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Planning — August/September 2011

No Small Plans

The story of three master planned communities that have come of age.

By *Suzanne Sutro Rhees, AICP*

The 1960s and early 1970s were an era of unrivaled ambition in the scope and scale of master planned community development. Teams of planners, architects, landscape architects, and engineers worked to create complete communities intended to provide a full complement of housing types, jobs, services and amenities, break down social and racial barriers, and provide a meaningful alternative to sprawl. Some were funded partly through the Department of Housing and Urban Development's New Towns program, while others were privately funded.

The largest master planned communities are concentrated in the Washington-Baltimore corridor (Reston and Columbia), and in the Sunbelt (southern California, Arizona, and Florida). Massive population shifts into Sunbelt states and their proximity to major employment centers helped drive their growth.

How well did they succeed in realizing these ambitions? This article examines three master planned communities — Irvine Ranch, Lake Havasu City, and Coral Springs — that have been substantially completed (reaching close to their originally planned size) and that were built largely with private funds. All three are now about 50 years old, making them potentially eligible for historic district designation. And all three are now moving beyond their original development plans as they mature.



The biggest of all

Irvine, California, is the largest privately planned community in the U.S., with a population of more than 200,000, and is arguably the template for a lot of later development in Southern California. As the city's website proclaims, it is often singled out as a "best place to live" based on the quality of its housing, jobs, and schools, and has for the past seven years maintained the lowest violent crime rate for cities with more than 100,000 residents. The city's history is closely entwined with that of the Irvine Ranch, the larger landholding that originally encompassed the city, and the Irvine Company, which planned the city and supported its incorporation in 1971.

Like many planned communities in Southern California, Irvine grew out of several Spanish and Mexican land grants or "ranchos." The land came under the control of the Irvine family in 1878 and was later incorporated as the Irvine Company. The 115,000-acre property extended from the Pacific coast inland through a broad central valley to the foothills of the coastal mountains, now the Cleveland National Forest. Over the next 80 years, the ranch included grazing, profitable row crops, and orchards, creating its own water district and a vast irrigation system. Two Marine Corps air bases, El Toro and Tustin, were built on the ranch during World War II.

Small land sales for development began in the 1950s, as the interstate highway system moved closer to and eventually through the ranch. The era of urban development began in earnest in 1959, when the University of California requested a donation of land for one of its new campuses.

In her 2005 book, *Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia, and The Woodlands*, Cornell University planning professor Ann Forsyth identifies four phases in the planning of Irvine Ranch:

Modernist master planning, 1959–1966. During this period, the combined donation and sale of 1,500 acres for the University of California at Irvine sparked an ambitious plan for a new town on 10,000

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Metropolitan field, 1966–1977. The Irvine Company developed its own planning expertise during this period, creating the general plan for the central sector of the ranch and the detailed design of the village of Woodbridge, the first of 32 villages. The city of Irvine, incorporated in 1971, was cut from the middle two-thirds of the ranch, and immediately began to prepare its own general plan, as required by California law.

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Forsyth uses the term "metropolitan field" to describe the concept of a multicentered regional city in which each subcommunity has its own node of activity, rather than a single downtown or central core. Activity nodes include the university, performing arts centers, retail centers, parks, employment centers, and the like. Planners were inspired by the work of Kevin Lynch, who, in his 1960 book, *Image of the City*, emphasized the need to make environments "imageable" or legible to the general public through such elements as paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks.

The village of Woodbridge, which became the prototype for succeeding villages, embodies a classic Radburn-style design, with small lots arranged on cul-de-sacs within superblocks placed on a loop of parkways. Small parks are situated in most superblocks, and larger open space and trail corridors, centered on two manmade lakes, bisect the village. Unlike Radburn, however, where houses are reversed to face an internal path network, houses in Woodbridge are oriented toward the street.

City building, 1977 to the late 1980s. During this period, the Irvine Company focused on detailed design rather than large-scale land planning, while the city of Irvine conducted its own planning studies. Company partner and current owner Donald Bren brought his taste in Mediterranean architecture and lavish landscaping to new development. Meanwhile, the city's planners focused on the development of the industrial areas around the John Wayne Airport as the Irvine Business Complex, and on the increasingly important issue of environmental and open space protection.

