Neotraditional Town Planning

A New Vision For the Suburbs?

Lloyd W. Bookout

The Village Center at Montgomery Village, Montgomery Township, New Jersey, a neotraditional community scheduled for completion in 1994.
"American society needs a new ideal vision of how future development ought to occur in our large metropolitan areas. The current vision contains too many serious inconsistencies and undesirable outcomes."
—Anthony Downs

Since the late 1940s, the United States has made the transition from a nation of predominantly urban dwellers to one in which about 45 percent of the population lives in the suburbs. Generations of Americans have long looked to the suburbs to escape the displeasures of urban life yet retain access to the jobs and cultural facilities that the city offers.

But during the past 20 years, these areas have undergone dramatic change, becoming almost as complex as the urban cores they surround. Traffic snarls, inadequate social services, shortages of public facilities, increasing crime rates, and expensive housing are stretching the patience—and pocketbooks—of suburban dwellers. The locus of the American dream is proving to be not as restful as it was once cracked up to be.

Anthony Downs, senior fellow at The Brookings Institution, has identified four major flaws with the "vision" Americans have long held of the suburbs: 1) excessive travel needs brought about by low-density development patterns; 2) inadequate housing for low-wage workers; 3) no consensus on how to finance infrastructure needs equitably; and 4) no effective political mechanisms to deal with conflicts between the welfare of society as a whole and the welfare of smaller segments of that society (as evidenced in the increasing number of NIMBYs and LULUs). Downs has called for a new vision—or paradigm—to guide suburban development in the future.

Some planners and developers believe that such a vision has begun to emerge—its genesis being the much publicized 80-acre community of Seaside located on a barren coastal strip of the Florida panhandle. In 1988 in the Atlantic Monthly magazine, Philip Langdon referred to a new traditionalism through which "the revival and reinterpretation of traditional planning ideas are winning close attention from those who shape American housing patterns." This article kicked off a barrage of media hype on neotraditional planning ideas and proposals that is still going strong.

What is the neotraditional vision, how is it being applied to emerging communities, and what is the likelihood that it will have a long-lasting effect on how we live? These questions will be explored in a series of articles on neotraditional planning in Urban Land over the next several months.

The Contemporary Vision

The contemporary vision of the suburbs is predicated still on the "garden city" theories of Ebenezer Howard and the early examples set by urban designers such as Frederick Law Olmsted (Riverside, Illinois) and Clarence Stein (Radburn, New Jersey). In the late 19th century, Howard posed an alternative to the overcrowded and polluted conditions of industrial London. He called for a series of satellite cities, each of about 30,000 persons, surrounded by green spaces. Workers could either travel to London by train or obtain jobs at new factories envisioned for these garden cities, while nonworking family members would be left to enjoy a healthier living environment. In the 1930s, the United States experimented briefly with government-sponsored "green" towns fashioned in the

The Reston Town Center urban core is an 85-acre mixed-use area within a 460-acre "Town Center District" that was designated on the 1962 master plan. The first phase of the urban core opened in 1989 featuring 830,000 square feet of office space; 240,000 square feet of retail, restaurant, and entertainment uses; and a 514-room hotel. At buildout, the town center will contain up to 215 million square feet of hotel, commercial, and residential (660 units) space. Neotraditional design elements include a main shopping street, an urban plaza with fountain, on-street parking, and a grided street system. Still, some neotraditionalists consider Reston Town Center a "simulation" of the real thing because it is physically separated from the rest of the community and most people must drive to get there.
Begun in 1962, Reston, Virginia (top), is recognized as one of the most ambitious new communities in the United States. The organization of the 7,400-acre community is based on a town center urban core surrounded by five predominantly residential villages. Although the new town center development incorporates neotraditional design elements, the residential villages continue to be developed on the original planned unit development themes. Less than 10 miles east of Reston, development has begun on a new 2,892-acre community to be called Brambleton (right). Here, Kettler & Scott, the community developer, has opted for a noticeably neotraditional design.

In response to the chaotic leapfrogging of development in the 1950s, a purported "better way for the suburbs" emerged during the 1960s and remained the dominant vision through the 1980s—the planned unit development. In 1971, ULI defined the PUD as a housing project with the following characteristics: 1) dwelling units grouped into clusters, allowing an appreciable amount of land for open space; 2) much or all of its housing in townhouses or apartments, or both; 3) higher densities than conventional single-family projects of the same acreage; and, often, 4) nonresidential land uses, such as shopping and employment centers.

