The San Jose Experience: Vision, Plan, Strategy

Thomas R. Aidala with Rita Skevos

Twenty years ago the capital of the Silicon Valley was a place of decay. Two generations had grown up going to shopping malls, and there was no longer a constituency for downtown. If a new cultural and civic center were to be created, we at the San Jose Redevelopment Agency realized a totally new physical infrastructure was needed. In a city whose population kept growing, and whose borders were continually being stretched, we knew this would also require a major overhaul of the city's economics.

In 1982, after two years of intensive work by a thirty-member Work and Review Committee, the agency and City Hall produced a plan to accomplish these things. It aimed to bring new jobs to San Jose, balance residential development, and provide the tax flow needed not only to spur a downtown renaissance but address as many community needs as possible. Among its goals were the following:

- Intensive, high-quality office, retail, and hotel development in the San Antonio Plaza area (the portion of the central business district first flagged for slum clearance in the 1960s).
- A plan to attract national-level events and trade shows through construction of a convention center.
- A strategy to bring retail activity back downtown, including development of a retail center.
- A return to downtown living through development and rehabilitation of housing — including low- and moderate-income units.
- Streetscape improvements, including new lighting, landscaping, fountains, and artwork, designed to create an amiable public environment and provide a strong visual identity for downtown and surrounding commercial areas.
- New parks and park improvements, including a 150-acre Guadalupe River Park to serve as a city gateway, link downtown to the airport, and provide sites for major public facilities.
- Creation of a theater and entertainment district to provide a home for cultural groups and a magnet for nightlife.
- A variety of transportation improvements: new parking, a transit mall serving bus and rail systems, and a new segment of Highway 87 connecting downtown with the airport and Highway 101.
- A program for the revitalization of nearby neighborhood business districts.
- Renovation of major historic structures, including the ornate St. Joseph's Cathedral.
- A 20,000-seat community sports and entertainment arena.

By the time I left the agency in 1998, it had been remarkably successful at achieving these goals. We had built more than a dozen urban parks and plazas and planted some 5,000 trees along downtown streets. We had helped build three museums, two major hotels, two theaters, a multiplex movie house, and the San Jose Arena. We had constructed a 27-mile-long light-rail line through the downtown. The Cathedral had been restored, as had two historic hotels. The three-mile-long Guadalupe River Park was underway, as was construction of a direct freeway connection to San Jose Airport. As required by state law, we had also set aside 20 percent of our revenues for low- and moderate-income housing, and close to 2,000 units of affordable and market-rate housing had been built in and adjacent to the downtown.

While I am not suggesting the San Jose experience is replicable, in hindsight I can point to two lessons from our experience. Lesson one (as the title suggests) is we had a vision, a plan, and a strategy. Lesson two was that when setbacks occurred, we did not tamper with our principles; we changed our tactics.

Local Determination

One of the great strengths of San Jose's redevelopment effort is that it has been rooted in San Jose. Early on, we recognized the social, economic, cultural and recreational interconnectedness of all civic activity. And we knew that private retail/commercial development, absent financially leveraged input from the public sector, generally leads only to a maximization of private concerns at the expense of public goals.

As I have found, all good community development is also specific to a time and place. And what a time and place it was! To our great good fortune, our work in San Jose coincided with an incredible national economic expansion. Locally, the impact of that expansion was even more pronounced, since San Jose lay directly in the path of the high-tech revolution.

Of course, the extent of the high-tech boom to come was not apparent as we began in the early 1980s. What we were seeking then was a stable source of funding, preferably with few strings attached.

The economics of redevelopment demand enough initial financing to bring a first stage of public improvements on line. The hope then is that these will generate enough momentum to attract private participation. Yet by 1982,

Opposite: McEnery Convention Center with mural by Lynn Utzon. Decorative manhole covers. Fairmont Plaza / Silicon Valley Financial Center. Photos courtesy of Tom Aidala / SJRA.

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downtown San Jose was yielding only a trickle of tax revenues. Worse still, it had a 25-year backlog of needed upkeep and improvements. The masterstroke that propelled our vision for the next fifteen years was proposed by in-house lawyer Gary Reiners: the merger of San Jose's redevelopment areas.

