CITY OF
MENLO
PARK
IMAGINE A DOWNTOWN
DESIGN
CHARRETTE
APRIL 9
2005

CITY OF MENLO PARK
"IMAGINE A DOWNTOWN"
DESIGN CHARRETTE
April 9, 2005

Presented to the Menlo Park City Council
June 7, 2005

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CITY OF MENLO PARK
DESIGN CHARRETTE

Four Design Teams Focus on Area Surrounding Caltrain Station

A design charrette called “Imagine a Downtown” Menlo Park was held on Saturday April 9, 2005. This cooperative effort between the American Institute of Architects San Mateo County Chapter, the City of Menlo Park, and the Menlo Park Chamber of Commerce was approved by the Menlo Park City Council at its meeting on February 15, 2005. The event was held at the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church social hall at the rear of 700 Santa Cruz Avenue in the City of Menlo Park from 8:00 am until 8:00 pm.

The Charrette involved 78 volunteer design professionals and team members organized into four design teams. Starting at 8:00 am, the teams spent the day brainstorming, sketching, and drafting ideas, which coalesced into one final design proposal per team. Each of the teams presented its final design to the general public and the other teams and attendees at the end of the long day. The event concluded at 8:00 pm. This interactive process included members of the public providing comments and suggestions throughout the day.

The teams were asked to create and present urban design concepts for the area bounded by and including the street frontages of El Camino Real, Oak Grove Avenue, Alma Street and Ravenswood Avenue. The goal of the Charrette is to inform and stimulate community dialogue focused on transforming this area into an inviting and vibrant extension of downtown Menlo Park. These blocks connect the Civic Center and Burgess Park with the main shopping district on Santa Cruz Avenue, yet the railroad tracks and El Camino Real intersect them. The design teams considered how to improve under-utilized areas of the subject blocks and advanced ideas to enhance linkages to adjacent areas. The teams also had the opportunity to consider how possible grade separation changes to the railroad tracks now under discussion could be integrated into improving the accessibility and usability of the downtown area.

Members of the public, the Menlo Park City Council and appointed boards and commissions were in attendance and provided comments and suggestions to the design teams through the course of the day. Elected and appointed officials from neighboring communities were also in attendance after having expressed interest in observing how Menlo Park is conducting this community effort. Soliciting, acknowledging, and responding to public input and dialogue are important parts of the Charrette experience.

The modern usage of the word “charrette,” which is French for “cart,” is said to have originated at the Ecole des Beaux Artes, where proctors would circulate

with a cart through the streets of Paris to collect students' final projects as the students worked rigorously up to the last minute. The term now commonly refers to the intensive final period of work by architects and students in an intensive, collaborative architecture project.

The design concepts summarized in this report will be widely circulated. They will be presented to the Menlo Park City Council at its regularly scheduled public meeting on June 7, 2005. This report will also be distributed to interested community groups in the City. It is likely that these ideas could have significant impacts on the direction of development in this area of downtown Menlo Park. It is our hope that with additional public input, the Council will provide leadership in framing the discussion leading the City toward a shared vision for downtown, potentially combining elements from these concepts and post-event suggestions.

Date:
Saturday April 9 , 2005

Time:
8 AM to 8 PM

Location:
700 Santa Cruz Avenue, Menlo Park

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a Menlo Park with a more defined and attractive central area. Imagine a Menlo Park where the convergence of amenities and conveniences around a focal point creates an intimate, small town atmosphere. Imagine an accessible town center that is inviting to bikers and walkers, and where opportunities for parking are readily available. Imagine a town center that builds on existing historic elements and also incorporates a state-of-the-art transportation hub with improved train, bus, taxi, and parking facilities. Imagine new retail and transit-oriented housing development contributing to an enhanced sense of place. Imagine El Camino Real as a walkable boulevard with a special ambiance that differentiates downtown Menlo Park from surrounding areas. Imagine El Camino Real as a unifying element rather than as a barrier that severs the town into isolated East and West areas. Finally, imagine revitalization efforts for downtown Menlo Park that are channeled by a vision of the downtown district as a true "City Center" worthy of the civic pride of all the City's residents and business owners.

The "Imagine a Downtown" Menlo Park Design Charrette is a cooperative effort between the American Institute of Architects San Mateo County Chapter (AIASMC), the City of Menlo Park, and the Menlo Park Chamber of Commerce. The Charrette is expected to involve approximately 50 volunteer design professionals organized into four design teams. The teams will be asked to create and present urban design concepts for the areas bounded by and including the street frontages of El Camino Real, Oak Grove Avenue, Alma Street and Ravenswood Avenue.

The goal of the Charrette is to inform and stimulate community dialog focused on transforming the area into an inviting and vibrant extension of downtown Menlo Park. Although isolated from the rest of downtown by major thoroughfares and the railroad tracks, the block to be studied is historically significant and adjoins the civic center, several major employers, and the main shopping street. The design teams will consider how to improve under-utilized areas of the subject block and enhance linkages to adjacent areas. The teams will also have the opportunity to consider how changes to the alignment of the railroad tracks over the long-term might be used to improve the accessibility and usability of the downtown area.

Members of the public, City Council and appointed boards will be invited to attend and provide comments and suggestions to the design teams through the course of the day. Soliciting, acknowledging, and responding to public input and dialog is an important part of the Charrette experience.

