

## **From intentions to consequences in urban design: comparing TOD design guidelines versus actual implementation in San Diego, California**

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### **Purpose**

Urban design and planning initiatives are filled with well-meaning intentions, such as the preservation of historic assets, creation of compact and walkable residential neighborhoods, generation of low-energy and low-impact patterns of development, and types of urban form that promote greater choice in modes of transportation, including access to public transit. However, what matters ultimately are the consequences, more than the intentions, of such efforts. In other words, a key measure of the relative success of such initiatives is whether they have actually had an impact once they are implemented and built. Thus, it is important to understand the on-the-ground impact of well-meaning urban design guidelines as they are translated into built form, as well as the effectiveness of mixed-use transit-oriented developments located within low-density automobile-oriented contexts.

### **Case Study**

This research project examines the relative effectiveness and subsequent impact of two pioneering and related urban design initiatives. In 1989, the City of San Diego became one of the first American cities to propose citywide transit-oriented development (TOD) design guidelines. Formally adopted by the city as public policy in 1992, the *TOD Design Guidelines* were intended to pursue an urban form that includes a pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use multimodal transportation environment. In 1992, the Rio Vista West project was conceived as the first new transit-oriented development project in San Diego. Completed in 2006, Rio Vista West contains over 1,000 residential units, 325,000 square feet of retail development, 165,000 of office space,

and amenities such as a 2-acre park and a day care center. The project is located on the San Diego trolley's Blue Line in the Mission Valley area. Both initiatives were the first of their kind, and both now have a nearly 20-year history from conception to implementation that can be evaluated and learnt from. This case study analysis included interviews with key actors, site visits to the project and extensive photography, study of government policies, design guidelines and master plans, literature review about the design of TODs, and a review of newspaper articles.

### **Findings**

One finding of this study is that planners working for the City of San Diego not only had a pioneering vision embodied in the *TOD Design Guidelines*, but that they also pursued a number of different strategies to implement that vision. To give the *Guidelines* real teeth and have a city-wide impact (rather than only on isolated projects), they incorporated the design principles into documents that carried greater political and legal weight, including the City of San Diego's *General Plan*, *Street Manual*, and *Land Development Code*. For Rio Vista West, they worked proactively and closely with the master developer and master planner to ensure consistency with the *Guidelines*. In this respect, the San Diego planners clearly understood the vital relationship between intentions and consequences in urban design.

Another finding is that a project-based approach for designing patterns of urban growth around transit has the potential to create vibrant, walkable neighborhoods that can serve as prototypes for many other TODs. However, the approach has its limitations, as Rio Vista West has shown. The challenges are the larger system of designing and building cities, and the prevailing attitudes that govern these systems. For example, as in Rio Vista West, American street standards and widths tend to be shaped by outdated engineering standards for vehicular rather than pedestrian flows and by the fire department requirements, such as the turning radius of a fire truck. The pedestrian orientation of the development, which is essential to a well-connected and lively development, is seriously lacking in details (e.g. lack of crosswalks and traffic stop signs where there should be one, blank facades along major sidewalks).

A third finding of in this research is the need to clearly prioritize the pedestrian. Regardless of our modal choice of transportation, every trip begins and ends on foot.

Many policy documents such as the *TOD Design Guidelines* include pedestrian-friendly designs, such as tree-lined streets or clearly marked crosswalks. However, suburban-style developments with these design elements remain car-dependent communities because they are still designed for the car. If a TOD is to act as a true urban village, it must put walking first; streets must be welcoming to the pedestrian and the streets must be appealing and safe. If neighborhoods are built in a way that encourages people to walk, transit use is more likely to increase. The key to walkability also lies in the details at the building scale (e.g. transparent facades on the ground floor that contain pedestrian-oriented activities) and the infrastructure scale (e.g. painting crosswalks and putting up a stop sign for vehicular traffic in order to encourage pedestrian flows from the residential to the retail).

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