Irvine as landscape, late 1980s onward. During the 1980s, the city and the company wrestled with issues of habitat protection, and lengthy negotiations led to the designation of about 44,000 acres — about half the total area of the Irvine Ranch — as protected habitat. Protected lands are concentrated in the San Joaquin Hills along the coast and in the foothills of the inland Santa Ana mountains, and include state and regional parks, conservancy areas, and the city of Irvine's open space network.

The city's population at the 2010 U.S. census was 212,375, making it the 98th largest city in the U.S. Its median household income was \$84,950 in 2009.

One of the most noticeable legacies of the Irvine Ranch plan is the complete absence of strip commercial development along major thoroughfares. Commercial development is clustered in centers, each of which is lushly landscaped and designed for internal pedestrian circulation.

Irvine has, however, been criticized on many counts. Its large residential neighborhoods have been called monotonous, diffuse, and difficult to navigate. The arterial road network minimizes traffic through the villages, as it was designed to do, but also funnels traffic onto those roads rather than local streets. Heavily landscaped parkways make trips more pleasant, while the extensive network of bike paths creates a popular alternative to the car, especially around the university campus.

Housing costs are a major issue in Southern California, but are particularly high in Irvine, where median housing value in 2011 is estimated at \$559,000. Long-running controversies over a lack of affordable housing have been resolved to some degree through city-sponsored linkage programs requiring set-asides of affordable units, now comprising about six percent of the city's housing stock.

One of the more evident shortcomings of the maturing city has been its minimal level of transit service. The original plan included transit rights-of-way connecting village centers, although the city eventually dropped this concept. In the 1990s, planning began for construction of the CenterLine, a nine-mile light rail transit line running from Santa Ana to Irvine. But in 2005, Irvine voters rejected plans for the line, prompting the Orange County Transit Authority to suspend the project and divert the funds toward other improvements in the existing bus and commuter rail (Metrolink) system. Local bus service is infrequent, and the city's size and multicentered layout works against effective service.

Now that Orange County's two military air stations are closed, more housing is going into previously industrial areas. The area that has caused the greatest controversy in recent years has been the former El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. The city, Orange County, and the region were bitterly divided between proponents of a new commercial airport and advocates for a "Great Park" to serve the county. After prolonged debate, park advocates won out in 2005, when the land was auctioned to a private developer who entered into a development agreement with the city to dedicate over 1,300 acres to park use, while developing the remaining acreage.

While ambitious plans were made for the park, the collapse of the housing market stalled its development, since park development relies heavily on tax increment financing from the surrounding areas. Today, a small corner of the park — 200 acres, large by most standards — is under construction, with a great lawn, sports fields, a community farm and farmers market, and arts and performance spaces.

After a near standstill in new housing development in 2009–10, home building is reviving in Irvine and Orange County. The Irvine Company is developing six new villages north of the Great Park site, some with a more gridded, almost new urbanist-style street pattern, with attached housing served by alleys and single-family detached houses with recessed or side-oriented garages, a distinct departure from the curvilinear layout of the early villages.



Crowd pleaser

Coral Springs, Florida, was planned and developed beginning in the 1960s by the private development firm of Coral Ridge Properties, then working in the Fort Lauderdale area and seeking affordable land farther west. This swampy area next to the Everglades had been drained by a system of canals and levees in the 1950s, and then used for farming and ranching. The company began buying land in 1961; over the next 10 years the city grew to almost 24 square miles.

The city was designed by Haden Benning, a firm based in the well-known planned community of Columbia, Maryland. The plan was implemented by an in-house team of architects and engineers under the leadership of company president James Hunt. City historian Wendy Wangberg quotes one of the designers as saying that Hunt "designed his own city and would have designed his own country if he could." Hunt's goal was complete modernity — all household appliances had to be electric, not gas — and complete aesthetic control. Deed restrictions were used to regulate signs and awnings and to prescribe lavish landscaping. Would-be home builders were taken on tours by company employees on a double-decker bus before they were allowed to submit plans.