The design concepts that emerge from this Charrette will be widely circulated. They will be presented to the Menlo Park City Council at a regularly scheduled public meeting, and subsequently to interested community groups around the area. It is likely that these ideas will have significant impacts on the direction of development in this area of downtown Menlo Park for many years to come.

PROGRAM

The Charrette is intended to address the following program elements and ideas:

Create a sense of "place" for the intersection of Santa Cruz Avenue and El Camino Real by establishing some sort of identifiable "City Center" element or elements.

2. Extend the ambiance of Santa Cruz Avenue from West of El Camino Real across the street and into the block between El Camino Real and the railroad tracks.
3. Study how the development of shops, restaurants, plazas, or other types of usable indoor and outdoor space could be used to create an inviting "pedestrian-scaled" streetscape and "City Center" in the area under consideration.
4. Study how the areas adjoining the railroad tracks could be improved, with an emphasis on how the space between Merrill Avenue and the railroad tracks could be better utilized.
5. Consider how visual consistency might be introduced in the area by proposing a distinctive and consistent design vocabulary for street frontage, lighting, and landscaping elements.
6. Improve linkages to nearby employment centers, transit facilities, retail, housing, recreation, and the government center by proposing concepts that make the area more inviting to pedestrians without adversely impacting vehicular traffic.
7. Consider how the design and regulation of land use, building heights, massing, and site development could be modified to improve the urbanity of the blocks facing both sides of El Camino Real between Santa Cruz Avenue and Oak Grove Avenue. Evaluate the potential for mixed-use development in the area. Consider how these ideas could be applied as models for enhancing other areas of El Camino Real frontage in the Menlo Park downtown district.
8. Reconsider the interface of the train, bus, automobile parking, and bicycle parking and propose changes that establish the area as a well-integrated and efficient multi-modal transit hub.
9. Incorporate or relocate existing historic buildings.
10. Consider how long and short-term automobile parking in the area can be improved.
11. Evaluate ways in which changes to the alignment of the railroad tracks in the long-term might benefit the area.
12. [Your own ideas here]

TEAM LEADERS

Torin Knorr AIA	650.344.2001
Dale Meyer AIA	650.348.5054
Wayne Gehrke AIA and David Schnee AIA	650.871.0709
Susan Eschwiler AIA and Tom Gilman AIA	650.364.6453

"Imagine A Downtown" Design Charrette
DESIGN ELEMENTS GUIDELINES
City of Menlo Park

SUGGESTED ELEMENTS

- Focal point for downtown
- Intersection of Santa Cruz and El Camino Real as an identifiable gateway to City
- Community gathering space/plaza; enhance pedestrian aspects; flowing, inviting
- Integrated transit with adequate seating area
- Retail outlets
- Mixed use development
- Large scale art/sculpture/water feature
- Incorporate historic fire carriage building
- Traffic circulation/configuration enhancements to streets in and around study area

MANDATORY ELEMENTS

- Rest rooms
- Provide parking to support functions in team's proposal:
  - -Parking for any new uses
  - -Loading/unloading for transit and other functions
- Security considerations:
  - -Provide drive-through access for police cruisers
  - -Excellent lighting and visibility

ELEMENTS TO REMAIN

- Train Station; but may be relocated within study area
- Clock Tower: but may be relocated within study area

ELEMENTS THAT CAN BE REMOVED or REPLACED

- Surface parking
- Tree stump art work
- Model train building
- Bicycle storage shelter
- Current street lighting fixtures
- Mature Trees

MENLO PARK URBAN DESIGN CHARRETTE
AIA SAN MATEO COUNTY

Team Green Summary Report - Elevated Track, Depressed Road Bed Scenario:

The focus of the Green Team was the urban design of the city blocks between Oak Grove and Ravenswood, bordered by El Camino and the Alma Street. The issues that were studied were:

- Creating a focal point for downtown
- Developing the intersection of Santa Cruz and El Camino as an identifiable gateway to Menlo Park
- Creating new community gathering spaces such as plazas
- Enhancing pedestrian experiences along the streets
- Integrating transit and providing adequate seating
- Providing new retail and mixed use development
- Adding large scale art, sculptures or water features
- Incorporating the historic fire carriage building
- Enhancing traffic circulation

The theme of our solutions is “Connections”: visual, physical, vehicular, pedestrian and bicycle. It is our approach to connect the train station with the rest of Santa Cruz avenue, to connect the east side of the train tracks with the west side, and to capture the interest of travelers of El Camino to connect to downtown Menlo Park.

Although there were other thoughts, the group settled on a one third up and two-thirds down approach to the railroad tracks. The purpose of this was to make sure there continued to be eye-level visibility over the railroad tracks so that there was not a Great Wall of China and to encourage connectivity between both sides of the tracks under them. This was accomplished by bringing wide access areas under the tracks that could continue park like landscaping, bicycle paths and pedestrian walkways from Alma through to Merrill. Also, the Ravenswood and Oak Grove underpasses would not have to dip down too far and only moderate retaining walls would be needed, thereby having minimal impact to adjacent properties.