California redevelopment law stipulates that the tax increment realized in a redevelopment district must be spent in that district. At the time, other than downtown, San Jose had two main redevelopment districts. Both were industrial areas — Rincon de Los Esteros and Edenvale. We recognized that once the infrastructure is put in and the trees are planted in an industrial area, there is not much more to spend redevelopment money on. Thus, by obtaining a one-time exemption to California law allowing us to merge all the city's redevelopment areas, we gained a continuing source of funding for the decrepit downtown (or whatever subsequent redevelopment areas we created).

This exemption not only allowed us to define our problems locally; it allowed us to finance our solutions. Merged tax-increment financing was our guarantor that we would control downtown redevelopment, and that investment pools distant to the community would not influence the shape of things to come.

The Public Realm

The matter of a vision was far easier. In San Jose, the mayor, the Redevelopment Agency Director, and I all believed that urban design — the shaping of the public physical realm — should be the role of a municipality, and that the process should create something that looked, and was, authentic.

The public realm is that exquisite confection of commerce, inquiry, chance, contemplation, public space, buildings, and institutions belonging to a city. It is to a large degree the cultural expression of a consensus of civic tastes, values, talents, and intellects. It is rich in complexities, ironies and possibilities; and it flourishes whenever a citizenry senses it can be powerful, abundant and proud.

A true public realm carries a powerful sense of authenticity. It is abundant in spirit, accommodating of opportunity, visually stimulating, and articulated. It occurs over time, and has about it the inevitability of a natural occurrence. It can also be — with hard work and luck — splendidly beautiful.

An authentic public realm is not the result of rogue consumerism or the shaping of private environments. "Shopper-tainment" centers, gated golf-course housing, and nostalgic dream communities can never be truly public. And since an authentic public realm emerges from the specifics of place, it cannot be conjured in response to the demands of distant investors, developers, or designers. Such forces, which seek predictable returns by reproducing what has worked elsewhere, lead only to cities and landscapes that look the same from one end of the country to the other.

A third danger to the authentic public realm, ironically, is too much design. Any design or fabricated contraption, be it a building, a theory, or a pair of shoes, should have an internal basis for being. The public realm is no different. Its inevitability may be disquieting, even at times unfair. It is, however, correct.

In my experience, too much fashion in the design of the public realm usually masks too little substance; and too much style, theory, or design gums up comprehension. The challenge is not merely to make something new and special. It is to get the design out of the way so that a narrative of place can develop from the real things that go on there. Thus people strolling, talking, window shopping, sitting, eating lunch, or simply wool-gathering need not be forced to endure benches that don't drain, trees that are too far apart, drinking fountains that get in the way, or the myriad other annoyances of overly designed public space.

Importance of the Street

In San Jose we defined the public realm as having two parts: (1) streets, parks, plazas, and open space; and (2) public buildings, private buildings, and public/private developments along their margins. Of these, the first was the more important.

The most significant and memorable work we did in San Jose (and, for me, the most gratifying), remains the rehabilitation of the old network of streets and the introduction of a new overlay of parks, plazas, and miscellaneous open spaces. At a minimum, we would repair or replace broken curbs and possibly enlarge the sidewalks. Ideally, we would redesign and rebuild the entire street: paving, gutters, curbs, trees — the works. We viewed it as housekeeping before the guests or the appraiser arrived.

This emphasis on streets emerged partly from my definition of a city. When I think "city," a grid comes to mind. A grid is a sum of streets. And so keen is the notion of street, that a grid of them, four crossed lines (#), is mnemonic for my experiences of a city.

The street is also that shared public place that contains the history of those who inhabit it. It is where community is possible, where chance is enhanced, movement universal. It is where order is triumphant in a continuing battle with chaos, where communication is ubiquitous.

It follows that the good street is about publicness. The

good street connects, while the bad street separates. The good street allows for maximum activity; the bad street reduces choice. Good streets are particular — you know where you are; they have character and are memorable.

The good street is also comfortable to walk along, and frequently it has trees providing shade, movement and pace. By contrast, the worst streets are those that facilitate only one agenda — such as the incredibly wide rights-of-way called for by the formulas of traffic engineers.

So strong was our belief in the importance of the street that I put together sixteen rules that we could present to private developers and architects when they first contacted us. They embodied our expectations at the Redevelopment Agency about how a building should get inserted into the downtown (*see sidebar*).

