

A vibrant sunset scene over a beach. The sky is a deep orange and yellow, with a bright sun low on the horizon. Silhouettes of many people are scattered across the beach, some walking, some standing, and some pointing. A single bird is captured in flight in the center of the frame. The overall mood is peaceful and scenic.

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**ORANGE COUNTY**

# MASTER BUILDER

CREATING COASTAL VILLAS, FIVE-STAR RESORTS AND EXCLUSIVE SHOPPING CENTERS, THE IRVINE CO. CONTINUES TO SHAPE ORANGE COUNTY'S LUXURY LIFESTYLE. BY ROGER GRODY

NO SINGLE ENTITY HAS INFLUENCED THE LOOK AND FEEL OF Orange County more than the Irvine Co., a 150-year-old organization that has reinforced the region's appeal to high-net-worth individuals. Once primarily known for master-planning the city of Irvine, the firm has put its stamp on Newport Coast estates, the Fashion Island shopping center and the lavish Resort at Pelican Hill.

The company's origins date back almost a century, before anybody dreamed of theme parks or coastal resorts in the dusty, drought-stricken area. In 1866, James Irvine and partners acquired 93,000 acres from Spanish land grants, at about 50 cents per acre, which they used for sheepherding and wool production. A decade later, Irvine bought out his partners; in 1886, his unexpected death left the massive Irvine Ranch in the hands of his 18-year-old son, James Jr. The wool business gave way to crops, which ultimately yielded to residential development after World War II.



TOP: THE LAVISH RESORT AT PELICAN HILL IN NEWPORT COAST AND ITS GOLF COURSES

HOMES BY ROBERT HIDEY FEATURE MISSION-INSPIRED ARCHITECTURE. ABOVE: SHADY CANYON IN IRVINE. PREVIOUS SPREAD AND OPPOSITE: WATERMARK IN CRYSTAL COVE.

Today's Irvine Co. has been defined by real estate developer Donald Bren, who became a shareholder in 1977 and by 1996 acquired all of the company's shares. The publicity-shy billionaire transformed the Irvine Co. into a statewide powerhouse, but its influence remains most concentrated in Orange County. What makes the Irvine Co. so remarkable is its dominance in virtually every type of development: single- and multi-family housing, commercial office towers, retail centers and hotels.

The city of Irvine, 66 square miles of some of the most meticulously planned land in America, is the single largest development project of the Irvine Co. The effort, initiated in 1960 by prominent architect and urban planner William Pereira—better known for San Francisco's Transamerica pyramid than for conservative subdivisions—ultimately resulted in a vibrant municipality with a current population of about 250,000.

With a diverse economy, a wide range of housing choices and ample acreage dedicated to nature preserves, parks and a University of California campus, Irvine is considered a model for master-planned communities. Some may scoff at Irvine's perceived homogeneity, but its quality of life is undeniably superior to that of most of America's suburban environments. Given the city's wide boulevards, exceptional public schools and perennial ranking as the safest city of its size in the nation, Irvine's detractors are drowned out by its admirers.

The most opulent neighborhood in Irvine is the gated Shady Canyon Golf Club development, possibly Orange County's most prestigious non-coastal enclave. Seventeen of the 20 highest-priced homes on the market in Irvine, including a handful tagged over \$10 million, were in Shady Canyon at time of publication.

"Even though the community has been here less than a decade, Shady Canyon has quickly established itself as an address of choice among Orange County's captains of industry and professional athletes," says Surterre Properties luxury real estate agent Jacqueline Thompson.

While most of Irvine was designed for middle-class residents, this development draws a global clientele of high-net-worth individuals. Its unique physical setting, a California coastal chaparral with dramatic outcroppings of rock, inspired Irvine Co. planners to reserve it for something special. "In many ways, Shady Canyon is reminiscent of the hillsides of Tuscany, with the same kind of topography and scenery," says Thompson, who notes that its proximity to freeways, shopping, dining and recreation enhances the development's desirability. She currently reports considerable interest in Shady Canyon

from Pacific Rim buyers as well as from locals trading up.

SWA Group, a landscape architecture and urban-planning firm that has worked with the Irvine Co. since the 1960s, began master-planning Shady Canyon in 1998. The firm's plan preserved as much of the canyons, creeks and ridgelines as possible, landscaping streets and hiking trails with native vegetation and even allowing the golf course to double as a wildlife habitat.

In all, about 1,000 acres—roughly half of the entire development site—was set aside as open space. Robert Hidey Architects, another firm with a long relationship with the Irvine Co., took the lead in establishing design guidelines for custom houses with California mission-inspired architecture and preserving a rural ambiance on every homesite.