A key part to connectivity design was the handling of El Camino. In general, we believe that the broad boulevard can be effectively narrowed in visual scale to provide more focus as one passes through Menlo Park. We feel that this experience should be a visually pleasant one. The team experienced crossing El Camino as if crossing Death Valley… risking your life as you crossed from one side to another. Solutions considered for this were realigning the crosswalks at the intersection of El Camino and Santa Cruz, developing a circular paving pattern and perhaps even developing a visual feature in the center of the circular pattern.

It was noted that since it is not currently permitted to turn left onto Santa Cruz from El Camino, perhaps the median should be continued to give pedestrians a place to land on their journey across the thoroughfare and to give visual relief in the no man's land. Other improvements along El Camino include the widening of the sidewalks from 8' to 10' to make them more pedestrian friendly and allow the introduction of street furniture and landscaping.

Another suggestion is the addition of landscape bulb-outs in El Camino where parking is not currently allowed, thereby adding visual softening without the loss of parking. It was noted that this could be a near-term change, rather than needing to wait for other long-term improvements. These bulb-outs will provide the opportunity to add much-needed street tree planting. The intersections of Ravenswood and Oak Grove could be similarly enhanced such that the El Camino traveler would become aware that they were entering the downtown of Menlo Park.

Once across El Camino, the northern portion of Santa Cruz would be re-landscaped to match the character of the southern portion of Santa Cruz. The street would end in a new cul-de-sac that would occur at the intersection with Merrill.

The historic train station that is home to the Chamber of Commerce would be relocated to align on axis with Santa Cruz and would be the new terminus of this main street. Buses would be reorganized to drop off on the other side of the tracks along Alma, with pedestrian connections under the tracks. The historic train building used by train hobbyists would be relocated with the train station to form, with the newly reinstalled former fire station, a new historic district parallel to the track.

Small retail shops would be in filled to create an interesting district to meander and explore. Existing restaurants in the new mixed-use project would be supported by this new pedestrian traffic. A new plaza would be added that could be used for larger gatherings such as the Connoisseur's Marketplace art and

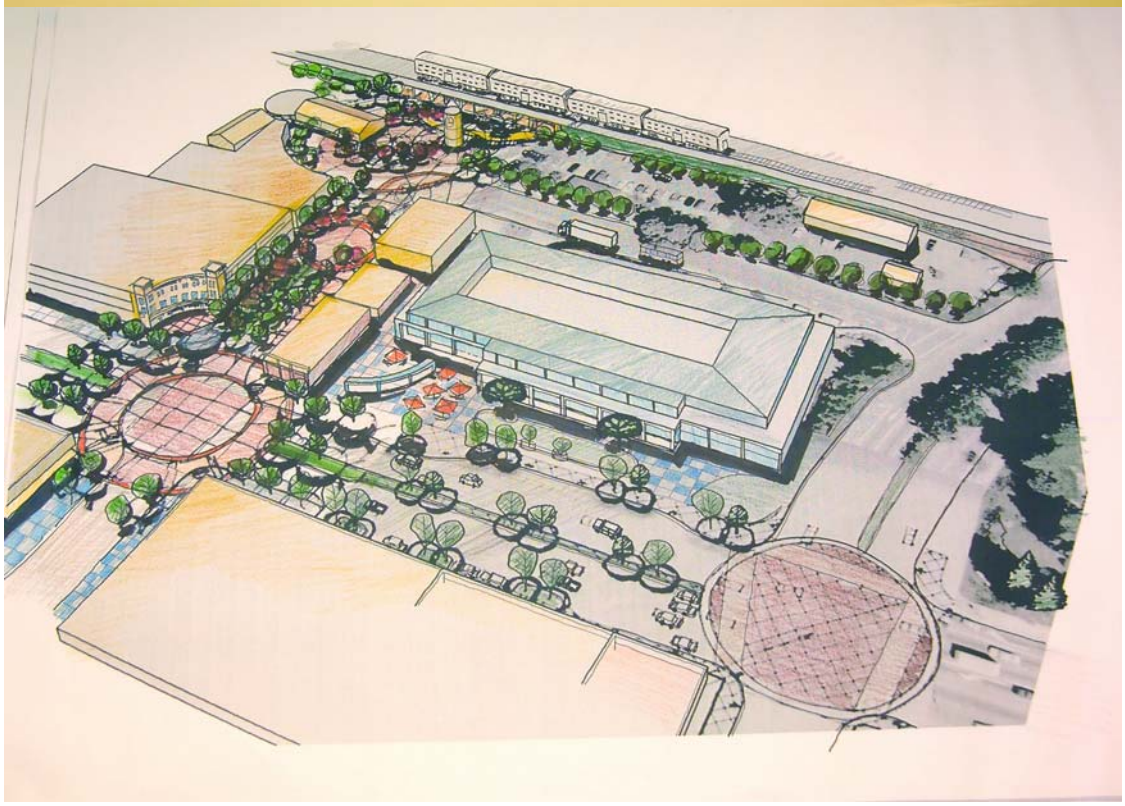
wine festival or a new, more centrally located home for the city's weekly farmer's market.

At the corner of El Camino and Santa Cruz, fast food restaurants would be replaced with a new crescent-shaped mixed-use building around a new plaza. The lower floor would be retail, the upper floor could be residential or offices. The height would mirror Menlo Center and bookend the historic British Banker's club.

