

Mr. Open Space? Let's Remember Larry Livingston As Mr. Rational Instead

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Larry Livingston, who died the other day at the age of 89, was one of California planning's true pioneers. And through a courageous public declaration of his own disillusionment, he became a symbol of the practicing planner's frustration.

Livingston was an early (1949) graduate of MIT planning school. He was the founder, more than a half-century ago, of the planning firm now known as Dyett & Bhatia. He worked on many of the greatest planning projects of the '60s and '70s in Northern California, including BART and Yuerba Buena Center.

Livingston should have been known for his pathbreaking methods of assessing the impact – fiscal and otherwise – of suburban development. Instead, because his own careful research was twisted around by advocates to make a case for something he didn't believe, he's known as "Mr. Open Space".

In fact, the lingering mischaracterization followed him all the way to [his obituary](#) last Friday in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which put "Mr. Open Space" in the headline.

Livingston had a distinguished career that spanned all the way from California's postwar boom to the fiscal crunch that followed Proposition 13. He received the American Planning Association's Distinguished Leadership Award in 1987. But he was best known for his 1980 essay in *Planning* magazine, "[Confessions of a Planner](#)," in which he looked back on his 30-year career and questioned the value of planning in general and his contribution in particular.

"I must confess that I share the blame for the failures of city planning in California," he wrote. "While in some cases I foresaw the adverse consequences of planning programs — such as those that fostered suburban sprawl — I was unable to block them, sometimes because I did not present my case convincingly, and sometimes because the odds against me were too great."

Livingston was best known for the project that brought him the most publicity — and the most frustration: An open-space study for the City of Palo Alto in 1971 that assessed the impact of permitting development of 5,000 acres of foothill land. Livingston concluded that the city would be better off fiscally if the land were left undeveloped — and bought by the city at market value -- than if development were permitted.

It was the first time any planning study had ever dared to suggest that new housing was a money-loser for local government — and this was long before the passage of Proposition 13.

In the ferocious anti-development environmental politics of the day, Livingston also became the poster child for open space — and soon came to regret it. In "Confessions of A Planner" — and, years later, in an interview with me for *Planning* when he won the Distinguished Leadership Award - - he took great pains to point out that the only reason buying the land was cheaper than allowing development was because Palo Alto's lavish public services were so expensive. In a normal city, this would not have been the case.

"People typically hear only what they want to hear, and, without real justification, I became a minor hero to many conservationists," he wrote. "On the strength of an undeserved reputation as an uncompromising advocate of open-space preservation, I received commissions to prepare

comprehensive plans for such environmentally sensitive areas as Santa Barbara and Jackson Hole. Some residents of these areas were disappointed when the plans I prepared did not rule out all development possibilities. They were unable to accept a balanced view of the consequences of urban growth.”

After my own 30 years of writing and consulting in the field of planning, I guess I feel quite a bit of empathy for Larry Livingston. By now I’ve pumped out so much work product that I suppose you can find something I’ve researched or written to support just about any point of view about urban growth. And, like Larry, on more than one occasion I have been frustrated as to the underlying reason why somebody wants to hire me – and taken the job (and the money) anyway.

Goodbye, Larry, and thanks for the inspiration. From now on I’ll let the *Chron* call you “Mr. Open Space”. I’m just going to remember you as “Mr. Thoughtful”.

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