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Moving beyond sustainability to optimization

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"Sustainability is just a minimum. If I asked you, 'How's your relationship with your wife?' And you said, 'Sustainable,' I'd say, 'Oh, I'm so sorry for you!'" --Michael Braungort, Dwell Magazine, September 2006.

During the last year, our columns have discussed the importance of sustainable design and community involvement in the quality of life in our home, San Diego. The definition we have used for sustainability has been broad and diverse. It has been reflective of one used by Bruce Babbitt, former Secretary of the Interior: "Sustainability is a bundle that covers everything -- from our relationship to the external environment to our relationship with each other and how cities function as organisms -- that enhances both our urban quality of life and the surrounding natural landscape."

And senior adviser of Mitsubishi, Yashuhiko Watanabe, said, "When you talk about sustainability, it's not just limited to energy consumption. You are talking about a city's culture, the history, and how to preserve them so that the flavor of the history can be felt there."

However one defines sustainability, there must be community consensus and political will if we are to enjoy success. Perhaps, then, one place to begin is around a common vision of what we want to be when we grow up.

Our city, our country and our world are captured by the common vision of sustainability these days. Has there ever been a time in our history when millions of minds were focused on such a singular point? It's like a cry from the world whose prayers are now being answered. Becoming sustainable provides an opportunity that can move us from our visions of sustainability to visions of optimization (most desired). You can't create something if you haven't imagined it first, so let's dream big.

In the San Diego region, we have many visions of what the future of our community should be. Community organizations, interest groups and government agencies all have short-term, midrange and long-term goals and objectives that they are moving forward. But, the challenge is to tie them together in order to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. This is the dynamic of creation by which sustainability moves toward optimizing or, in other words, creating beyond maintaining.

Recent events are providing the opportunity to form a unified optimal vision and a strategy to implement it. The defeat of Proposition A, the Miramar airport measure, will make us rethink how to make Lindbergh our airport for the future. It also reinforces the need to focus on bay front development, not only with regard to the airport but also to the area surrounding the bay. Moreover, state Sen. Christine Kehoe's airport initiative fuels creative thought on the airport authority's role on a broader scale. Should it be merged with the San Diego Association of Governments, the port district and other countywide agencies to form a coordinated regional planning authority? Perhaps such a regional organization will determine that our future air travel needs can be served best by high-speed rail -- at least in part. The impact of the changing economy and our need to provide not only housing but also neighborhoods for our children and grandchildren will bring us together to plan for a forward-looking future beyond sustainability, which requires a big vision. It's time to confidently put that vision out there.

Thanks to the San Diego Architectural Foundation, the Orchids and Onions Award Program has been successfully reinvented. This renewed people's choice event for best and worst of the built environment in San Diego is a great start. Continued support throughout the year could involve highlighting enlightened clients, announcing positive development regulations and encouraging an active and informed community. Performing these actions would serve our city well.

We clearly believe a consensus-building approach to our region's future that is bold, visionary and equitable -- in other words, optimal -- will result in a commitment to raise revenues to pay for the region's needs and dreams. We are at the nexus of moving beyond sustainability into optimization, and the only thing we need do is to let go of our fear of the success of actualizing our greatest visions.

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