

How San Diego Lends Itself to Urbanizing Suburbia

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Urbanizing suburbia is something many developers are looking to achieve, adding density as land prices rise. San Diego and its surrounding area have been prime locations for use of this strategy.

On Thursday, a panel at the ULI Spring Meeting in San Diego explained the thought process and how to execute on this goal, focusing in particular on life sciences architecture.

The session, “Tech(s) in the City: Urbanizing Suburbia while Amenitizing the Urban Workplace,” was moderated by Sean Slater, principal at RDC, and included panelists Justine Nielsen, senior vice president of development at IQHQ; John Moshy, vice president, development, at BioMed Realty; and Sean O’Malley, managing principal at SWA.

San Diego offers an enviable quality of life, both in its urban core and along the stunning coastline. Until recently, young tech workers lived downtown among dining and entertainment venues and reverse-commuted to suburban office campuses, and suburban dwellers came to town only to be entertained. But that is all about to change.

Nielsen said San Diego “is where life sciences lives,” as so much of the traffic on Interstate 5 is going back and forth from downtown to the northern suburbs for work.

Slater said that years ago, “life sciences companies were so concerned about ‘locking the door’ to keep their talent from leaving or sharing with the outside world. That’s no longer the case. Employees want to get outside the office and into the neighborhoods, and design is helping to make that happen.”

Finding Context

“To urbanize suburbia, you need context,” O’Malley said. “When you can connect to the surrounding area and its culture, that brings value to the real estate.”

Moshy said nice, lush outdoor space is great to have “because it leverages the great California weather.” Nielsen said “open, green spaces are the most valued aspects in our clients’ minds.”

O’Malley said an emphasis on geography is among the “must-haves” for design today.

“We’re bringing nature into the building,” O’Malley said. “We’re designing so that the trees can move through the windows. And you must include outdoor meeting spaces with wi-fi hookups and screens. We’re doing retrofits, and we look to make gardens part of the floor bases of the building.”

When the Space Is the Amenity

In one urban village complex—surrounded by a creek and a canyon—that SWA is designing, the space becomes the amenity, O’Malley said.

“There’s lot of topography,” he said. “Because people do a lot of their greatest thinking when they are walking or strolling, we ran a trail up 150 feet [45 m] from below. We’re adding meandering paths and lanes where you can end up at a coffee shop or plaza—just like in Europe. It makes it fun and funky to be in. Art is so important, too, so we added a muralist to do some work.”

And beer is becoming a key element in San Diego, O'Malley noted. "It's an industry that has really taken off and it's defining the city, so look for ways to take advantage of that," he said.

Moshy said many of the elements that help a city thrive are already present in San Diego. There is venture capital investment; the talent pool is strong (the city is reversing the trend of college graduates leaving the market); and vacancy rates are low (about 2.5 percent), he said. "We're truly trying to grow our footprint here. San Diego is not that 'biggest little city' anymore. It's preeminent," he said.

Public Transportation Creates Synergies

All kinds of synergies will come from the \$2 billion Blue Line trolley investment in the San Diego market, Nielsen said. The State Route 56 corridor is getting a lot of attention lately, Moshy said.

"It will connect to the core—a lifeline to letting things open up geographically," Nielsen said. "It will become a marketing tool for the city."

Nielsen said there is not too much product growth in San Diego. "More is more; more is better," she said. "Just ask our leasing team."

To properly expand an urban area, O'Malley said, look at the circulation structure of the block to find where a street or sidewalk can be widened. "San Diego has a great grid system," he said, pointing out that cities must plan for e-bikes and micromobility and maximize the capacity of every lane with safety in mind.

There is also the "stickiness" of the urban texture.

"Today's design is more textural, playing off the landscapes and creating the 'unexpected' around every turn, maximizing that indoor/outdoor relationship," O'Malley said.



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