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The Streets of Playa Vista [Streets: Old Paradigm, New Investment]

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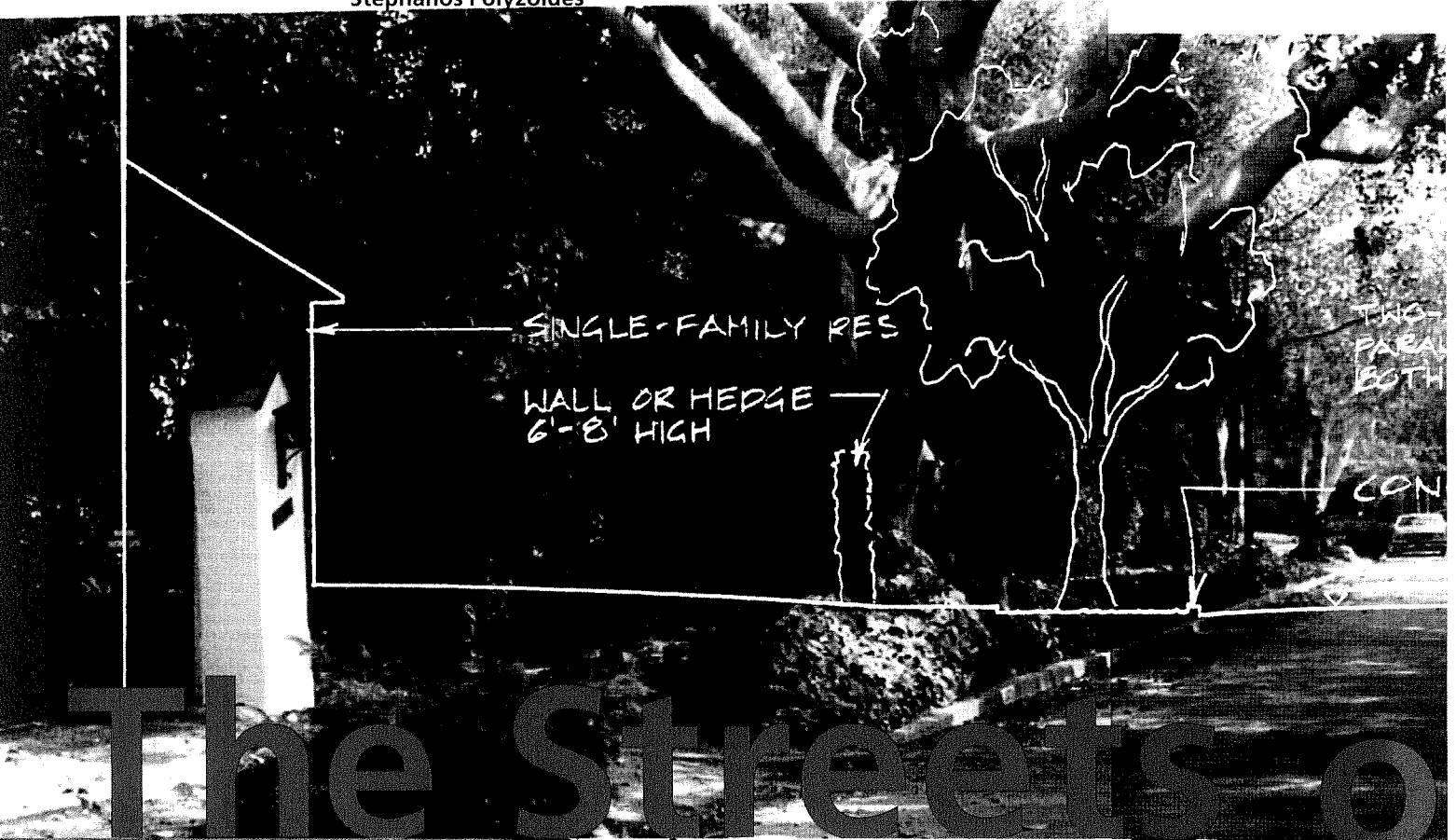
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The Streets





30'-40' HIGH, 40'-50' B.C.

