

The Long Now of Santa Barbara

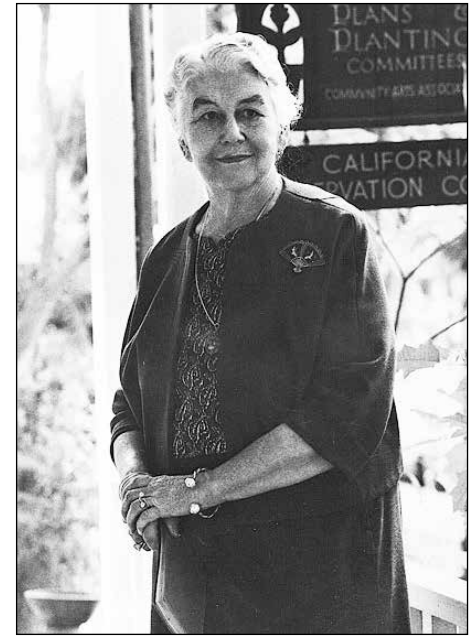
by Mitchell Kriegman



Novelist *Being Audrey Hepburn*, *Things I Can't Explain*. Creator *Clarissa Explains it All* and more. Writer for *The New Yorker*, *LARB*, *National Lampoon*, and *Saturday Night Live*



Team 7 (Architects: Gabriel Zamora, Anthony Grumbine, Rachel Back, Gordon Brewer. Landscape: Chris Gilliland. Planning: John Moyer) capitalized on the Chapala Transit Hub, wrapping higher density residences around the busy Chapala/Figueroa block



Pearl Chase

pronouncements of a “retail apocalypse” were made, the Funk Zone with its eclectic mix of business types and free-wheeling architectural spaces appealing to millennials near and far thrived, confounding the city norm. Downtowns in surrounding cities like San Luis Obispo and Paso Robles also experienced an uptick.

It has become obvious that downtown Santa Barbara’s decline was due to more than increased online shopping. State Street is stuck in time – the 1970s to be precise, when “cruising down the boulevard” and big department stores with two floor escalators meant something. As a thoroughfare it’s useless, the traffic crawls but can’t stop, it’s like driving through a fish-bowl.

Now, it seems pressures in Santa Barbara have built to the point where a wide array of community groups, stake holders, and businesses are

Five years from now, Santa Barbara will mark the 100th anniversary of the earthquake of 1925 that killed thirteen people and caused 111 million in damages in today’s dollars. The quake sparked a stunning re-envisioning and rebuilding of the small town of 20,000 people laying the essential foundation of the unique city that is known the world over. That unified vision of red tile roofs and white-washed stucco as manifest in the architectural designs of George Washington Smith, Lulah Riggs, and others championed by Pearl Chase and Bernard Hoffman in the 1920s, has served Santa Barbara exceedingly well for almost a hundred years.

Today almost exactly two years after the triple once-in-two-century environmental disasters of drought, fire, and mudslides that struck the county in 2018, killing twenty-three people and causing quite possibly more than a billion dollars in damage, the city now of just under 100,000 is facing a reckoning with a wide host of issues, perhaps none more crippling than a lack of leadership and vision.

A Vision Vacuum

An understanding of the “long now” and how to achieve it is in short supply these days. It requires seeing today in the context of the future,

with a persistent commitment to a long-term vision. That’s the way Pearl Chase thought. If she were here today, what would Pearl Chase do? Where will the vision for the Santa Barbara of the future come from?

An investigation into that question – the Once and Future Santa Barbara – begins with another set of architectural designs created by a collective of local architects completed three years ago during a two-week charrette, before the mudslides. The drawings were only marginally discussed in the public at the time, yet they offer a glimpse of a dynamic potential Downtown Santa Barbara; one filled with natural neighborhoods, meandering paseos, green plazas and courtyards, as well as blended residential housing and retail, bringing State Street to life. The drawings evoke a town still true to its reassuring red tiled roofs and stucco walls, yet filled with diverse urban spaces, where something is always happening around the corner, as opposed to the current tedious, thirteen block main street thoroughfare that State Street is today. That enticing alt vision of a Santa Barbara soon fell by the wayside in the necessary focus on the emergency efforts that followed the January mudslides. “It was understandable given the greater, immediate magnitude of what was going on at the time,” remarked

Ellen Bildsten, past president of the American Institute of Architects Santa Barbara and one of the leaders of the charrette. An awareness of the charrette permeated discussions that followed but the drawings were soon forgotten.

As Montecito dug out from behind boulders and mud, stores on State street continued to decline at an ever-alarming rate, leaving buildings empty and lifeless. Pricey studies, city meetings, commissions, and surveys followed, while efforts to create incremental change in permitting and trial initiatives gradually developed. As



The 1925 Santa Barbara earthquake killed 13 people and caused millions in damages to downtown



Amy Cooper,
owner of Plum
Goods on State
Street

demanding change inside and outside the city government.

"The fight for State Street is the fight for Santa Barbara," Amy Cooper, the owner of Plum Goods, has said. Ms Cooper more than anyone is the face of change, serving on more committees and task forces that one can imagine one might manage, cordially knitting alliances and interconnections across participants and groups in and out of the city government. She is the charmingly, persuasive warrior of State Street drawing on her background in public relations and corporate communications while managing a thriving retail enterprise on the front lines in the very midst of the empty downtown storefronts. This month she's won support of a proactive initiative on behalf of city stakeholders to fill empty storefronts on State Street.