The design and legal principles inherent in the PUD approach to community development are now evident throughout the United States. They are embodied in such notable communities as Reston, Virginia; Columbia, Maryland; and Irvine, California.

spirit of Howard's garden city, albeit without the jobs and full range of services Howard advocated.

Major population movement from U.S. central cities did not occur until after World War II. While that movement has hardly slowed since, American suburbs did not materialize as Howard might have hoped. Instead of developing as orderly, identifiable new towns, they became a sprawl of cookie-cutter houses bisected by highways and land uses supporting housing. As families fled to the perceived safety and comforts of the suburbs, urbanologists such as Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford criticized the emerging land use pattern. As Mumford put it: "Nobody can be satisfied with the form of the city today. Neither as a working model, as a social medium, nor as a work of art does the city fulfill the high hopes that modern civilization has called forth—or even meet our reasonable demands."
And it is the experience with these communities—and others like them but on a smaller scale—that neotraditionalists point to when they argue that still a better way is needed to guide development patterns in the 1990s. Philadelphia-based architect and planner James W. Wentling is one who has questioned the business-as-usual approach to community development: "Perhaps the stock recipe for planning new communities has become all too familiar: subdivide the land into self-contained development ‘pods’ made accessible by a loop collector street; develop an entry statement and architectural theme to be carried out throughout the various housing types; and build an amenity area as a focal point with appropriate facilities for a select market segment."

**The Neotraditional Vision**

What distinguishes neotraditional communities from other forms of suburban development? First, and perhaps foremost, the idealized neotraditional community intends to capture a stronger sense of place through the layout of its streets, the arrangement of its open spaces, the appearance of its streetscapes, and its link to historical and regional prototypes.

According to Andres Duany of the Coral Gables-based firm Duany & Plater-Zyberk, Architects—Seaside’s planner and the leading spokesperson of the neotraditional town planning movement—there is nothing radical about "traditional neighborhood developments" (his terminology for neotraditional communities). "The prototype," he says, "is right under our noses and it’s the traditional American town of the early 20th century."

Duany is not inhibited in his criticisms of the PUD and the suburban development pattern it has fostered. At ULI’s 1990 spring meeting in Dallas, he presented to ULI’s Recreational Development Council a long list of the failures of the suburbs and the negative lifestyle effects they have had upon most who live in them—for example, his sister, who gave up a successful career to become a full-time chauffeur for her children.

At a neotraditional town planning workshop sponsored by the American Planning Association in fall of 1990, he called the new community of Rancho Santa Margarita in Orange County, California, a "pale simulation of the American dream," despite its apparent economic and market successes. Without question, Duany’s comments have ruffled a few feathers, but he has sparked a reevaluation of how we have been building the suburbs for nearly 30 years.

What Duany and other neotraditional planners are calling for, essentially, a small town where children and the elderly can walk where they need to go without fear of speeding vehicles; where a small downtown (now more fashionably referred to as the town center) exists within walking distance of homes; and where residents feel they are part of a community, not just dwellers in a subdivision.

The key components of the neotraditional vision can be described within the context of seven planning and design considerations: land use mix, density, street patterns, pedestrian circulation, open spaces, architectural character, and sense of community.

**Land Use Mix.** Typical suburban developments have tended to be divided into a series of development pods, each designated for a particular housing type or commercial activity. While many PUDs—striving for a balance in residential, commercial, employment, recreational, and public service uses—offer a wide range of uses, they have often failed to truly integrate them. Automobiles usually continue to be needed to move between clusters of single land uses.

The neotraditional approach is also based on the concept of balanced uses, but with a much finer grain of mixing. A primary goal of neotraditional communities is to make it easy for residents to walk between houses, jobs, and commercial services. Residential units above storefronts are encouraged; commercial services such as a convenience store are considered appropriate on a residential street corner; and small offices are intended to be interspersed throughout the community.

**Density.** The goal of a balanced mix of uses within walking range of each other necessitates a higher density than most suburban jurisdictions typically allow. Neotraditional planners put single-family houses on smaller lots, and include relatively more townhouse and multifamily units in their plans. The density factor is often driven by the objective of locating uses within one-quarter mile of one another—the common rule of thumb being walkability. Thus, most housing units are located within a five- to 10-minute walk of the town center, where commercial services and offices are concentrated.

