

Calendar

Small Yards, Pocket Parks

San Diego's Ideal Neighborhood

Michael Stepner, known as the father of the Gaslamp Quarter, was asked: Who was the mother? "Actually, it had a lot of parents," he said. "I just hung in there a little longer than others, perhaps. A whole group of people over the last 25 years contributed to it. I got the title because, perhaps, I wrote most of it down. I put the ordinance together."

Stepner worked on the Gaslamp while he was city architect. Later he was director of land use and housing at San Diego Economic Development

Corporation. Today he has a private design-consulting firm and also teaches at the

LOCAL EVENTS

NewSchool of Architecture & Design, where he once was dean. On Saturday morning, Stepner will give a public lecture at the school, part of a series sponsored by the Friends of San Diego Architecture.

"The Friends is a group that was founded almost 20 years ago by Harriet Gill, a woman in her late 80s now," he said. No relation to architect Irving Gill (1870-1936) and not an architect herself, Harriet Gill was a clinical social worker who has had a lifelong interest in the visual arts.

Each year Gill and her committee pick the architectural topics that they think need talking about, and the one they think needs talking about this time is, in Stepner's words, "the inability of the San Diego community to deal with its housing problem."

"Americans don't like sprawl and they don't like density," said Stepner. And they especially don't like these things when they're combined. "But I'm going to talk about design as a solution to both of these options and offer some good examples, all of which are more intense than what people would expect."

One of his good examples is Otay Ranch. "People want access to open space, but not everybody wants a big yard they have to spend all weekend tending. At the same time, there's a need for small, social spaces — small parks. That's what Otay Ranch has found out with its 'pocket parks.'" People without big yards can have their kids go play in these parks. "They're not so big that the kids would get lost in them. And they're not far away, so that parents can have some sort of direct contact with the kid when they're there. And there are enough of the parks so that the parks don't attract



Oak Crest Park, Otay Ranch

a lot of outsiders, because the outsiders have their own parks."

Stepner likes Otay Ranch's mix of "housing opportunities and options." He names them: "Traditional single-family houses, single-family houses on smaller lots, apartments, condominium complexes, and some senior-citizen housing, too." And, said Stepner, "if all goes well, it will be connected to the rest of the city by the trolley."

The trolley is necessary, because most Otay Ranch residents must commute to work. "In Otay, there's lots of land available for industry. The question is, 'How do we get industry to locate there?' That's one of the ongoing issues being discussed."

In this conversation Stepner named some other "ideal" neighborhoods in varying states of completion: Black Mountain Ranch, 4S Ranch, San Elijo Ranch. And he talked about the benefits of "in-fill" structures in existing neighborhoods. "In-fill" is jargon for the buildings that get built on vacant lots, defunct shopping centers, or other empty spaces. Stepner

also favors the idea of "granny flats." Their legal name is "accessory dwelling units." California law (Bill AB 1866) was amended recently to encourage their growth.

Harriet Gill and the Friends of San Diego Architecture favor them, too. And to celebrate their organization's 20th anniversary they are sponsoring a design competition in the fall that will encourage both professionals and nonprofessionals to come up with new designs for this controversial concept. The competition's official announcement will be at the Stepner lecture.

"The state allows a homeowner to build these second units, whether a place above the garage or an apartment in the back," Stepner said. "And there's a lot of discussion about them — support, opposition. The aim of the competition is to show that, with good design, you can make these things fit into neighborhoods without causing any adverse impacts."

Guidelines for the competition will be up on the Friends' website

(www.friendsofsdarch.com) by mid-October. Judging by "prominent architects, design instructors, and business leaders selected for their expertise in business and/or design" will happen in December.

There are two categories for entrants, "students" and "professionals/others." The "others" covers "unlicensed practitioners" of architecture — "nonprofessionals," as Stepner described them, because the Friends want even "some guy working at his kitchen table to come up with ideas for this."

— Jeanne Schinto

Lecture by Michael Stepner:
**"Sprawl or Density:
Where Will All the Housing Go?"**
Saturday, May 15, 9:30 a.m.
**NewSchool
of Architecture & Design
Foster Art Center
1249 F Street, downtown
Suggested donation: \$3
619-287-0050 or
619-235-4100**

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