"We need to come together as a community and decide what we want our town to be," Ms. Cooper adds, "not just wait for someone to sign a lease. We have to be more intentional about our downtown. We need to target, curate, and recruit new businesses. We're asking – what do we want downtown Santa Barbara to look and feel like?"

Inspired Drawings Collecting Dust

Which brings us to the lost drawings of 2017. Portland transplant, architect Marcus Schiff, first brought the drawings to the attention of this writer when he realized that the AIA document was receiving surprisingly low public and government engagement.

"I had seen first-hand the trans-

formation of Portland's downtown from a somewhat run-down older city to one of the world's most exciting, sustainable and successful 24-hour live, work, leisure, tourism environments with growing job creation and financial strength," Schiff remarked. "I believed and still do that these drawings are a rich collection of ideas for creating a vibrant and flourishing downtown, based on establishing a strong residential core that would create neighborhood, support businesses, and attract employers."

Anyone can see these drawings and examine them for themselves. The entire charrette is accessible online at aiasb.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2017Charrette-BookletBinding.pdf

Without cost to the city, 66 professions gathered under the auspices of the AIA in nine teams made up of local architects, planners, and landscape architects to explore the revitalization of State Street. Each team focused on a two-block stretch around State Street extending from Chapala to Anacapa. Teams presented their ideas after the design portion of the charrette using hand-drawn designs and Sketch Up models provided by OGEO, a measurement and visualization company that made a "digital twin" of all of Santa Barbara, a 3D interactive computer-generated fly through model with near perfect accuracy.

"We are trained in taking different codes, laws, regulations, ideas, concepts, concerns, problems, frustrations and issues, and solving these problems from eight different perspectives," Principal of AB Design,

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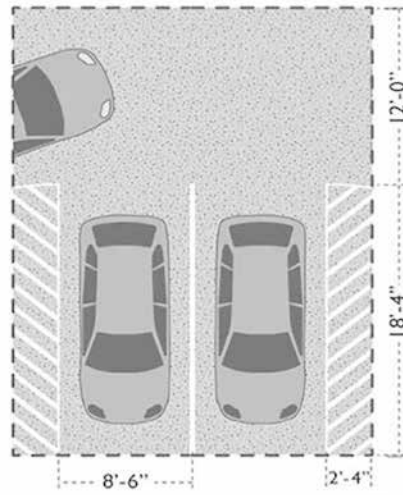
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The earthquake destroyed the historic core of the city

one of the city's leading design firms, **Clay Aurell** offered. "Architects can lead on these issues." These kinds of charrettes are part of what architects consider their social responsibility to the community.

Importantly the project showed how 3,000 additional housing units could be artfully integrated into the State Street Chapala Anacapa Street

corridor creating blended residential and commercial density. "If you want long-term sustainability for our downtown you've got to have people down there," said **Detlev Peikert** of RRM Design, who was also key to the AIA endeavor. "That's how you get a long-term sustainability and the economics of vitality."

"Decoupling" housing and parking

was another hallmark of the plans – meaning an end to surface street parking lots. One quick expression of how wasteful parking space can be was presented in another overlooked presentation "Building a Resilient Future 2019 Santa Barbara," which demonstrated the graphic truth about parking allotment versus living space. The size for a two-bedroom apart-

ment equals roughly the size of two parking spaces. It doesn't pass the common-sense test.

"Surface parking is the lowest functional land use. It's just a matter of time until it's gone," **Rob Dayton** remarked. Dayton, Santa Barbara's Transportation Planning and Parking

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Team 5 (Architects: Lisa Liles, Alex Pujo, Paul Poirier, Valerie Froscher. Planning: Matt LaBri, Matthew Cameron) envisions housing above Paseo Nuevo bringing life downtown 24/7

Manager, is a garrulous, passionate believer in the future of Santa Barbara with an expansive vision of the future. The title "Parking Manager" doesn't come close to describing what he does. Dayton oversees some of the most valuable property in the city – the surface parking lots, which may become instrumental in the future evolution of Santa Barbara. Twenty percent of State Street real estate is downtown parking.

Cisterns for Capturing Rainwater for Reuse

One stunning idea in the 2017 charrette, remarkable for its simplicity, is the appearance of collective downtown water capture, or the ancient idea of cisterns. Rainwater is a natural resource, but the city has managed to turn it into a nuisance. Landowners are required to capture it and filter it back into the groundwater. The infeasibility of this

