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A Vision Still in the Making

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The kids playing in the burbling fountain of Plaza de Cesar Chavez reflect the present and future diversity of California. They are the grandchildren of Vietnamese boat people, and the descendants of pioneer suburbanites from Eichler tracts. They are Latinos whose ancestors arrived two, or two hundred, years ago; and they are the scions of newly minted dot-com millionaires. As they dance through the geyser-like plumes of water, their parents, grandparents, babysitters, older sisters, or big brothers watch from park benches or blankets on the nearby lawn.

In the 1980s, when the plaza (until 1958 the site of a Victorian wedding-cake city hall) was redesigned by Hargreaves Associates, it became an instant success. Mayors and redevelopment agency chiefs could point with pride. It seemed to prove that downtown San Jose, long a wasteland of parking lots created by over-eager redevelopment plans in the 1960s and 1970s, was again becoming a people place.

But in 2003 that promise has still not been fully realized. One reason may be that the downtown has not followed through on the very diversity – and strength – represented by the children in the fountain. True, there is great craftsmanship in many of the city's new downtown spaces and buildings. But a successful downtown is ultimately measured by its ability to sustain itself economically, civically and socially.

As a new generation of planners and architects looks ahead, there is much good work for them to build on. But they may also want to revisit a fundamental question: what is the purpose of a downtown in an era of suburbanization?

A Bold Vision

When the twin horsemen of suburbanization and redevelopment struck San Jose full force after World War II, its downtown had served as the vigorous urban center for a rich agricultural region for more than half a century. Through the 1960s and 70s, as the downtown struggled to regain its footing, its leaders engaged in a number of false starts — from Park Center Plaza (a typical windswept Modernist office plaza) to a bold Taliesin Associated Architects design for the Center for the Performing Arts.

By the 1980s, however, San Jose was still scrambling to regain its former stature as the central business, retail, political, and cultural locus for an area now reborn as Silicon Valley. That was when a new mayor, Tom McEnery, launched a bold campaign to rebuild downtown. To rapidly create an economic and architectural foundation for his vision of a 24-hour city, he hired Frank Taylor,

Above: Cesar Chavez park fountains. Fairmont Hotel in the background. Photo by Paul Asper.

an architect and planner from Harvard via Cincinnati, as Redevelopment Agency Director. Armed with redevelopment funds tapped from outlying high-tech campuses and backed by a solid political consensus welded together by McEnery, Taylor set to work at shoring up the sagging townscape.

Over the terms of McEnery and his successor, Susan Hammer, Taylor primed the pump with money generators: a new convention center to draw in visitors; hotels (including the upscale Fairmont) to house them; high-rise offices for brand-name Silicon Valley companies like Adobe Systems and IBM. To attract crowds from the suburban diaspora, San Jose built a sports arena to house mega-concerts and an ice hockey team; a retail pavilion for upscale boutiques; a Children's Discovery Museum and a Tech Museum of Innovation; a new wing to the San Jose Museum of Art; and a Repertory Theater.

To trundle people in from the hinterlands, the county built a light-rail line through the heart of downtown. And to increase the number of people around after work and on weekends, large new housing projects — both upscale and affordable — were built in the center city.

Today, the jewel in the crown (and one of Taylor's final involvements) is under construction: a new City Hall to bring city government back downtown. It is an explicit declaration that San Jose claims the business, cultural and political mantle of Silicon Valley.

Throughout, the strength of Taylor's vision lay in his predisposition as an architect. And by hiring Tom Aidala as the agency's chief architect, he signaled the city's intent to put a premium on quality. This vision was ultimately conveyed through the public Urban Design Review Board and Aidala's behind-the-scenes cajoling.

Most importantly, Taylor, Aidala, and Redevelopment Agency staff paid close attention to the design of public spaces. Frequently, last-minute injections of agency funds would be used to upgrade materials or add amenities. One example: when the station platforms and shelters of the new light-rail system suffered from banal design, the agency foresaw the potential disaster. For several blocks through the heart of downtown, it devoted its own funds and design talent to upgrading paving materials from concrete to stone, installing wood benches, and custom-designing stations at the Children's Museum and Convention Center.

