FOSTER CITY - A NEW CITY ON THE BAY

A TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR MICHAEL McDUGALL

KALVIN PLATT

As a tribute to Michael McDougall, long-time friend and colleague, Calvin Platt revisits the project for Foster City, a planned community in the San Francisco Bay Area. Mike was a principal planner and designer of this successful story of a new community which, as early as 1958, pioneered several planning and urban design maxims that we value today in good place-making and sustainability. Foster City is a lesson for all of us.

In the early 1960s; when I came to California as a planner and joined Wilsey, Ham, and Blair, an Engineering and Planning Company in Millbrae; I met Michael McDougall. He was working on Foster City, a new town along the San Francisco Bay. The sinuous “Venice-like” lagoon system that formed the backbone of the plan amazed me with its inherent beauty and appropriateness to the natural sloughs that ran along the Bay. What also amazed me was that this was a Master Planned New Town, the first significant effort of this post-WWII large scale planning concept in California and it had begun to be built as planned.

This article, then, is about Foster City and its remarkable evolution from plan to successful community. It is a story about how a mixture of good timing, vision, creativity, can-do mentality, and true determination started a process with a good plan and stuck to that plan throughout more than 57 years of its fruition into a well balanced, beautiful community in every sense of that word. Not without turmoil, and not without some modification, Foster City was the American Dream realized—a place to do better, to be better, and to share that good fortune with fellow citizens.

That dream was also the driving force behind the life story of the planner who gave Foster City its physical shape and character. Michael McDougall, who from 1972 to 1993 taught City and Regional Planning at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, was born in Swatow, China of Portuguese-Scots-Chinese heritage. He lived in Bombay, India during WWII, was educated in Hong Kong, London, and Cornell University, and became an American citizen in 1967. His background in British New Towns Planning and urban design gave him insight into how to use these new concepts of planning in the design of Foster City. He worked closely with his immediate superior, Abraham Krushkhov at Wilsey, Ham, and Blair, who was also a visionary, looking for an alternative kind of development in the design of Foster City to counter the sprawl that was devouring the farmlands of the Bay Area.

I. Significance of Foster City as a Planned New Town

Although the U.S. had sporadic experiences with planned towns before World War II, they mainly consisted of utopian or company towns, railroad suburbs, or “greenbelt” communities such as Radburn or Baldwin Park. After World War II, the magnitude of need for new housing and towns worldwide led designers, initially in devastated Britain, to the New Town Movement. In America, the city of Reston, Virginia echoed needs from decades of depression and war, and started the U.S. New Town movement in the 1950s. Later, a Master Plan developed between 1958 and 1961 for Foster City, which led the way in California as a balanced, planned New Town.

The plan, approved by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors in 1961, while modified in detail over its 46 years, remains remarkably similar in concept and design to the original. The original concept, to develop a balanced community able to function physically, economically, and socially to meet the needs and desires of its residents has been magnificently accomplished.

Kalvin Platt, FAIA, is Chairman of the SWA Group, an International Planning and Landscape Architectural consulting firm with 7 offices and award winning projects around the world. Mr. Platt has extensive experience in Planning New Towns and Communities, Sustainable Land Planning, Urban Design and Park and Conservation Planning.

Physically, the community is a hallmark of beauty and function, the “island of blue lagoons” of its early marketing claims. It has a good circulation system including city-wide shuttles connecting to Bay Area Transit, and award-winning major commercial and residential neighborhoods. Socially, the community pioneered equal opportunity housing at a time when that was unfortunately uncommon, and has a diverse mixture of people unlike most suburban enclaves on the San Francisco Peninsula. Jobs at all levels have always been available from the beginning and have kept up to a remarkable jobs/housing balance to this day. Affordability of housing marked the beginnings of Foster City, but it has eroded, just as the entire housing-deficient Bay Area. Economically, the city enjoys fiscal resources that allow for high maintenance standards on infrastructure and facilities, good schools, and excellent recreation and park facilities. This is in great part through the establishment of the Estero Municipal Improvement District (EMID) by the California Legislature in 1960. Foster City was thus the beginning of a concept of “pay as you go” for infrastructure and facilities that is now an established methodology in California new development through Community Services Districts, Mello-Roos financing, etc.

