

SPUR's view: Silicon Valley and San Jose need better designed places

By Leah Toeniskoetter Special to the Mercury News

Updated: 07/14/2014 10:26:20 AM PDT

Those of us who've lived here a long time may have grown so used to our landscape that we don't think about it anymore, so here's a look at some of our challenges.

Much of the South Bay is designed for cars, not people. Buildings are often set behind large parking lots, rather than next to the sidewalk, and there are a lot of long, blank walls or parking garages bordering pedestrian routes.

The quality of our architecture is inconsistent and often uninspiring. The streets are over-wide, often without adequate sidewalks or bike lanes, which encourages fast auto speeds.

All of this adds up to places without a lot of people on the street. Without pedestrians, how can stores and restaurants be successful? How can sidewalks and public spaces feel interesting -- and safe? How can we be encouraged to ride transit if, once we arrive at our destination, we are met by large parking lots with no easy path to a front door?

Leading-edge companies know that they cannot attract the talent they need if the work environment they provide is a 1980s-style office park surrounded by parking lots. Increasingly, people (and companies) are flocking to cities as more and more employees want a lively environment with stores and restaurants they can walk to.

Yes, some large-scale companies will still choose to build their own self-contained campuses. But even these campuses are going to be more highly valued if they provide amenities and a sense of activity on surrounding streets. The success that Santana Row has had in attracting office tenants who want to be near the action is just one example.

San Jose, the largest city of the Bay Area, is just starting the long work of remaking communities to be more walkable through its 2040 General Plan vision. By channeling growth into the right places, and making sure that new buildings follow basic principles of urban design, we can retrofit our city and make it more livable and successful.

The city made a good start down this road years ago with the North San Jose Urban Design Guidelines, a set of strategies for new developments to incrementally build out a walkable, mixed-use district that would become a major draw for South Bay employers.

The idea is to ensure that individual development projects add up over time to a much more attractive destination. We have some great examples of projects that fulfill this vision, like Samsung's new headquarters (recently celebrated by the architecture critic of the New York Times) and N1's speculative development.

But too often, San Jose has been afraid to guide the design of new development and have let it stick with the old suburban models -- the same ones that have created a "nowhere in particular" brand identity for North San Jose.

San Jose needs to have the confidence to demand higher-quality development and to set a framework of public planning that shapes investment in our community.

We can be pro-business in every way and still end up with a community that is well designed and filled with people doing what they do: talking, walking, meeting up, inventing things and enjoying city life.

What we build today becomes the city of tomorrow. It's worth getting it right.

Leah Toeniskoetter is the director of SPUR San Jose. SPUR's latest report, "Getting to Great Places: How Better Urban Design Can Strengthen San Jose's Future," is available at spur.org/greatplaces. She wrote this for this newspaper.