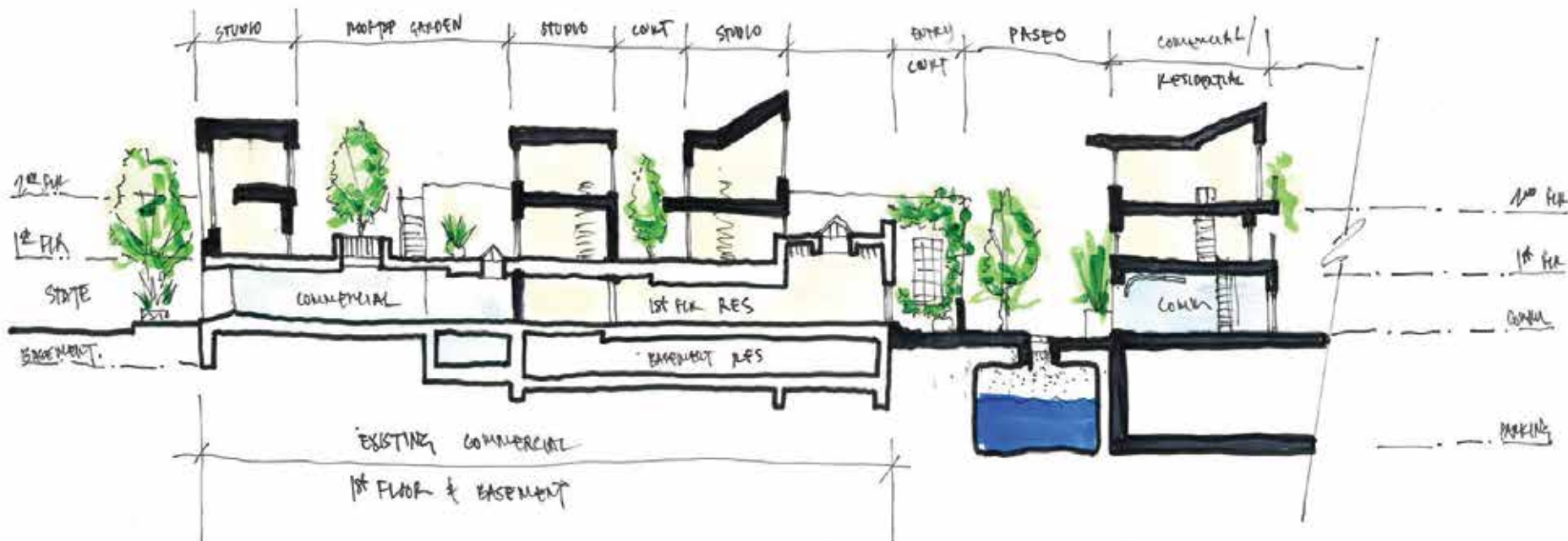
regulation downtown is obvious.

"Why aren't we just collecting it, and figuring out a way to reuse it?" Clay Aurell remarked. "If you go to Israel, they use their water seven times before they dispose of it." We all know exactly where at the end of city streets the water ends up and where it can be collected and recycled.

All in all, these drawings bring out what is beautiful and unique about Santa Barbara urban design,

featuring the use of paseos, a signature of Bernard Hoffman's original plans from the 1920s, to connect paths throughout the downtown area, crisscrossing the grid of Santa Barbara streets adding a leisurely human dimension. The AIA designs are one potential, a beautiful evocative well-executed vision for downtown Santa Barbara's future.

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Team 9 (Architects: Chris Manson-Hing, Cass Ensberg, Christine Pierron, Karl Kras, Elizabeth Wentling; Landscape: Katie Klein) looked at a city block cross section – creating cisterns for water capture and rooftop gardens and robust usage above and below street level



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Troubles Chronicled in Council Commissioned Report

Two years after the AIA Charrette, the situation remains essentially unchanged despite a number of measures. The 2019 Kosmont report, commissioned at a cost of \$84,000 by the City Council, is considered the latest and certainly most official confirmation of the sad state of downtown. The report states bluntly that the town “does not have a business-friendly reputation,” is “expensive and high-risk” for new retailers, and the city staff itself is “is not enthusiastic to expedite development.” The report alone should have caused an upheaval in city government but was met instead with polite handwringing and a variety of half measures.

High among the list of troubles are homelessness and vagrancy, an emphasis on tourists and cruise ships rather than locals, a lack of realistic response to climate change and an alarming city-wide housing shortage marked by the lowest numbers of new homes and apartments being built since the 1940s. Coupled with an obstructive bureaucracy that hobbles new business and new housing through an unresponsive, entrenched and difficult and expensive permitting process, the conditions are stifling new projects, innovation, and economic growth.

Horror stories of absurd hold ups and costs are legion – such as construction at the Draughtsman on Mosaic on State Street Red Tagged for lack of a “saw permit.” A local restaurant’s new venture having to



Detlev Peikert of RRM Design

pick up the \$200,000 tab in unnecessary work to the owner after contradictory water tier information by city inspectors.

Carrying costs on a new venture of \$10,000 a month for two to three years while waiting for approvals are not uncommon, all the while the new business paying for construction and insurance can’t get one dollar of income. But these kinds of delays cost everybody. Delayed construction means delayed commerce, delayed income in taxes and fees for the city and taxpayers as well. It also is a drag on the economy.

The barrier to entry has become enormous, even for owners who are local and have gone through the process before. No wonder storefronts are empty.

Every study points to the lack of accountability and leadership. “It’s not going to get better just all of a sudden by itself,” Detlev Peikert remarked recently.

“We do projects all over and it’s not like this everywhere,” remarked Mr. Aurell. His frank, no-nonsense approach makes him a leader in town. “In San Luis Obispo, we just finished a Finney’s. We submitted our application, a planner called us up and said,



Artist Hank Pitcher

‘my job is to get your project through, that’s like arm-in-arm.’ Many architects, builders and owners don’t want to speak on record about obstruction and delays, but the stories are everywhere.

