

Communities By Design, a
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education
organization, in cooperation with the
City of Redwood City,
is pleased to present:

The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



THE CITY OF IDEAS

2008-09 SEASON: FORUM #1
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2008
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On October 2, 2008, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit "Communities by Design" held the first presentation of the 2008-2009 Forum season. The presentation featured **Robert Davis**, partner at Arcadia Land Company, and developer and co-founder of Seaside, Florida, who shared concepts from his forthcoming book, "The City of Ideas."

Mr. Davis reflected on the current economic crisis, noting that we are on the downside of another boom and bust cycle that has characterized American financial history. Previous booms have left behind an important legacy, the railroad building boom yielding an infrastructure legacy and the dot-com boom spurring significant investment in fiber optic cables that serve as the nerve center of our current economy. The current housing bust leaves behind auto-centric and energy intensive developments that will need to be retrofitted with transit, denser housing, public gathering places and areas for food production. Mr. Davis explained that retrofitting these "ex-urb" areas will be our job over the next century and that architectural history provides abundant models to guide and inspire this effort.

"Our job, over the next century, is to repair the damage."

-Robert Davis

Since the early renaissance, ideas for building cities have been disseminated by models as much as word. Many of the models were inspired by the work of Leon Battista Alberti whose masterpiece, "De Re Aedificatoria," remained the classic treatise on architecture from the sixteenth century until the eighteenth century. Alberti's ideas are embodied in the Italian city of Pienza, the first Citta Ideale ("City of Ideas"), a human scale city with curving mainstreets leading to the center of town that is filled with beautifully and culturally significant buildings. Southern facing streets are linear, revealing the adjoining country side and allowing summer

breeze and sun to sweep through the City while the northern side of town is filled with large buildings and curving streets designed to block out winter winds.

Roman inspired architecture elevated the civic realm to a level of grandeur approaching the sacred, emphasizing a connection between the city and the country, yet also with a clear separation and edges between the two. The roman architectural legacy is one of movement, splendor and function. Public works such as the aqueducts were incredible monuments and investments. Mr. Davis stated, "Hopefully we can invest similarly if we can recover from our current drunken spree of overconsumption of everything."

"The utopia of private comfort has become a nightmare."
-Robert Davis

Other models inspired by Alberti include London's Covent Garden, Bath and Paris where houses are built around green squares; curving streets are framed by crescents and churches with an architecture that borders on the theatrical. American cities built during the 1920's represent many of these ideals as well, built for humans to support a diversity of uses. As such, they are often the most desirable places to live today and represent the culmination of centuries of architectural craft.

This craft and tradition has been thwarted over the past 50 years in the United States where an abundance of cheap land and energy gave rise to exurb development, mass building techniques and hour long one-way commutes to work. The 1939 World's Fair exhibit "Futurama" portended this future when it presented a vision of motorcars on open freeways and houses with big lawns. This scale of development and dependence on the automobile has had dire human and environmental costs, where a Florida resident may spend up to 6 weeks a year driving and nearly 44,000 people die in the United States annually in auto-related fatalities.

"This 50-year-old experiment [Futurama] has failed miserably."
-Robert Davis

"We can rebuild our cities and towns."
-Robert Davis

Looking forward, Mr. Davis emphasized that we can rebuild our cities and towns, learning from past models and working together as developers of human settlements and investors in the land. Mr. Davis sees his development in Florida (Seaside) as an attempt to pick up the threads of the 5000-year-old craft of building cities. When asked about the fate of the sprawling Central Valley in an energy scarce future, Mr. Davis was hopeful that some of those areas could be modified into high density farm villages where housing and appropriately scaled food production activities co-exist. Other encouraging trends are the move towards deconstruction and salvage of existing structures rather than demolition. Mr. Davis also encouraged participants to appreciate the architecture of Georgian London where 150 identical rowhouses conjure up the grandeur of a palace, and repetition and simplicity make for a magnificent neighborhood.

Mr. Davis is a part-time San Francisco resident and raved about the City for its walkability, diversity of housing and cultural institutions. When asked about development activity in the South of Market (SOMA) area, he said that developing additional housing is positive but that the area's industrial origins are a limiting factor to the neighborhood's potential. The former industrial district has large building footprints and not enough streets for a mixed use neighborhood. Mr. Davis also shared that he considered bringing his development practice to San Francisco when he moved here but upon learning about the cantankerous entitlement process he decided against it, figuring he would not live long enough to see his projects get built.