

a 30 year quest for human scale

the irvine experience

In 1960 a privileged few of us were challenged to plan and design an entire community on the vast irvine ranch. it was to surround a new campus of the university of california. the irvine ranch was then located on the outer edge of one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the world. the vast basin of the los angles metropolitan area covers over _____ acres. larger than give references. by 1960 that basin held _____ men, women and children who called it their home. and _____ more were moving in every day. _____ additional souls were expected to make that basin their home over the next 20 years.

By 1960 much of that growth was occurring in the county just to the south of l.a. county. orange county had been coping with l.a.'s overflow for over a decade and had by then become known for its many pleasant residential communities within easy commuting distance of l.a., the home of the united state's best 20th century example of community design, disneyland and from the northern boundary of the irvine ranch acres and acres of orange groves and cattle ranches.

The theme of this conference: "housing design :...maintaining a human scale" is an objective we at the irvine company have been struggling with for the past 27 years. you also ask the question: "in the year 2000, how will we provide for the enormous demand for housing in our urban centers while addressing the need for an architecture which incorporates a human quality in its design?". as your meeting notice suggest, that is not only a "complex" issue but one which requires some definition. what do we mean by "human quality" when we say it is missing in the design of our housing? in fact, i might add, has the design of the house, per se, had much to do with the loss of human scale in our cities?

Professor Spiro Kostof says a great deal about the american house in his book and television series, america by design: he says: "the american house is at the core of our national existence.it is much more than a house. it is a home, a sacred hearth. it is the american dream."

He then links the design of the home with the instincts and wants of the people who live in those homes when he says: "...the most human want of all ---the want to be visible, to stand out and be counted. it's the shingle house on the corner, we say, with the big elm out front, you can't miss it, it has a green door and brown trim." "the want to be visible, to stand out and be counted", isn't that what human scale is about in our cities?

Professor Kostof talks about how the american house

has changed in design as our society has changed and our cities grown when he says: by the mid-nineteenth century "...a great urban revolution had been set in motion, and its reverberations are still felt today. there were two interlocked cycles to this epic. one had to do with the movement out of the urban centers; the other, with the establishment of suburbs as the new ideal of domesticity."

He then cites the conflict between the historic role of our home as the most important expression of our individuality and the growth of our cities. he points out the consequences of our small villages growing into urban cities and they into gigantic mega-regional conglomerations when he says: "... a nagging problem remained unresolved: how to reconcile the idea of the house as a free expression of its owner-occupant and still create a disciplined general order that would signify a harmonious community".

That conflict between the role of the house as a free expression of its occupant and the desire to produce a harmonious community is exactly the challenge the irvine company planners and designers faced in 1960 when given the challenge to build a new town on the edge of one of the largest mega cities on this earth. now, 27 years later, the challenge has become more difficult and even more important. more difficult because rising land and infrastructure cost force higher densities and thus less ability to use the house to produce the individuality we all want. yet the need for individuality is even more important today because of many of the more dehumanizing consequences of the growth of our cities and the industrialization of our society.

The "want to be visible"...to stand out and be counted" is as important to our human psyche today as it ever was, but our ability to satisfy that "want" with the "shingle house on the corner" disappeared long ago for anyone but the privileged rich.

So, what can we do? how do we bring human scale back into our mass produced communities? frankly, it is a never ending and progressively more difficult challenge. first, we need acknowledge that there is a limit to how much individuality we can provide in our house designs. the truth is, most any house you buy on the irvine ranch is most probably available elsewhere close by.

As a consequence, we believe our primary job is to build communities, not just buildings. therefore, we always begin with the community design. village design as we call it. that's not to say we consider the house less important. it's just that until we have settled on a community design we can't possibly know what particular house design appropriately belongs in that village.

So it is the village design that is the real challenge. as professor kostof asked: how do you "...reconcile the idea of the house as a free expression of

its owner-occupant and still create a disciplined general order that would signify a harmonious community?".

Frankly, i don't know how to answer that question other then to say: the community must be designed, not just occur. not just become the vague description of where you live. or a land use designation on a zoning map. the role of community design in todays environment of sprawling mega cities is much more then to produce "a disciplined general order that would signify a harmonious community". unfortunately, too much emphasis on harmony can produce monotony. the more difficult task is to reintroduce human scale back into our cities.

Inside the front doors of our homes, whether they be apartment, town house or the rapidly disappearing detached house we can still produce our own individuality and the size of our homes are certainly human in scale. but once outside the front door human scale and individuality quickly dissipates depending on the individuals perception of the size of the physical environment he or she images that they live in.

One of the most visible ways man has attempted to distinguish where he lives is to build a wall around his community. as architectural students we studied the ancient, walled cities of antiquity. the modern version of those walled cities are the walled subdivisions with guard gates to keep the enemy out. of course, the number and variety of houses inside the new walled communities usually depends on the size of the property owned by the builder and the builder's taste in house design. nevertheless, the wall and the gate, in all of its' forms, continues to be the most powerful visual means of setting your neighborhood apart from the dehumanizing size of our mega cities. the economic and cultural advantages of our regional cities will continue to attract more and more people all attempting to crowd into a finite space. at the same time that "human want....to be visible, to stand out and be counted" that professor kostof talks about will continue to cause those same people to seek micro environments that satisfy that instinct.

With that as a back ground and the company's 1960 decision to build a city around the new university of california, irvine, we started our 27 year quest to find solutions to the challenges posed by professor kostof.

