

Aseem Inam, Ph.D.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology / Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists

**From Policy to Reality:  
TOD Design Guidelines and the Rio Vista West Project in San Diego**

**POLICY RELEVANCE: WHAT WORKS AND WHY IN URBAN DESIGN**

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 context.

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 city-wide 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 (RVW) project was conceived as the first new transit-oriented development project in San Diego. Completed in 2006, RVW 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.

The research will examine the San Diego case study via two sets of questions on the impact of these initiatives. The first set focuses on how the TOD guidelines as public policy were translated into the concrete reality of a built urban design project:

- In what ways did San Diego's TOD design guidelines have a positive impact on the design of RVW, and in what ways did fall short? How did the guidelines facilitate the design of key TOD components, such as compactness and walkability, a mix of uses, promoting a variety of modes of transportation, and a higher density than the surrounding areas?

The second set of questions focuses on ways in which the RVW project does or does not embody the ideals of TOD design more generally:

- Now that the RVW project is fully built and occupied, can it be considered a successful example of a TOD? In what ways is it a prototype for future TODs in San Diego and similar contexts—for example, in terms of levels of car ownership and transit ridership, creation of a pedestrian friendly neighborhood, and work and shopping destinations that are easy to access? In what ways could it have been better designed and built?

The goal of this research project is not to portray either San Diego's TOD design guidelines or the Rio Vista Project as infallible practices; rather, the goal is to conduct a critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the impact of each initiative, and to draw lessons for innovative public policies and urban design practices.

#### METHOD OF INVESTIGATION: PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The approach I bring to this research project is a unique combination of extensive professional experience and a track record of scholarly research. My most recent professional experience was as a project leader at Moule & Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists in Pasadena, California. I led multidisciplinary teams on several urban design projects that range from a new village on 30 acres on the island of Anguilla in the Caribbean to a 3,000 acre master plan for the City of Sunland Park on the U.S.-Mexico border. Prior to that, I worked as an urban designer and planner for the University of Southern California, the City of St. Louis, and a leading architecture and planning firm in India, Stein Doshi Bhalla. At present, as a visiting Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, I am working on a book-length research project on designing urban transformation. The book describes a conceptual shift in urban design practice that views the production of urban form not just as an end in itself, but also as a means for transforming the decision-making mechanisms of city-building process. My previous book, *Planning for the Unplanned: Recovering from Crises in Megacities*, was a comparative analysis of successful urban redevelopment by government planning agencies in Los Angeles and Mexico City.

The relationship between intention (e.g. conceptual design, policy goals) and consequence (e.g. concrete reality, impact of development) is central to my research, and is more broadly significant for understanding how urban designers and planners can be more effective in shaping cities over the long term. The San Diego case study allows one to study two levels of professional practice simultaneously: city-wide public policies such as the TOD guidelines, and context-specific urban design projects that are shaped by those broader policies. The case study method used for this research will help understand TOD public policies and urban design within the complexities of a real context (i.e. city of San Diego), and will rely on multiple sources of evidence (e.g. interviews, policy documents, newspaper articles, photography). The research will follow the steps of the case study method: determine and define the research question, select the cases and determine data gathering and analysis techniques, prepare to collect the data, collect data in the field, evaluate and analyze the data, and prepare the report. These steps are described in detail in the next section.

## TIMELINE: WORK PLAN

Phase 1: Preliminary Research: 2000 – 2002: Starting in 2000, a colleague and I conducted research on RVW as a part of a larger project entitled “Developer-Planner Interaction in Transportation and Land Use Sustainability,” with the final report available at the following website: <http://transweb.sjsu.edu/mtiportal/research/publications/documents/01-21.pdf>. We conducted original research about the project, including interviews with the developer and the planners, analysis of the master plan, and newspaper accounts. We found that while the TOD design guidelines were a strong incentive to create a transit village at that location, the project would not have succeeded without perceptible market demand in the private sector. The new research will build upon the previous work but will be different in several ways. First, RVW was far from complete in 2000, so it would not have been possible to measure how effective it was as a fully occupied and working TOD, as this new research proposes to do. Second, with the passage of nearly 20 years, we can also now observe what impact San Diego’s TOD design guidelines had on the relative success or failure of RVW. Third, the new research will focus directly on lessons for professional practice, including the formulation of effective TOD policies and the design of flourishing TOD projects.