All this doesn’t even address what we’re truly missing. “State Street has activity from noon to six pm. That’s the flash in the pan every day. Six hours,” Rob Dayton remarks with astonishment. “That street should be six am until midnight,” he remarked. “What if you saw people and heard laughter well into the night and there was activity in the streets?”

“I think it was Winston Churchill who said, ‘Man shapes the city, then the city shapes the man,’ artist **Hank Pitcher** remarked after driving downtown one deserted evening. “It is very true that the space where we live and work shapes us, and the sad shape of State Street is creating a civic depression.”



Debbie Rudd, Urban Planner Principal at RRM Design Group

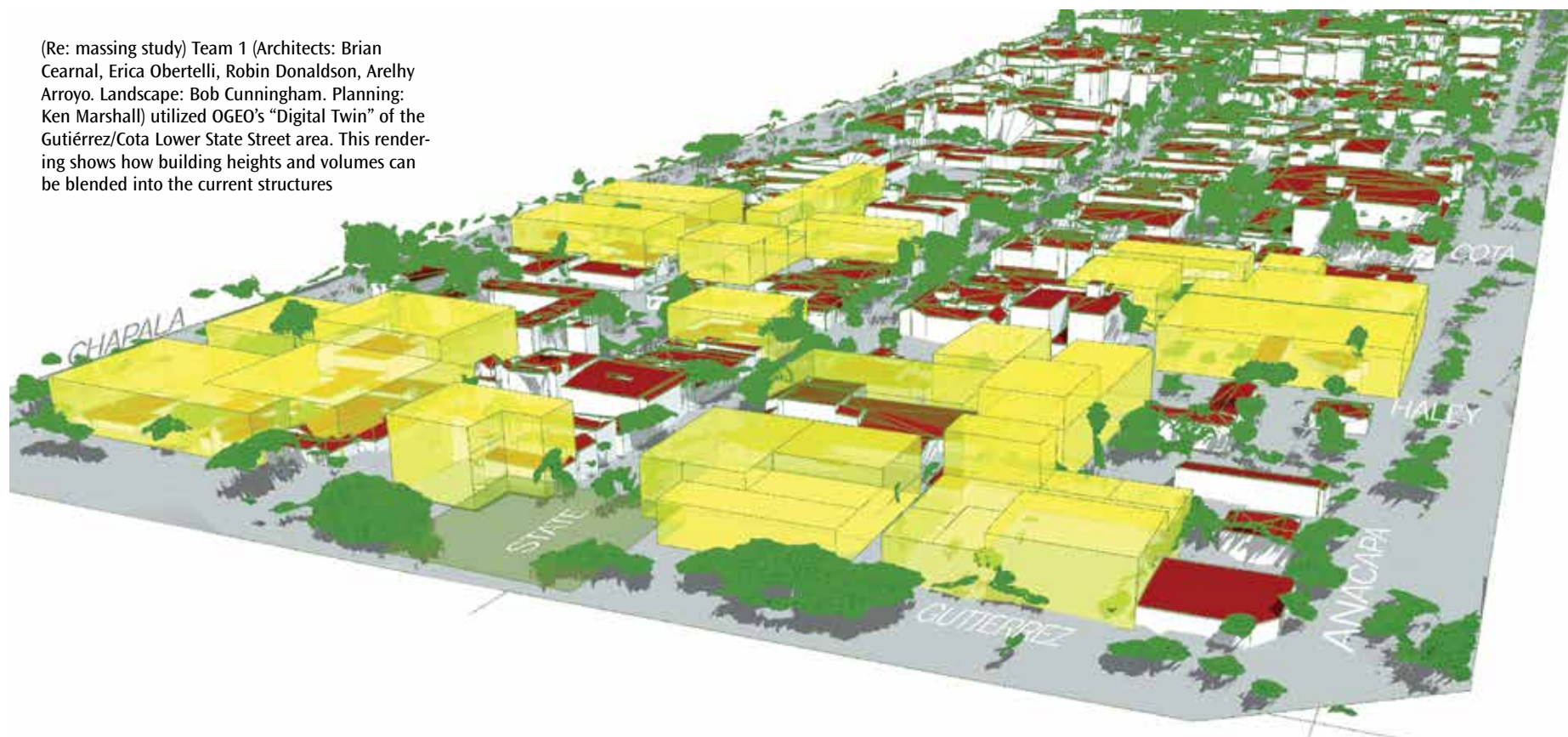
Housing Helps Feed Businesses

Nathan Vonk, the owner of Sullivan Goss Gallery, an American art gallery representing California artists with a worldwide reputation, agrees. “It used to be State Street was an exciting place to be. State Street used to be where Santa Barbara and Montecito connect. Now buyers from Montecito don’t want to come down here.”

Downtowns ebb and flow as culture, retail, and lifestyles change and many of these issues transcend any one city. Evidence shows a purchasing shift to services rather than things, a generational shift, income inequality and even bigger box stores outside downtown areas are also significant factors in the retail decline.

But what are Santa Barbara’s options? How does the city move forward? Where will the leadership come from – the City Council or the town stakeholders? Fortunately for all interested parties, the solutions and remedies to these dilemmas are known and documented. As Urban Planner Principal at RRM Design Group **Debbie Rudd** recounted, “I’ve worked with different communities up and down the coast and have seen how retail has shrunk. We’re seeing in

(Re: massing study) Team 1 (Architects: Brian Cearnal, Erica Obertelli, Robin Donaldson, Arelhy Arroyo. Landscape: Bob Cunningham. Planning: Ken Marshall) utilized OGEO’s “Digital Twin” of the Gutiérrez/Cota Lower State Street area. This rendering shows how building heights and volumes can be blended into the current structures



a lot of communities the need to infiltrate their downtowns with housing so that they can have more foot traffic downtown to feed those businesses.”