How? by emphasizing the distinction of each village thru the creation of strong edges, clearly demarked entries and a diversity of building types and amenities within each village. in retrospect, the idea was neither unique nor new. but i can't emphasize enough the importance of the up front commitment to think of the community as a serious of distinct but related parts.

That were our greatest difficulties? it's interesting

to think back and recall just what were the hurtles we had to overcome. indeed, still have to overcome. there were many. both internal and external. but the one that stands out the most in my mind is the lack of congruence on just what is a city. particularly in the 1960's.

Once it was determined we were serious about building a new town the suggestions, ideas and demands came down on us like an avalanche. what is the ideal city size, as though there is one. should it be incorporated and self governing or not. what new and innovating social service or program should it adopt. how should we, or even should we, mix housing types within a village. particularly apartments and for sale housing. what should we do about about housing for the moderate income. how do you balance the desire of the family home buyers for small parks close to their homes versus the public officials propensity to think in terms of bigger parks and "open space" standards.

To understand the atmosphere surrounding our efforts to forge a new town from ideas and plans you must also understand the social and political climate of the early and mid '60's. we were in the throes of the "great society". on our way to the "small is beautiful" era. the popular mood was, we can solve any problem given the will and the money and our newly affluent society believed it had the money. as a consequence the expectations imposed on our efforts often far exceeded our ability to fulfill them.

As i recall, how we dealt with all the pressures to incorporate everyone's suggestions on how to create the utopian community of each of their respective dreams was to resist the temptation to attempt to solve every societal problem that had evolved since the industrial revolution.

I don't mean to over simplify the incredibly complex task of building a town but my point is that our discipline was to concentrate our energies on those parts of the effort that we believed we could impact. in the area of design they came down to creating a town that had human scale, individuality and variety.

We also believed in the political concept of self governance. we supported incorporation. but even in that concept we have always made it clear we consider ourselves the community designers and the elected and appointed public officials as the public managers and public policy makers. it's been a difficult distinction to maintain.

As professor kostof says in his television version of america by design, "we are all designers of america". indeed, we are. but one of the problems with the design of our cities is that they have been designed, thru a process called "public hearings", by groups of people who all know what we should want but have little idea how to ultimately produce it.

Don't misunderstand me, we do listen to what the public says, for they are our customer. it is them that we must ultimately please. but we also take risk and propose ideas and designs that we believe they will ultimately like and accept when it serves the objective of variety, individuality and human scale. we believe there can only be one holder of the pencil. as a result we've had concepts denied, we've had to modify others but we continue to aggressively take the leadership in the complex job of designing our villages.

Finally, as you say in your meeting notice: "the challenge of designing to meet the housing needs.....while maintaining a human scale is a formidable one.". frankly, i don't agree that the challenge is solely design. in fact, we have plans and designs coming out of our ears. what we lack is the public will to build the parts of the plans that allows the region to function in a fashion that we humans deserve and want. we have, for over 20 years, virtually stopped building the regional roads our growing population desperately needs. is there anything more dehumanizing then sitting in a car in the middle lane of a so called freeway along with seemingly millions of other cars?

The greatest disappointment i have in our efforts here at irvine is that despite all the positive feed back we get on the micro environment we've created in our villages the overall impression is that irvine is becoming just another part of the hugh gridlock of southern california. and my frustration is compounded by the knowledge that, except for societies neglect, the problem need not exist. exist, however, it does. continue it will. unless we face up to the fact that our problem is traffic not growth. for growth we can't change. traffic we can. not by exotic bullet trains, nor complex "growth management ordinances" which treat us all like mindless mice who can be diverted from one maze into another and thus relieve the problem in the former while ignoring the fact we have merely moved it next door.

The unpopular, but plain, fact is that we either have to reduce the number of cars on our roads or build more roads. and the roads we need are the regional corridors we used to call freeways. my view is that we must do both. reduce the number of cars and build more and better roads. the reduction in the world's supply of oil will ultimately increase the price of auto fuel to the point where car pooling and public transportation will become an economic necessity. that, together with a fuel tax that at least pays for the maintenance of our roads will reduce the number of cars on our roads.

Don't get me wrong. i'm for urban villages, bike trails, housing near work places, regional planning and

anything else that will help. but they are all bandaids trying to stem the flow from a major and near fatal injury. our mega cities are going to continue to grow. whether we like it or not that is a fact we need face up to. what managed growth means to me, then, is that we must build the infra-structure required by that growth. if we don't, no amount of town planning and community design produce the human scale our psyche craves and we deserve.

Is that an impossible dream. frankly, it will continue to be as long as professions such as ours continues to deal with the problem as though it's solution was dependent on some new and unique design or mode of travel. the public's gullibility makes them suckers for any easy fix you can suggest that doesn't cost them anything and lays the blame on someone else. we've already spent too long waiting for the quick fix or the new break thru. what we need now is to acknowledge that what we need is more roads and car reduction induced by economic incentives. there just "an't" no other way.

The public has lost faith in us and before we do anything our first priority is to gain back that faith. as professor kostof says "we are all the designers of america". somewhere along the way, however, that committee approach to design has broken down. what we now need is leadership that will show us the way to again bring human movement back to our regional cities and then the work we do at places like irvine in bringing human scale back to our communities will have the meaning to our lives it promises. my hope is that as a profession you can and will assume your share of that leadership.