Phase 2: Update on Case Studies: Present - March 2010: I will perform a literature review of the current status of San Diego’s TOD design guidelines as well as the RVW project, by searching for newspaper and magazine articles, public documents such as reports, and websites of professional organizations such as the APA, ULI, and CNU. In recent year, RVW has figured prominently as one case study among many in scholarly research as well as professional reports on the state of the art of TODs in the United States. I have already begun this phase of this research.

**Phase 3: Field Research: April 2010:** The grant proposal seeks funding specifically for this phase of the research. I will contact key stakeholders such as planners in the City of San Diego, representatives of current owners Sudberry Properties, condominium owners association, retail and office tenants, and community groups such as neighborhood associations from nearby areas to set up interviews for a 10-day field trip. The field research will also consist of documentation and analysis, including photography of how the development is occupied and utilized (e.g. transit use, walkability) and how the surrounding area has developed, public policy documents such as updated design guidelines and land use regulations, and examples of recent TOD projects that fall under the guidelines and may have been influenced by the design of RVW. This proposal seeks funding for this phase of the research, with a detailed budget described in the next section.

Phase 4: Report Writing: May 2010: The literature review and evidence gathered from the field research will be organized and analyzed according to the two research questions described on pages 1-2 of this proposal. The detailed report of the research will include an overview of the innovative nature of the TOD guidelines and the RVW project, the role that public policy played in the realization of the private project, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the project vis-à-vis its original goals, and the types of impact the project has had on other TOD initiatives in San Diego. The report will conclude with lessons for the role of public policy in fostering urban design innovation, and ways in which TODs can be better designed so that they attract greater private and public support in the future.

Phase 5: Dissemination: June-July 2010: The research report will be written and illustrated for an audience of professional urban designers and planners primarily, and will be made available in

either HTML or PDF format for the APA Urban Design and Preservation Division website. Based on the detailed report, the analysis and lessons for practice will be disseminated in two other professional forums: an essay in *Planning* magazine, and a slide presentation and talk at the national APA conference in April 2011 in Boston. A more scholarly version of the study will be submitted for publication in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*.

#### BUDGET: FIELD RESEARCH

Airfare: Boston – San Diego roundtrip	\$ 440
Hotel: San Diego: 10 days	\$1,980
Transportation: San Diego transit Pass (\$50) + Cab Fare to/from both airports (\$160)	\$ 210
Meals: 10 days	\$ 450
Photography and printing with film-based SLR camera of project and context	\$ 100
Printing and Copying Documents (e.g. online articles and reports, copies of plans)	\$ 200
Mailing Documents (e.g. plans, reports, meeting minutes, project evaluations)	\$ 50
Contingency in case of rise in cost of travel or documentation: 10%	\$ 340
<b>Total budget</b>	<b>\$3,770</b>

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH TO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

In recent years, there has been an increase in well-meaning policy makers, city planners, and urban designers pursuing such laudable goals as historic preservation, green design, vibrant streets, and convenient access to transit. However, it is less clear how effective these initiatives have been in achieving their goals and having a larger impact on the city. The research examines two innovative initiatives in order to assess their impact in terms of TOD design and the workability of a TOD project. The goal of the research is to draw lessons for future TOD policy making and project design. The research will highlight what aspects of TOD design guidelines were most effective and why (e.g. location and proximity to transit service, network of pedestrian routes, flexible parking standards), and suggest what roles urban designers can play in formulating similar city-wide public policies (e.g. developing strategies of blended densities, designing relationships to surrounding neighborhoods, creating urban parks and plazas near transit stations).

The research will also tease out the roles played by two key sets of stakeholders: planners in the City of San Diego Planning Department, and the urban design consultants, Calthorpe and Associates, who helped formulate the TOD guidelines as well as the master plan for RVW. For example, were they advocates for transit-oriented development as a desirable goal, partners with the private sector in the development process, designers with a creative vision, bureaucrats who worked out the intricacies of land use regulations, community enablers that helped mobilize popular support, or political entrepreneurs who got elected officials involved early in the process, or some combination of the above? What were their strengths and weaknesses in these efforts? In this manner, the research will help other planners and urban designers to create more innovative policies, design valuable projects, and have a genuine impact on the future of the American city.