ONE-TWO STOREY SINGLE FAMILY RES.

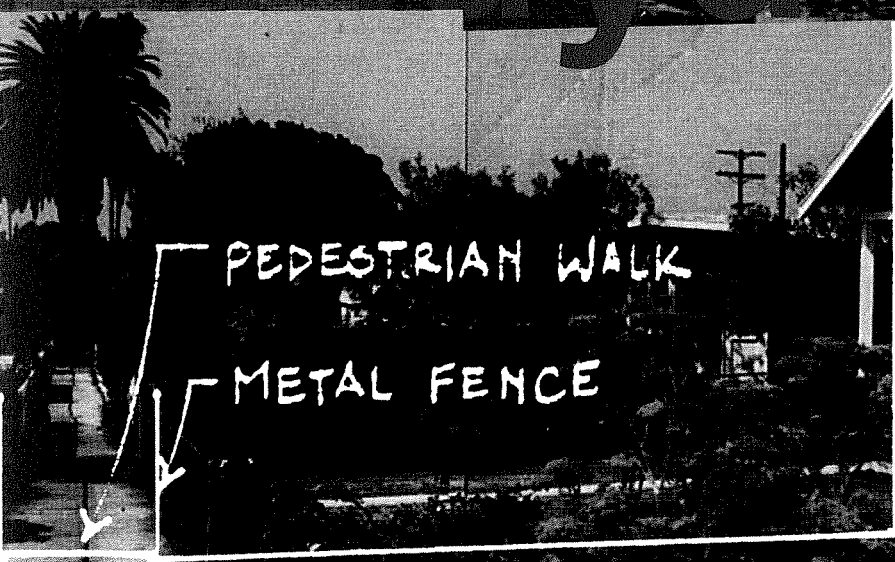
TRAFFIC PARKING SPACES

CONCRETE SIDEWALK

WHITE CURB

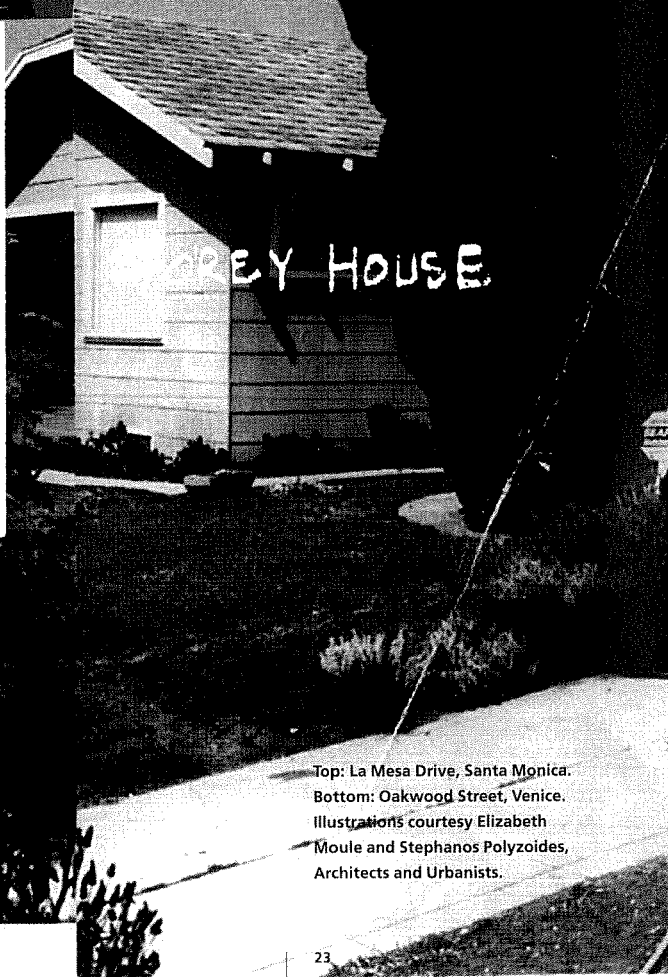
LANDSCAPED LAWN

Playa Vista



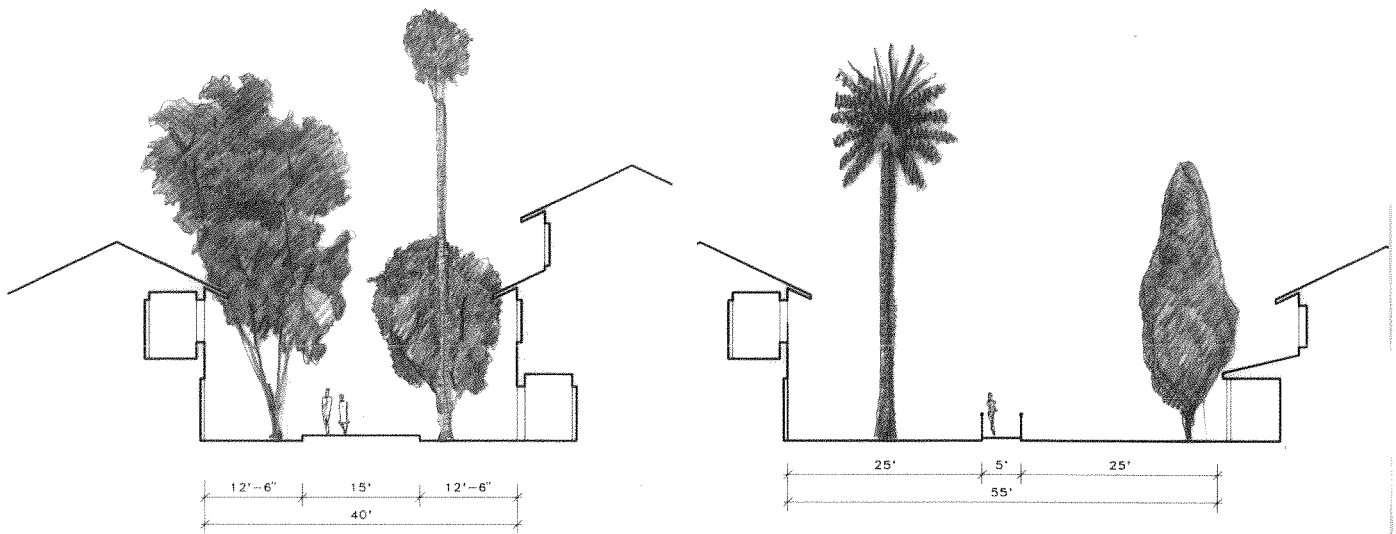
PEDESTRIAN WALK

METAL FENCE



TWO STOREY HOUSE

Top: La Mesa Drive, Santa Monica.
 Bottom: Oakwood Street, Venice.
 Illustrations courtesy Elizabeth Moule and Stephanos Polyzoides, Architects and Urbanists.



Regional street types:
Left: Pedestrian passage (under 50 feet wide). Walk streets, Manhattan Beach.
Right: Pedestrian passage (more than 50 feet wide). Oakwood Street, Venice.
 Drawings by Trace Wilson.

Playa Vista is an urban infill project located on more than 1,000 acres in west Los Angeles, just south of Marina del Rey. When built out, this undeveloped site (Howard Hughes' airport and aircraft plant had been located there) will include a mix of residential, office, retail and cultural uses.

When the design of Playa Vista was launched in 1989, the developers (Maguire Thomas Partners) challenged the design team to model it after Southern California's historical urban and architectural patterns. It did not take long for our team to realize that little useful analytical information existed on the subject. The important physical ingredients crucial to the foundation and early development of Southern California, including types of street grids and sections, parks and squares, housing and civic buildings, had simply never been documented.

Consequently, in order to design a region-specific town, we needed to research region-specific physical standards. The developer urgently authorized a series of precedent studies. Street grids, street plans and street sections are the most important formal determinants of the character of any settlement, so collecting a broad range of Southern California street types became our first research priority.