In fact, the answer from every study, consultant and commission is the same – density, downtown blended retail and residency use. But density means taller buildings which many are against, fearing a loss of the small town feel Hoffman and Pearl seem to have fostered.

“If we truly want to make an impact in revitalizing downtown, we will need to accept that some buildings will be taller than forty-five feet,” Santa Barbara City planner Renee Brooke remarked recently in a public forum. “I know some people fear a loss of public views with taller buildings, but if designed carefully, buildings can actually frame really amazing views.”

Some locals balk at the newly passed California state laws that would allow developers to build structures up to 80 feet high, but the impact of height is little understood in downtown. After all the Balboa Building near the corner of State and De la Guerra is 80 feet tall and has never been a concern. The Masonic Temple on East Carrillo Street towers 67 feet and the Lobero Theatre is 70 feet to the top of its stage house both built in 1924, not to mention the 80-foot-plus Courthouse.

What 50, 60, and 80 feet really means is the possibility to create density without being all spread out and the possibility of bringing economic life to downtown. It also makes new construction financially feasible and housing potentially more affordable.

What we do know in Santa Barbara is that if the heights remain at two and three stories, we get more luxury condos with a promise that someday when housing levels are saturated the prices will drop. Seems doubtful and certainly in a near term unlikely.

While no one wants to lose what’s special about Santa Barbara, it’s important to keep in mind that the original vision of Spanish revival architecture that has worked for so long a time was not actually “historic.” It was an amalgam of blended Spanish Colonial, Moorish, and Andalusian styles as well as cultural appropriation of Hispanic influences which were not historic but grafted on this quaint town by the sea, ignoring the Mexican, Barbareños, and Chumash cultures that had been dominant.

“If you pull the fondant (stucco) off of those old buildings, you’re going to see beautiful brick buildings that were built in the late 1800s,” Mr. Aurell states. “You can see that the proportions aren’t right in some of them, the arches, a filigree is off.” Santa Barbara was like other cities at the turn of the century, standard issue brick Victorian. It could have been

Wichita.

Pearl Chase and Bernard Hoffman’s Santa Barbara dream was a uniform and effective confection that has been a profitable brand for Santa Barbara. But how does that successful formula for Santa Barbara come to terms with today’s issues, the need for density, and contemporary lifestyles?

Landmarks Commission Chair Sees Value in Change

One Santa Barbara architect believes the answer lies in an unlikely place – The Historic Landmarks Commission. **Anthony Grumbine** is a principal architect at Harrison Design. He is also the current Chair of the City of Santa Barbara’s Historic Landmarks Commission (HLC) and serves on the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation’s Board of Directors. One would expect the HLC to be the home of anti-change naysayers. But Grumbine is a voluble, enthusiastic advocate and activist for Santa Barbara growth and urbanism.

Utilizing the original pre-earthquake drawings by George Washington Smith from the 1920s and others that hang in the Bernard Gebhard Room near City Hall, Grumbine has demonstrated through a kind of architectural archeology that the original elevations envisioned by Bernard Hoffman, George Washington Smith, Lutah Riggs, and other early era architects and urban planners, actually included higher density and taller buildings. Hoffman and Chase had envisioned Spanish revival Santa Barbara well before the disastrous earthquake.



Anthony Grumbine is a principal at Harrison Design and current Chair of the City of Santa Barbara’s Historic Landmarks Commission



Graphic designer Pierre Rademaker

Bernard Hoffman in particular had already built the Paseo to show the way.

“These drawings show what the original 1920s visions both pre- and post-earthquake were meant to be a much larger downtown,” Grumbine explains. “The aerial perspectives of the blocks each correspond to historic 1920s elevations.”

These elevations represent a city that never happened, utterly faithful to what we consider the Santa Barbara aesthetic. Yet after the earthquake it was built lower and smaller to get up and running quickly. Bernard Hoffman seized upon the emergency created by the aftermath of the disaster to impose his vision of a uniform Spanish Colonial style Santa Barbara, offering to pay for architectural plans for those conforming to his direction, and denying construction loans to those who refused.

“Today we have an opportunity to make Santa Barbara, even more ‘Santa Barbarish,’ since the vision was only partially produced and executed,” Grumbine concludes.