The rules dealt with sidewalk materials, curbs, building to the property line, having all entrances face the main street. They called for clear glass and retail uses at ground level. They contained requirements for orientation, access drives, trees, materials, etc. In sum, they spelled out how individual projects should contribute to our primary goal of shaping street spaces and activating them. After that, what happened within a building (other than in the semi-public spaces that were an extension of the street) mattered little.

We were not indifferent to architecture. We just believed that urban quality has little to do with who designs the buildings that frame streets and open spaces. In particular, urban design quality does not follow the hiring of "archi-stars."

Buildings are correctly about individual concerns and agendas; even public buildings are specific to an interest. The street, on the other hand, should remain a neutral collector.

16 Rules for Developers
(from a memorandum to Redevelopment Agency Staff dated May 13, 1996)

What follows are a few simple-minded rules you should be alert to whenever a project proposal comes your way. In the predrawing/discussion stage, the appropriate rule should be made clear to the developer team so that they do not waste time and money preparing drawings that will have to be changed. Changes to drawings are expensive, acrimonious, and sometimes can cause us political embarrassment. Like all rules, however, they are made to be broken by the truly gifted — a condition I have realized once. The list is not inclusive; design staff will take care of both filling in the blanks and know how to apply, and when to bend, the rules.

The Universal, Eternal, Inviolate 11th Commandment: Thou shalt not allow one more mansard roof in San Jose.

Sidewalks within the public R.O.W. shall be concrete. Certain streets can have a special treatment as determined by policy and design. Building lobbies shall not spill out into the public way.

Crosswalks/intersections shall be striped with paint and not tarted up with "special" materials or designs.

Curbs shall be straight, without bump-outs or duck-ins.

Trees belong on and in the ground. No trees in pots or on building roofs.

No more redwood trees or *agapanthus* shall be planted in the Downtown.

All buildings, except special public or symbolic buildings, shall be built to the street property line.

The main entrance of all buildings shall be off of the street and not a parking area.

All buildings shall be oriented orthogonally. That is normal to the grid of the Downtown.

Ground levels of buildings in the Downtown shall contain retail uses. The doors to these uses shall be on the street.

Ground level windows shall always be clear glass.

No mirrored glass or bronze glass shall be allowed in the Downtown. Ideally, glass should be clear. However, since we live in an imperfect world, only light green tinted glass or light grey glass shall be used.

Quality materials, i.e., stone, shall be used at the base of major buildings, offices, hotels, etc. Other approved materials can be well-made precast concrete, tile, glazed terra cotta, etc.

