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## AVRP Skyport Studios adds renowned urban designer



Howard Blackson.

**By Mark Armao**

The architecture and planning firm AVRP Skyport Studios recently expanded its design studio with the senior-level hire of urban planner Howard Blackson.

After joining forces last year, principals Douglas H. Austin and Frank Wolden brought in the acclaimed urban designer to serve as the firm's planning studio director.

Blackson, a San Diego native who has implemented his urbanist vision in projects from Canada to Singapore, said he made the move so he could have a greater impact in his hometown.

"I'm able to work on walkable, urban, mixed-use projects in San Diego, as I've been advocating for for years, but right now the forces have all come together and it's really happening," Blackson said. "So, I just felt like it was the right time for me to be San Diego-focused on the things I do best, and I feel like I can do that with Frank and Doug."

Blackson, who previously worked for Michael Baker International, PlaceMakers, and the City of San Diego, will lead the urban design and planning of various projects, assisting in the design of both small-scale developments and multi-building projects in the San Diego region and elsewhere along the West Coast.

Along with his experience working with Wolden on multiple projects throughout the years, Blackson said the proximity between his home and the firm's East Village office was a major factor in his decision.

"The office is within biking distance from my home, it's within walking distance from my kids' schools, it's within walking distance to my wife's work," he said. "[The] quality of life is so much better being in proximity to our home... so I'm very excited about that."

The concepts of walkability and transit-oriented development are not trivial to Blackson.

He believes today's city-building strategies should embody a paradigm shift from mid-century, suburban strategies based around the automobile to a contemporary, multi-modal city in which people move via a combination of cars, public transit, bicycles and walking.

"We're shifting the culture and shifting the modes so that we have a healthier city, a more [economically] resilient city that doesn't rely on fuel costs in the Middle East to thrive-it's a more contemporary city-making pattern," he said.

Progressive as his ideas may seem, Blackson said planners must learn from the patterns of the past to realize the city of the future.

"To be walkable, you need small blocks and you need connected streets and parks and parkways," he said. "You also need three-dimensional buildings that have shops and offices and residences all mixed-in, at either the scale of a downtown or a North Park or even the scale of a Ramona or a Julian."

In his new position at AVRP Skyport Studios, Blackson said he hopes to enhance the connectivity of the city while strengthening the reputation of what he calls the "go-to design firm" in San Diego.

"It's a very exciting time to be focused on San Diego because San Diego is focusing on its urban character," he said. "That connectivity is what's been lacking; we had a city of villages that were independent, and now we're becoming a city of neighborhoods."

[mark\\_armao@sdtranscript.com](mailto:mark_armao@sdtranscript.com)