Although the first 50,000 acres of the ultimate 110,000-acre Irvine ranch was acquired in 1864 and The Irvine Company was incorporated in 1894 its master planning and community building era only dates back to 1960. That was the year the Company announced its gift of 1000 acres to the University of California for a new campus and its intention to build a new town adjacent to it. Here was a Company known primarily for the diversity of its cattle ranching and farming operations with little experience in real estate development committing itself to something that had overwhelmed even the most experienced builders throughout this century. Build an entire new city from scratch. And, if that weren’t ambitious enough, stating the town’s first housing would be open before the university opened its doors in 1965.

A schedule that even an experienced developer would have found challenging. But the Company was far from an experienced real estate developer, in fact, it had neither development experience nor an internal organization to back up its promises. And to compound the difficulty of this challenge the new town and campus were to be built on land that lacked the necessary utilities, water system, sewers, roads and basic infrastructures necessary to function.

The Company also announced that no development would occur without first developing a comprehensive master plan for a major portion of its holdings. In the summer of 1960 this ninety-six year old farming company was with these announcements transforming it overnight. It would open up its land to development to accommodate the urban growth that was pressing on its northern border. But it would only do that within the discipline of a comprehensive master plan that would have as its objective, the building of a new town. The now forty-seven-year old commitment to build a town and communities only within the context of a comprehensive master plan was established by a company that had no experience to back that commitment up but which was willing to stake its future reputation on promise to do so, a commitment that it has adhered to for over forty-seven years.

Although new for the Company, as a reaction against the formless suburban expansion that had dominated growth since the end of WW-II other developers in the country were also beginning to explore the idea of building new towns. While a number of new-town developments had been tried before WW-II the decade long economic depression of the 1930’s had quickly either aborted their efforts before they were started or shortly after their birth. After the war a number had been launched in Europe, particularly Great Britain, but for the most part they were part of a government-financed program.

No such movement seriously emerged in this country until the 1960’s. The American new town movement that emerged after WW-II was primarily influenced in their design
by a mixture of our Anglo/European and early American settlement heritage while attempting to deal with the explosive suburban movement of this century. What did those efforts result in? In many, maybe most, cases reasonable well defined communities where families, jobs, learning institutions, churches and those hundreds of community tying pieces like schools, parks, play lots, bicycle paths, community associations and local governments came together into what those who live and work there now proudly call their community.

Then as now, however, for a new town development to survive the immensely expensive planning and entitlement processes and initial costly infrastructure development it is the private developers of those communities that take the financial risks associated with any of the ideas put forth by town planners. And it is the reality of those pressures together with the cyclical nature of real estate markets that most often either causes the developer to significantly compromise many of the early planning concepts or aborts the project in its entirety. As a result very few of the proposed new towns announce in the 1960’s have survived to the point of maturity that now characterizes those we have built on the Irvine Ranch. **For forty-seven years now the Company has been able to grow, mature and learn the difficult craft and business of community building.**

Forty-seven years ago we started with the desire not to replicate the endless sprawl that had characterized most of southern California’s growth but rather produce mixed use communities whose scale and identifiable form was evident to those who lived and worked there. Today, with the advantage of forty-seven years of building and observations I believe we have demonstrated that form and imagery significantly contributes to the sense of place we were seeking. And that the attention we also gave to the simultaneous development of business/social/political community building institutions has transformed our carefully crafted “physical places” into living and working social communities.”

Beginning in 1960 planning for us began at the basics. Extending regional infrastructures such as arterial roads, flood control channels, electricity and gas mains. Creating a water distribution and sewer collection system where they didn’t exist. Deciding on whether to build one or two “new towns and deciding on their size, character, land use mix and economic base. Proposing changes to the existing school district boundaries to coincide with future “town” boundaries. And finally, to estimate the cost of all of that and attempt to figure out how to pay for it. Not a small task. An even bigger risk since we were a private company with limited resources. And at the same time we had to secure the concurrence of and abide by the growing mountain of regulatory processes of dozens of public agencies (surrounding cities, county, state, university, school districts, etc. etc.)

As we progressed in the early stages of preparing our comprehensive master plan and at the same time began development of the detailed community (we soon referred to them as village) plans we realized that plans alone were not enough. As necessary as were the plans the process of coordinating the development of the variety of housing types, shopping centers, parks, bike trails, schools, and businesses required management of the entire process. The builders whom we were dependent upon to transform all the parts of
our plans into the diversified residential and business villages we envisioned had little
interest in building a “town” or for that matter much more than another subdivision or
shopping center to add to their portfolios.

We soon saw our “master plan” as only the necessary beginning of the process and
not the end. If, as we had announced to the world, our goal were for a new town to be
built on the Irvine ranch then we would have to become the master builder of the
communities we sought.

With master plan in hand our next job was to conceive and design the neighborhoods,
communities and ultimately the town. Others may join with us to build the pieces
(homes, shopping centers, businesses, parks, etc. etc.) but if we wanted the end result to
add up to a comprehensive whole there could only be one “master community builder”
and we decided that was to be us.

As you can imagine accepting the responsibility of declaring our selves as master
builder and planner we were obligating the Company to the financial risk that had been
the down fall of the vast majority of previous ventures here and abroad. But we knew that
no one else had the self interest in our success or failure then we had. It was to our self­
interest if nothing else. But deciding the form, size, texture, mix and ultimate governance
of the communities proved to be a daunting challenge. When we began that process in
1960 Orange County had become the fastest growing major county in the United States.
The Los Angeles metropolitan area, of which we were a part, was characterized as the
suburban sprawl capital of the world and planners and architects lamented the loss of
“city” and deplored “sprawl” which they loosely defined as all development outside our
historic core cities. Yet our core cities, including Los Angeles, were often declining in
population and businesses. Families and industries were flocking to the very place
planners detested. And the Ranch was on the outer edge of that sprawl.

