution in other New Towns proved fatal.

We started each village with residential developments and held off providing the ancillary shopping and commercial components until there were enough residents to justifying building them. We also made business arrangements with builders in which we exchanged our land for installation of some of the infrastructure needed for adjacent developments.

During the early years the pioneers, as we called them, had difficulty visualizing how their town would ultimately fill out. To help them we built elaborate models in the sales offices showing what each village would look like when completed and kept them apprised as to our schedules and progress. Our message to them was we were building the town together.

DID THINGS CHANGE MUCH WHEN DONALD BREN TOOK OVER?

Bren took control of the Company in 1983. Prior to that he had been a partner with a group of investors headed by Al Taubman, a shopping center developer, and Henry Ford. They had bought the Irvine Company in the summer of 1977 when the Company’s majority owner, the Irvine Foundation, was forced to sell because of the 1969 tax reform act. Although Bren was the largest (35)% investor in that group Taubman together with his other partners controlled the Company.

During the period between 1977 and 1983 that group continued to develop the Irvine properties according to the plan we had established prior to their acquisition of Irvine Company and had little interest and spent little time on anything other then developing it as fast as they could. Among the group Bren was the only one with any community development experience having briefly headed up the community development Mission Viejo Company to our south and built several thousand homes in the Valencia New Town north of us. So he understood and believed in Irvine’s mission. Early in 1983 he bought out his partners and has controlled and run the Company since.

I had left the Company when the Taubman group purchased it in 1977. In February of 1983 I was named Chairman of The Walt Disney Company. Upon Don’s purchase he formed a new Board of Directors and asked if I would join it. I did so in June of that year. The following year Disney fought off a hostile take over of the Company and concerned about it ability to survive I led a battle to bring in new management. In September of 1984 we hired Michael Eisner as Chairman and CEO and I ceased active management and returned to the role of Board member and Chairman of the Executive Company.
Bren immediately asked if I would assist the Irvine Company in planning the 10,000 acre Irvine Coast. I did that as a consultant for one year and following that Bren asked if I would rejoin the Company as Vice Chairman. That is the position I still hold only on a reduced schedule. As a consequence I’ve experienced the progress of the development of the City of Irvine since it’s inception through three different ownership’s and management’s. While I was President in the 70’s I brought Bren on to the Ranch as a residential community builder. He has always been a thoughtful, hands on developer. He is an outstanding businessman with taste. He is a student of planning and architecture and considers the development of the Irvine Ranch as a life time job. He takes pride in its growth and reputation and brings to it his zeal for quality.

As the communities on the Irvine Ranch have matured and development has jumped over the ranch to our south we are no longer considered part of the suburban fringe. Irvine alone now has over 120,000 residents and over 60,000 jobs. The University of California, Irvine campus is approaching completion of its 33rd year and has over 17,000 full time students.

What Bren has brought is a constant upgrading of the design and quality of the new communities and developments. Because of our strong job growth he has been able to create one of the most outstanding high technology business centers, Spectrum, on the West Coast.

Shortly after buying out his partners interest in 1983 he launched a program to upgrade and renovate Fashion Island, Irvine Company’s regional shopping mall which is located in Newport Beach and anchors our Newport Center business complex. He spent over $100 million transforming a rather ordinary regional shopping plaza that I had built for the Company in 1966 into one of the most beautiful shopping plazas in the Country. Newport Center, which surrounds Fashion Island, has a full complement of high rise office structures, hotels, restaurants, banks, a museum, the city library, chamber of commerce, police station and most recently over 500 residential apartments. Clearly what in the early 60’s we called a New Town in Town.

As owner as well as manager he has used his now considerable resources, management skills and taste to take Irvine Company’s many communities to a level of excellence that is difficult to match anywhere in the Country.

DISNEY

HOW DID YOU FIRST BECOME INVOLVED WITH THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY?

Early in 1966 I was asked if I would critique a community Walt Disney was planning. He called it EPCOT, Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, and wanted someone with my background to comment on it. I spent several hours with Walt. I commented that thou inventive and exciting that it was more of a show place than a livable community. Some months later I was asked to again see the progress of his planning. I did. Shortly after that Walt Disney died and those plans were scraped and the current EPCOT is totally different.
After Walt’s death periodically Disney’s management asked me to critique different projects in Florida which I enjoyed doing. When I became President/CEO of the Irvine Company in 1973 I was asked to join Disney’s Board of Directors. I’ve been on that Board since.