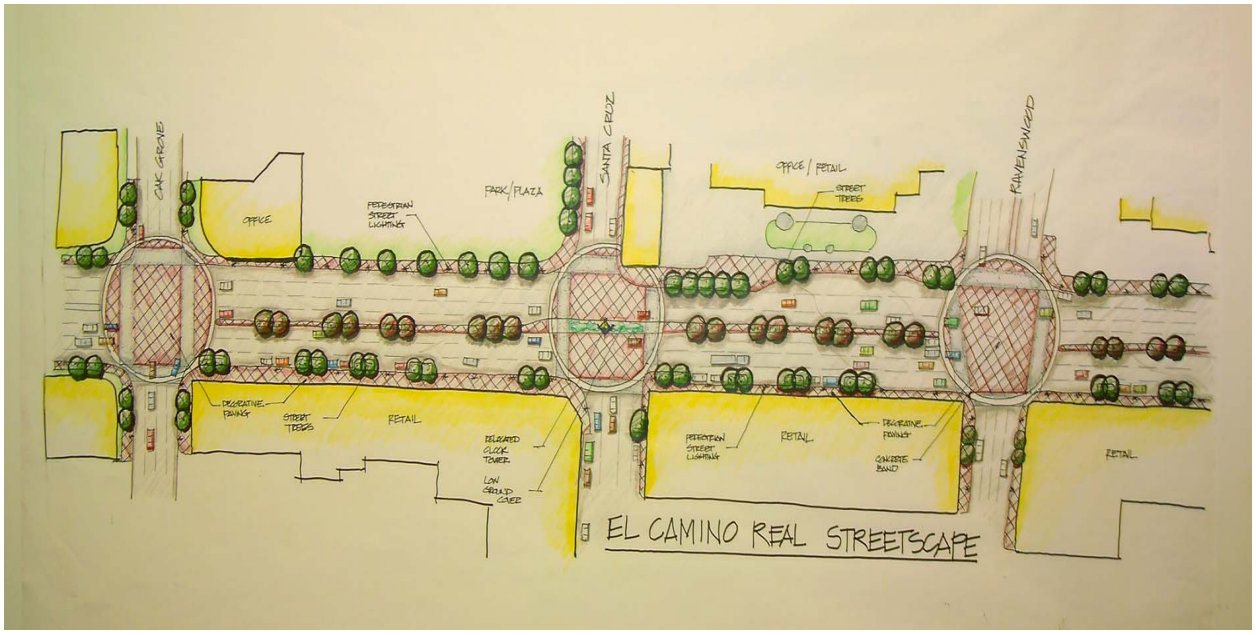
We believe that some of these urban design ideas can help Menlo Park form its urban design vision. That vision is critical to achieving good, long-term goals, while incremental change occurs.

The Green Team was lead by Tom Gilman and Susan Eschweiler. The other team members were Waibun Lee, Rico del Moral, Howard Kwok, Joanna Leong, Stuart Bussian, Danielle DiLuzio, Carol McHugh, Alex Marquez, Lisa Volpe, and Pasha.

NEW RESIDENTIAL / RETAIL
NEW RESIDENTIAL / RETAIL
NEW RETAIL / OFFICE
PEDESTRIAN UNDERCROSSING
ALMA STREET
BUS DROP OFF
PEDESTRIAN UNDERCROSSING
BUS DROP OFF
RETAIL
RETAIL
TRAIN STATION
FARMERS MARKET
MODEL TRAINS
RETAIL
NEW RETAIL/OFFICE
OAK GROVE
RESIDENTIAL
NEW MIXED USE RESIDENTIAL/ RETAIL
MENLO CENTER
KAYE SWOOD
NEW RETAIL/OFFICE
BIKE
NEW PLAZA
SANTA CRUZ
MASTER SITE PLAN



SECTION THRU PEDESTRIAN CROSSING


OAK GROVE
OFFICE
PEDESTRIAN STREET LIGHTING
PARK/PLAZA
SANTA CRUZ
OFFICE / RETAIL
STREET TREES
RAVENSWOOD
DECORATIVE PAVING
STREET TREES
RETAIL
ELEVATED CLOCK TOWER
LOW SHRUB CARE
PEDESTRIAN STREET LIGHTING
RETAIL
DECORATIVE PAVING
CONCRETE BAND
RETAIL
EL CAMINO REAL STREETSCAPE

MENLO PARK URBAN DESIGN CHARRETTE
AIA SAN MATEO COUNTY

Team Blue Summary Report – No Grade Separation Scenario:

The day started early Saturday morning with a small gathering of architects, and grew all day to include Menlo Park citizens, members of the Chamber of Commerce, elected city officials, and students. “Imagine a Downtown” was our challenge. We thought about what a new image would be like for downtown Menlo Park. The two square blocks bordered by El Camino Real, Oak Grove Ave, Alma Street, and Ravenswood Ave with the Cal-train passing through the eastern edge was the area to be designed.

Each team had the same two blocks to design, although each team was assigned a different elevation and perspective for the Cal-train track. The BLUE team (our team) was instructed to keep the track exactly as it is now. That is, level with the existing grade.