“Let’s face it, Santa Barbara has got the aesthetics down,” AIA Charrette leader Ellen Bildsten adds. “We’ve

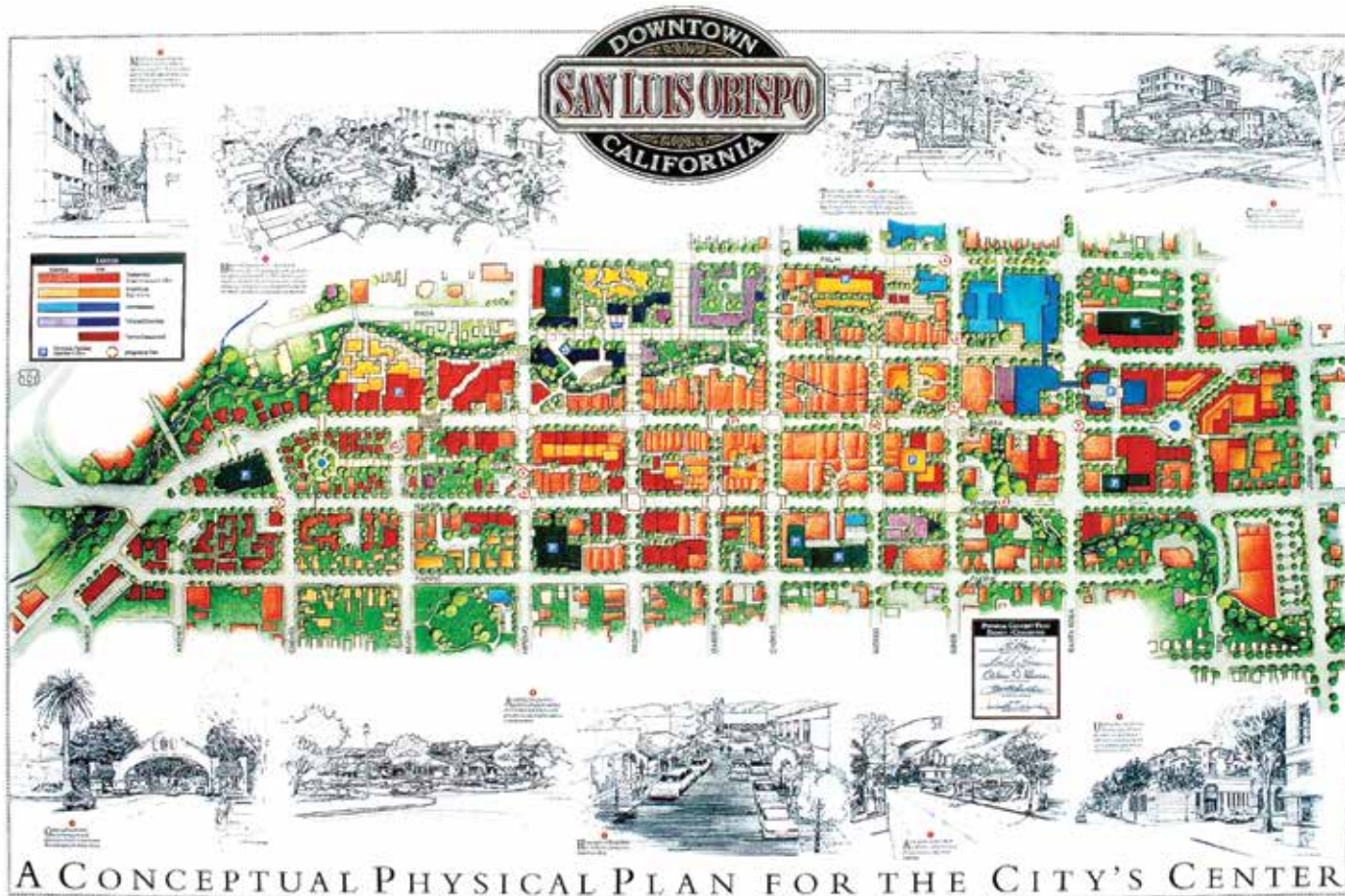
got this, now let’s deal with homelessness, affordability, density, stormwater management, and global warming.”

