

Cities & Communities

BY **ANDREW BLUM** AND **MARA HVISTENDAHL**

Conversations with John Rahaim, director of the San Francisco Planning Department, and Yongjie Sha, a professor of architecture and urban design at Shanghai's Tongji University, about what community means in the context of a city and how to encourage it.

This article appeared originally in *Dialogue* 17. ©2009.
Please see the current issue at dialogue.gensler.com.

JOHN RAHAIM was recruited as San Francisco's planning director from Seattle, another waterfront city with a reputation for livability. Compared to Seattle, San Francisco is more compact (and only New York is denser). Founded as a Spanish garrison town in 1776, the city no longer anchors its region. Yet it remains high on the list of desirable places, a mecca for the creative class and a perennial draw for tourists. Growth has followed, but San Francisco is not an easy place to build. Can the city support community in a broader sense while reconciling the different interests of its diverse, vocal, and politically engaged constituents? For John Rahaim, the starting point is the idea of community itself—what it is and how it is encouraged.

What does community mean in San Francisco?

John Rahaim: There's always the geographic community, typically the most important when it comes to project-based planning. But there's also the environmental community, the preservation community, the development community—people who share certain values around certain issues. That defines a community now, especially given the Internet and all the stakeholders and special interests out there. These groups can be very vocal, and they work well beyond the boundaries of single neighborhoods.

How does San Francisco create new communities?

JR: That's the crux of our work as planners. Place making is what we call it—building the possibility of a physical community, or at least the infrastructure to support one. You can't force community, but you can create the environment for it. You can also build in a way that prevents it from happening. That occurred in many of the urban renewal projects of the 1960s

and 1970s, but it's a risk in any project. Our work is complex and happens on a number of different scales. It's about encouraging certain uses.

The heart of any neighborhood is a public place—a plaza, park, or main street. Encouraging the creation of these major gathering places is one of our most important roles. For example, we just completed plans for the formerly industrial Eastern Neighborhoods. The plan calls for each of the four neighborhoods to have at least one new park. Now the critical issue for the success of a park is the activities at its perimeter. Surround it with blank walls, and it won't work. We can't control those activities, but we can encourage them. In the Mission district, we hope to make a park on land owned by the city's Public Utilities Commission, but we're working with the Housing Department to develop half the site as affordable housing. Designed together, they can create activity—liveliness.

To me, a city is defined by the relationship between its public and private realms. We spend a lot of time with streets, plazas, and open spaces, but their interface with private development gets just as much attention. What private uses will enliven the street? How does a building relate to pedestrians?

You have lived in both. Has Seattle influenced San Francisco?

JR: Seattle was the first US city to require city-owned buildings to be green rated. That created an incentive for the private sector. Seattle's experience probably induced San Francisco to go further. The city recently enacted outright green construction requirements for all buildings above a size threshold. It starts with LEED Silver and ramps up over time to LEED Gold.

When I was Seattle's planning director, my staff included a sustainable infrastructure planner—the person who looked for cross-departmental opportunities to do things more sustainably. In capital budgeting terms, it's called asset management. You look at the triple bottom line for infrastructure. We could use a staff position like that here.

Are you planning San Francisco as a sustainable community?

JR: San Francisco's 1985 Downtown Plan mandated that all high-density development be within a 10-minute walk of a transit stop. It's one of the great success stories in this regard. We don't allow new freestanding parking facilities downtown, and we actively discourage parking in new buildings—we're down to half a space per unit in some places. The city is considering congestion pricing to limit traffic. We're proposing

the Better Streets Plan, which designs streets for walking and biking, not just for cars. We're almost finished with a bicycle plan, recognizing that bicycle riding is part of commuting now. We're also looking at sustainability at a district scale—things like energy facilities and water-retention facilities. There are developing neighborhoods in Seattle that are doing this already. It may offer the biggest bang for the buck in terms of the sustainability of new development in San Francisco.

The whole issue of global warming has created allies for us. Sustainability, as it pertains to my work, is really just good planning. You want to make sure you can accommodate growth with a wide range of uses, and develop it densely around transit. Those fundamentals haven't changed. So it's a great time to be doing this work. There's a growing awareness of the role cities play in creating a sustainable future.

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YONGJIE SHA began teaching urban design at a unique moment in China's development. His dual focus on urban-scale modernization and revitalization reflects the country's need to do both concurrently, reworking its existing city centers as it also develops new districts to accommodate surging growth. The rapid pace of change also explains his other role as an adviser to city planners across China. He splits his time between Shanghai, where he teaches and also serves on a panel that advises the city on historic preservation, and the many smaller cities that benefit from his counsel. We caught up with him in Shanghai, at his office at Tongji University.

What does community mean in Shanghai?

Yongjie Sha: Most people here would say there are two kinds of community: monuments or large-scale public space and everything connected to everyday life. Cities need both, but community really takes place in the everyday. In Shanghai, everyone used to work and live in a danwei or work unit. Professors lived around the universities, and shipbuilders lived near the shipyards. Everyday life took place there. This changed in 1990. Suddenly, you could buy your house from the danwei, and then sell it to anyone. Soon, people were moving to new neighborhoods, buying cars, and driving to work.