**DID YOU PLAY A ROLE IN THE TAKE OVER OF THE DISNEY COMPANY BY ROY DISNEY?**

First of all Roy didn’t “takeover” the Company. In the summer of 1984 I was Chairman of the Board and Ron Miller was President and CEO. Ron was Walt Disney’s son-in-law. During that spring and summer we fought off a hostile take over by Saul Steinberg and then a another takeover threat emerged. Our board decided, on my recommendation, that we needn’t new leadership to survive and asked our CEO to resign. In September we brought in Michael Eisner as Chairman/CEO and Frank Wells as President. I stepped down as Chairman but remained a member of the Board and Chairman of the executive committee. If you want to know more read the book by John Taylor, Storming the Magic Kingdom which tells of the events surrounding those changes.

**CELEBRATION**

**HOW DID THE IDEA OF CELEBRATION ORIGINATE?**

Celebration is located on a portion of the 28,000 acres near Orlando, Florida acquired by Disney in the late sixties and upon which DisneyWorld was built. The portion of land upon which Celebration is being built is across a major toll road and visually separated from the rest of DisneyWorld property. For years Disney planners struggled over its appropriate use. Several years ago they made the decision to not include it as part of the resort. After exploring many alternative uses decided to build a New Town.

Disney planners visited New Towns around the country including Irvine. During this period some community planners were beginning to talk about what they called neo-traditional communities. The concept was to recall the nostalgia of the small walking villages of the last century. Whether residents would abandon their cars and walk to the village store was not as important to the developers as the marketing appeal it had to the suburban weary commuter. They established an architectural theme from the 19th century with front porches hopefully encouraging a “sense of neighborliness.” Whether it does or not only time will tell but where it has been built it has had strong sales appeal.

**WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT CELEBRATION**

Most of what I’ve said about what is unique about Irvine could be said about Celebration. One owner planning and building the town. What is different is the architectural style and plan layout. There are a number of similar neo-traditional
communities being built around the United States today. It’s a worthwhile experiment in town planning and I applaud Disney for committing to it.

DO YOU THINK IT WILL BE SUCCESSFUL?

It depends upon how you define success. As a place to live I believe it will be very successful. It has charm based on the traditional architecture. It is distinguished from the surrounding developments. Disney will do what is necessary to see that it is finished and of quality which many other developers might not have had the resources to do.

As a business investment it probably won’t win many prizes within the Disney Company. The Company has spent a great deal of money creating the infrastructure and town center upon which the concept depends. More money than the typical developer could have afforded.

As a planning concept it is too early to tell whether the traditional lay out and porch theme architecture will encourage a more relaxed and neighborly community. I hope so but have some reservations.

TITLE VII NEW TOWNS

WHY DID TITLE VII (THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT’S NEW TOWN INITIATIVE) FAIL?

I served on the Board of HUD’s experiment urban growth policy started in the early 70’s. Title VII was an attempt by the Federal government to influence urban growth policy in the United States through a series of outright grants and low interest loans to developers who would agree to build new communities. Ultimately there were 13 “new towns” funded. Each represented a different challenge and reflected different town planning ideas that were popular at the time. Unfortunately many of the applications came from developers who didn’t have adequate capital to attract commercial lenders and for projects that were located in weak markets. Thus the government became a partner of last resort. About the time the 13 projects had been approved and started the Country fell in a serious recession.

Thus, the combination of risky developments, a government program that was big on ideology but low on experience and a prolonged economic downturn doomed the program from the start. Of the 13 new towns approved 12 went bankrupt within two years and only The Woodlands north of Houston survived.

WERE YOU DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN ANY TITLE VII NEW TOWNS?
In 1983 I joined the Board of Directors of Mitchell Development and Energy Company. Mitchell is one of the country’s largest producer of natural gas and is the developer of The Woodlands. By the time I joined the Board Mitchell had paid off it’s government bonds and no longer was in the Title VII program.