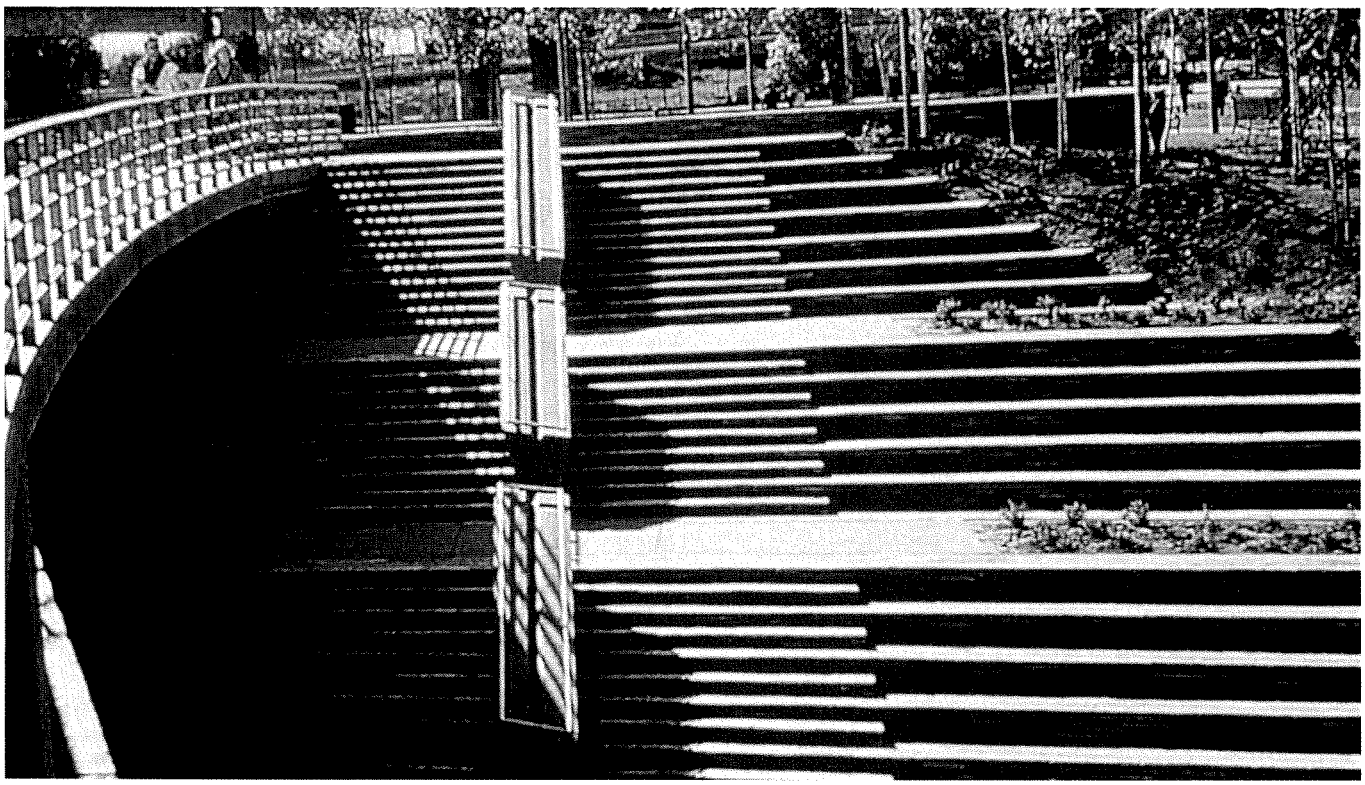
If a brick building is proposed, it shall be real brick — not Z brick or other such sham material. Color shall not be dark brown or red generally (depending on context) but in the pale tan, beige, yellowish range such as the Bank of America building or the Hotel Sainte Claire.

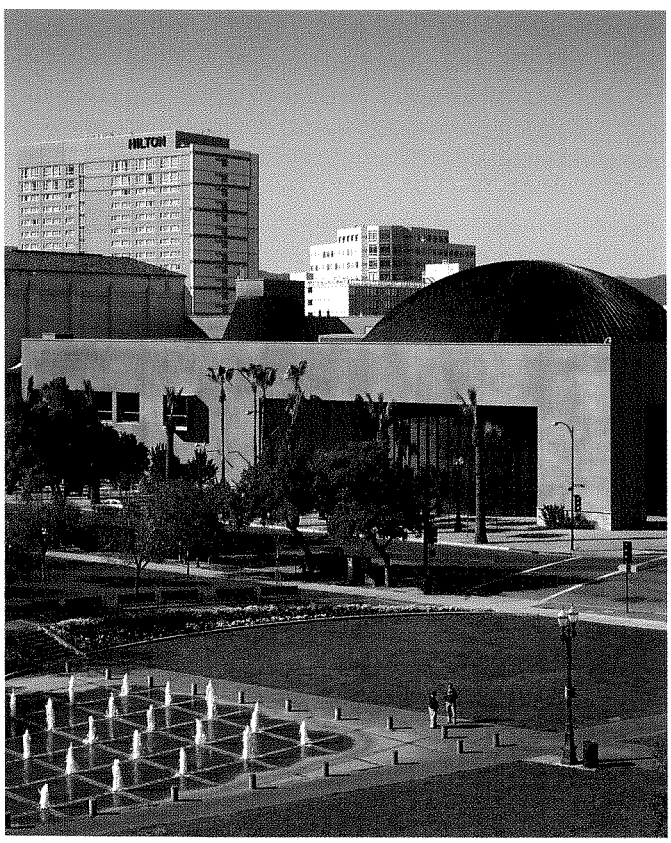
Avoid all-glass buildings like the plague, except when proposed by the shade of Mies Van der Rohe.

Parking structures shall not have sloped ramps facing the street.