After introducing ourselves to each other we took a walk down Santa Cruz Avenue to the area we were to redesign. As we strolled the area we began to discuss the various options available to us. We returned to our charrette studio and began designing.

Our team sat around the large table debating, evaluating, and considering the whole design concept. We talked about access to and from the site, we discussed crossing the train tracks, we discussed the buildings that were to remain, as well as those that could be eliminated.

We discussed what “place” and “image” meant in the context of Menlo Park. What is a “city center” in terms of activity, uses, etc? We looked at the edges of these two blocks, exploring what happens or should happen across the streets. How the autos, buses, and trains interact or connect with these two blocks was one of the most important elements in considering an appropriate design scheme.

Our group discussed, discussed, and discussed all of the above issues, and more. We had excellent input from a local citizen who worked at SRI. She provided information on the daily comings and goings of the people in her office, more specifically how they interact with downtown Menlo Park. This lady’s information was very helpful.

An engineer, who had studied depressing Oak Grove Ave and Ravenswood Ave under the train tracks, spent half the day trying to convince us of the validity of this approach. It is worth looking into in the future.

Much of our discussion and a little sketching took from early morning to early afternoon. We then had to rush to complete our design in time for the evening presentation.

Our design solution came together to create a wonderful concept we called the “Menlo Park European Plaza” a place with lots of activity. First, we closed off Santa Cruz Avenue, east of El Camino Real to create a walking plaza area culminating just west of the railroad tracks with a fountain/amphitheater that can be used for all types functions.

We created a historic cluster of buildings on the north corner of the Plaza. Included in this historic corner the Old Train Station (now the Chamber of Commerce), the Old Historic House (now an office), and the relocated Old Fire Station. On the northeast side of this Plaza, we located the Historic Clock in a new Tower to be a focal point when people are walking east along Santa Cruz Avenue. The Clock Tower will become a visual aid for directions as well as another landmark along El Camino Real.

On the northeast side of the Plaza, we designed a new Movie Theatre and Art Center that can replace the Guild Theatre, which has been closed. This multi-use facility will attract people to the Plaza day and night as on the weekends. It will help make this “City Center” a happening place with vibrant activity.

Along the west, southwest, and north along El Camino Real, a village of small retail spaces with narrow walking lanes, engages people passing through this area, and invites outdoor interaction.

The British Bankers Club with its plaza, on the south and southeast side of this portion of the now closed off Santa Cruz Avenue will remain. Our biggest change in this area was to provide a separate parking ramp, into and out of the lower level garage. This allowed us to close off Merrell Street to thru traffic and creating more activity space along our walking plaza. However Merrell Street at each side will have ramps down to an underground garage directly below the Plaza, creating plenty of accessible, convenient parking for these two blocks.

We have also relocated the bus drop-off areas along Alma Street just east of the railroad tracks. This keeps the buses out of the Plaza area, while allowing passengers to have a pedestrian connection to the train and the Plaza.

Finally, we have lined the eastern side of Alma Street with mixed-use buildings that have retail on the first floor, offices on the second floor, and residential on the third floor. This will increase the number of people living close to the city center and provide some small retail for the transit passengers using buses and trains.

WOW, WHAT A DAY! We had a great time and were stimulated by the dialogue, designing, and the interaction with everyone present. Who would have thought that our “IMAGE OF A DOWNTOWN” turned out to be a spot for all, residents and visitors alike? We can’t wait to see these collective visions realized for all to enjoy!

The Blue Team leader was Dale Meyer AIA. The other AIA team members were Tim Haley, Ricardo Reyes, Alan Olin, and Liz Roepke. Rob D’Spain, an artist, Steve Kikuchi, a landscape architect, two students and citizens with useful insights, joined us.

ALMA ST
BUS DROP
RR CALTRAIN
RR CALTRAIN
TRAIN STATION
MOVIES ART
MENLO SQUARE
OAK GROVE AVE
RETAIL
RETAIL
RETAIL
BBC
KEPLER'S
RAVENSWOOD AVE
EL CAMINO REAL
EL CAMINO REAL
MENLO AVE
NORTH
SITE PLAN

Team Yellow Summary Report – Fully Depressed Railway Below Grade

Our team's challenge was to develop a design with the Caltrain railway fully depressed below grade. This alternative reduced barriers between the area east of the tracks and the Santa Cruz Avenue area, and greatly improved vehicular and pedestrian circulation. It also provided the opportunity to re-plan the block around the Caltrain station, create a rich mixture of office, retail and housing, and conceive a somewhat different pattern of development for downtown Menlo Park.

Following a team meeting in which we developed a work plan and project goals, our approach to designing a new downtown for Menlo Park began with a team tour of the plan area. We also conducted a short "cognitive mapping" exercise, asking people on the street to draw a quick sketch of downtown Menlo Park. The resulting maps quickly revealed key streets and landmarks that people include in their definitions of the downtown Menlo Park. For example, Santa Cruz Avenue was included in all of the maps, confirming the central role that the street plays in the function and image of downtown Menlo Park. The British Banker's Club was also frequently included, which revealed the value of distinctive architecture to people's image of the downtown area. Just as interesting, however, were the elements that people did *not* include in their maps. El Camino Real was not prominently featured in many people's definition of downtown Menlo Park, nor was the area north of Santa Cruz Avenue.