We measured and photographed one hundred streets. Each had an unusual, distinguishing formal characteristic, such as its parking arrangements, streetscape or configuration of traffic lanes. Our measurements included the distance buildings set back from property lines and the width of pedestrian ways and carriageways within each right-of-way. We documented views along each street with two photo montages, one taken from the center line and the other from center of the sidewalk.

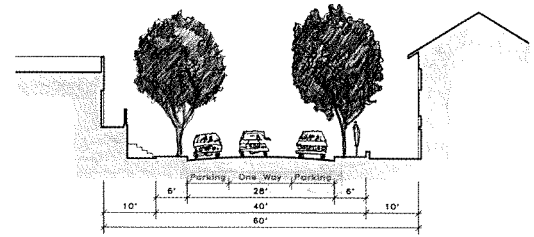
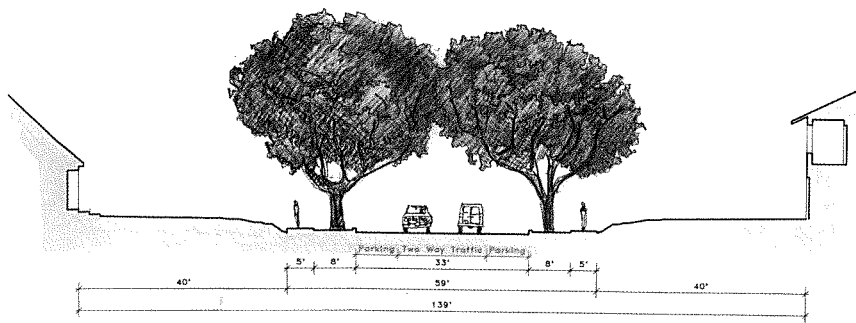
We divided the streets into seven types: pedestrian, one-way, local (under 35 feet wide), collector more than 35 feet wide, divided/parkway, edge and commercial. This relatively imprecise mode of categorization was not set a priori. It evolved as we began to organize the case studies empirically into groups that shared formal characteristics and were similar to the types identified in various transportation manuals.



Hart Avenue, Santa Monica

However elementary the methodological framework, the study rendered very rich results. It confirmed the fact that streets are a crucial element of Southern California urbanism. The region depends on a concise range of very high quality street types both to distribute its traffic and to build up its image as a unique urban place. The study also led to a series of important conclusions that became incorporated into the Playa Vista project.

Curb-to-curb issues. The streets we measured exhibited a surprising variety in the number of



traffic and parking lanes and in their dimensions. This inspired us to think of streets as places that could be designed in response to the specific conditions of a project. Moreover, the pre-1940 regional street grid operated smoothly, despite the fact that it was generally undersized by twenty-five percent from current standards.

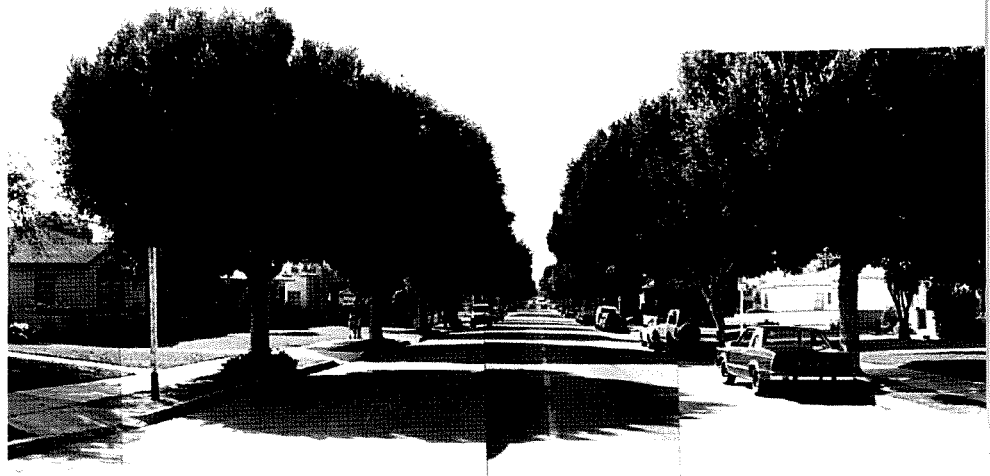
Curb-to-building issues. The dimensions and sectional profiles of parkways, sidewalks, front yards,