For major monuments, Taylor and Aidala and their successors brought in Modern architects with national reputations, usually resulting in distinguished designs. Mitchell/Giurgola designed the Convention Center in a series of low vaults, with a lofty concrete colonnade as its

street-to-street lobby. Its main entry was spectacularized by an enormous abstract tile billboard by Lynn Utzon — one of the best pieces of public art downtown. The Children's Discovery Museum and the Museum of Technology were Ricardo Legoretta designs, whose brilliant colors, deeply carved arcades, and windows suit the strong light of the Santa Clara Valley.

The sports arena (later the Compaq Center, soon the HP Pavilion) by Fentress Bradburn Associates is as enormous as any of these formless masses anywhere in the country, but it is unified by large-scale corrugated stainless-steel cladding.

The most avant-garde of the new designs is the Repertory Theater, designed by Holt Hinshaw Pfau and Jones. Its cascading blue metal sides provide a well-tuned contrast to the rest of downtown. In terms of housing, Dan Solomon designed two apartment projects that introduced European densities and concepts. Finally, the ultimate brand name in high design has arrived in the form of the new city hall by Pritzker Prize-winning Richard Meier.

As might be expected, the high quality of these new civic buildings has not been matched by the high-rise office structures that have filled out the rebuilding effort. Most commissions here have gone to the usual architects favored by commercial developers: HOK, SOM, Gensler. The results have generally been acceptable, but an FAA height restriction (downtown lies on the approach path to San Jose International Airport) has imposed a uniform appearance on the skyline. Consequently, the most striking tower remains the Bank of America building, a 1928 Mediterranean Renaissance block with a slender cupola spire.

So how has it all worked? Walk around downtown San Jose and the deliberate effort to unify is evident. The placement of most major buildings reinforces a walkable core. Cultural buildings are found on premium sites. The web of plazas, paseos, parks and sidewalks is well conceived and executed. Landscaping, street furniture, and paving are all consciously designed and well planned. On First and Second Streets, the addition of light-rail tracks and medians slows vehicle traffic and creates a pleasant, pedestrian-friendly space. With shade trees lining the sidewalks and a mix of Victorian, Classical, Moderne and contemporary architecture, this historic core is one of the best parts of the city. The care and intelligence reflected in the majority of urban design decisions is evident.

Paths not Taken

What is there not to like about all this success? One might begin by recounting some of the opportunities that were missed.



One tantalizing project that never saw the light of day was a sophisticated 1986 proposal for four “gateway” arches or sculptures at the four main entries to downtown. This major work (to be produced by artist Robert Graham, a San Jose State University graduate) was shot down by callow and misguided criticism, much of it from the local media — indicating that sometimes San Jose deserves its reputation as sophisticated San Francisco’s gawky little sister. Since that daring reach for excellence, the city’s public-art program has been mired in politics and blandness.

There have been other aesthetic disappointments as well. A hotel designed by Arquitectonica and symphony hall by SOM were never built. But the demise of these projects could be traced to the high mortality rate of real estate deals.

More avoidable (and therefore more serious) failures can be traced to the fact that the Redevelopment Agency under Taylor was only intermittently mindful of historic preservation. The city did subsidize the restoration of a historic medical office tower for housing, and it helped restore two handsome c.1930 landmark hotels as boutique hostelrys. A major remodeling of the historic Fox Theater, a magnificent 1920s movie palace, is also underway for Opera San Jose.

But Taylor’s Redevelopment Agency often put new construction ahead of the preservation of older buildings — a serious lapse in the historic core; and only the active

lobbying of the San Jose Preservation Action Committee compelled it to save certain key buildings. Eventually, mayoral regime change was necessary to ensure the rehabilitation of the 1904 Jose Theater (reopened as a comedy club in November 2002) and the handsome 1916 Montgomery Hotel. Other outstanding buildings were lost outright, including the excellent 1959 Pestana Building (a ten-story tower with a checkerboard facade of white marble panels, recessed windows, and a stylish, space-age roof sign). A law office by Taliesin-trained Aaron Green was also demolished.

Other missteps have been of a more strategic nature. For example, a new Retail Pavilion was to have transformed most of a block adjoining the historic district into an upscale boutique shopping center. It included some commercial space facing out to the light-rail lines. But most of its shops and restaurants lined a two-level open-air pedestrian way that cut diagonally through the block.

Though designed by mall wizard Jon Jerde, this project failed miserably. And three years ago, in stark Info Age irony (since the site skirts a major trunk communication line), its internal pedestrian way was filled in and converted to an AboveNet Internet data storage facility. But computers don’t go out to lunch, shop downtown, or live within walking distance. The push to turn downtown into an upscale consumer destination — with all its tantalizing economic benefits — failed.

