

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



Global City Blues

The Impact of Globalism
on the Livability of our
Cities

2003-04 SEASON: FORUM #6
WEDNESDAY, MAY 5, 2004
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On May 5, 2004, the City of Redwood City and the not-for-profit "Communities by Design" held the sixth and final forum of the 2003-2004 season in what has been an ongoing monthly speaker series¹. The presentation featured **Mr. Daniel Solomon**, President and Principal of San Francisco-based, Solomon E.T.C (a WRT company), an architecture and urban design firm. Mr. Solomon's 35-year distinguished career also includes roles as a Professor of Architecture at UC Berkeley, a co-founder of the Congress for the New Urbanism, and a writer. His latest book, *Global City Blues*, was published in the spring of 2003 (Island Press).

Mr. Solomon's presentation focused on the difference between modernism as an architectural style and modernism as a city planning movement. Mr. Solomon discussed the merits of the modernist architectural style (when executed properly) and its contributions to creating livable, attractive urbanism. In contrast, Mr. Solomon explained how the modernist city planning movement has failed to create livable urban spaces, and by doing so, has caused great harm to our cities.

The failure of modernist city planning in America, according to Mr. Solomon, is now being tragically replicated in other parts of the world. Mr. Solomon showed examples from Beijing and Shanghai, where apartments being built today are being designed as impersonal high-rise towers that are surrounded by deserted open areas and have no relationship to the surrounding urban fabric. Mr. Solomon drew a parallel between the apartments being built today in China and the public housing that was constructed in the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s, where formless spaces between buildings became an unusable "no man's land."

¹ "The Forum at Redwood City: A Continuing Conversation in City Design," will break for the summer and will resume the first Wednesday of the month beginning October 2004.

To illustrate his point, Mr. Solomon focused on the urban block. Using San Francisco as an example, he showed several city blocks as illustrated by the “figure/ground drawing” (developed by Cornell University) to demonstrate how the urban block becomes the basis of building typology.

Figure/ground drawings are very simple sketches which show building footprints in black, and all other spaces (streets, squares, parking lots, etc.) in white. His illustrations showed how San Francisco’s alleys and courtyards create mid-block spaces that help to make the city’s streets more interesting and inviting.

“What was lost in America is now what is being lost in China... and that is, public space in the traditional city.”

– Daniel Solomon

Mr. Solomon also used the city of Vienna, Austria as a model. His images showed how Viennese “block plans” – public housing blocks built in Vienna between 1919-1933 – were respectful of the surrounding environment and created portals and passages as “permeable and operable membranes” to mark the transition from public to private space. The architecture in Vienna at the time placed a high value on social public spaces, such as courtyards and parks. According to Mr. Solomon, the “heroic and grand” Viennese housing of the 1920s was the only large-scale public housing built in the midst of – and in a way that was sympathetic to – the historic city.

There are several reasons, according to Mr. Solomon, why the Viennese urban block model is still relevant today. The buildings both respect and define the traditional urban space of the street. The Viennese model is reasonable from a financial standpoint; it’s large enough in scale to be relevant to our building culture today and to be amortized by banks. In addition, it’s small enough for ordinary builders to undertake and to be within the traditional lending structure for banks. Such development is often a catalyst for similar development in the surrounding areas.

Mr. Solomon explained how he strives to incorporate elements of the Viennese model into his architectural work. For example, when he worked on Holly Park Transit Village, a 440-unit housing project in Seattle that integrates public housing with market-rate housing, Mr. Solomon reconfigured the site in such a way that emphasized the social space of an organic community garden used by local Cambodian and Ethiopian residents as a centerpiece of the plan. He reconfigured the commercial sites so as to create spaces for local residents for entrepreneurial business opportunities. Similarly, Mr. Solomon integrated Viennese principles such as courtyards, portals and passages, and natural sunlight, when he designed a public housing project in South Central Los Angeles.

Mr. Solomon shared how an important part of making great urban places and urban blocks is the practice of “sitting with people” through a series of meetings or at a charrette, to produce block plans. He cautioned architects and planners to not be thinking, “I know better than they,” but to really listen to what local “citizen planners” have to say. He reminded designers to use the mid-block lane as an opportunity for subsidized workspace for artists and artisans, which become social spaces as well. “In the end,” Mr. Solomon stated, “what one makes is a question of patronage as much as it is architecture.”