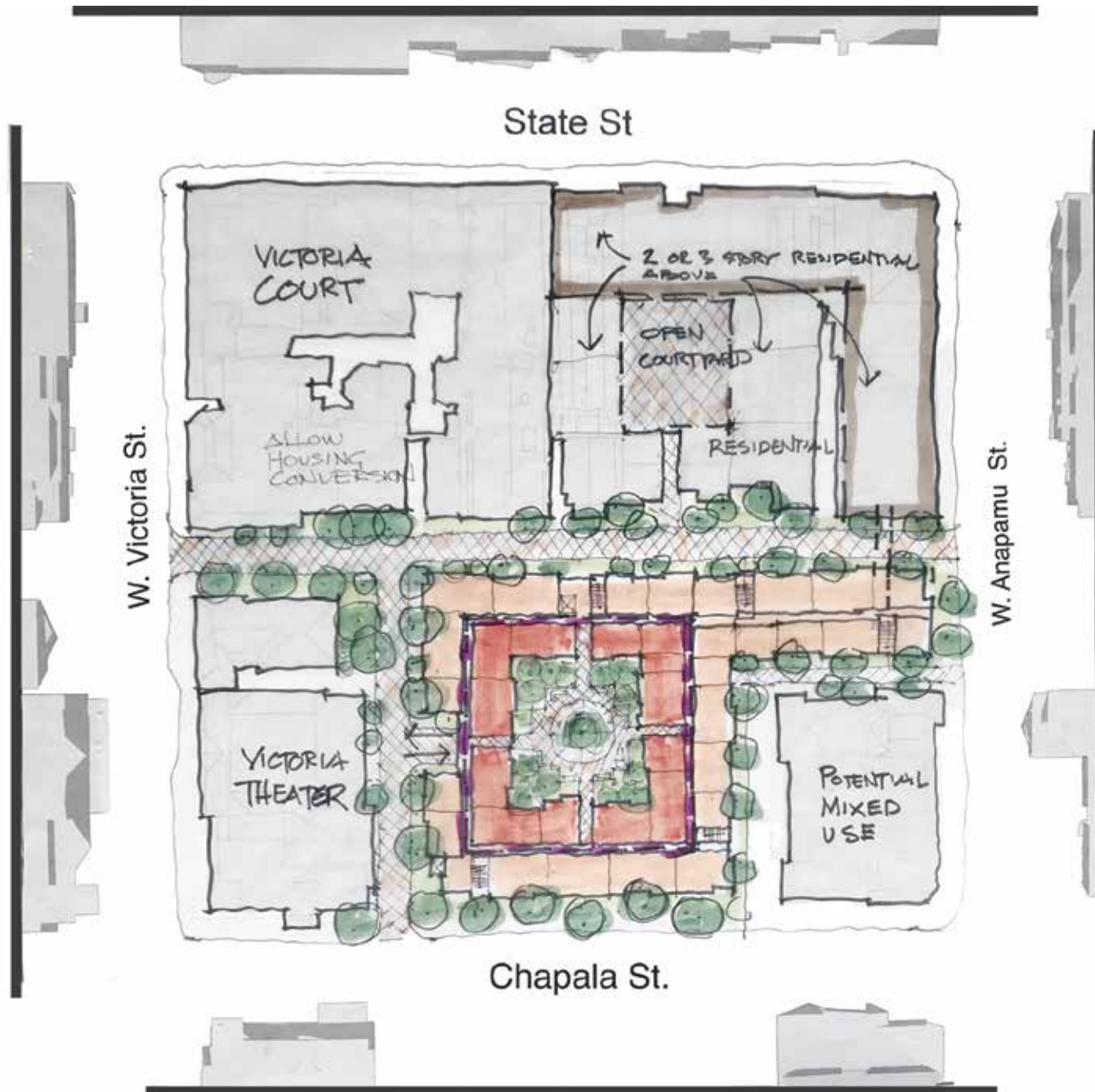
If so many solutions have already been established and so many evocative design elements are already present, what is the hold up? How do these remarkable possibilities become reality? Pearl Chase and Bernard Hoffman were never city officials. They imposed their vision on the city by wielding enormous power and wealth in the 1920s. How can it be done today?

The successful example of San Luis Obispo may be useful. That city has managed to create an exciting new prosperous vision of itself over the last two decades while dealing with the same kinds of problems Santa Barbara faces here – collapse of retail, empty storefronts, and homelessness.

Pierre Rademaker is a renowned graphic designer and branding expert who volunteered and led a number of other community professionals in the late 1990s San Luis Obispo’s plan to develop with Downtown Concept Plan, a plan that continues to be

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Team 8 (Architects: Detty Peikert, Akiko Wade Davis, Peter Hunt, Joe Moticha, Jeremy White. Planning: Matthew Hendren) created an excellent example of surface parking conversion – the Victoria Lot – to housing, mixed use, with courtyards and other open space



Closing Arlington Avenue to vehicles could create a new grand plaza fronting the Arlington Theatre and affording new city vistas

revised over the passing years and has led the city along a successful path of growth.

“It’s really more of a political problem than it is a design problem,” Mr. Rademaker begins. “We created a concept plan, not a master plan. Not too specific because it’s a vision. And a vision is loose enough to invite all the stakeholders in,” he offers. “We began with three architects and myself, we wound up with like thirty-two people and by extension the entire community.” Rademaker’s vision-making endeavor didn’t result in new requirements or regulations. It wasn’t a restricting, inhibiting, binding vision. Instead it was an agreed upon goal of what the community wanted San Luis Obispo to look like, how they wanted the city to develop, who they wanted to be.

