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 rational 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
in search of more property taxes and control over the lands just outside their boarders.

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 door step 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 to around their promise of non-annexation but in the meanwhile the
cooperation of the bordering cities was 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. 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 in his report 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 38 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.