Access drives to the parking structures shall be as few and as small as possible and not the principal street when appropriate.

Above: Gore park (Parco de Los Poblares).
Below left: Pedestrian bridge to Children's Discovery Museum (Tom Aidala: design).
Below right: Children's Discovery Museum.
Opposite top: Landscape terracing in Guadalupe River Park.
Opposite bottom left: The Tech Museum of Innovation as seen from the Fairmont Hotel. Photo by Paul Asper.
Opposite bottom right: Cezar Chavez Park promenade.
All other photos courtesy of Tom Aidala/SJRA.

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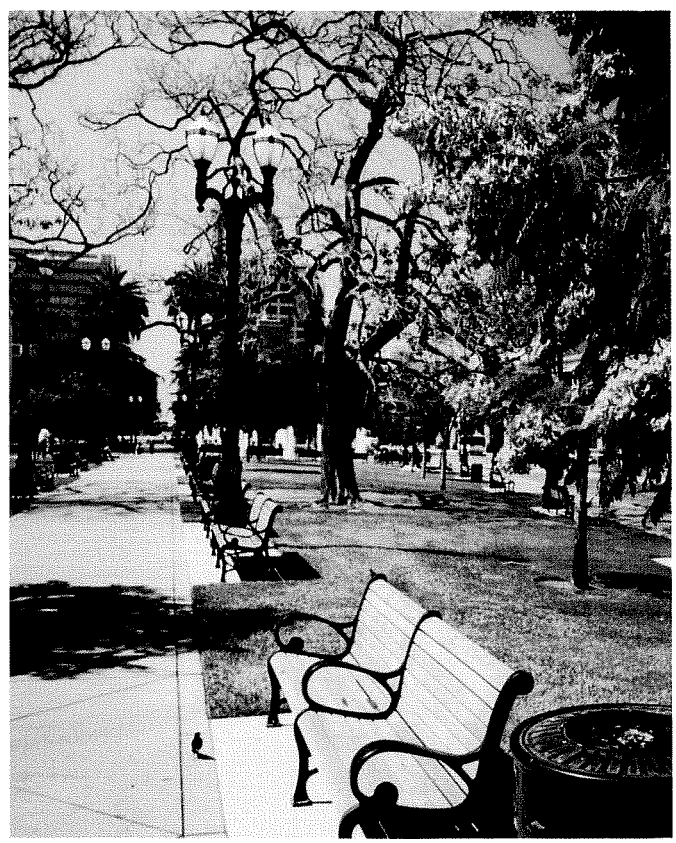

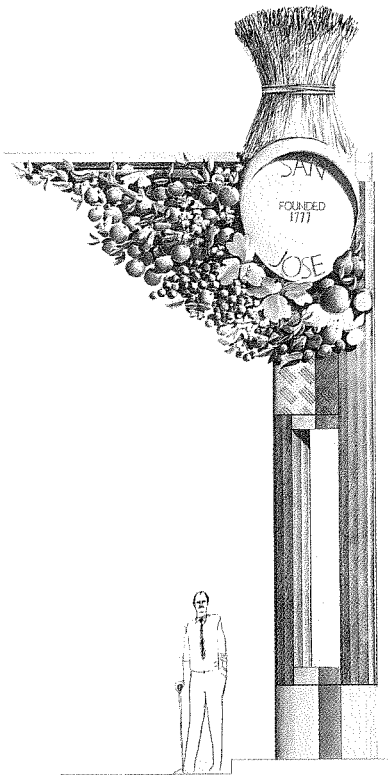

For this reason we believed our downtown streets should do the civic work of remaining public and accommodating everyone equally. As far as possible, they would be parallel, straight, and sheet-drained. They would not be decorated or furnished as an extension of any building. There would be no ad-hoc bump-outs at corners or bus stops, or pull-ins for service. Sidewalks would be the same no matter where: five-foot grid, 75 percent French Gray, float finish — period.

People

Given a plan for keeping decisions local and a vision based on the importance of the street and an authentic public realm, we were ready to develop a strategy.

The San Jose redevelopment effort I joined as Principal Architect began in 1979, when Frank Taylor was hired as Executive Director of the Redevelopment Agency. Taylor came from Cincinnati, where he had served as Assistant Redevelopment Director. More importantly, he had been trained and licensed as an architect and had practiced in Boston (his home town) and Cincinnati.