*Figure 1: Comparison of Planning Concepts*  

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Source: Reid Ewing, Developing Successful New Communities (UIU: the Urban Land Institute, 1991).
The master plan for Lake Park Village in Union County, North Carolina, uses a combination of neotraditional and conventional PUD design concepts. The linear village core area includes formal open spaces and commercial and townhouse uses. Surrounding parcels are designated for single-family residential development and feature more curving, informal street patterns. A planning objective was to make the core area accessible to all residents of the community by keeping walking distances to under 10 minutes.

Street Patterns. Perhaps the central misconception about a neotraditional community is that it is based on a grid street pattern. According to architect Victor Mirontschuk, president of Houston-based EDI Planning and Architecture, “It is a myth to believe that a neotraditional community has to be laid out on a grid to achieve the desired planning objectives. Even Seaside does not follow a strict grid pattern.” Mirontschuk points to Lake Park in Union County, North Carolina, as an example of a neotraditional community in which grid streets and curving streets are used in combination: “The plan features a grid in the vicinity of the town center, but as distance increases from the center, the plan becomes more organic, following the topography and other natural features.”

Whether or not they follow a strict grid, neotraditional projects reject the cul-de-sac that have long dominated suburban design in favor of more formal street layouts. They emphasize providing a system of through connections that give drivers alternate routes between two points, rather than funneling all vehicles onto a few collector streets and arterial highways. Planner Lane Kendig of Mundelein, Illinois, author of Performance Zoning (Chicago: American Planning Association, 1980), agrees with this logic: “It is true that many new PUDs cause people to travel very indirectly and on a few number of streets and we have made a mistake by not providing a greater number of connections. For the good of the community as a whole, everyone can’t live on a cul-de-sac.”

Pedestrian Circulation. Neotraditional plans are formed in large part to benefit the pedestrian. After all, a primary objective of the concept is to get people out of their cars and onto the sidewalks. Conventional PUDs have long stressed off-street pedestrian circulation systems to connect residential and commercial uses and institutional uses like schools. But as Mirontschuk observes, “Most PUDs are not pedestrian-oriented despite the best intentions of their planners and developers. There are too many big roads to cross and the pedestrian system too often leads nowhere. The reality in most PUDs is that if you want to go to the neighborhood shopping center, you get in the car and drive there.”

Neotraditional plans put the pedestrian back on the street—or at least next to it. To make streets
more inviting, sidewalks are aligned traditionally, that is, next to the curb; houses and other buildings are pushed closer to the curb to create the perception of narrower, friendlier streets; and buildings are scaled so as not to overwhelm pedestrians. Formally arranged street trees and parallel parking help give pedestrians a sense of protection from passing cars. To reduce the negative effects that garages have on the streetscape, some neotraditional plans call for garages to be placed at the rear of the lot and accessed by long driveways or from alleys in the rear.

To better encourage pedestrian activity, street widths are often reduced—especially the widths of residential streets. Neotraditionalists argue (and many developers of conventional PUDs agree) that local standards force residential streets to be over-designed which, in turn, promotes speeding, increases conflicts between pedestrians and automobiles, and poses a danger to children living in the neighborhood.

**Open Spaces**. PUDs have successfully encouraged the preservation of large blocks of open space with an emphasis on natural-appearing features such as greenbelts. But some planners and public officials have questioned the real value of much of that open space, which, they assert, often is simply the land left over from development; community residents then have the problem of maintaining a preponderance of steep slopes, drainageways, and expansive greenbelts that serve little recreational purpose.

Neotraditional plans treat open space in a more formal way, both locationally and functionally. Village squares, town greens, formally designed parks, and small but intensively used recreation areas are common features of a neotraditional town. These spaces are often partially enclosed (for example, a village square framed on three sides with row-houses) so that they feel and function much like an outdoor room.

**Architectural Character**. American small towns seem naturally to have a certain look, one that usually is embedded in their own history and regional tastes. Neotraditional towns modeled after these familiar places strive to capture some of the same architectural qualities. For example, Seaside draws for inspiration on vernacular themes such as tin roofs, clapboard siding, and wooden picket fences. Before undertaking a design for a neotraditional community, the design team typically explores historic examples of small towns within the region. Participants in the design charrette for Kentlands, Maryland, spent time in historic Annapolis trying to understand better why that town has endured the test of time so well.