Foster City is a great success, and being so is therefore a great example of how Planned Communities, or New Towns can be a superior way to have development occur with mitigation of the impacts of growth built into the planned balance of land use, infrastructure, and public finance.

II. A Short History of the Planning and Development of Foster City

Brewers Island

In the late 19th Century, the state of California (illegally by most expert opinions) sold land in San Francisco bay to local farmers, industries or salt producers. Brewers Island, located halfway between San Francisco and San Jose on the Peninsula, was reclaimed with dikes as a 2,200-acre dairy farm and 550 acres of salt evaporation ponds. 2,600 acres of the Island was optioned in 1958 by T. Jack Foster, a successful businessman from Texas and Oklahoma, and previously Mayor of Norman, Oklahoma. During World War II, he helped increase the status of the University of Oklahoma in Norman by bringing in Military technical and medical facilities. After the war, he built military and private residential developments in California, Texas and the Southwest. He envisioned Brewers Island as an opportunity for a longer term development venture, one in which he could involve his three sons, who were scattered across the country.

T. Jack Foster’s broad experience in business and development, as Mayor of a large city and as an institution builder with the University of Oklahoma, combined with his desire to involve the next generation of his family, led him to think longer term and of a city rather than a subdivision on Brewers Island. His sons carried on the family’s linkage to Foster City in name and concept after his death in 1968. He is remembered fondly in Foster City and is commemorated in a sculpture in front of the new City Hall.

Engineering and Design

Foster’s initial partner on Brewers Island was Dick Grant, a successful San Francisco developer who was bought out early on by the Fosters. Grant was instrumental in bringing in the local engineering firm of Wilsey, Ham and Blair who shaped the plan for Foster City into a workable and elegant concept.

Originally, the Corps of Engineers and the County Engineer wanted eight to twelve feet of fill spread over the island to provide positive gravity drainage to the bay. The Fosters’ highly experienced soils consultant Dames & Moore concluded this projected 45 million cubic feet of fill would create substantial settlement of the underlying soils, if that amount could even be found nearby, or more

importantly, could ever be an economic venture. Instead Wilsey, Ham and Blair explored another concept.

Wilsey, Ham and Blair was lead by Lee Ham, a Civil Engineer of a new generation that put good creative design over textbook manuals. His firm included a planning section led by Abraham Krushkhov, and included Michael McDougall as Principal Planner. Krushkhov, a former professor of Public Administration and planner in Santa Clara County, favored creative physical design as the foundation for planning. He fit into Lee Ham's belief that engineering not only made things work but could do that as well as make them beautiful. This connection of enlightened engineers and planners with physical planning orientation within Wilsey, Ham and Blair enabled the evolution of an elegant alternative solution to the fill problem. What was adopted as the backbone of the plan proved to be both problem-solving and beautiful. The lagoon system that would enable drainage of developed areas with only 4 to 5 feet of fill also became a beautiful "blue lagoon" and a backbone for the recreation system of boats, waterfront parks and houses.

The new lagoons were also a reminder of the natural sloughs that coursed the bay lowlands. In the winter, the lagoons are lowered two feet to enable storm water to drain into them and be held while large pumps removed the storm water into the bay. Here, again, engineering factors such as the optimal distances for pumping and for drainage were incorporated into the aesthetics of the lagoon system, avoiding a "channel-ized" or a rectilinear approach and producing the meandering curvilinear system of lagoons and natural slough-like shapes.

The design and character of the lagoon system and how it worked with the New Town plan is shown dramatically in an early drawing by Michael McDougall while he was in the planning group at Wilsey, Ham and Blair (see cover and figure 4). McDougall was a key player due to his great ability to communicate through drawing, his studies in Hong Kong and London at the height of the British New Town Movement, and his graduate studies at Cornell, exposing him to the American style of private enterprise development. His skills and talent allowed him at Foster City to realize Lee Ham's belief that engineering and aesthetics are intrinsically interwoven. McDougall and Krushkhov continued working on Foster City even after they left Wilsey, Ham and Blair for the planning firm Ruth+Krushkhov (R+K). McDougall even stayed involved as a design consultant after he left R+K years later.

