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Port of San Diego's Seaport Village Chooses Gafcon's Integrated Master Plan Vision

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Seaport Village, the waterfront shopping and dining complex adjacent to San Diego Bay in downtown San Diego, is undergoing a massive revitalization effort. Gafcon Inc. is a development firm run by Seaport San Diego partner Yehudi Gaffen.
Gaffen is a principal in the group selected by the port to replace the Seaport Village with shops, restaurants, three hotels, an aquarium and a 480-foot observation spire. The 1980s-era Village has not been able to keep up with the newer entertainment districts in San Diego, and thus has looked to deliver a complete, vibrant experience by a working waterfront. TPR sat down with Gaffen to discuss the roles of both government and the private sector in building out such a project, and where opportunities lie in the future of sustainable urban development for Southern California.

Describe the real estate development niche that your company, Gafcon, fills in Southern California and internationally.

Yehudi Gaffen: As a company, we're in the physical built environment to help owners deliver complex projects. That could be everything from redeveloping the fabulous Los Angeles Forum into an entertainment venue, building a school program, or helping owners plan a large project. Our niche, really, is providing the technical capabilities and skillsets that owners need to get a project completed.



Yehudi Gaffen

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You spoke recently at *CityAge: Build the Future* about the development of San Diego's Seaport Village by your firm. Elaborate on this project's vision and current plans.

Seaport San Diego, for me, is an amazing opportunity. It's a huge responsibility and an honor to be involved in what is one of the best sites on the waterfront in the United States.

The site is 70 acres: 40 acres of land and 30 acres of water. It's been referred to as the 100 percent corner of the San Diego Bay. That name was given to it because people have identified it as the best site on the San Diego waterfront, which is pretty significant.

When we competed to come up with a vision for the site, the Port of San Diego had gotten hundreds of interested applicants. They chose 11 proposals, and the 11 were qualified down to six. Out of those six, everyone anticipated it being shortlisted down to two or three. But in a surprise move, the Port Commission selected our team to be the developer on an exclusive basis.

Our project is the result of significant outreach to all the stakeholders, from Downtown San Diego residents to the fishermen to the Seaport Village tenants to Barrio Logan. Our design is great, but I think the decision ultimately came down to the fact that this is not just a project; it's really a new district that's hopefully going to solve some of the issues the downtown is currently grappling with.

San Diego's downtown issues are not new. What explains the energy and impetus to develop San Diego's Seaport Village now, and what are your team's capabilities to meet the Port's expectations?

I've got to give the credit to the current Port Commission. It's a group of truly creative, visionary leaders who don't have their own self-interests at heart, but are trying to do something for the community. It all started with Commissioner Ann Moore, who had experience in urban planning and city government.

Historically, the port had been undergoing piecemeal planning. 40 or 50 amendments to the Port Master Plan had been done ad hoc, without looking at their impacts as a whole. Commissioner Moore said, "Enough with this—I'm going to put together a new vision." That was the Integrated Master Plan, and it brought

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the Port Master Plan into the 21st century. It also identified this site as the 100 percent corner, and the commission wanted to bring in private developers to help them plan within the context of that vision. That's how this opportunity came to us.

It was significant for me, because I was involved with the original North Embarcadero Visionary Plan in the late 1990s/early 2000s. I've lived downtown for 15+ years, looking onto the waterfront. A lot of my time is spent thinking about how San Diego's downtown could be better.

We also have a home in Santa Monica, which is another wonderful place I really enjoy living. In fact, to be frank, I enjoyed being in Santa Monica on the weekends more than I did being in Downtown San Diego, because there are much more experiential outings you can go on—even just going to have a cup of coffee or a meal, or going for a walk.

As a city seeking to compete globally in a time of changing retail and hospitality behaviors, what does San Diego expect the Seaport Project to deliver tourists and residents?

To me, it's a new district for Downtown San Diego that fills in some of the gaps that have been missing. We do have wonderful places: We have Little Italy, East Village, and the Gaslamp District, and each of them has a distinct personality. But I feel they've also been developed as very separate, individualistic places. At Seaport, we've tried to create a diversity of experience that has different zones within it, and to connect the downtown to the waterfront.

That's been a major issue downtown. Traditionally, the ports have really walled off the waterfront, whether through the Convention Center, which turned its back on the bay and created these barriers to get through to the water, or through the very large hotel developments that do the same thing.

What we have tried to do is bring the city grid to the water, and within that grid, create hospitality, retail, and experiential opportunities—a rich *mole* of ingredients to make a truly authentic place that will bring you back again and again.

Elaborate on the theme of what cities of the future are going to need to attract patrons and talent and thus investment and jobs.

I am truly a believer that as people, and especially millennials, living in a rich urban environment is what we want. I travel a lot between LA and San Diego; commuting is hell. I think people want to live, work, play, and be educated within community that is accessible, fun, and experiential.

In the United States—especially as differentiated from third-world countries—it's a zero-sum game. Certain urban regions are growing and thriving, while certain urban regions are dying. That's because the regions that are offering that rich urban experience are the regions that are going to attract talent, and talent, ultimately, is where businesses go to. A rich environment is the engine that attracts talent, which attracts business, which attracts talent.

Speaking of millennials, what might the advent of the autonomous vehicle mean for you Seaport and other like projects incorporate parking into project

planning?