Our team felt that it was very important to create a downtown that would sustain and renew itself. We envisioned an increased number of people living and working in downtown Menlo Park, supporting local business and reducing automobile congestion through access to Caltrain and public transit along El Camino Real. As our designs began to emerge, we focused on what we see as achievable goals for downtown Menlo Park.

Make downtown Menlo Park visually distinctive

Gateway elements on El Camino Real at Menlo Avenue and Oak Grove Avenue would create a sense of arrival in downtown Menlo Park. In our design, gateway elements include vertical mini towers that are both graphic delineators and public art; decorative paving with texture and scale at intersections; taller buildings to reinforce the image of a commercial center; and the use of unique signage and landscaping. These strategies will enhance the downtown identity for businesses both along El Camino and to the east. Well-planned signage will direct vehicular shopping and business traffic to mid-block parking plazas and commuter traffic to the Caltrain station.

Extend Santa Cruz Avenue

Our plan proposes improving the development of Santa Cruz Avenue across El Camino to the Caltrain station area, creating a strong visual connection to draw shoppers and downtown employees to this new development area. Those working near the rail station would also be better connected to restaurants and shops across El Camino.

Encourage mixed use development

Mixed use is the leading approach to redeveloping existing urban areas. Why? Because it allows people to live, eat, and shop near where they work – or at least near major transportation opportunities like Caltrain, such as in downtown Menlo Park. It makes for a lively urban mix while reducing our reliance on automobile transportation. Simply put, mixed use development promotes the sense of vitality that we want in our downtowns.

Create a (modest) super block

Our design proposes to create "Santa Cruz Plaza," a densely-developed block with stores, restaurants, offices, and housing on the east side of El Camino. With rail and bus transit to the east and the established Santa Cruz Avenue commercial center to the west, this area will be the centerpiece of the Menlo Park's revitalized downtown. Our design presents a rich tapestry of plazas and pedestrian walkways that also bridge across the newly-depressed railway to embrace revitalized office, housing, and commercial uses to the east of the tracks.

Mitigate the visual impact of autos

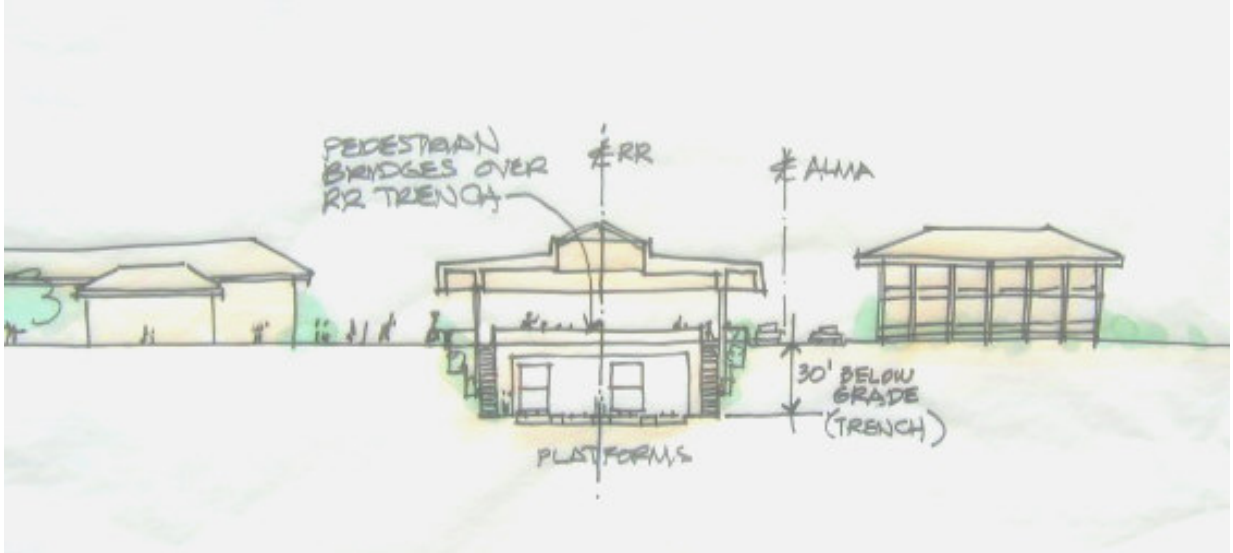
Our team was very clear that the buildings, trees, and people should be the primary visual image in the downtown area. Most car parking is located below the buildings, including our proposed Santa Cruz Plaza, in order to present and preserve an inviting pedestrian scale.