The easiest part of the job was deciding what we didn’t want our communities to
become. Namely more of what was being built. But given the fact that as much as our
professional peers and we criticized the formlessness of our metropolitan cities there was
no consensus on what form it should take. There was no question in our minds, however,
that what ever we created it should be contained within recognizable edges. Whether
those edges were natural, man­made or political was less important to us than their
evident identity.

We had begun with Pereira’s 1960 University Community plan which had proposed a
university town of 10,000 acres but which was contained within a boundary that had little
if any relationship to natural topography, climate nor existing and/or future governmental
boundaries. It did not address what was to happen to the vast central portion of the ranch.
Was it to be another new town or part of the cities of Santa Ana and Tustin, which
bordered the northern boundary of the ranch?

We soon concluded that neither developing a significant portion of the ranch as
adjuncts to existing older cities nor devoting the central valley of the ranch to two new
towns made little sense. So after much internal discussion we utilized the natural, man
made and governmental boundaries as they existed or were proposed and expanded the
size of the proposed university town to cover the entire central section of the ranch. We
then worked with our surrounding cities and existing school districts and agreed upon
which portion of the ranch outside the new town would become either part of their respective cities or at the least their areas of influence.

Having established the principle of using natural topographical features such as canyons, bluffs and ridges together with regional roads to help establish recognizable boundaries for the respective cities. We then used the same principle of having strong boundaries define the future residential, commercial and business communities we proposed to create within the new town and the portions of the surrounding cities the ranch was a part of.

Our idea of creating villages, which by definition were smaller than a city but often larger than a traditional neighborhood, required us to think about what mix of uses they should contain. From that the concept of a variety of neighborhoods, which by themselves are most often small in scale and more monolithic in use and design, within our villages developed. Thus Irvine villages evolved into communities that contained a mixture of uses compatible to each other including: Schools, parks, neighborhood shopping and businesses, apartments, houses and townhouses. The community design challenge was how to place the various uses within each village so they became integral and accepted parts of each village without intruding on the sanctity of each neighborhood.

We knew we weren’t inventing some new form of community since the integration of densities and uses had characterized most of our historic cities. But since the introduction of the automobile and the suburbanization of our regional cities whole generations of Americans had grown up where the separation of uses and densities had been the norm. The question was would the buying public accept our modest but clear rejection of the monolithic neighborhood that had come to characterize contemporary suburban sprawl. All our market data said otherwise. At least it gave us no comfort that they would. After all, the dramatic success of the monolithic single-family subdivision of the previous 15 years was something the academic planners and architects could ignore but we couldn’t. We were committing the Company to millions of dollars of planning and infrastructure costs. The builders we would need to entice to build the various pieces of our villages were risking millions more.

We also knew of the financial disaster that more often than naught characterized other attempts to change the status quo. But we had settled upon a concept that in our judgment was neither a radical departure from what we knew was acceptable to either the buying public nor a clone of the monotonous sprawl that had come to characterize suburbanism. And fortunately we had no time to listen to the conflicting chorus of views and comments of our peers who then comprised the Newtown development or planning community. We had a community to build.

In 1963, just three years into our master planning and infrastructure-building period we simultaneously started constructing our first two residential communities. One we named Eastbluff because it was located on a 500-acre mesa overlooking the upper Newport Bay and within the city of Newport Beach. The other community, named University Park, was located on existing farmland near the future campus. They were to become the first residential communities, or Villages as we soon decided to define them. Both received their first residents in 1964.
In each we mixed apartment buildings, town houses, condominiums, single family detached houses, stores, jobs, churches, and just about anything else that ever was in our historic small communities. How did they differ from what had become characterized as Orange County suburban sprawl? Instead of separating each use into its own separate community we allowed each neighborhood to have their own place in the village yet become equal partners in the entire community. We did that by constraining the size of each residential neighborhood, making the lines between them as seamless as possible and then providing them with a common core. Our goal was to make each resident, no matter where they lived, to feel part of one community.

In a county that in 1963 was dominated by single family, detached houses the introduction of attached townhouses was clearly our greatest marketing risk. Would the buying public accept this style of housing when they had choices elsewhere, including in an adjacent neighborhood. However, we were desirous of mixing housing types and the Company was willing to test the market with our planning ideas.

Fortunately, upon opening they both became instant successes exceeding all our sales projections. Fortunately, also for us, that success gave us the confidence to stay with our village mixed use concepts. Today, nearly forty-seven years later, Community and Village have become synonymous with the Company’s planning and developments.

But that was 47 years ago. What challenges do we face today that differ from what we faced then? How has society changed? What has been happening to our communities that cause us to pause and reflect on what we now might need to do different?

A rapid series of economic, social and technological changes, especially immigration and economic globalization, have transformed the United States into a microcosm of the world. The exceptional uniformity that characterized American society in the early post-WW-II period has been supplanted by extreme diversity. The most integrated national market in the history of the world is now splintering us into an array of niches.

While we can’t ignore the changes that are escalating around us we believe that our basic job is to continue to create communities that, while they accommodate those changes, don’t lose the strong sense of place and community that first emerged over forty years ago in our first villages. By so doing we can, perhaps, provide a living and working environment that provides a balance of identifiable local places to the ever expanding global universe that more and more is becoming our expanded environment.