At the same time, a huge influx of new people arrived in Shanghai. The city had to plan for rapid growth. When Shanghai's planners looked around for planning models for the new areas of the city, they were influenced by modernist urban planning concepts, expressed through zoning regulations, and also by American suburban densification strategies that relied on cars instead of transit. These are quite different models, but they both assume that cities consist of four distinct elements—living, working, commuting, and leisure.

When you divide life up this way, it leads to very big blocks and very big neighborhoods. It's hard to walk around. You need to drive a car to go to the supermarket or take your kids to kindergarten. Even strolling around the neighborhood becomes difficult. A true community has mixed functions. When single-use zoning and traffic come first, it's hard to achieve any mixture. The midcentury US model made it easier for Shanghai to build highrises anywhere in the city, but community suffered.

Is Shanghai now considering other models?

YS: Start with the unique characteristics of the neighborhood, and work from there—that's emerging as the new model. Cities like Shanghai were laid out between the mid-1800s and the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. They have districts where people came together because of their nationality or lifestyle—a Japanese quarter or French Concession. These areas have a distinctive character, with smaller blocks, made for walking, that provide a sense of community. They could be a model for new development at a residential scale.

The city government now views the renewal of Shanghai's central districts as an evolution, not an overnight change. The goal is to preserve community, allowing urban life to continue as it always has. That means preserving older buildings—there's more focus now on historic preservation. Some district governments are trying to redo historic areas in a new way. These buildings may look nice on the outside, but many families share them, and the living conditions are not ideal. Paying some people to move to new housing near their old homes allows the older buildings to be renovated. Those who stay and those who go both have a better quality of life, and no one has to leave the neighborhood and move to the suburbs.

How did this change in thinking come about?

YS: City planners initially didn't believe in the older urban fabric. They thought it meant that a city was poor and underdeveloped, and the only way to deal with it was to destroy it and build anew. Shui On's Xintiandi project in Shanghai showed how that fabric could be incorporated into an urban-scale redevelopment.

It also showed that preservation could be profitable. I brought several mayors from other Chinese cities to visit Xintiandi recently, and they all asked how they could do something like this back home. That project has changed a lot of minds.

In 2003, Shanghai's planners started identifying parts of the city center that could be designated as historic and cultural preservation zones. They spent three years looking into this and then codified them as conservation zones. Within each zone, we've listed restrictions for every building on every block—what should be conserved, what can be renovated, and what can be demolished and replaced. Where you're allowed to rebuild, there are restrictions on height, bulk, and floor area. In parts of downtown Shanghai that were redeveloped early on, you sometimes find highrises next door to historic lane houses. But thanks to these new regulations, that won't happen again. We're better now than Tokyo or Seoul at preserving older buildings.

We're moving toward comprehensive urban planning. Shanghai's central districts, within the outer ring road, were inspired by European precedents. They're compact and walkable, a high-quality lifestyle that relies on public transit. The challenge is to apply that model to the rest of the city. But we have many challenges that Europe doesn't face. Shanghai has 19 million people, and city officials spend most of their time dealing with the consequences.

How is the city dealing with this constant growth?

YS: The solution they've come up with is to create a network of compact, high-density cities on the periphery. Each of these satellite cities accommodates around half a million people. While they're connected to downtown Shanghai by train, they're self-contained, with jobs, housing, universities, and cultural life. They even have their own suburbs. More than half of China's population lives in cities of similar size, so it's a familiar scale. Pudong taught us a lot about what doesn't work. These new cities are well planned and much more livable.

China is embracing the car. What can be done about it?

YS: There's no prejudice against cars here—average people in Shanghai like driving and buying big houses. And to some extent our planning encourages them to drive. It will take time to change that mentality. Not long ago, people were living in very poor conditions, so the first reaction to that past is to buy things that symbolize they've made it into the middle class. But you don't really need a car. Shanghai has one of the best public transportation systems in China, with new metro lines

under construction and high-speed trains to nearby cities like Hangzhou. Still, many people have moved out of the city center, seeking what they regard as a better lifestyle. In time, they may move back.

Most of our pollution comes from cars. Industry has moved out of the city and is also much more sustainable now, thanks to measures that force them to account for their energy consumption—and give them financial incentives to pollute less. Development that requires people to drive is unsustainable. So even if people here like their cars, we need to find ways to encourage them to walk, bike, and use public transit. When you set aside a big piece of land for housing, just leaving the neighborhood is hard without a car. So we need to design smaller blocks and narrower streets where people can walk around and interact.

Will the 2010 World Expo reinforce the city's sense of community?

YS: The city is renovating Shanghai's main streets and painting the buildings that line them, to show that this is a new and beautiful city. People like that, because it shows that living conditions have really improved. When the city looks better, there's more pride in it. Even the taxi drivers are learning some English and some manners. It means that Shanghai is becoming more international. That's exciting—and it's a very good thing for the city.

Based in Shanghai, **Mara Hvistendahl** writes for the *Financial Times* and *ID* magazine.