The kind of creativity that brought this key combination of elements into being spurred other creative engineering solutions. The fill was sand and shell found at the San Bruno shoals north of the San Francisco Airport, purchased from the state for a million dollars, and dredged and barged to the site. The sand/shell combination formed a hard layer over the bay mud island with good results for development. A system of a grid of concrete grade beams over the sand layer became the foundation for all light housing and commercial

Figure 1
*Brewers Island before development.
(from a Foster Family brochure, 1960)*

Figure 2
*Billboard at the entrance of development, c. 1963.
(M. McDougall personal archive)*

structures. The quality of this method was proven in the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake where damage was extremely rare in contrast to other low-lying areas of the bay. And differentiated settlement was relatively inconsequential compared to those other areas. To this day, Foster City neighborhoods have never been flooded.

The engineering of the lagoon edges and bridges over the waterways were all done with engineering and design results in mind. The bridges are graceful arches that enable sailboats to traverse the lagoon system. Streetlights and fire hydrants won design awards with their distinctive "Foster City Blue" color. Street trees line the well-designed arterial streets and neighborhoods. Also, all electric lines were set underground, which was a new scale for PG&E and became the foundation of later large-scale projects throughout California.

The Estero Municipal Improvement District (EMID)

The establishment of the Estero Municipal Improvement District in 1960 by the California Legislature was the first time special improvement districts were used for such a large and mixed urban use rather than solely for agricultural or industrial projects. The District could issue bonds to provide

Figure 3
Schematic land use plan.
(from a T. Jack Foster & Sons
brochure, 1963.)

for construction and to collect taxes from beneficiary users. A three-member Board of Directors governed the District based upon one vote per dollar of assessed valuation.

The fact that this put the EMID under the control of the developers, that it could tax homeowners, and that there was no debt limitation suggested this process, while facilitating the beginning of Foster City, would come back to haunt the process as the city developed toward its goal of 35,000 population. In 1963, Foster produced a copyrighted brochure with three options for the future: 1) maintain the EMID, 2) annex to the City of San Mateo, and 3) incorporate as a Separate City.

The Plan for Foster City, 1961

Table 1 shows the land uses that were planned for Foster City in 1961, and then slightly revised in 1966. Table 2 shows the planning targets for population, housing and jobs in 1961 and 1966. The plan adopted by San Mateo County on June 13, 1961, in the words of a Ruth+Krushkov report "...transforms a low lying site (with strategic locational advantages) into a water oriented community of beauty and utility to include: serpentine lagoons. Man-made islands, waterfront parks, apartment towers, clustered homes, landscaped boulevards, a central townscape and variegated job complexes".

The plan encouraged a wide range of housing types, even in the early phases and a balanced relationship of living and working areas. It emphasized the development of distinctive types of housing for "...accommodation of the full life cycle for most of the population," and "a full component of community facilities (schools, parks, shopping centers, churches, etc.) for the resident population." Also, the plan set processes for architectural review.

Unique features in the neighborhood areas were "micro-neighborhoods." The larger neighborhood areas were broken into smaller units of 50 lots and approximately 200 people to which "the resident can readily identify." The county approved plan applied techniques of planned unit development to allow varying lot sizes and setbacks, and the overall neighborhoods were mixed at about 60% single family and 40% multifamily. This produced higher densities than the typical San Mateo County subdivisions. With 11,000 housing units planned for 1,360 residential acres, the overall residential density of 8 units per acre produced a more sustainable development, even by current day standards.

Table 1
Foster City Plan; distribution of land uses.

Land Use	Total area / acres	
	1961 Plan	1966 Revised Plan
Residential	1,360	1,334
Commercial Recreation	150	60
Industrial Service Commercial	310	76
Schools	180	150
Churches	40	32
Parks/Lagoons	230	50 parks 230 lagoons
Municipal	30	7
Streets	300	240
Total	2,600	2,670

Table 2
Foster City Plan Targets.

		1961 Plan	1966 Revised Plan
Acreage		2,600	2,670
Population		35,000	35,000
Housing	SF	5,000	5,000
	Townhouses	2,600	2,184
	Garden Apts.	2,000	2,516
	High-rise apts.	1,400	1,300
Total		11,000	11,000
Average population / household		3.2	3.2
Jobs		10,000	10,000
Jobs / Housing balance		0.9	0.9

The overall density and mixed uses of the plan, the jobs, community facilities, and open space, and the use of micro neighborhoods were leading edge planning concepts of the day. It shows that Foster City was at many levels a pioneering and visionary plan.

