Architecture

A consensus approach to public projects

By MARIA GAURA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — When a community wants a new library, park or civic center, it normally turns to an architect to draw up a building plan. And when the architect's creation is finally unveiled, it is typically met with a firestorm of criticism, scorn and controversy.

Like public art, public buildings never make everyone happy. And often there is good reason for the unhappiness. In many towns you can point to a taxpayer-funded building that is ugly, uncomfortable or exasperatingly nonfunctional.

But with the influence of one local architect, Santa Cruz County is changing the way it plans its public spaces.

For the past 13 years, architect Jeff Oberdorfer has pushed for "community consensus planning," a radical alternative to traditional planning that allows area residents to design their own communities, parks and buildings.

From his small, sunlit office located in the Sash Mill complex, Oberdorfer and his staff of two have created a corporate resume' featuring an impressive number of community design projects.

And because Oberdorfer's consensus projects, such as the Boulder Creek Library and the Felton Town Plan, have proved so popular, county officials are now *requiring* consensus planning in a number of upcoming projects.

With consensus planning, area residents provide ideas for the project and the architect provides drawings and technical support. Nothing ends up in the final plan unless it is approved by consensus — with the support of *everybody* in the group.

Getting 150 diverse neighbors to

agree on anything — much less an entire blueprint — sounds like an impossible task. But Oberdorfer is entirely committed to the concept, and says it's not as difficult as it sounds.

"When you see the tremendous impact the environment has in manipulating people, you realize that people have the right to participate in the design process," he said.

"The energy and ideas that come out of a group are very exciting," he said. "When people are in on the ground floor of a plan, they feel more possessive of it, they put more energy into seeing that it gets implemented."

By any measure, Oberdorfer has left his imprint on a large chunk of Santa Cruz County. His publicly commissioned designs have included — (not in chronological order) — Santa Cruz's "Livable Streets" plan, the Arbor Cove Seniors Housing Project at Neary Lagoon, two low-income housing plans in Beach Flats and a Downtown Parking Structure Study; the Scotts Valley Drive Master Plan; the Aptos Village parking and circulation plan; the Soquel Village Plan; the Felton Town Plan and restoration of the Felton Covered Bridge; the Boulder Creek Library; the Quail Hollow Regional Park Master Plan; and an Open Space Master Plan for UC Santa Cruz.

Next month, he and his staff architects will begin the process of creating a town plan for Ben Lomond. His firm also creates designs for private landowners and many other Northern California cities.

Now that consensus planning is a proven concept, why doesn't the county planning department have its staff planners design such projects themselves?

According to to former Fifth District Supervisor Joe Cucchiara, an

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Architect Jeff Oberdorfer takes a look at a plan that was conceived by consensus.

architect himself, the county has several reasons for contracting out public design projects.

"By and large, the planning department is set up to review and respond to projects," Cucchiara said. "They establish codes and regulations ... they don't initiate designs."

Outside contractors also bring "vitality and freshness" into the county process, he noted. And while the county pays hefty fees to Oberdorfer and other outside consultants, it is far more economical to contract out than to hire new employees to handle special pro-

jects, Cucchiara said.

Consensus planning is not entirely new, but it has taken a while to gain a foothold in the architectural community. One of the barriers to professional acceptance is the fact that authentic community design doesn't allow the architect to leave a distinctive stamp upon the resulting structure.

"The uniqueness of the product has to be a product of the people in the community," Cucchiara said. "No architectural gimmick can be associated with one person."

Oberdorfer discovered the con-

sensus concept when he studied architecture in the '60s at Kent State University in Ohio. At Kent, he researched the effects the physical environment — and buildings — have on people's behavior. He went on to earn honors degrees in architecture and environmental psychology in 1971, then earned a master's degree in community planning from California Institute of the Arts a year later.

He then taught community planning at Harvard and another university for several years. In 1976, he won four national awards —

By any measure, architect Jeff Oberdorfer has left his imprint on a large chunk of Santa Cruz County. His publicly commissioned designs have included most of the major master plans around the county.

cash awards — for his participatory urban designs, and began traveling the country again, this time looking for a place to settle.

Nine months later, that place turned out to be Santa Cruz.

Oberdorfer wasted no time getting involved in the community. He joined the Downtown Neighbors Association, helped paint the mural on the Louden Nelson Community Center and began doing design work from an office in his home.

Today, Oberdorfer, his wife and two young children live in an unpretentious rented home on the west side of Santa Cruz. In addition to his work, Oberdorfer spends a lot of time spreading the word about consensus planning by writing on the topic for national journals.

While you may not be able to drive through Santa Cruz county and point out Oberdorfer designs with absolute certainty, his work may ultimately be significant in a broader sense.

If a building suits its purpose well, it is a success today. But if it also reflects a community's desires, needs and sense of style, it is ultimately a monument to local history.