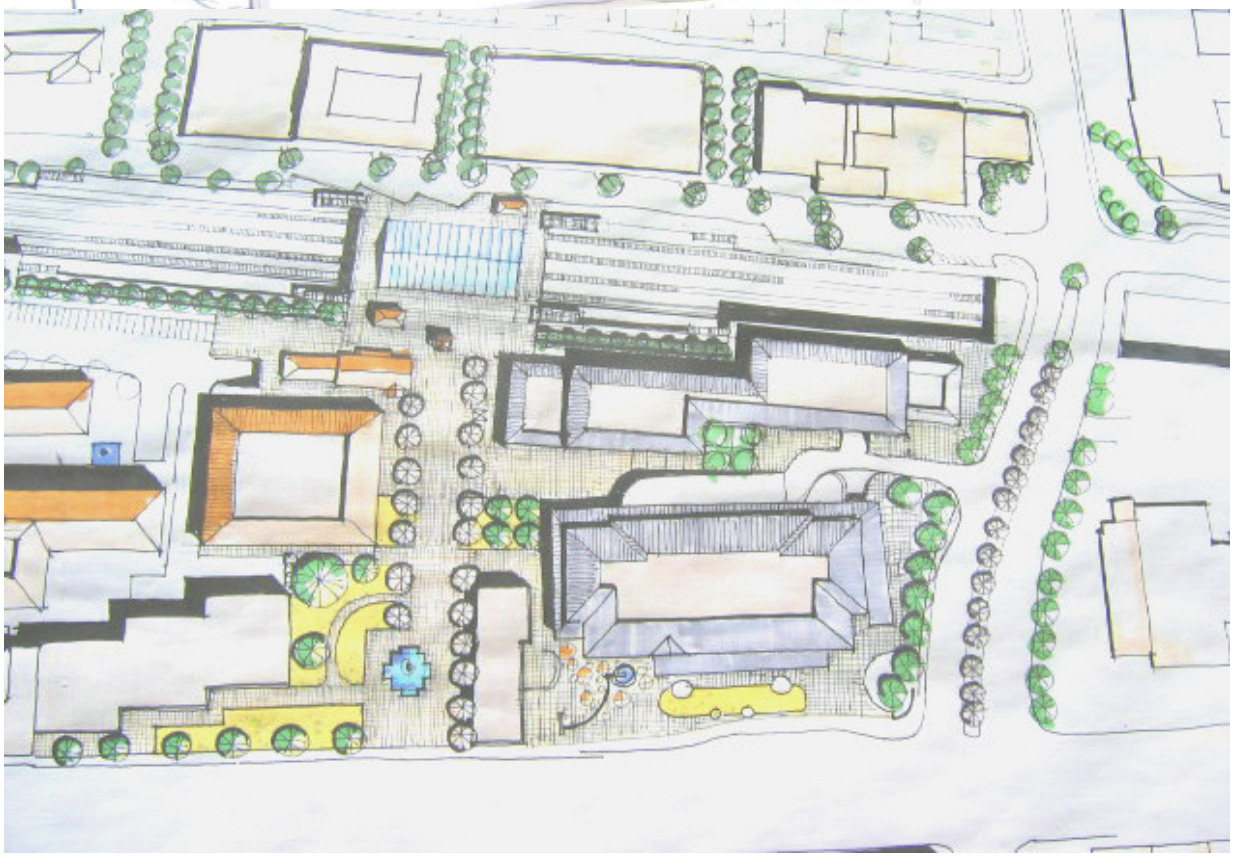
Capitalize on the parks to create an urban path

Our design suggests making a connection from Fremont Park through a heavily-landscaped downtown and an inviting urban park at our proposed Santa Cruz Plaza to end of the civic center park, the library, and Burgess Park beyond. In that way, the walk along Santa Cruz Avenue will present a series of discoveries that will encourage visitors to continue east toward the civic center area, and west towards the downtown area.

Menlo Park has all the ingredients to make a regionally renowned downtown with the best of dining, shopping, walking, and living. We hope that our vision encourages the community to take the initiative and make it happen.

The courageous yellow team was lead by co-captains David Schnee AIA, AICP and Wayne Gehrke AIA. Our band of yellowistas included Robert Scheren AIA, Jim Dierkes AIA, David Sturges AIA, Joan Dolan, Amy Strazzarino, Jonathan Hartman, Kari Holmgren, Tatiana Poliakova, Kirsten Keith, Terrese Brekke, and Michael Lambert.


PEDESTRIAN BRIDGES OVER RR TRENCH
℄ RR
℄ ALMA
30' BELOW GRADE (TRENCH)
PLATFORMS



Team Orange Summary Report - Elevated Track Scenario:

Due to the sizable train and seismic loads, it was understood that a retained earth support base was the method preferred by Cal Train for this alternative. Openings could be achieved to bridge right-of-ways or passages up to 60 feet or more with intermediate columns.

Although superficially presenting a daunting physical challenge, this alternative also presented our team with some positive opportunities that included:

- A most direct visual and pedestrian connection across the rail right of way at grade, and

- The potential to lift the noise impact of the train up and above those places dedicated to people and human activity.

The morning gathering resulted in ours being a rather large team of over 20 individuals who included architects, allied designers as well as a very welcomed representation of resident-design professionals. This large group immediately broke up into 3 brainstorming sub-groups intent upon flushing out some first impressions of the problems at hand.
After about an hour and a half the team was ready to re-assemble, pin-up and discuss the immediate and most intuitive design reactions.
Listening to the comments and viewing the sketches posted on the wall, several functional goals and urban design concepts emerged common to all:

- Public and private vehicles serving the station should be isolated to a one-way route northeast of the tracks;

- Through vehicle circulation should be avoided at the southwest side of the tracks.

- Historic buildings should be moved to create a grouping of historic buildings on the northeast side of the tracks.

- There should be a strong pedestrian, experiential and visual connection between the station area and the Civic Center park area.