directed us to a spatial – sectional architectural understanding of streets. When linked to particular street plan dimensions, trees became the key ingredients for establishing the architectural character of a street and, therefore, of street hierarchies. A street defined by California Fan Palms is as dramatically columnar as an Egyptian temple. A street defined by the expansive canopies of Camphor trees equals the naves of Christian basilicas.

Regional street types:

Left: Local street (under 35 feet wide). Prospect Avenue, Pasadena.

Right: Local street (under 28 feet wide). Hart Avenue, Santa Monica.



Cloverfield Avenue, Santa Monica

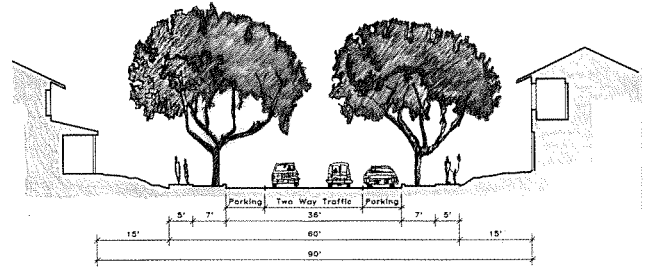
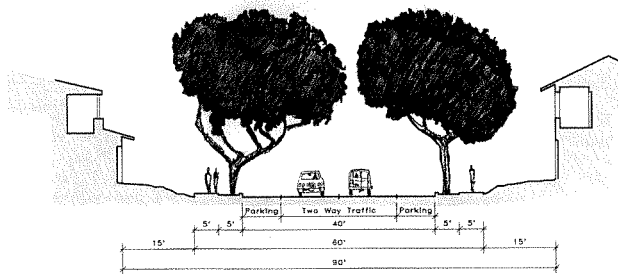
side yards and driveways also varied widely. They suggested a regional, combinational language for designing neighborhoods connected by pedestrian friendly streets. By varying and combining these elements, we could create a multitude of rich designs for the public space of the city.

Building to building issues. The sectional definition of streets by buildings illustrated the interdependence between building mass, threshold elements and public space in the design of streets in this climate.

Landscape. Tree types, sizes and spacing

The most surprising finding relative to landscape concerned the effects of street trees on the perception of various right-of-way dimensions. Tree-induced light and shade patterns, along with the perspectival diminution of streets due to the planting rhythm of tree trunks, reduced the apparent width of carriageways by up to 20 percent.

In clear understanding of this concise catalog of regional street precedents, we designed the Playa Vista grid to balance traffic, parking, pedestrian and infrastructure issues. The grid was composed of four principal street types:



Above left: Los Angeles Department of Transportation standard residential street, with a 40-foot carriageway. Above right: Playa Vista standard residential street, with a 36-foot carriageway. Drawings by Trace Wilson.

There are two *regional highways*, Jefferson and Lincoln Boulevards, which are under state control. Their traffic load was so high that the dimensions and geometries of their carriageways could not be challenged. Our intervention was limited to landscaping the right-of-way in a superior manner and encouraging transit, both buses and light rail, to enhance the quality of pedestrian life at the sidewalks.

housing densities of up to 60 units/acre, retail and commercial ground floors and parking, to connect with significant neighborhood parks and to accommodate bus transit through the town.