**Sense of Community**. By incorporating the design principles noted above (and others to be explored in later articles), neotraditional planners are trying to create a sense of place—and community—that they believe is missing from contemporary PUDs. Creating an easily perceptible, recognizable place is an elusive task and perhaps the greatest challenge facing urban designers. For neotraditionalists, the solution encompasses all of the design principles noted above, and perhaps one other factor that even the best design cannot offer—time.

The prototypes for most neotraditional plans are places that have been allowed to form and evolve over decades. Neotraditional designers believe there is great value in studying these successful models and recreating their most enduring qualities. For example, historical prototypes point to the importance of locating public buildings prominently within the community and elevating their status through architecture and the provision of adjacent public spaces. Neotraditional communities such as Mashpee Commons on Cape Cod have striven to do the same. Thus, neotraditional planners hope to lay a foundation that will allow perceivable and livable communities to evolve over time.

The sense of community is furthered by the neotraditional objective of socioeconomic diversification. Each community is intended to provide housing for a spectrum of incomes, lifestyles, ages, and family structures similar to the way small towns accommodate the full range of the population. Because housing types would be highly integrated, large blocks of households with similar incomes or family structures would not exist in isolation.

**Something of Value**

In theory, the neotraditional vision of community has much to recommend it. Whether the communities that neotraditionalists design and develop will have a significant effect on future patterns of urban development will depend on how well those communities respond to the needs, problems, and aspirations of contemporary society.
The 25-acre retail core of Mashpee Commons on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, includes this prominently positioned post office. Although physically integrated with retail activities, the building is set back farther from the street and fronted by a formal public plaza. Mashpee Commons also features a 1.8-acre town green adjacent to the retail core. This green will be surrounded by housing for the elderly, a church, and a public library; negotiations are underway to relocate the Mashpee town hall on the remaining parcel surrounding the green.

In short, they will need to offer an increasingly diverse population something of value: shorter or less congested distances to travel, opportunities for leisure pursuits, good quality and affordable housing, and overall improvements in "lifestyle." Future articles will explore some of the possibilities and potential pitfalls.

Notes
3Downs, "The Need for a New Vision for the Development of Large U.S. Metropolitan Areas."

Lloyd W. Bookout is a real estate development consultant and freelance writer based in Washington, D.C. This five-part series will continue next month with a look at the transportation and circulation objectives embodied in neotraditional design theory. Subsequent articles will examine issues related to regulations and design controls, social considerations, and marketing. The final article will offer a critique of the concept’s implications based on the ideas of a panel of ULI members.

For More Information from ULI . . .
Reid Ewing, Developing Successful New Communities, 1991, 154 pages (Order #D78).
Seaside, PRF Video (Order #S40).
Neotraditional Planning, ULI*InfoPacket (Order #338).

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Q: What do you get in return for a multimillion-dollar planning process, six years of hard work, public/private cooperation, and one of the most extensive citizen participation programs ever undertaken?
A: A program of land uses and design concepts for a multibillion-dollar, in-town development that should have little trouble making it through the next few decades of implementation.

Operating in one of the most cantankerous regulatory environments in the United States, Catellus Development Corporation, after a nine-year struggle, finally obtained official approval of a plan for development of Mission Bay in San Francisco. The 300-acre project offers one of the last opportunities for major development in the city, and thus its planning drew rapt attention from city officials and constant review from community leaders.

When the San Francisco Board of Supervisors approved a development agreement for the project on January 7, 1991, the planning process had consumed almost a decade, occupied three separate teams of planners and countless attorneys and consultants, and cost millions of dollars. The plan itself—for 8,000 dwelling units and 4.8 million square feet of office space, plus other uses—is considered one of the more innovative neighborhood design efforts in the city and in the nation.

The story of Mission Bay's evolution from a gleam in the eye of the Santa Fe Railroad to a public/private cooperative venture demonstrates just
how exhaustive and exhausting an approval process can be—and shows what other developers may expect to encounter in today's development world.