The Builders

Foster City as a major New Town was also a pioneer in the separation of the process of development into two phases: what is now known as “horizontal development” or land development, and what is known as “vertical development,” or building homes, commercial or industrial buildings, institutional or other special kinds of buildings. Foster’s organization, working with EMID did the basic lot development including fill, drainage, utilities, roads and bridges. Then builders who specialized in residential, commercial or industrial buildings came in under Foster’s management.

Unlike Levittown, which was built by a home builder who did both horizontal and vertical development, Foster City could avoid the large tracts of similar houses that stigmatized much of suburban sprawl, and be built more like an older city by a number of builders with different price ranges and architectural styles. In Foster City, the Fosters went beyond the typical land sales of other planned communities, which also used different builders, but which sold large tracts of land within the community where the builders did produce a uniformity of homes. The Fosters, partially because they had to create the land with fill that required time to settle before homes could be built, and partly because they were interested in a more diverse mix of homes, selected the builders carefully for quality and gave them scattered small sites where they would build a smaller number of homes. This gave the community much more diverse neighborhoods as to the style and cost of homes. They also developed on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood phasing assuring that parks and shopping were built along with the houses in one area before they moved to another area.

Figure 4
*Bird's eye view rendering
of the master plan, by
Michael McDougall, 1960.*

For the home builders, the Fosters chose Eichler Homes for their contemporary design, Duc and Elliot for their classic floor plans, and, at the lower end, Kay Homes, a popular ranch style builder. They had Kay hire an architect to revise their first plans to better meet his goals for these homes, and demanded corner and waterfront homes follow through around the building with the architectural treatment. Some custom homes were also built on waterfront lots. In 1964, the first home was sold at \$23,000 and occupied in a neighborhood by Kay Homes.

In 1965, a waterfront home designed by James Levenson won a Sunset Magazine Award. In the 1970s, Whalers Cove, a number of homes by Fisher-Friedman Architects also received the Sunset Magazine Award. In 1976, The Islands, a condominium project designed by the same firm, received an Award of Excellence from the Architectural Record, and an Award of Merit from the American Institute of Architects and House and Home magazine. These projects helped put Foster City on the map for quality and architectural integrity. The Islands projects still are the focal point of the Foster City Central Lagoon, seen from Leo Ryan Park across the Lagoon.

Schools in Foster City

Schools were a problem because, although school sites could be planned for and reserved, the San Mateo School Board would decide when its school would be built and staffed. In many cases this caused a delay in the planned “neighborhood schools.” The San Mateo elementary and high school districts, beset with growth and financial issues elsewhere in their large districts, did not support the development of Foster City, causing its residents a “problem” that continues to this day. Being part of a larger school district has meant that residents had to fight for special bond issues to build the Foster City elementary and middle schools. District-wide attendance problems for high school students meant that the high school in the plan was never built, and the site was later sold. To this day, students travel long distances to high schools outside of Foster City.

This problem was by no means unique to Foster City and has its origin in the multitude of school districts in California and their sometimes poor relation to the areas they serve. It was a flaw in the otherwise masterful management by the Fosters of the early development of the New City.

When the Irvine Ranch was in planning for its development in the 1960s, right after Foster City, the planners wisely saw the schools issue as critical to the huge ranch and its subsequent development as a series of New Towns and Planned Communities. Ray Watson, chief planner for Irvine at that time and later President of the Irvine Ranch, lobbied to have the Irvine Unified School District boundaries cover major portions of the ranch, and established a working relationship with the school district that resulted in a closely coordinated development of homes and schools throughout the Ranch and in the City of Irvine. Mr. Watson says he feels this decision about schools was one of the most important functional decisions made and has contributed vastly to the success of the Irvine communities.

The Foster City Community Association (FCCA)

The school problem led to the creation of the Foster City Community Association in 1964, and the association was successful in getting bond issues for schools in Foster City. But the larger issue of governance galvanized the FCCA to take on the broader issue of citizen involvement in the New Town.