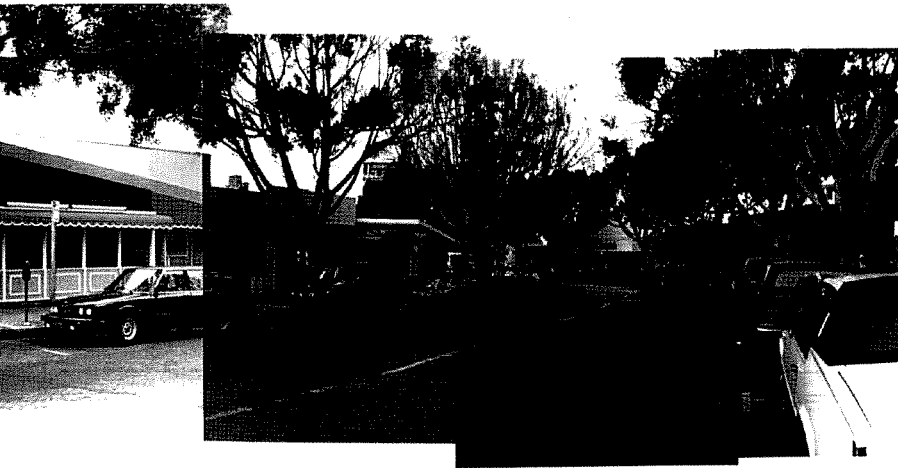
The *residential street* is the most common type, utilized locally within neighborhoods. For this type, we initially preferred a 30-foot street with a single-lane, 14-foot carriageway, two parking lanes and turning radii of 15 feet. Such streets are in use throughout Southern California and are associated with high levels of service.

But as the project planning advanced, it became clear that typical Playa Vista streets would have to service housing densities between 15 units/acre (fourplexes) and 40 units/acre (courtyard housing). Therefore, it was decided that the typical local street should be 36 feet wide, with room for two traffic lanes, and have turning radii of 25 feet. Building setbacks were defined at 15 feet each.

Maguire Thomas, the developer, faced a dilemma: Challenge the city on all deviations from its standards across all four types and thus precipitate a political crisis, or fight the city on the dimensions of residential streets only? (The city's standard calls for an even wider carriageway, 40 feet).

A positive outcome of the latter strategy would clearly result in the most planning benefit for the project, namely the realization of the street character envisioned by the design team for most of the project's streets. Maguire Thomas sensed it could win this argument and opted to challenge Los Angeles' local street standard.

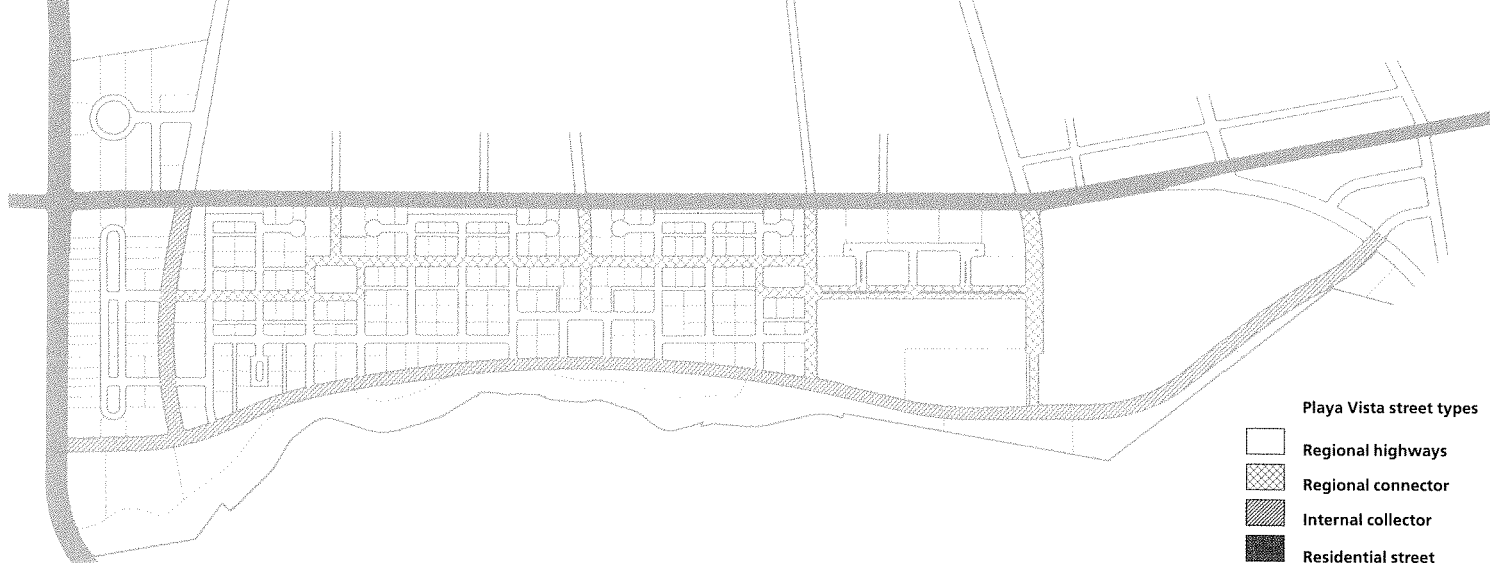
This negotiation was no small matter. Los Angeles is the mother of sprawl — the oldest and the vastest in the country. Its bureaucracy is not