With Taylor as Executive Director and Tom McEnery as Mayor from 1980-88, San Jose had a one-two punch. A fourth-generation native of San Jose, McEnery had the shrewdness, force of personality, and dedication to build the political and civic coalitions needed to realize agency goals. And after I was hired as Principal Architect and Urban Designer in 1982, the three of us developed a congenial working relationship based on shared interests and philosophies.

Like myself, Taylor and McEnery were ardent students of history, readers of biographies and autobiographies. Taylor also helped McEnery become an aficionado of cities. Together, Taylor and McEnery relished wit, the idea of a downtown, and big dreams. They were also black-belt politicos — and fiercely ethical.

One key to our early strategy was Taylor's belief in getting good-looking stuff built fast and inexpensively. Tactical maneuverings could be underway toward larger goals, such as the timing necessary for the coincidental delivery of the Fairmont Hotel and a publicly funded convention center. But the public wanted to see results — projects, not paper; product, not process. In particular, Taylor wanted new parks and open spaces right away. Thus, a series of small, good-looking projects, such as neighborhood parks captured from excess roadway and a children's garden for the Main Library, were completed early on and opened ceremonially.

Taylor was also a design zealot, and demanded quality materials and performance. Expediency was not a good

enough reason for anything. And he told his staff that if he or they gave anything less than their best to every project they applied their talents to, they would be cheating the City Council, the Agency Board, and the city they served. Such a contemptuous attitude toward the community could only poison projects from the start. A quality public environment could never grow from "cynical roots."

My role was to build an in-house staff of architects, landscape architects, and graphic designers. Among our major tasks were to provide design services to City Hall; win converts among other public agencies (mainly the Planning Department, Department of Public Works, and Mayor's Office); preach to the community at meetings of the Rotary, Lions, etc.; and educate and support the Redevelopment Agency Board.

Over the years, we succeeded in gaining respect and influence by telling the truth, avoiding jargon, and delivering good work. Perhaps more importantly, we struggled to defend the integrity of designs in the face of value engineering, cost overruns, program changes, and changes in developers, designers, and mortgage holders. We understood that good design is essential to creating the type of environment that can support an agreeable life.

We used a full array of persuasive devices to ensure design quality. These ranged from expressing our desires for particular sites, to performing discretionary review, writing guidelines, and engaging in strong-arm tactics. On certain occasions we might withhold review by the Urban Design Review Board. Couple lack of review with a developer's need to exercise a land option on schedule, and our goals for a site could usually command attention.

City building, I came to realize, is like everything else in life: it implies losing one's innocence, building consensus, and knowing when to bite one's tongue and leave the field — only to return later to chew throats. It involved learning to make the very best sausage with what was left after a particular beast (the project) had been gnawed over by the hyenas of development — the Home Builders Associations, various social victimhood groups, labor organizations, other city departments, and real estate interests — all of whom wanted theirs off the top, steaming.

A Final Word

Over decades of observation, practice and reading, I've come to understand a few things about good urban design. One is that the redesign of cities should not be a referendum on popular taste. Opinions are not equal in value; nor are they universally held. Indeed, some serve only to waste time and elevate the blood pressure.

Our work in San Jose proceeded according to a few simple principles. One was that a city undergoing redevelopment courts a second-rate environment and diminished quality of life without a first-rate design staff to make informed judgments and avoid straying from agreed-upon goals. By having respected professionals on staff, the City Council and Agency Board were able to make informed decisions on development and design. As a result, environmental quality became more than a professional concern; it became a matter of public pride.

To paraphrase Dave Wallace: every moment in the life of a city appeals simultaneously to three realms of consciousness: memory of the past, preoccupation with the present, and dreams of the future. The ongoing and inescapably contentious discourse among these realms defines the essence of human endeavor.

The city is both the principal arena of debate and the cumulative, absolutely authentic, minutely accurate record of its outcome. Despite all the miracles wrought by science, the city remains in the words of Claude Levi-Strauss "the human invention, par excellence."

Opposite: Pencil concept sketch for a downtown San Jose gateway. Although sculptor Robert Graham was eventually commissioned to execute final designs, the project was cancelled. Drawing by Tom Aidala.