The Woodlands was sold by Mitchell last summer to another developer. As a community it is a delightful town. It has all the elements of a town originally promised by Mitchell when it applied for government aid under Title VII. But to say it was a successful business venture for Mitchell would be stretching it. The horrendous up front cost normal to such developments was capitalized to the land and discharged as each piece was sold to a developer. After twenty-five years of careful nurturing the community from concept to its present state Mitchell sold it for less than its book value. That is the price of the sale didn’t cover the money Mitchell had put into it. Hardly a testimonial to the business of building new towns.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE TRUE PLACE OF NEW TOWN DEVELOPMENT IN AMERICAN PLANNING? IS IT GOING TO BECOME A HISTORICAL EVENT OF THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES OR DOES IT DESERVE A LARGER ROLE?

For someone with a large piece of land located in a strong market area it’s still a good business and planning strategy. But to assume that the lure of a New Town can negate a weak market location is folly.

The financial difficulties most of the New Towns have experienced over the past 40 years should make anyone proposing to build one appropriately cautious. And in contrasts to the early 60’s today the environmental concerns about growth have significantly extended the planning process and thus the cost. On the other hand the past and current experiments in New Town development have provided use with creative alternatives to the status quo. While planners continue to debate the viability or appropriateness of the different town planning concepts the fact that concepts are moving off paper and out of our academic halls onto the ground is invaluable. They have been one of our most visible and influential development lavatories.

WHAT DO WE loose BY DEVELOPING OUR SUBURBAN FRINGES IN A PIECEMEAL FASHION?

The assumption in this question is that our urban centers were not developed in a “piecemeal fashion.” The truth is that with rare exception all urban and suburban development is the result of piecemeal development by a multitude of developers building over a long period of time. Even in Countries with strong central governments and little private development growth has been the result of piecemeal development. And that is not going to change.

What has changed over the past 35 years is that what we mistakenly continue to call the suburbs has dramatically expanded its composition to the point where it no longer is
“subordinate” to any historic core. Until the mid-sixties Orange County was primarily a residential suburb of central Los Angeles. The morning commute was from Orange County to Los Angeles and in the evening the reverse. Los Angeles is where the jobs, commerce, higher education and culture were located. As such Orange County was subordinate to Los Angeles. Today that is no longer true. The Orange County of today contains more jobs, commerce, and culture than Los Angeles proper.

Robert Fishman, author of Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia, recently wrote in the Harvard Design Magazine’s issue called Changing Cities a piece titled, “Cities after the End of Cities.” In that piece he wrote that “cities today have ….. entered a pluralistic posthistorical era of possibilities and permissibilities.”

Our professional schools have spent too much time lamenting the loss of central city and bashing suburbia and by so doing have not participated in the “posthistorical era” Fishman wrote about. Irvine and other new towns are the leading edge of the new “possibilities and permissibilities” he alluded to. It is, perhaps, less important which ones fail and which ones succeed in such a short time than the fact that so many are cropping up across the Country. Even the more prevalent “piecemeal” developments offer us examples of the changing character of what used to be the molasses like residential growth that characterized suburban growth since the onset of the Industrial revolution.

**ADVICE TO ARCHITECTS AND PLANNERS**

**IN TERMS OF ADVICE TO ARCHITECTS AND PLANNERS, HOW COULD PLANNERS BECOME MORE RELEVANT IN THE CREATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT?**

The truth is that over the past thirty-five years thousands of architects and planners have played a significant role in the changes that I have just described. Until the mid-sixties most developers developing in the “suburbs” rarely used architects or planners except to dress up their housing projects and process their plans through the local community planning agencies. Today few developers proceed with any project of any size without a team of architects, landscape architects, engineers and planners. Irvine Company led the way in Orange County in hiring talented young professionals to work on all parts of our communities.

The question is do our professional schools and scholars recognize the changes that have been occurring in the built environment and the role they could play in guiding those changes? That the lower densities of outer city developments decried by urban critics may not provide as many opportunities for individual architectural monuments but do provide unlimited opportunities for creative and professional involvement.

My advice to young persons entering architectural or planning school today is to take advantage of the full university in addition to the professional curriculum in their architectural or planning schools. Understand more about how our economic system works. Be able to converse with and respect the needs of the developer clients you are attempting to influence.
My experience is that the more balanced and broad-minded the professional or executive the more effective they are in influencing the future of our built environment. Indeed, as Professor Fishman suggest, there are more “possibilities and permissibilities” for all of us to seek. The time we waste on lamenting about how life and cities have changed the less time we have to influence how it can be better.