Hunt quickly moved five employees into temporary housing on the property in 1961, making it eligible for incorporation as a true "company town." In an effort to create a visual landmark, he oversaw construction of a covered bridge, a single steel span 40 feet in length, crossing a small creek. Hunt even contracted with the American Snuff Company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to paint vintage chewing tobacco advertisements for "Bull of the Woods" and "Peach Snuff" on either side of the bridge: The Coral Springs Covered Bridge is now a Florida Heritage Site and the only covered bridge in the public right of way in the state of Florida.

The master plan organized the city into neighborhoods set within a one-mile grid of section-line arterials. Today, each mile-square neighborhood displays a classic suburban pattern in which strip commercial and multifamily development line the arterial "edges" and single-family homes occupy the interior, while canals play the role that internal pathway systems do in many planned communities. Most neighborhoods include at least one public school and one park. Industrial uses are restricted to one square mile next to the Sawgrass Expressway.

According to community development director Susan Hess, Coral Springs was marketed well. "The word quickly spread that this was to be a family-oriented community, unlike the rest of Broward County, which was known for its tourism and seniors." By 1970, the new city's population was only 3,750, but in the 1980s and '90s it soared, reaching 117,549 by 2000. Growth has since slowed — it had 127,359 residents in 2010 — and, at about 14 percent African American and 22 percent Latino, its population is less diverse than Broward County but similar to the state of Florida as a whole.

What makes Coral Springs unique is its enduring design controls. The deed restrictions of the early years were translated into comprehensive architectural review guidelines in the mid-1990s. An Architectural Review Committee reviews all development plans, including those for single-family houses, using guidelines that go so far as to specify preferred architectural styles and paint colors. The guidelines provide multiple stylistic and design options, and are written with "should" rather than "shall" language; however, the city administration has the power to reject a design that fails to comply, with the option of an appeal to the city commission.

As the city matured, it became clear that, like many suburban communities of that era, it lacked an identifiable downtown, and that its one-story commercial strips and shopping centers were approaching obsolescence. The failure of the Coral Springs Mall and its purchase by the city for a charter school led, in 2001, to the designation of a Community Redevelopment Area of several blocks in the city's geographic center. An urban design plan prepared by the city in 2002 shows a new urbanist-type mixed use center tightly organized within a framework of new streets, with specified building heights and build-to lines. However, the planned development has yet to materialize, delayed by a glut of existing office space and the economic downturn.

As of this spring, the Community Redevelopment Agency was moving ahead with the infrastructure elements of the plan, including street and transit improvements, funded through American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Bonds, and is anticipating the first new development in the downtown area, a Broward College satellite campus.



Way out there

Located on the Arizona-California border, roughly halfway between Los Angeles and Flagstaff, Lake Havasu City owes its existence to the lake of the same name. Lake Havasu was formed by the building of Parker Dam on the Colorado River for hydroelectric power and water supply in the 1930s. The lake behind the dam became an attractive location for fishing camps. During World War II the military used the area for test flights and developed a basic rest and recreational site near the airfield.

For the town's founder, Robert McCulloch, the project was an unexpected turn in a career built on manufacturing — chainsaws and outboard motors — aviation, and oil and gas exploration. Visiting Lake Havasu in search of an outboard motor test site, he was struck by its development potential and low land values. McCulloch first bought 3,500 acres of lakeside property and then 26 square miles of desert. He envisioned both a tourist attraction and a year-round manufacturing hub that would capitalize on the site's proximity to southern California.

Planning began when McCulloch bought a real estate development firm, Holly Development. It appears that the plan was prepared entirely by this firm, with the assistance of architect C.V. Wood, the designer of Disneyland, who laid out the city's streets. According to an account by one resident, some liken it to "dumping a bowl of spaghetti on a table top, and that's why so many of the streets wind around and we have only two streets that run completely straight." In fact, the streets follow the hilly topography, with a high degree of interconnection but few if any distinguishable neighborhoods.

The community centerpiece is London Bridge, certainly an unexpected sight in the Arizona desert. Built in 1831, the bridge was sinking into the River Thames when the City of London Corporation put it up for auction in 1967. McCulloch's winning bid of about \$2.5 million was far less than the \$7 million cost of moving it to its new site, where it was placed across the newly excavated Bridgewater Channel, separating an existing peninsula from the "mainland." An "English Village" tourist attraction was built on the island, complete with a double-decker bus and Tudor-style shops.