**Defining the Mission: The Planning Process**

Mission Bay is located less than a mile southeast of downtown San Francisco's financial district. Once an area of swamps and tidelands, the site was used as a city dump and "reclaimed" all through the latter half of the 19th century by filling the wetlands with rock taken from the surrounding hills. This allowed the establishment of major marshaling yards, terminals, and piers for rail and boat shipping. As happened in many other such areas, however, Mission Bay's prominence as a railroad and shipping terminus gradually declined. In addition, by comparison with surrounding built-up areas, Mission Bay was distinctly underused, and almost half the land was owned by public agencies. Although adjacent neighborhoods were down at the heels, the site boasted a two-mile shoreline overlooking San Francisco Bay, a development opportunity waiting to happen.

In the late 1970s, the Southern Pacific Railroad sought to realize what company officials supposed was a glittering, profitable future for the site. The company hired John Carl Warnelle, who in 1981 presented a plan replete with suburban culs-de-sac and garden apartments, not to mention enough office and hotel space to employ 30,000 people. Undertaken without major involvement of city officials and community groups, the proposal found immediate disfavor, not least because of its proto-suburban nature.

Raising the planning stakes, the Southern Pacific Development Company sought city advice and commissioned I. M. Pei and WRT Associates, who in 1983 unveiled an elegant showpiece of a plan that featured Venetian waterways and office towers as high as 42 stories. Although city planning officials were initially enthusiastic, the city finally disapproved the plan, citing the competition the project was likely to provide for downtown, the emphasis on commercial uses at the expense of residential development, and its infrastructure costs. In retrospect, James O'Gara of the Catellus firm calls the Pei plan a "bonehead plan" requiring heavy front-end investments in basically unusable waterways that would have wiped out profits.

By this time, city officials were beginning to understand that they must move beyond knowing what they didn't like to taking a more positive approach to establishing a plan for Mission Bay. After three years of acrimonious but definitive community discourse, moreover, some general notions of the ideal form and content of development at Mission Bay were starting to take shape.

The city decided to assume control of the planning process, putting itself in the driver's seat not only for determining an appropriate development plan but also for seeking community consensus on that plan. The developer, now transformed by corporate mergers into the Santa Fe Pacific Realty Corporation (and later renamed the Catellus Development Corporation), agreed to donate $2 million for planning purposes.

According to Dean Macris, San Francisco's planning director, the city over this period had developed five important objectives for the project:

- **Mixed Uses.** The project should emphasize housing but also incorporate office and other uses that would generate employment, especially back-office buildings with expansive floor plates not available in downtown.

- **Contextual Design.** The project design should extend street and building patterns from adjacent neighborhoods, and should maintain fairly high densities to take advantage of the high level of transit service available in the area.

- **Affordable Housing.** As much as 30 to 40 percent of the housing should be subsidized below-market rents and prices, including some very deep subsidies, to be achieved through city pledges of half or more of the increased tax revenues from development and matching sums from the developer.

- **Facility Investments.** All infrastructure costs should be borne by the developer.

- **Waterfront Uses and Amenities.** The economic position of the existing port should be improved and, at the same time, significant waterfront access provided for residents.
The public/private arrangement was kicked off in 1984 with a letter from the mayor setting forth an agreement between the city and the developer. The letter outlined the general scope of expected development: 7,570 dwelling units, of which 2,300 were to be affordable; 4.1 million square feet of office space; 2.6 million square feet of service and light industrial space; 200,000 square feet of retail space; and 500 hotel rooms.

The city then selected EDAW as the lead firm to manage a group of 10 consultants in producing a plan, working with the city’s and the developer’s staffs, and meeting with community groups. Later, at a more contentious stage, the developer brought in Skidmore, Owings & Merrill to act as its advocate on final planning issues.

The final plan outlined a program of uses and design concepts that undoubtedly will be subject to continuous adaptation as conditions and community desires evolve. The major changes in allocations of uses over the entire planning period are shown in Figure 1. Nevertheless, the city’s main objectives as cited by Macris have been served by the approved version of the plan, which seems likely to be able to survive future revisions during implementation.

The community consultation process in itself absorbed a tremendous amount of time and effort. EDAW’s president, Christopher Degenhardt, characterized the process as “the most extensive citizen participation program I have witnessed” (“The Plan for Mission Bay, San Francisco,” Environmental and Urban Issues, Spring 1991). The process, he reflected later, “really was the main feature of the plan.”