As taxes levied by the EMID increased, homeowners wanted more say on how the District was run. They wanted a voice on the Board and with intense effort by the FCCA, 1967 legislation was passed by the state to increase the EMID Board to 5 members, 2 elected by residents. As the city grew, the issues of governance became more strident. Investigations of the potential annexation of Foster City

by the City of San Mateo faltered by the barrier created by the 101 Freeway, the large indebtedness of EMID, and the independent mindedness of Foster City residents.

In 1970, Foster City representatives appeared before the new Local Agencies Formation Commission (LAFCO) to make their case for incorporation. Two items were key to approval: demonstrated fiscal self support and the uncertainties for the future fueled by the desire of the Fosters to sell the remaining undeveloped areas of the city to Centex, a Dallas development company for \$15 million.

Foster City Becomes a City

In 1971 the elections held for incorporation of Foster City passed by a 98% vote! The City Council was elected and they took over the functions of the EMID. However, the mid 1970s were tumultuous for the new city. Centex was not the Fosters, and strife took hold in every deliberation. It wasn't until 1977, after the City Council gave increased executive powers to the City Manager, that the City began to settle down into an efficient governing mode.

Even so, throughout the turmoil, the city maintained vital control over planning. With quality as an issue after Centex took control of the undeveloped lands, the city maintained an active Site and Architectural Review Board and the City's Planning Commission continued the policy of the San Mateo County Planning Commission's strict adherence to the Master Plan. In the early 1980s, Foster City came into its own as a city dedicated to serving its residents and maintaining the quality of the New Town Plan.

The travails of Foster City as a New Town played against a larger American issue of the feasibility of New Towns, given the experience of intense cycles of real estate development. The first American New Towns--Reston, Virginia and Columbia, Maryland--got into financial distress and had to be rescued: Reston by acquisition by the Gulf Oil Corporation and Columbia by the Federal Government. Title VII of The Housing and New Community Development Act of 1970 was created to incite private developers to build New Towns as a way to combat sprawl in a more efficient and socially relevant form of new development. The program quickly became bogged down in "red tape" and political maneuvering. Throughout the country, and unlike Columbia which was a well conceived plan, developments that were poorly conceived or in need of financial backing applied as "New Towns." The extremely difficult real estate market conditions in the mid 70s doomed many of those ventures and the program became discredited. The dramatic up and down fluctuations of the housing market in those decades made long term land holding almost impossible for private developers.

Due to the quality of its initial plan and developments and to EMID, FCCA, committed local residents and politicians, Foster City made it through these hard times to thrive in the 80s and 90s to essential build out. It became a prime example of the intrinsic value of the New Town model.

Transportation

At first, access to Foster City was indirect, via Third Avenue in San Mateo, which was also the only access to the old San Mateo Hayward Bridge. The bridge was replaced in the 1960s with a modern span and more direct access from Highway 101 was via East Hillsdale Boulevard running through Foster City. This route quickly became congested in the 1970s and the state had plans to extend Highway 92 from the bridge west to 101 and eventually up the hill to the planned 280 Freeway. Intense lobbying by Foster City gained the funds to create a freeway to freeway interchange at 101 and 92 by the early 1980s, and the 92 Freeway became a reality, greatly improving access to Foster City and the San Mateo Bridge.

Early in the 1970s, the city studied ways to improve public transportation to and within Foster City. Routes were set, and a bus system was begun and then incorporated into the San Mateo County Transit District (SAMTRANS). Eventually a shuttle bus system became employed throughout Foster City, serving all the areas of the city and connecting to shopping in San Mateo, and to the new BART Millbrae station and CALTRAIN.

Creating the Center

The final neighborhoods of Foster City, with their schools, parks, churches, and small shopping centers were built out in the 1980s. The commercial areas of the city extending on both sides of the Highway 92 San Mateo Bridge corridor had begun small scale development in the early decades of the city, but larger scale commercial development would be delayed. The attempt to get a major shopping center within the Town Center site opposite the Central Lagoon was thwarted when the regional center went to a site in San Mateo directly adjacent to Foster City in the early 1980s. Later on in the 1980s, two major projects were proposed to essentially build out the remainder of the commercial and Town Center sites. Transpacific Development at the Town Center site opposite the Central Lagoon proposed and built the Metro Center, and Vintage Properties proposed and built the large Vintage Business Park with office, hotel, and industrial projects. Both projects were built to high standards and essentially completed the jobs and commercial areas of the city.