Swarthmore Avenue, Pacific Palisades

There are three *regional connectors*, Bay, Teal and Centinela Avenues, all under the control of the city's transportation department. The traffic counts here were very high as well and the carriageways of these streets could not be modified. To the landscape and traffic improvements of the first type, we added the design of medians, appropriate setbacks to better architecturally define the streets and pedestrian crossings at all points.

The principal *internal collector* is Runway Avenue, which was conceived as Playa Vista's main street. It was designed to service buildings with



used to negotiating away its standards. But the city eventually relented; in part because of the importance of intimate streets to the success of Playa Vista, in part because it could not support its “standard. Still, the fire department disagreed and dragged the developer through the planning commission and all the way to a city council hearing. The council finally granted Maguire Thomas its wish to have local streets smaller than required.

This is not to say, of course, that the war was won. Many other significant dimensional differences remain to be resolved. For example, city standards on residential parking require 2.5 cars per dwelling, independent of location or project type. The city further claims that the number of cars to be parked per unit affects the flow of traffic throughout the project, thus inflating the design of carriageways.

At Playa Vista, all streets other than the local ones are being built to standards other than those desired by the design team. And subsequent phases of the project will open up for discussion issues of dimensional discrepancy for all the remaining streets. Most ominously, as Playa Vista is about to break ground, the Los Angeles Fire Department is making noises in writing that it will challenge the council’s decision directly or indirectly by withholding further cooperation.

Since we began this project we have learned a great deal about the importance of well-designed streets:

Streets must be as narrow as possible to establish a balance between the requirements of cars and the human needs of pedestrians.

Streets must be formed by buildings rich in threshold elements, which bridge interior and exterior space.

The public realm of the city can thus become the vehicle for a variety of social interactions.

Streets must be paved as little as possible in order to allow for maximum water percolation and minimum maintenance.

Streets dimensions must be varied in plan and section to establish a hierarchical and readable quality of place within the public realm.

Streets must be designed with a more rural or more urban character by the degree of design uniformity and materials, signage and lighting endowed to them.

Streets must respond to the climatic conditions of their setting. The landscape should be native and its presence lasting.

This sense of what role streets can play in an evolving American urbanism is now shared by a widening circle of architects and urbanists and has been incorporated into the theory of the New Urbanism. What is missing and often not understood is the importance of designing based on precise information about the cultural setting in which design occurs.

The absence of regional design standards regarding street grids, street sections, appropriate landscape, square and park types, housing types and civic building types is shocking, but not surprising, considering the fact that our country is currently awakening from an ideological design slumber. Modernist urbanism glorified the universal over the local and eliminated from the rule books all references to cultural specificity of the kind that is hard won through historical practice. We should embark on a national crusade to recover regional design standards and fight for their incorporation into codes and ordinances.