After two failed plans, the community at large and a myriad of citizens’ groups in particular took a strong stand, as time went on, mushrooming, interest in the planning and development of Mission Bay. Alec Bash, the city’s project director for Mission Bay, estimated that 50 or more civic organizations were involved at one time or another, including five formed specifically for Mission Bay. The city’s mailing list included 2,000 organizations, agencies, and individuals. Pamela Duffy, the developer’s attorney, wryly observed the emergence of the letterhead phenomenon, in which the waxing and waning of various groups’ interests were reflected in letterhead lists of supporters. Sometimes, she noted, it took a
lot of digging to determine who the “we” were for some groups claiming to represent constituents.

Community groups were involved in setting the work program, in selecting the consultant, in the preparation of the objectives and policies statement, in the drafting of the plan, and in the examination of the Environmental Impact Report. Besides countless meetings, review and comment procedures, and public hearings, the city held a two-day workshop to explore the consultant’s plan and the plans drawn up by three community groups. Each Tuesday during the design process, the consultant’s design studio was opened for two hours for citizens’ review of the most recent plans. Halfway through the process, the work schedule was put on hold while 20 special studies were prepared.

Catellus’s staff entered the process with some trepidation. James Augustino, the firm’s vice president in charge of the project, warned the consultant team members that they were quite likely to lose their jobs before finishing the plan, because of the long planning period involved. James O’Gara commented that some citizen activists apparently believed that given enough flack the developers would “cut and run.” Says Augustino: “One thing was clear—the citizens trusted no one, not the developers, not the city, not even each other.” The development team persevered, however, involving citizens in the project’s decision-making process, in addition to what O’Gara called “hanging out with the community.”

The original timetable called for an 18-month planning period, beginning in 1984. Macris characterized the actual five- to six-year planning process as “not a long time,” but most of the players felt it to be interminable. As final agreement approached, public involvement intensified. Two dozen hearings were held on the development agreement from July 7 to September 22, 1990, each from four to 10 hours long. The planning commissioners read every word, said Duffy, and “seemed to become lawyers in the process.” But the heavy community involvement paid off as the focus of the Mission Bay development effort switched from specifics of the plan to the details of the process that would move the plan into implementation.

The development agreement and required plan amendments to the City Planning Code and Zoning Map were approved by the city’s Planning Commission and by the Board of Supervisors of the City and County of San Francisco. In addition, the commission adopted the Mission Bay plan as part of the city’s master plan and adopted necessary amendments of the Central Waterfront Plan and elements of the master plan. According to Macris, the key to success was that the members of the public/private planning team “felt an affinity for each other” that was parlayed into an ultimate agreement.

Mapping the Mission: The Plan

The plan conceived Mission Bay as a highly urban, mixed-use neighborhood, integrated into the city’s street system and open space network. In many senses, Mission Bay will be an “urban village,” a much-discussed but underapplied planning concept that calls for a mix of uses and a jobs/housing balance.

Most housing will be clustered south of the China Basin Channel, along quiet residential streets amid an open space system that features play areas, pedestrian paths, and waterfront access. Much of the housing will be no higher than three or four stories, although along some major streets residential buildings may rise to six or eight stories. About 900 units of higher-density housing, up to 10 stories high, will be focused north of the channel, closest to transit lines. Within the central residential areas, housing densities will range from 30 to 85 units per acre, averaging overall about 80 units per acre.

Offices and commercial/light industrial land uses will be developed in two areas, both within walking distance of the area’s housing and easily accessible by all forms of transit as well as automobile. Centered on King Street north of the channel, six blocks of office buildings with ground-floor retail space will rise up to eight stories and feature large floor plates suitable for back-office operations. Along I-280, commercial/light industrial buildings with a maximum height of six stories will be permitted. A low-rise, 500-room hotel is planned for a channel location at Third Street.

Retail space will be located along two parallel streets, one pedestrian-oriented and one auto-oriented. Shopping areas will be extended to the Sixteenth Street edge of the site, providing a shopping connection with the Potrero Hill neighborhood.
The interior open space network intersects the pedestrian street, creating a central focus for the neighborhood. The plan calls for 150 units in which artists can live and work in second-level space along Third Street.

An essential part of the package is community facilities. A cultural center, still to be defined in detail, may include a 200-seat theater, a gallery, classroom and exhibit space, and community meeting and multipurpose rooms. A recreation center, police station, and fire station will be clustered on the central park. An elementary school, health clinic, and several child care centers also will be developed.

The open space system serving the entire site will encompass a total of 68 acres, including an 11-acre wetland. The open space will extend to the edges of the project area, facilitating connections to surrounding neighborhoods.