I truly believe that, within the next five years, we will have fully autonomous vehicles. My Tesla already has all the hardware needed to be fully autonomous. Every two weeks, I get a software update, and every two weeks, it's a different car. I can see the future.

At Seaport, we are planning to build 2,800 spaces of parking, because that's what current codes say we have to provide. I truly believe that that will not be needed long-term, because autonomous vehicles are going to take out a lot of the traffic issues we have today. But we don't have the option at this stage not to build it, because it's required.

So we're planning our parking structure to be adaptable. With flat floors and 12- to 13-foot ceiling heights, we will be able to convert it to something else in the future—whether it's an attraction, a movie theater, or office space. That's being planned into what we do.

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Developers at the master-planning scale need to think forward—especially with a project that could still be here in 80 years' time.

Entertainment was the design theme of architect Jon Jerde's most famous project in the heart of San Diego, which has fallen on hard times. There's certainly something more to your project than entertainment alone.

I live next door to Horton Plaza, so I know what isn't working there. It was too focused on Disneyland-type entertainment—on this whimsical feeling—and there wasn't any real substance or “nutritional value” to it. There has to be more than glitzy façade.

At the Seaport, we've tried to create a working waterfront where people can go and watch real fishermen fishing, bringing the fish in, and selling it; where a maritime institute can create opportunities for lifelong learning for school kids or seniors; where there are multiple hospitality opportunities, not just for rich people to pay \$400-500 a night for a room, but also for budget-minded travelers who can rent a bed and also enjoy it. It's that combination of uses that I think creates that authenticity that you find in other great cities, like Paris or New York.

The LA Waterfront represents another opportunity that apparently has attracted your firm. Share the nature of the opportunity and your involvement with the AltaSea (<http://www.planningreport.com/tags/altasea>) project at the Port of LA.

San Pedro and the Port of LA is another one of my favorite places, because it's really authentic. San Pedro is an honest, grounded community that is still looking to find itself in the LA that we know today.

Our company was in a joint venture to re-plan the LA waterfront, from the Vincent

Thomas Bridge to the breakwater. Over a four-year period, that effort got me very integrated into the local community.

At the time, AltaSea wasn't there. When, about three years ago, I became aware of what AltaSea was doing on the in the context of our original master plan, it attracted my attention. And recently, our company has gotten involved.

Oceans and waterfronts have been a personal interest for me. To me, they are the new frontier of conservation. AltaSea's work in the blue-tech economy, as well as Bob Ballard's (<http://www.planningreport.com/tags/robert-ballard>) work, is exciting to me in terms of creating a talent attractor in Los Angeles.

Another Gafcon engagement is with an Indian Tribe in San Bernardino County. Elaborate.

About five years ago, we were retained by the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians to help with a master plan for their entire reservation.

I think this was really visionary of the tribal council. Traditionally, reservations have focused on money-making ventures like casinos and hotels. But the San Manuel council wanted to expand that with a plan for the future of the tribe that covered housing, education, worship facilities, and all the rest of the necessary infrastructure. We led a team that provided that master plan and got it adopted by the tribe, and we've recently been called back in.

As you know, any planning is a living document. It's never done and put away. It keeps changing and evolving. San Manuel is in a very interesting position because they're one of the closest tribes to the LA Metro area. Their business has been growing very fast, and they've been fortunate enough to have the resources to acquire new land. We've now been called back in to take another look at the master plan in light of the additional opportunities that have come forward.

One recent purchase was the 2,000-acre Arrowhead Springs property, which is very close by. It's an incredibly historic treasure in the area, and the tribe wants to make sure that what they are creating there has authenticity and sustainability, and isn't just an ad hoc planning exercise. We've been brought in to help them think through that.

Four decades after the battles between Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs, the issue of how to plan for growth is back in the forefront—with LA's Measure S, for example. What is your take on the role of city planning, or master planning? Is it vital, or just a negotiation vehicle for getting projects done?

I believe in planning. Planning should happen; it needs to happen. In today's environment, I don't think you can do much without planning and without community involvement. I don't think the Robert Moses model of autocratic planning would work today, especially in California.

At the scale of the projects we work on, I'm a very strong believer in honest engagement with the stakeholders. The old paradigm of developers who feel that they should have the right to do whatever they want because they own the property is a thing of the past. Communities won't stand for that anymore.

Communities are very engaged. They want to sense true attention to their needs, and to know that big projects are not only creating money for the developer, but also helping the community deal with issues like homelessness, blight, connections, traffic, etc. All of that must be legitimately dealt with in any major project.

Lastly, when your firm works on these large-scale development projects, you're very visible—even politically exposed. How do you both manage the politics of a multi-year project with great public exposure, and still execute – get to goal?

It's a tough arena to work in; it's not for the faint of heart. But personally, I'm an extremely competitive person. I love challenges. If anyone tells me something can't be done, that's just throwing down the gauntlet to see how I can make it happen.

There's a lot of risk, and you do put yourself out there as a target; we've had a number of shots taken at us. All of them unfounded and driven by nefarious agendas. Gafcon is celebrating our 30th year business and is one of the most respected Project Managers in Southern California —and as they say, it's not about how many times people try to knock you down, but how many times you prevail by proving your opponents wrong.

To me, these big projects are worthwhile endeavors. I love the work. It gets me out of bed real early. I don't ever see myself retiring from it; I just see myself gaining experience and being able to do things better.

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