The city, incorporated in 1978, was planned for a total population of 75,000, with an economy split between tourism and light industry, each comprising 40 percent of employment, with service businesses picking up the remaining 20 percent. Actual growth was slower, reaching 24,363 in 1990 and then almost doubling to 41,938 in 2000. The 2010 population was about 52,500. The city's general plan points to both the high degree of compliance with the original master plan and the need to revisit it, saying both the zoning and subdivision regulations are outdated.

The city's housing stock is not particularly diverse: about 75 percent of all units are single-family detached, and the majority of the remainder consists of multifamily units in midsized complexes. Almost three-quarters of all units are owner-occupied. As a retirement-oriented community, the city has a high proportion of senior residents; 22 percent of the population is over 65, and the median age is 47 (compared to 33 in Irvine and 37 in Coral Springs).

In 2007, an American Institute of Architects Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team visited the city to help craft a vision for the central business district, which is located along a winding boulevard one mile inland and uphill from the London Bridge. The team suggested a pedestrian-oriented live-work-play environment, with a significant amount of high-density housing to help sustain this "Uptown" district. The city has since adopted a regulating plan and transect-based zoning district based on the R/UDAT recommendations. Similar districts have been created for other redevelopment areas, including the original English Village near the London Bridge.

According to senior planner Stuart Schmeling, *AICP*, the economic downturn has slowed redevelopment of the Uptown district, but the city has moved ahead with pedestrian improvements such as curb bump-outs and crosswalks, and it has bought several parcels for future redevelopment. A privately funded Main Street archway was recently approved by the city council.

Some lessons

The master planned communities of this era were consciously designed to provide an alternative to sprawl — that is, to incremental, uncoordinated, and auto-oriented development. They emphasize peaceful residential environments, with ample access to open space, parks, and amenities. Pedestrians often benefit by separated pathway and trail systems. Traffic moves along well-landscaped parkways or arterials with thoughtfully designed commercial development. While the architecture of individual buildings is generally considered unremarkable, the landscape is often memorable in the way that it creates community structure and shapes complete environments.

Racial and ethnic diversity varies considerably among the three communities profiled here. In general, those communities that include a diversity of housing types have encouraged a correspondingly diverse range of occupants, compared to suburbs that are dominated by single-family housing.

Ann Forsyth points out that the most successful planned communities display many characteristics of today's smart growth and new urbanism: high densities, efficient land use, mixed housing types, and well-defined pedestrian and open space systems. "What's remarkable about them," she says, "is that they achieved at a really large scale and pushed against the market." In other words, they provided a real alternative to the uncoordinated, piecemeal suburban development that was the norm. In

What is lacking for the most part in these master planned communities are meaningful alternatives to the automobile, along with truly walkable urban centers connected to the larger metropolis by transit. Also lacking is the vertically integrated mixed use that is an essential element of such urban centers. As new initiatives in all three communities demonstrate, this may be the next step in their evolution.

Suzanne Rhees is a planner and writer in Minneapolis with a long-standing interest in historic planned communities, from the 19th century to the 1960s.

Resources

Images: Top — Part of the shuttered El Toro military base will be converted into a 'great park' to serve all of Orange County. Image courtesy Orange County Great Park. Middle — Irvine's manmade North and South Woodbridge lakes have shoreline pedestrian trails. Bottom — Downtown revitalization concept for Lake Havasu City, Arizona. Image Lake Havasu City.

Reading: Ann Forsyth explores postwar new towns in *Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia, and the Woodlands* (University of California Press, 2005). In *The Image of the City*, published in 1960 by MIT Press, Kevin Lynch explained how people make mental maps of their surroundings while traversing urban areas.

On the web: The Irvine Company maintains a website devoted to the planning of the Irvine Ranch: <http://www.goodplanning.org/>. Each city also maintains a website that includes historical background: <http://www.cityofirvine.org/>; <http://www.coralsprings.org/>; <http://www.lhcaz.gov/>.

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