The housing program, summarized in Figure 2, was particularly carefully defined to meet community interests. Catellus will develop the 5,200 market-rate units, will develop/subsidize about 965 affordable units, and will subsidize an additional 100 affordable units to be developed on city land. The developer will also provide $4 million in in-lieu fees for city acquisition or rehabilitation of 250 very low-income units off the site. The city will develop 2,300 affordable units, including the 100 units subsidized by Catellus, on 26 acres to be contributed to the city by the developer. Responsibility for subsidizing a final 88 units will be determined later.

Residential areas will blend a mix of affordable and market units, sales and rental units, and unit types. A typical street will include townhouses, flats, walk-ups, and mid-rise apartments, some over parking or shops, all of which are planned to match the styles in adjacent neighborhoods.

Sales prices for affordable housing will average $80,000. The city expects to provide housing subsidies of about $5 million a year over the 30-year buildout period. In return, it will gain major tax revenues that will more than offset the subsidy costs. Catellus plans to generate a similar amount of subsidy funds from the development of office and commercial space.

When the plan received a 1988 award from the American Planning Association for its “outstanding planning process,” the chair of the award committee lauded it as “the best I have seen anywhere,” a plan that offers “imaginative approaches to neighborhood planning” and a “successful integration of waterfront” with neighborhood residents. Second-guessing has already erupted, however. In the October 1991 Planning, Thomas W. Schurch takes the plan to task for its “overemphasis on physical determinism, which removes true choice and decision making” from its residents. He criticizes the designer’s decision to extend existing street grids, the proposed open space system for its concern with scenery rather than “viewer’s involvement,” and the failure to retain a sense of a working waterfront and railroad center. No doubt such carping will continue throughout the development period. Nevertheless, this plan has an overriding point in its favor: it has won official approval.

**Realizing the Mission: The Development Agreement**

The development agreement worked out by Catellus and the city and county of San Francisco provides the implementing mechanism for the Mission Bay plan. As with many such agreements, its provisions tie down understandings and commitments about the details of the development—both its physical character and the nature of the development process. In many ways, the development agreement structures the future relationships of both public and private parties involved in this complex development project.

The details of the housing program outlined above, for example, are spelled out in the development agreement, along with provisions that will guide adjustments and alterations in the program. The agreement specifies that Catellus must initiate construction on the first increment of housing within two years of the project start date and that 2,000 units, including 740 affordable units, must be started within 10 years, subject to various conditions. In addition, although Catellus may develop housing at a pace faster than the scheduled rate of office and commercial development, the developer may not build at a rate of more than 712 square feet of office/commercial space for each housing unit developed.

Another intricate problem involved reconciling the various land ownerships with development re-
The Mission Bay plan emphasizes open space, recreational facilities, cultural activities, and public gathering spaces.

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Although construction on this filled-land site will be safer than in many San Francisco areas, the developer will be required to strengthen bridges and provide redundant roadway connections and use state-of-the-art construction practices to withstand seismic hazards.

Catellus will create a $5.3 million public art program, based on 1 percent of expected construction costs for offices, hotels, community facilities, and open space.

The city will be constrained from imposing certain new fees or increasing certain existing fees during the first 15 years of the project.

The agreement also coordinates development phasing to balance uses and facilities:

For every 107,000 square feet of office and commercial space, 150 housing units and one acre of public open space must be provided.

The school site must be ready for conveyance to the school district when permits are issued for 2,750 housing units.

The recreation center must be completed before development is initiated on the abutting park.

The cultural center must be developed in sequence with adjacent development but reach completion when occupancy permits for 2,000 dwelling units have been issued.

Land and funding for the police and fire stations must be provided when permits for 2,000 dwelling units have been issued.

Subdivisions must be developed so that infrastructure and public areas are completed concurrently with private development.

Catellus officials have indicated that they expect to break ground for this ambitious project late this year. Meanwhile, to no one's astonishment, the developer and city are continuing to make adjustments in the plan and development agreement. Mission Bay's mission (almost) impossible appears to be heading toward realization, demonstrating once again the triumph of perseverance over adversity.

Douglas R. Porter is a growth management consultant and is founder and president of The Growth Management Institute, a nonprofit research and educational organization in Washington, D.C. Parts of this report were drawn from presentations at workshops on development agreements, sponsored by the Urban Land Institute and the American Bar Association in February and October 1991.