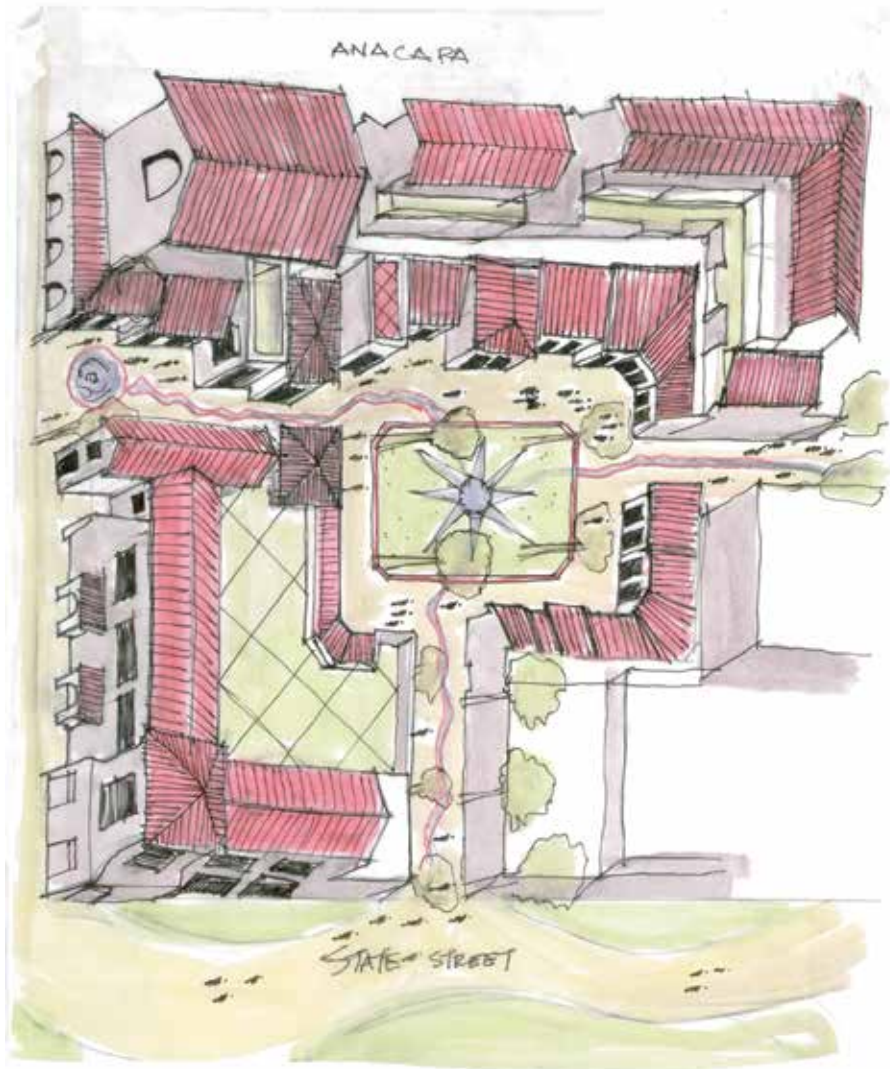
“It was a poster, the front was the map, the entire general plan was on the back and we hung it in City Hall,” Rademaker concludes.

Gradually developers began to build around the concept drawing using the vision document as a guide. Rademaker’s process shows how an overwhelmingly complex idea can be agreed upon as a vision and still allow the details to begin to work themselves out naturally.

Remarkably the timing for change in Santa Barbara could be fortuitous. Just this month the city announced the appointment of Santa Barbara’s first Economic Development Manager (EDM), **Jason Harris**, to oversee the implementation of the City’s economic development program. Mr. Harris currently serves this function for the City of Santa Monica where he oversees a division of fourteen staff members and a budget of \$5.5 million. No doubt the new hire’s twenty years as a skilled development manager will be helpful but when he relocates to Santa Barbara he will have no staff and no budget in a town where he is a stranger to the stakeholders, who initiated the demand for the position, but had no consultation in his hiring. Not one business owner was on the search committee.

The lack of consultation with stakeholders in the process of moving forward with the city’s first EDM is emblematic to the difficulties that downtown stakeholders, investors and participant parties have with the city government and the concern that action, change and vision are in short supply within City Hall.

Part of the frustration may stem from the “manager” structure of Santa Barbara city government. Usually people assume the mayor is the head of city government, but in a manager run structure such as ours, the manager is in charge of key hires and runs the administration and is not required to regularly seek approval from the Council or the public.



Team 2 (Architects: Dawn Sherry, Anthony Spann, Michael Holliday, Craig Goodman. Planning: Steve Welton) created new open spaces and pedestrian flows with modest heights that transform State Street into a mix of walks, fountains, and intriguing retail experiences

Many citizens don't realize this distinction. Few voters even know **Paul Casey**, even though he has been Santa Barbara's City Manager for the past five years. They've never voted for him. He's never been on a ballot.

If a city is simply run as a business operation, the City Administrator can be efficient manager. But if important changes need to happen or vision is required, the management structure tends to be resistant. The potential for intransience and obstruction on a managerial level is great unless that individual City Manager is a leader and a risk taker. City Managers are also paid a lot of money. Paul Casey's salary was recently raised to \$372,675.04. City Attorney **Ariel Calonne** is paid \$337,062.07, while Mayor **Cathy Murillo** made \$71,000 in 2017.

Still the appointment of the Economic Development Manager represents a genuine opportunity for a new and focused look at adapting the spirit of Pearl Chase and Bernard Hoffman's original vision of Santa Barbara to downtown. Amy Cooper, who wrote the stakeholder letter demanding the creation of an Office of Economic Development, is the first to express optimism.

"I'm hopeful that we now are all coming to the table together. We as a community need to inform the EDM," she remarked. "He's not from Santa Barbara. He needs to come together

with the community from the start. So, I'm hopeful for the future of our downtown. Hopeful that the time is now."

The myriad of interconnected downtown and development organizations led by people like Amy Cooper and the enormous depth of local professional urban planning and architectural talent exemplified by the AIA Charrette certainly seem sufficient to offer and guide a cogent, cohesive, community vision. The new EDM would be foolish not to take a cue from the people who live and work here.

Under current conditions a new vision of a revitalized Santa Barbara is not likely to originate from within City Hall, City Council, or managerial staff. Downtown is a story without real villains other than complacency and inertia. But like all good stories it needs a hero.

Pearl Chase and Bernard Hoffman nurtured the idea of beauty and progress that lasted a century. Today the voices of active, educated citizens like Amy Cooper, the AIA, and chair of the Historic Landmarks Commission Anthony Grumbine, are advocating fundamental change that is harmonious with that original inspiration. The choice between preserving beauty and fostering growth is a false one. It's time to have the courage to leave paralysis and half measures behind and envision the Long Now of Santa Barbara.

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