

IRVINE'S URBAN FORM

By Ray Watson

In his book "The City Shaped", Professor Spiro Kostof, one of the most respected architectural historians of our time, stated that his interest was more in "how and why cities took" their shape than abstract theories about how urban spaces influence "human behavior." His point was that the historical circumstances that influenced the original form remains unchanged over time while human behavior in relation to urban form changes with time.

So what were the "historical circumstances that influenced" the selection of the form for our future city? Although the vast, 93,000 acre Irvine Ranch was three times the physical size of San Francisco the central valley of the ranch was but an extension and relatively small piece of the entire LA. Basin. And by 1960 Orange County had become the quintessential example of a diverse economic, cultural and residential regional city, which was emerging without the historically familiar clear boundaries, and recognizable centers that would have given its parts a sense of the whole.

Therefore, the challenge was whether within the context of that ever expanding region-city we could create a form for Irvine that would allow it to take its appropriate place within the region and yet be distinguishable enough that those who lived and/or worked there could visually recognize their city. Interstate freeway 5 had just been completed through the ranch and now connected down-town San Diego with down-town Los Angeles (as well as Vancouver, British Columbia.) And the major arterial grid of Orange County had long been extended onto the Ranch. So the Irvine Ranch and any town we were to build on it was already irrevocably linked to the greater region. But the decision to locate a major university in the heart of the proposed new town provided both a physical and institutional central node around which we could attempt to provide the individuality we sought.

As a starter, let me give a brief insight into why we selected the form we did. Historically the evolution of the region-city known as the LA Basin is much more important than any of its parts - such as Irvine - but that evolution (of LA. Basin) cannot be told without understanding its many parts. The idea that I came out of Architectural and Planning School with that a city to be a city must have a center and an edge had little meaning in 1960 when we set down to determine the future city of Irvine's place in a region as large and as intertwined as the Los Angeles/Orange County conglomeration had become.

It was my view that the future city would become so intertwined with and dependent on the broad region that the concept of independent city had little relevance. Yet it was also our belief that despite the reality of what the metropolitan region had become and the supporting/dependent roles the multitude of "cities" within the region had found themselves in those who were to live or work in our proposed new city needed more than ever **a sense of where they were**. What we set about doing was to incorporate into the future city its own "**sense of place**" within the larger region. And within the new city, physically distinct and identifiable mixed use residential and business

neighborhoods, which we called villages. And to use the road and bicycle paths as the connecting links between the different villages.

The question was how. It was our belief that the stronger the ties between the institutional and the physical communities the better the chance to sense the **"Place."** The physical communities, our villages, became products of the Architect/Planners visions reinforced by the geography we had to work with. Irvine, therefore, as a physical form was our job but for it to achieve "institutional permanence" it needed to be "validated by some instruments of authority and service" and that authority was created by incorporating Irvine as a legal city, creation of a Irvine Unified School District within the new city and the numerous locally controlled Community Associations serving the many new villages and their subsets.

Now the villages are the most visibly and admired form within the city. It incorporated in 1971 and in the year 2005 had over 180,000 residents living there. The Irvine Unified School District became a reality in 1972 and is now identified as one of the best K-12 school districts in the State.

For the most part the shape of the new city is formed and its' residents unlikely to allow it to be changed into a different physical form (an abortive effort along that line was tried in the late '80's.) But as Professor Kostof points out "human behavior in relation to urban form changes with time." The question, therefore, is: Does Irvine need a new 21st century vision. Only time and changing regional and environmental conditions may call for change. But those are decisions the residents can and will make using the democratic powers the incorporation of their city allows them.

What has physically changed from its early plans is Donald Bren's gift of thousands of additional acres of open space linking the other existing cities to Irvine. In its ultimate state in excess of 50% of the 1960 93,000-acre Irvine Ranch will be preserved as a nature preserve. And as the Company physically and institutionally planned its farming/urban transformation it is now giving the same attention to the role of the Irvine Nature Preserve in serving and helping to define both new and old cities on and surrounding the once great Irvine Ranch.