Metro Center, with its architectural composition of structures centered on the Lagoon and Ryan Park, culminates with a 22-story central tower that put Foster City “on the map.” This complex holds the headquarters for VISA as well as many other high quality businesses. Metro Center has a pedestrian mall that links to the Lagoon and Park, and in many ways is a more successful Town Center than the traditional shopping center that sits nearby in San Mateo.

III. Accomplishments and Perspectives

Accomplishments

When the 1961 Plan for Foster City is compared to the 2007 City Map, the result is an extraordinary example of a plan well conceived and well implemented. The overall land area of the city remains the same, as does the configuration of the Lagoon system, the major roadway network, the land use configurations and major public facilities. Neighborhood configuration is faithful to the original plan

Figures 5 & 6

The Town Center from across the lagoon, and a major pedestrian area leading to the central tower; 2007. (photos by K. Platt)

as is the wise configuration of commercial and industrial uses along the then planned 19th Avenue Freeway (now the Arthur Younger Highway 92 Freeway).

Moving these commercial uses to the north part of Foster City at once gives them regional access without disturbing the sanctity of the residential neighborhoods to the south, and moves these uses to a location where they can act as buffers to the Freeway and Airport noise issues.

The planners and engineers got it right! Small shopping centers serve each set of neighborhoods and schools; parks and churches are well distributed among them. Each neighborhood has a relationship to the bay or lagoon system, credibly implementing the “island of blue lagoons” in the 1963 marketing literature. Yes, given the right sky conditions, the lagoons are blue to this day!

Foster City--belying the infamous Herb Caen 1962 quote--“sounds like a company town in Eastern Pennsylvania” but is an incredibly imaginable and beautiful city with a unique identity that very well places it on the San Francisco Bay. It is one of the best examples in the Bay Area of the use of water as a civic image. Not blessed with the famous hill views to the Bay that make up the basic image of the San Francisco region, the mirror-like stillness of the lagoons reflect the various parts of the city into a magical third dimension.

The 2007 estimated population of Foster City at 30,000 approximates but falls somewhat short of the 35,000 projection. The housing types in Table 3 show a similar distribution between planned and projected housing types with the exception of the build out having a much higher proportion of apartments than in the original plan. Even though the projected total number of units was 11,000 and 12,000 were built, the lower population per dwelling unit average contributes to the lower overall population.

Two factors seem to point out the reason for the lesser population. One is the faster conversion of this “infill” site near San Francisco and the airport to multifamily rather than family units with fewer persons per unit as shown above. The other is the incredible run up in prices for bayfront real estate due to the infill effect and the advent of the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) that came into being after Foster City was begun. The BCDC severely limited residential development or even other kinds of non-marine development along the entire San Francisco Bay. The high prices resulting from these limitations lessened the ability of families with children to gain access to Foster City in its later years of development.

Figures 7 & 8

The restaurant at Edgewater Place overlooking Whaler's Cove, and one of the Islands across from the lagoon, 2007. (photo 7: K. Platt; photo 8: from www.fostercity.org on 12/10/07)

Redwood Shores, a planned community on Leslie Salt lands directly south of Foster City was one of the last large -scale developments on the Bay. Influenced by the planning approach at Foster City, Redwood Shores also attained a higher density, higher quality mixed use development.

Foster City Community Development Director, Richard Marks had several conclusions about the original Master Plan based upon his twenty years of experience in bringing the plan to fruition. First, he praised the land use patterns in the original Master Plan, which clustered the nine neighborhoods around the lagoon and bay in the eastern and southern reaches of the city. The heavier commercial and industrial uses were located on the northern and western reaches adjacent to Highway 92. This allowed for easy accessibility from the commercial areas to the surrounding region and to the residential areas but there was enough separation to buffer any conflict with the neighborhoods. This buffer gave the city the ability to work with later modifications of the commercial developments such as the construction of the landmark 22-story Metro Center development in the 1980s without undue impacts to the neighborhoods. This is testimony to how a good plan can help in the planning process and overcome Nimbyism.