Other fashionable urban design ideas were grafted onto

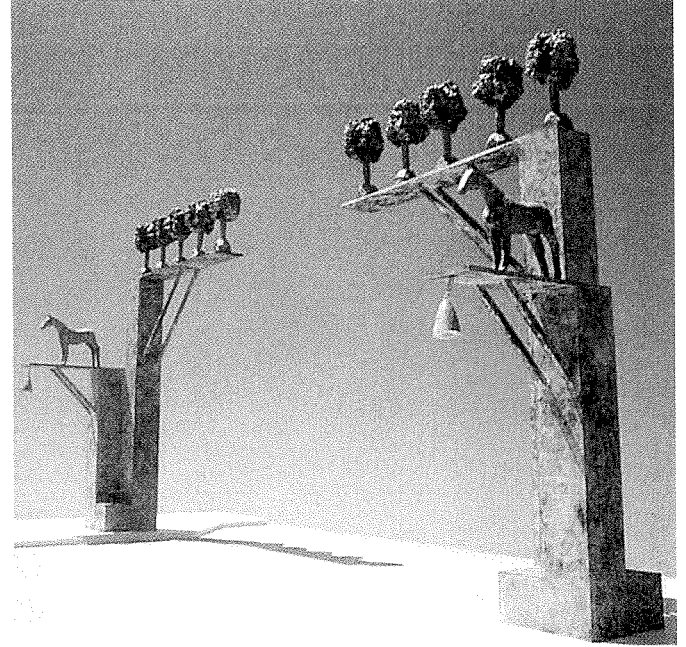


San Jose but didn't take. One was the introduction of sidewalk stoops and front doors for several large residential projects to encourage the kind of street life found in Boston's Back Bay (a favorite Taylor reference) or Manhattan's Upper West Side. But along noisy, one-way arterials like Third and Fourth Streets, the forlorn stoops have been abject failures. Everyone enters their homes the sensible way, via the elevator from the basement garage. Even when the stoops faced onto a quiet mews, the city permitted developers to gate them off, destroying whatever urban qualities they might have generated.

Likewise, a major effort to clean up the Guadalupe River and turn it into a downtown park — a joint effort between the city, county, and Army Corps of Engineers — has made the river more accessible, but so far missed major opportunities to orient offices or restaurants toward it.

Finally, such piecemeal critiques mask an even harsher judgment on San Jose Centro: after almost twenty years, a billion dollars in city subsidies, and a historic economic boom all around it, downtown has still not become a self-sustaining urban center, and there is still little private, unsubsidized development of any noticeable size going on.

Make no mistake, San Jose is now a remarkably livable city, with restaurants and entertainment, new housing, culture and parks, with handsome sidewalks and refreshing prospects. It has its own appealing character, made up of sunshine, small-town friendliness, safety, and invigorating entrepreneurial energy.



The efforts at redevelopment have mostly supported those qualities. But the emphasis on building more housing downtown since the administration of Mayor Susan Hammer has still not triggered regular evening crowds — which are evident only during the scheduled festivals and holidays that the many ethnic populations of the region hold downtown. Neither has a shift in emphasis from retail to entertainment as the city's redevelopment engine fully achieved this goal.

Thus, while San Jose Sharks games at the sports arena have helped to spur restaurants, many of these are hanging by a thread in the current economic downturn. And while Adobe Systems and a few other high-tech firms have moved their headquarters downtown, most prefer the ranch-like spreads of the outlying Golden Triangle or South San Jose.

Opposite left: Boutique on the Paseo de San Antonio. Photo courtesy of SJRA.

Opposite right: The Paseo de San Antonio provides a mid-block connection between Cezar Chavez Park and San Jose State University. Photo courtesy of SJRA.

Above left: Housing adjoins the Paseo de San Antonio near the campus of San Jose State University. Photo courtesy of SJRA.

Above right: This proposal by sculptor Robert Graham for a downtown gateway would have celebrated San Jose's agricultural past. Photo of model courtesy of Tom Aidala/SJRA.



A True Urban Population

One possible explanation for downtown's sluggish revival is a miscalculation of the ethnic and social facts of San Jose. Following conventional development wisdom, San Jose grabbed for the gold ring. The Retail Pavilion was but one embarrassing miss at this upscale market. But in so doing, it crushed the seeds of a true urban population. The *taquerias*, Vietnamese *pho* restaurants, western clothing stores, wedding-gown emporia, and other mom-and-pop retail outlets of its historic core were businesses that could have formed the foundation for a lively, unique public realm. But these were run out of town, or out of business, during the long and messy late-1980s construction of the light-rail tracks.

