

Building for Optimization – December 2007

San Diego's Future - Make No Small Plans

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In January San Diego will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Nolen Plan, San Diego's first long range urban planning document. John Nolen was a relatively unknown Philadelphia landscape architect hired by San Diego businessman George Marston to prepare a comprehensive development plan for the city. Some of the most memorable suggestions were a civic plaza along the bay and a paseo along what is now Broadway to Balboa Park.

What may be most significant about Nolen was not the 1908 plan, but rather the focus on *planning*. Prior to Nolen the city was not laid out with a focus on long range planning and civic vision, rather plans were driven by individual real estate deals. In some cases the long range planning implications have worked out quite well – such as Alonzo Horton's compact city blocks in "New Town" which provided more valuable corner lots. In other cases the shortcomings and lack of planning affect us to this day.

Looking back, and looking ahead, one sees how much the region has changed and how important the role of appropriate planning has become. A century ago planning was primarily focused on two dimensional planning and landscape architecture. The great planners of the era, like Fredrick Law Olmsted and Daniel Burnham helped shape some of the greatest American cities – like Chicago and New York's Central Park. Those plans were designed to create great public and pedestrian places, but did not concern themselves with the issues faced in a more complex twenty first century – like traffic, the natural environment, public input, building codes, and thousands of property owners and their plans.

Since Nolen, our region has had some examples of great civic planning. These range from some of the most interesting master plans to great small scale neighborhoods. In most recent years, however, our efforts at planning have become mired in local issues rather than looking at the region comprehensively. Our plans are limited in scope to small areas that do not function together. Planning has also taken on the role of looking at far more than the act of physical land planning. We look at issues of community, environmental sustainability and our role as stewards of the natural environment as opposed to masters of it.

Nolen's 100th anniversary year ushers in several major planning efforts that will have a profound effect on our region. In January the City of San Diego's General Plan update comes before the City council. While San Diego is just one of eighteen cities in the County, the City's General Plan can set the tone for the region. Our recent fires have initiated another planning effort. As we look to

rebuilding after the second wave of catastrophic fires in four years, planning must focus on how we build in fire prone areas, and where we choose to build. It is imperative that great planning be driven by how the environment built or not, interacts with people – not just by roads designed to hold emergency vehicles. We may also see plans for a new football stadium. While it is easy to argue about costs and locations, what we have seen from Petco Park is that a well conceived plan can greatly enhance not only a world class sports venue, but spark a multi billion dollar renaissance in its surrounding areas such as that of the east Village. Finally, planning in our region is beginning to focus more and more on sustaining our region environmentally. Like it or not, \$4 per gallon gas and less water from the Colorado River and Delta will affect how we live, plan and build. We can choose to embrace these inevitable changes and even prosper from them.

What I hope we have learned from John Nolen is that we must plan. We still do not have a great civic plaza on the bay or a paseo along Broadway, and maybe we do not need them. What we do need is to continue planning. While sometimes we can let things happen and the results are great – I doubt the Gaslamp would have been what it now is had it not been from Mr. Horton's small blocks. However, if we are to be a great region we must plan to make it happen. As Nolen contemporary John Burnham said – make no small plans and we encourage San Diego to answer this call from the past.

Over the next several months many of the land use and real estate organizations in San Diego will have programs dedicated to John Nolen, planning and the San Diego region. On January 8th the Urban Land Institute will host a breakfast in observance of the centennial of Nolen's first plan for San Diego, commissioned by George W. Marston and other City Fathers. We will look at his plan as one with continued vibrancy and relevance from our contemporary perspective in hope of inspiring us to a greater vision for the future of our region.