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## Austrian architect shapes El Dorado Hills' future



Victor Gruen

El Dorado Hills was conceived by Sacramento developer Alan Lindsey in the late 1950s. Highway 50 was in the works. The Cold War was raging. Local aerospace firms were expanding. Lindsey saw the rolling hills as a perfect place for those engineers and their families. He acquired roughly 11,000 acres of ranch land and arranged financing by 1960. The pieces were falling into place.

El Dorado Hills was his legacy in the making. Lindsey felt he had a real shot at creating a world-class community, and wanted a world-class master plan.

He turned to Austrian Architect and Planner Victor Gruen, who'd gained international notoriety in the 1950s for creating a pair of wildly successful shopping malls and had been in the news with plans to remake American downtowns.

Before Gruen, large shopping centers had never succeeded. No one had figured out how to pull all the pieces together. Gruen's 1954 Northland Center was located outside Detroit, funded and anchored by Hudson's Department Store. It included an unprecedented 100 smaller stores. It was a huge success.

The fully enclosed Southdale Mall opened in 1956 outside Minneapolis to even grander praise. Gruen's basic design, minus the five-story aviary and other extravagances he lavished on Southdale, became the design standard for the American mall, and was replicated thousands of times across the country and later, internationally.

From his earliest store designs, Victor Gruen demonstrated an uncanny ability to create environments that facilitated social experience and triggered subtle emotional reactions... buying decisions. In popular culture, the phenomenon became widely known as "The Gruen Effect."

The news media loved this story. And they loved Gruen, an outspoken Austrian refugee socialist with a hyperactive mind, a chip on his shoulder and a story to tell. What reporter could ask for anything more?

Certainly not Malcolm Gladwell, who argued for Gruen as the most influential architect of the century.

A mere four years after Southland opened, the father of the shopping mall also parented a master plan for El Dorado Hills. Yes, an avowed socialist created the original plan for ruby-red El Dorado Hills.

And yes, there was to be a mall in El Dorado Hills... that would come later. But a lot happened over the ensuing 20

years.

Aerojet layoffs ultimately cost Lindsey the project. Tony Mansour took the reins in 1981 and had the non-profit Urban Land Institute rework the plan. The mall became an open air "downtown" El Dorado Hills, a precursor to what became known as a "lifestyle center."

Many of the community amenities in Mansour's Town Center first appeared in Gruen's original work. Others are certainly Gruen-esque.

Gruen's mall success is a consummately American story. He worked on the concept for almost 10 years, authoring mall designs for five different clients before he ever got a chance to see one built.

His goal from the start, as outlined in dozens of articles at the time, was to reign in post-war suburban sprawl, which he condemned as both economically and socially corrosive.

Following his mall success, he immediately turned his attention to the nation's decaying downtowns, creating dozens of urban renewal plans over the following decade.

Again, most were never built.

His two notable successes, a \$50 million remake of downtown Rochester, NY and a massive reworking of downtown Fresno occurred just before and after the El Dorado Hills project.

A prolific writer and speechmaker, Gruen outlined a vision for American cities and self-contained outlying "satellite cities," roughly the size of El Dorado Hills.

He grappled with what he saw as the corrosive effect of the automobile, and argued for self-contained "villages," with parks, schools and small stores within walking distance.

Starting to sound familiar?

The socialist in Gruen favored community space over personal space. Later updates to the El Dorado Hills plan consistently increased home sizes. Areas planned for apartments became free-standing homes. Green belts between villages were sacrificed. The Lindsey/Gruen 75,000 population goal came down accordingly.

Gruen's recognition of suburban sprawl, urban decay and the impact of the automobile were years ahead his time. His outspoken opinions on how to address these problems were often radical, and reflected his belief that strict zoning regulations and a mix of public and private funding on well-planned infrastructure would facilitate smart growth, vibrant community and prosperity.

He believed that properly executed retail was the cornerstone of the American economy.

Throughout his 30 tenure in the U.S., Gruen led two lives. His outspoken, civic-minded public life played out in his books and hundreds of articles – often long tomes explaining his ideas and justifying his designs.

Gruen's commercial life was often at odds with his high-minded public side. His firm continued to design shopping malls for years after Gruen had taken to delivering blue-faced anti-mall, anti-sprawl rants to his peers – he seemed to save his best material for award banquet speeches.

The ostentatious store-fronts he designed in the 1940s helped create the commercial strips of suburban sprawl he loathed in the 1950s.

The European socialist never fully grasped Americans' capacity for consumerism. The rise of discount retailing in his lifetime must have come as a surprise to a man who believed that vibrant (full-priced) shopping districts provided far more to the shopper than mere goods and services.

Over the course of his career Gruen was increasingly at odds with those who hired him and built his designs. His most notable achievement, the enclosed Southdale mall, was a commission for one of the mall's anchor stores. Dayton's bought the land, hired Gruen and funded the mall.

Southdale was to be part of a much larger planned community of Gruen's creation. Ironically, the success of the mall quashed the planned community by driving up surrounding land value.

Dayton's sold out to speculators at a steep profit rather than take a chance on a socialist's vision for a planned community.

Within five years, the open prairie surrounding Southdale had become the claptrap suburban sprawl Gruen hated. The view that a shopping mall on the outskirts of a city could be the economic engine for a self-contained satellite city, preserving the surrounding open space, was simply naïve.

To discuss how Gruen's 1960 El Dorado Hills Master Plan has played out, stop by the senior center on Sept. 2. The conversation is good, and it's free. Victor Gruen would approve.

*The El Dorado Hills Local History Forum is a group discussion of El Dorado Hills history, led by former Village Life reporter Mike Roberts. The 1960 Master Plan for El Dorado Hills will be discussed at 10 a.m. on Friday, Sept. 2, at the El Dorado Hills Senior Center.*