

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



TURNING FAILED FREEWAYS INTO SUCCESSFUL CITY STREETS

2004-05 SEASON: FORUM #3
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2004
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On December 1, 2004, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit “Communities By Design” hosted the third presentation of the 2004-05 Forum season, with a presentation by **Boris Dramov, FAIA**. Mr. Dramov – who is Principal of ROMA Design Group, an architecture, landscape architecture and planning firm based in San Francisco – spoke about “Transforming Failed Freeways Into Successful City Streets” and how fixing our streets can restore community and create a sense of place.

Mr. Dramov’s presentation focused on one of his firm’s signature projects – the revitalization of the Embarcadero in San Francisco. Hugging the shore along the northeast corner of San Francisco, the Embarcadero Freeway was long derided as an eyesore as well as a barrier that cut the city off from its waterfront and the Bay. Mr. Dramov led the project team that helped knit together the urban fabric of the Embarcadero, following the removal of the Embarcadero Freeway in 1990.

Mr. Dramov began his presentation by commenting on how dividing freeways are a common element of cities along the west coast. In addition to San Francisco, Mr. Dramov identified Seattle, Portland, Vancouver and Oakland as urban centers that built highways and freeways that bifurcated once vibrant communities that are now looking at taking out those freeways. In the words of Mr. Dramov, “there are a lot of cities that have to be put back together.”

The process of rebuilding divided communities is not simply a matter of removing physical obstacles and recycling urban land, or addressing issues of social equity, it’s also an exercise in healing and pulling together the disparate components of a scarred landscape. Mr. Dramov said this rehabilitation process will only be successful if planning and design

looks at the city at every scale – locally, citywide and regionally. It is also important to consider the entire “movement corridor,” as streets not only move traffic, but also light and air, while serving as valuable open space.

The Embarcadero Freeway was a contentious project from its inception. Conceived as part of a freeway master plan in the late 1940s, the Embarcadero Freeway helped fuel what would become a full-scale freeway revolt. This anti-freeway campaign helped generate support for expanding transit services including the development of BART and MUNI. Following the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989, the leaders of the freeway scored a victory when they convinced city leaders to raze the damaged Embarcadero Freeway.

“It took 70 years to ruin some areas.... It is going to take some time to make them better.”
-Boris Dramov

Once the freeway was removed, the northeast corner of San Francisco was “liberated but not activated.” The freeway left a sizable gap between the waterfront and downtown buildings. One of the challenges, according to Mr. Dramov, was to take it from one mode of transportation and instead create a diversified system to satisfy all the different modes of transportation, including the automobile. And finally, to bring the Embarcadero back to life, there had to be places and events to activate the area.

The ROMA Design Group answered this challenge by re-establishing the Ferry Building as the centerpiece of the waterfront with expanded ferry service. He redesigned the Embarcadero into as a mixed-mode corridor, with a pedestrian promenade, light rail lines, bicycle lanes, public art and landscaping. This new urban space helped to reconnect the Ferry Building and the waterfront with Market Street and its cable car system. Today, the Embarcadero and the Ferry Building are vibrant public spaces that feature numerous public-oriented activities and events such as concerts and a farmers’ market. Mr. Dramov’s firm also restored the downtown ferry terminal as a reclaimed city landmark with a new pedestrian promenade that faces the Bay, instead of turning its back on the water as the previous building did.

Mr. Dramov continued his presentation by discussing a freeway that was supposed to connect to the Embarcadero Freeway – Interstate 280. San Francisco’s original freeway plan called for I-280 to link with the Embarcadero Freeway and then with US 101 at the approach to the Golden Gate Bridge. Mr. Dramov explained his role in helping to halt the extension of I-280 and the benefit that this had on the South Beach and Mission Bay communities. Although it was once a heavily industrialized area, South Beach is now home to several successful affordable housing developments. Similarly, Mission Bay houses the Biotechnology Campus for the University of California – a facility which would not exist had I-280 been extended.

In closing, Mr. Dramov emphasized that rebuilding cities takes time. Mr. Dramov remarked, “It took 70 years to ruin some areas.... It is going to take some time to make them better.” Mr. Dramov believes that our city centers actually need more population to make them better. For example, Paris has the same land area as San Francisco, but twice its population; as a result, the livability and social equity being achieved in Paris, and its transit system, are remarkable. Mr. Dramov noted that density is not the issue, and that we should actually have more density to create more livability and preserve our environmental resources and use them more efficiently.