Mr. Marks also mentioned another landmark in the final payoff of the original EMID bonds in 2007. Led by an efficient and responsive local government they controlled, the residents basically paid off the mortgage in 44 years: not bad for building a city given most individual homes carry a thirty-year mortgage.

He was also positive about the circulation system in the original plan which, in short, “works.” This is particularly noteworthy for an Island Community with a central lagoon system where there are inherent circulation limitations. With just a minor change in configuration, Edgewater Boulevard now connects directly to Mariners Island Boulevard and the Bridgepointe Shopping Center. This development on a small section of the original Brewers Island was not part of the original property planned as Foster City and remains in San Mateo, but contains the major regional shopping center in the area.

Some Perspectives on Foster City

In an article written in the San Francisco Chronicle in 1963, Alan Temko—the Pulitzer Prize-winning architectural critic—wrote about Foster City and called it a project that could be a masterpiece. Mr.

Table 3
Foster City Plan comparisons.

		1961 Plan	1966 Revised Plan	2007 (actual)
Acreage in city		2,600	2,670	2,670
Population		35,000	35,000	30,000
Jobs		10,000	10,000	20,000
Housing	Single Family	5,000	5,000	4,571
	Townhouses	2,600	2,184	2,205
	Garden Apt. or condo.	2,000	2,516	1,956
	Apartments	1,400	1,300	3,793
Total Housing		11,000	11,000	12,525
Population / Household		3.2	3.2	2.5
Jobs / Housing Balance		0.9	0.9	1.66

Figures 9 & 10
Looking north and south over Foster City, 2007.
(photos by K. Platt)

Temko's enthusiasm came in main from the announcement at that time of the engagement of the foremost figures in Modern Architecture, Le Corbusier and Mies Van der Rohe, to design the first two apartment towers. These concept designs were in fact done, but were never built.

In his article, Mr. Temko also spoke highly of the planning work by Wilsey, Ham and Blair, Abraham Krushkov and Michael McDougall, as well as Eichler Homes. He had the right instincts about the effort. Maybe a masterpiece should have been reserved for the great architectural masters, but Foster City became a beautiful place and a community masterpiece of its own.

In 1965, the San Francisco Museum of Art mounted an exhibition "Design of a City: Foster City" which was the first time that a community development was featured in a major American museum. The Museum picked up the proposal of Mies Van der Rohe, but also featured a ten-foot square mural of the land use plan by Ruth and Krushkov. By this time Abraam Krushkov and Michael McDougal had left Wilsey, Ham and Blair but continued to work intensely on the development team for Foster City. (At that time, I had followed them to R+K, but continued to not be involved directly with Foster City.)

Figure 11
The model of Mies Van Der Rohe's 22-story towers for Foster City, prepared for the San Francisco Museum of Art Exhibit, 1965.

The museum exhibition was comprehensive and featured the design of the lagoons, islands, neighborhoods and homes, and even the unique "street furniture" and bridges. The museum brochure for the exhibit summarized it as "the concept of a new city stimulates the creative mind. A city can be likened to a collage in which the contrast and variety of elements produce a vitality through an interaction of structures [...] it is not buildings alone that make the city. It is also the spaces between the buildings [...] the streets, the walks, the yards, the plazas, the parks, and, in case of Foster City, the Waterways."

Missed Opportunities

Building the Mies Van der Rohe towers or the work by Le Corbusier at Foster City proved to be too difficult for the brand new city. Another missed opportunity was the inability of the San Mateo School District to build a high school in Foster City. The lack of the high school was not a flaw in the plan, since the site was designated in an appropriate location. The failure was in the governance structure which allowed the district to balance its enrollment by requiring the Foster City students to commute to underutilized schools in other communities. The district finally sold the site for development.

Another missed opportunity that was better missed than accomplished was the proposed freeway that was to run along the bay edge of Foster City traversing the entire peninsula. Although shown on the original plan, this proposal by CALTRANS was never embraced into the planning concepts. It was there because this bad idea was then current policy and had to be acknowledged. The advent of Foster City and BCDC makes this freeway a plan never to be resurrected.