"All homes were sited to minimize grading and to keep as much of the hillsides intact as possible," recalls Sean O'Malley, managing principal with SWA. Shady Canyon was one of the first projects to use native California landscaping exclusively, at the time considered a risky proposition. "We wanted to build upon what was there already and use nature as the framework for the community," he explains. O'Malley credits the Irvine Co. with recognizing that a market existed for high-end homebuyers who were as passionate about Southern California's natural beauty as they were about luxury amenities.

The Irvine Co. was also quick to respond to Orange County's emergence as a destination above and beyond Disneyland, debuting the \$500 million Resort at Pelican Hill in 2008. The site of one of only three Forbes five-star resorts in the county, the property is perched above the Pacific Ocean on 504 acres that include 36 Tom Fazio-designed holes of championship golf, a massive circular pool inspired by the Roman Coliseum, a luxurious spa and six restaurants.

The Irvine Co. has maintained management of the resort, assembling a team of hospitality veterans rather than collaborating with an independent luxury brand.

"From the beginning, we have instilled a specific culture in our people and in the product to passionately pursue a long-term vision focused on a world-class resort for the next 100 years, and beyond," says Ralph Grippo, president of the Irvine Co.'s Resort Properties division, but he hesitates to reveal company strategy.

The resort's overall design, inspired by the work of Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio, features landscaping—including more than 750 mature olive trees—that enhances its coastal orientation. Accommodations at Pelican Hill are not simply rooms

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HOMES COURTESY ROBERT HIDEY ARCHITECTS



ABOVE: HIDEY-DESIGNED HOMES, SUCH AS THIS ONE AT CRYSTAL COVE'S SEA POINTE, TYPICALLY FEATURE TRANQUIL COURTYARDS AND TERRACES OVERLOOKING THE PACIFIC.

but entire bungalows or villas, loaded with distinctive amenities. The elaborate villas, ranging from 2,195 to 3,580 square feet, feature elegant Mediterranean architecture, stunning ocean views and an elevated level of service that includes an assigned butler.

The resort's bungalows and villas were designed by Robert Hidey, an architect who has probably influenced the evolution of luxury housing in Orange County as profoundly as has the Irvine Co. Among his signatures, fully evident at Pelican Hill, is a generous amount of outdoor living space integrated into all floor plans.

A Hidey-designed luxury home typically features tranquil courtyards—more like entire outdoor rooms with luxury furnishings—along with spacious terraces

overlooking the Pacific. "Because of that great setting, there was a sense to develop floor plans with seamless transitions from interior to outdoor spaces," says the architect, who infuses a sense of resort living into all of his residential projects.

Since 1996, Hidey's Irvine-based firm has designed 11 projects on the Newport coast for the Irvine Co., among them SeaPointe and Pacific Ridge, communities offering distinctive architecture and generous outdoor living spaces. "There's a consistency of development throughout Newport Coast, all of it drawing from a Mediterranean-based architectural aesthetic," says the architect. "Given the location and climate, that's appropriate."

Like others, Hidey suggests that the Irvine Co.'s success comes from the top, citing Bren's genuine passion for development. "They do a great deal of research and aren't willing to take shortcuts," he says. Hidey believes that the company's vision, financial resources and quality of development partners result in responsible, well-conceived projects not driven solely by return on investment.

"The Irvine Co. is extremely skilled at assessing land," says Hidey, whether it be the unique topography of Shady Canyon or the spectacular views of Crystal Cove. He reports that the firm is not afraid to start over if some original assumptions prove incorrect. "In this business, where schedules are everything, that's extremely rare," says Hidey. The Irvine Co. has also been quick to adapt to shifting market forces. When Irvine was originally planned by William Pereira, nobody could have anticipated sufficient demand for an opulent gated community such as Shady Canyon or foreseen that Newport Coast would draw movie stars from Beverly Hills and billionaires from another hemisphere.

Custom estates at Crystal Cove, the latest of the Irvine Co.'s luxury developments on the coast, have, in fact, become popular with NBA superstars, Hollywood celebrities and Fortune 500 CEOs. Steve High, president of Newport Beach-based Villa Real Estate, feels that Crystal Cove has no equal in Southern California. Based on the spectacular views, quality of architecture and amenities, he believes the Irvine Co.'s development of Newport Coast has dramatically changed the economics and demographics of Orange County. "They took a small town [Newport Beach] and turned it into an international destination," High says.

Spiked by demand from overseas buyers, home prices approach \$30 million and attract the likes of Rihanna, Sofia Vergara and Kobe Bryant. Newport Coast now rivals Malibu and La Jolla, and Crystal Cove is the newest and most sophisticated of the area's communities.

