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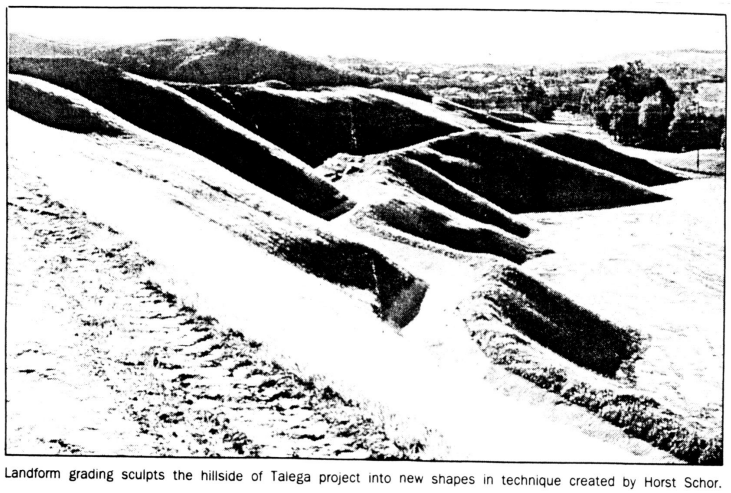

Landform grading sculpts the hillside of Talega project into new shapes in technique created by Horst Schor.

Grading on the Curve

Developer Goes for Natural Look in Sculpting Hills for Talega Project

By JOHN O'DELL
TIMES STAFF WRITER

SAN CLEMENTE

Fred Moeller has been operating bulldozers for almost 40 years now, piling dirt, cutting trenches and grading slopes all over Southern California.

But for all his experience, Moeller has never been on a job quite like this one.

Usually, when preparing hillsides and valleys for a housing project, Moeller and other heavy-equipment operators are asked to prepare a stairstep arrangement of flat-faced slopes with building pads on top.

At Arvida Co.'s Talega development in the hills just inland of Orange County's southernmost city, the rules have changed.

Moeller and fellow operators are being asked to think like sculptors as they follow a complex natural grading plan that calls for them to create slopes, valleys, gullies, hillocks and ridgelines for the homes and commercial buildings that will one day dot the 3,500-acre master-planned community.

In some places they are merely altering existing slopes to accommodate building pads. In others they are creating hills where none ever existed.

The grading process was invented in the late 1970s by Horst Schor, now Arvida's vice president for development. At the time, Schor worked for the Anaheim Hills Co. as it was developing its hillside community on the southern slopes of Santa Ana Canyon.

KEN HIVELY / Los Angeles Times

Fred Moeller guides his 25-ton bulldozer over a mound.

But no one else ever picked up on the idea, Schor said, despite the industry publicity the technique received at the time, when the American Planning Assn. bestowed an award of merit on Anaheim Hills Co. for its innovative natural grading plan.

One reason other developers didn't adopt what Schor calls landform grading is that it costs a little more—adding about 1% to a project's grading costs—and requires a little effort to train the grading crews.

"But Arvida feels the time is really ripe for this," he said. Environmental concerns and complaints about development that destroys natural landscape and ridgelines can delay projects for months, even years. Schor said Arvida's natural grading plan shaved at least 12 months off the time it took to get approval from San Clemente officials for the Talega development—which is located partly within the city and partly in unincorporated county territory. The time saved can more than make up for the extra grading costs.

There are three key elements of landform grading, he said Thursday during a demonstration of the process:

- Building hills and slopes with natural contours;
- Fitting the drainage system into the flow of the land so it follows the valley bottoms like a natural creek system instead of cutting straight down the face of slopes with concrete channels, as is done in a typical stair-step grading plan; and

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• Designing a natural landscape plan that mimics nature by placing the trees and shrubs in the valleys and on flat spots, where the heaviest runoff collects, and covers the protruding areas with less-thirsty ground covers.

For Moeller, who spent Thursday morning contouring a small hill with a 25-ton Caterpillar bulldozer, the process isn't much more difficult than building a traditional stairstep.

"It's a lot more challenging, because you're not just going in straight lines."

Russ Churchill, who works with Moeller and the other equipment operators as a grade checker—overseeing their work from the ground to make sure they are following the grading plan—said there is a lot more for him to concentrate on in a landform grading project.

"It's challenging," said Churchill, "but it is very satisfying to see the end result. I didn't really see the whole thing we're working on here until the other day when I was leaving the site about 6 in the evening and I happened to look back up the road and saw it all highlighted with the setting sun and the shadows. It was really awesome."

GLENN KOENIG / Los Angeles Times

Traditional grading of sites for homes is shown in picture of Tuscany Hills development in Lake Elsinore area.