Furthermore, Taylor's aggressive, close-to-the-vest style often stymied community consultation, creating political conflict. Meanwhile, in San Jose's suburban areas, its new ethnic groups — whose children are among those playing in the fountain — were developing active, economically successful centers of their own. For example, there are now at least a half dozen large suburban shopping centers financed by Asian money and devoted exclusively to the needs of Asian customers. Though still an evolving

type, they have begun to adapt the standard strip-mall form to the social patterns of that community. And a down-home flea market remains the city's most active public melting pot. It is held on a dedicated site, with a remarkable array of permanent and semi-permanent Butler buildings, tents, and pipe structures to accommodate the booths. This diversity was rarely factored into downtown planning or architecture.

Whither Downtown?

In the late 1990s hopes were still high that downtown would soon blossom under a new mayor, Ron Gonzales. But by the time a new Redevelopment Agency Director, Susan Shick, had enlisted a major developer to transform five downtown sites with infill housing, offices and commercial buildings, the high-tech bubble had burst.

If downtown San Jose didn't take off during the high-tech bonanza, it's going to be even rougher during the *borrasca*. San Jose has sought a downtown in the traditional mold. But now it has stiff competition. At one end, charming smaller towns like Mountain View and Los Gatos are thriving as restaurant and shopping areas. At the other, massive regional malls like Valley Fair and Eastridge

are continuing to siphon off department-store shoppers and moviegoers.

The multinodal urbanizing suburbs of the region are serving the public very nicely, thank you, for its shopping, employment and cultural needs. They are convenient, close, with good parking and sufficient variety. And with the opening of new mixed-use developments like Santana Row — a creatively designed faux-urban district on a commercial strip 3.5 miles from the city center — downtown San Jose may need a new way to define itself.

The big question yet to be faced is if a downtown in the traditional sense — the early-twentieth-century sense — is necessary, or possible. There is a difference between being the singular urban hub in a sprawling region of orchards (as San Jose was in 1940), and being only one in a network of distinct but equal urban nodes, from Mountain View to Milpitas to Sunnyvale to Santana Row.

Two decades of redevelopment have left downtown San Jose with many strong ingredients. It has two garden-like parks — Plaza de Cesar Chavez on the south, and St. James Square, surrounded by historic courthouses and churches, to the north. Single family residences — mostly winning Victorians and modest stucco bungalows — border the downtown to the north and east. And despite the potential urban synergy, the proximity of San Jose State University, a low rise well-landscaped quad to the east, has not been fully exploited — though a joint city-university library may help to link the two when it opens later this year.

There are other bright spots. San Pedro Square, a small collection of older buildings (Paul Masson gave birth to the California wine industry right here) is one of downtown's few commercially successful areas restored without city subsidy. Today it is filled with restaurants, theaters, offices and museums. Similarly promising are plans for a new transportation node around the old Cahill railroad station, where rail, light rail, bus, and BART (in the next decade or so) will all connect — a unique convergence on the West Coast.

Finally, another developer, the CIM Group, is planning infill projects on vacant lots in the historic core. This may strengthen the one significant asset of downtown San Jose that can never be matched by a shopping mall. But had the redevelopment agency focused on filling these gaps and restoring the historic district years ago, such an intimate, focused retail center might have been finished by the early 1990s — in time for the real boom, now passed.

Today San Jose is riding the screaming downward curve of the high-tech roller coaster. Twenty years after the ride began, the creation of a real 24-hour city still remains just around the next corner — despite what the children in the

fountain might seem to indicate. Though hardly as abandoned and bereft as it was in 1980, when my main memory of downtown was of the domes of old St. Joseph's Cathedral surrounded by vacant parking lots, the urban lightning that struck Pasadena's Old Town or Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade has not hit here.

San Jose's high-tech industries redefined commerce and community for the twenty-first century. In the years ahead, San Jose needs to redefine its culture of public life with similar imagination. When that happens, the precious infrastructure created over the last twenty years will be there.

Opposite: Downtown housing has been a major component of the San Jose redevelopment effort. In the foreground is the 101 San Fernando project by San Francisco architect Dan Solomon. Photo courtesy of Solomon E.T.C.