Finally, the decision of the developers to locate the regional shopping center on a small piece of Brewers Island that was not part of Foster City rather than locate it at the Designated Town Center Site was a mixed result. A small reconfiguration of Edgewater Boulevard made the site easily accessible to the city, which lost this significant tax base. However, the Metro Center which was later built on the Town Center Site created a better relationship to the lagoon than the internally oriented traditional shopping center, provided a landmark 22-story tower overlooking the large central lagoon, and provided office jobs more related to the residents of Foster City.

IV. Making a Difference: Learning from Foster City

The experience of planning and realizing Foster City offers four major lessons for city planners.

How a Developer Can Enhance Community

Today we tend to consider “developer” and “community” as two incompatible concepts. But here we have it: a developer who did everything he could to think long term, care about people and continually think of how he could create a better place. His larger-than-life statue sitting out in front of City Hall (with no graffiti) says it can be done. T. Jack Foster cared about that which he was doing—building community—and he did it well, almost as if he was following the “Community Builders Handbook” of circa 1954 by the Urban Land Institute. And he was not the only one; James Rouse at Columbia, and Don Bren at Irvine carry on the tradition—Bren with a recent \$20 million grant to the Irvine Unified School District for added courses in art, music, and science.

Figure 12
Whaler's Cove, 2007.
(photo by K. Platt)

A Better Way to Grow With Less Negative Impact

By planning well from the beginning, Foster City optimized its road system, created a jobs-housing balance, built solid diversified neighborhoods that are as desirable today as when they were built, used an innovative financing technique to pay its way for growth, and established a tightly-knit community which to this day loves its town and is fiercely protective of it. Foster City was “infill” development as the larger Peninsula had sprawled well beyond the site in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The Relationship Between Good Engineering and Aesthetics

At Foster City there is no chain link fenced concrete channels or tinker toy bridges where function trumps beauty. It is apparent everywhere that this is a man-made city, but it represents the belief that you can solve functional issues and do it elegantly and with a spirit. Design—whether engineering design, architectural design, landscape design, or graphic design—must solve problems in a way as to create a positive reaction from the user. This has been done at Foster City. It drains well, stands up to earthquakes, gets you where you want to go...and is beautiful!

The plan used a previously-filled island in the Bay and added a minimum of new fill in a manner proven to enhance the structural response and prevent flooding. It also provided new water areas to the existing island.

How an Individual Planner Can Make a Difference

Michael McDougall's visionary sketch of Foster City, made 56 years ago, is imagined as one flies over the completed city. You would be able to see practically the same view by actually getting in a plane today and looking at the real city from above. His kind of vision, his sensitivity to what could or would make

Figure 13
A Neighborhood Island;
2007. (photo by K. Platt)

Figure 14
A Neighborhood Island;
2007. (photo by K. Platt)

this field, but is tailor-made to California standards, and expresses the indigenous contemporary culture of the San Francisco Bay Area.”

The major billboard that sat at the barren entry to Foster City at the time Michael drew his sketch said “We’re Building a Dream Here.” Michael was able to make that dream possible by his plans and his abilities. In collaboration with T. Jack Foster, Abraam Krushkhov, Wilsey, Ham and Blair, City and County officials, builders and developers, and in the end with the initial, present, and future members of the Foster City community, he helped start a process that created a New Town! This process has no end as Foster City and its residents face the 21st century as a viable and beautiful community. It is important that he was there to start the process, but it is more important that he did it well!

Sources:

1. “A New Town Comes of Age,” Foster City, California, Foster City Chamber of Commerce, 1985.
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3. “Foster City Amended General Plan,” T. Jack Foster and Sons, August 18, 1966.
4. “A New City on the Bay,” Allan Temko, San Francisco Chronicle, November 20, 1963.
5. “Design of a City – Foster City,” exhibition brochure, San Francisco Museum of Art, October 1965.
6. “Foster City – The Island of Blue Lagoons,” brochure, T. Jack Foster and Sons, 1963.
7. “Community Profile,” City of Foster City, Website, 2007.
8. Interview with Richard Marks, Foster City Community Development Director, City of Foster City, November 2007.
9. Personal notes, archives, and aerial sketch of Foster City, 1960, Michael McDougall.

Figure 15
Leo Ryan Park at Town
Center Lagoon; 2007.
(photo by K. Platt)

Figure 16
Foster City; 2007.
(from Google Earth; december 2007)