"Donald Bren had a much greater vision for Newport Beach and surrounding communities than any of us," High says. "He must have looked at Bel-Air and said to himself, 'We can have our own Bel-Air and do it better.'"

Another hospitality project owned and operated by the Irvine Co. is Island Hotel, a high-rise luxury property in Newport Beach. A mile from the ocean and steps from upscale shopping and dining, the hotel has a bright and airy design that suits its coastal neighborhood but also has a cosmopolitan vibe that extends to its restaurant and bar, Oak Grill and Aqua Lounge.

The Irvine Co.'s other hospitality-industry assets

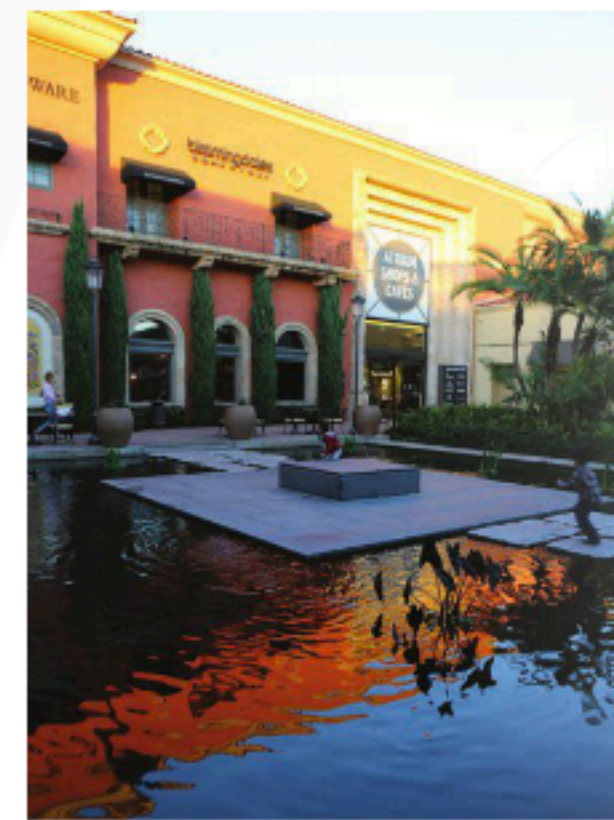
include the more moderately priced Hotel Irvine, Oak Creek Golf Club in Irvine and four Newport Beach marinas with a combined capacity of more than 400 vessels. Accommodations for the latest generation of mega-yachts, favorite toys of the richest of the rich, are being explored.

The Irvine Co.'s portfolio also extends to shopping centers, most notably Fashion Island in Newport Beach. It began as a relatively modest center in 1967 but has blossomed into a 1.5-million-square-foot open-air center with lush landscaping and more than 200 stores and boutiques. "The defining point came when Orange County's only Neiman Marcus opened in 1978," says Easter Liu, chief marketing officer for Irvine Co. Retail Properties. The county's first Bloomingdale's arrived in 1990, and incremental improvements included a \$100 million renovation in 2010. The center's fashionable boutiques include Kitson, Trina Turk, Seafolly and Tesla Motors; its collection of trendy restaurants features Fig & Olive, Red O and new Sushi Roku.

Also owned and managed by the company is Crystal Cove Shopping Center, in the heart of ritzy Newport Coast, where a guest can snack on edible art at Bluefin, a world-class sushi bar with an awesome ocean view. The center's architecture and landscaping is consistent with the neighborhood's resort-like setting, and growth has so far occurred with sensitivity to the surrounding neighborhood. Future expansion appears likely, but company representatives, fully invested in the lifestyle that Crystal Cove has come to represent, strike a reassuring tone. "The Irvine Co. always approaches growth with diligence, respect and mindfulness," explains Liu, "... balanced against the residents and their needs."

In addition to its signature centers, the Irvine Co. owns and manages 36 neighborhood shopping centers, and even some of those relatively nondescript developments feature unexpectedly diverse, destination-worthy tenants. The company is also experimenting with edgier shopping concepts, launching pop-up stores in recycled shipping containers at University Center. "Shipping containers seem to be ideal for us to test-market an array of brands in an unexpected way," says Liu, adding that the innovation will soon be rolled out at Fashion Island.

Nowhere in America has a single company transformed not only the built environment, but also the attitude, of a large urban area to such an extent. Whether it's the priciest real estate, the trendiest restaurants and boutiques, or the most exclusive resort accommodations, the Irvine Co. has redefined luxury living in Orange County.



CRYSTAL COVE SHOPPING CENTER IN NEWPORT COAST AND, BELOW, FASHION ISLAND IN NEWPORT BEACH.

FASHION ISLAND, EDWIN SANTIAGO