- The amount of openness under the tracks should be maximized for visual and pedestrian connections.

- Santa Cruz Avenue should be continued across El Camino with a turn about / cul-de-sac bulb at the terminus north of the BBC and flanked with new retail buildings to the North.

- The juncture of the Santa Cruz Avenue extension and the station area east of the tracks should flow under the tracks on axis with Santa Cruz Avenue creating a major civic outdoor place.

The singular issue of deliberation and subtle design debate involved the degree to which the character of the place should be "urban" or "suburban". Some team members envisioned a set of urban spaces formed or shaped with architecture 3-4 stories tall with a mix of housing and retail creating new distinctly urban spaces. Others envisioned a more suburban or park-like set of spaces inspired by the character of the Civic Center and the Sunset Magazine gardens loosely flowing under the tracks. Team members who were both design professionals and either residents of Menlo Park or neighbors who frequent the area offered valuable insights on the identity of the community. It became a quick but intense "reading" of the community resulting in defining an image of the community as a suburban place of connected gardens. The station area can be envisioned as the meeting and blending of the hardscape of downtown Santa Cruz Avenue and the rambling parks and gardens of both the Civic Center and the yards throughout town. The final design became a synthesis of these functional goals and this image or vision of a place being Menlo Park.
Key components of the final design as presented:

- A pedestrian oriented opening under the tracks of equal width and on axis to Santa Cruz Avenue.

- A new one-way road dedicated to vehicles serving the station northeast of the tracks.

- A continuation of the Santa Cruz Avenue streetscape across El Camino with a cul-de-sac / vehicle round about terminus.

- Northeast of the tracks should be developed as a wooded park with a meandering water feature and pedestrian path linking the Civic Center park to the Santa Cruz downtown through the opening under the tracks.

- A pair of two story parking structures, one between the existing parking structure/office building and the tracks and a second adjacent to the tracks near the relocated 7-eleven building.

- The historic buildings are located northeast of the tracks to create a community of historic architecture in a park setting;

- Oak trees or other native species should be incorporated and allowed to become identifying and softening features throughout.

- New development along the Santa Cruz Avenue extension should be similar in scale to the rest of the street, two stories, with ground floor retail and residential or live work above.

- New development along El Camino should provide a broader sidewalk and landscaped frontage;

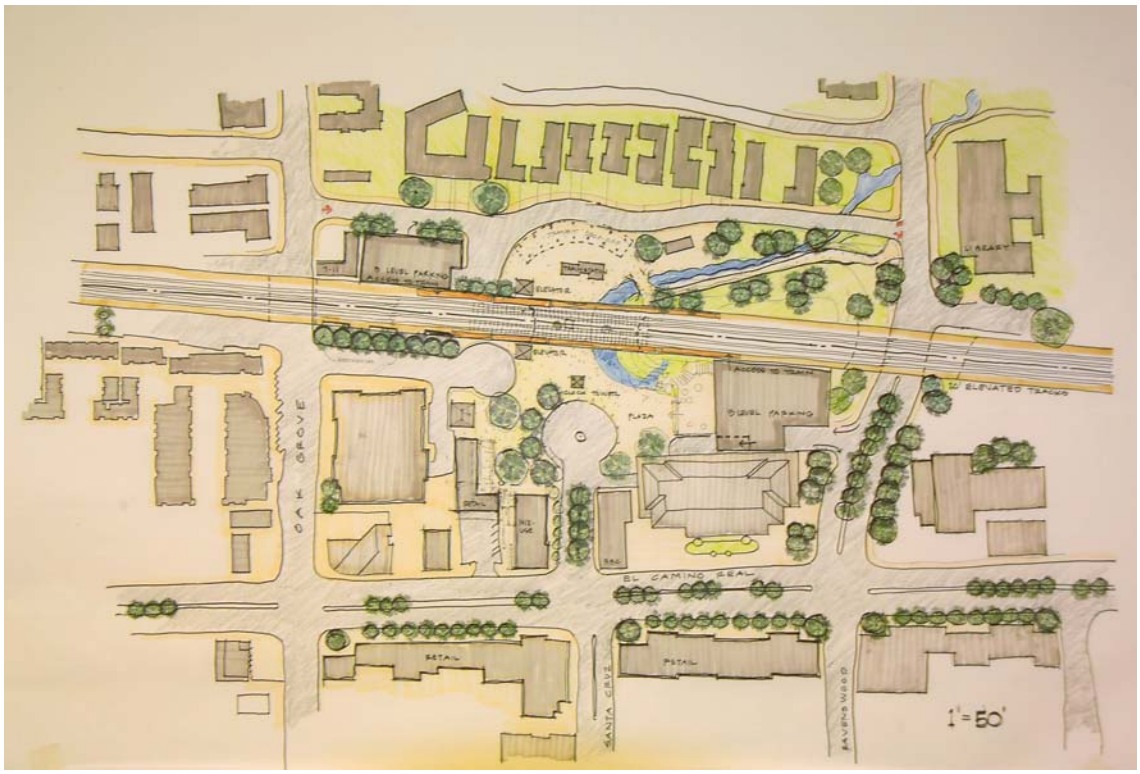
- The walls of the elevated tracks could incorporate niches serving the weekend farmer's market.

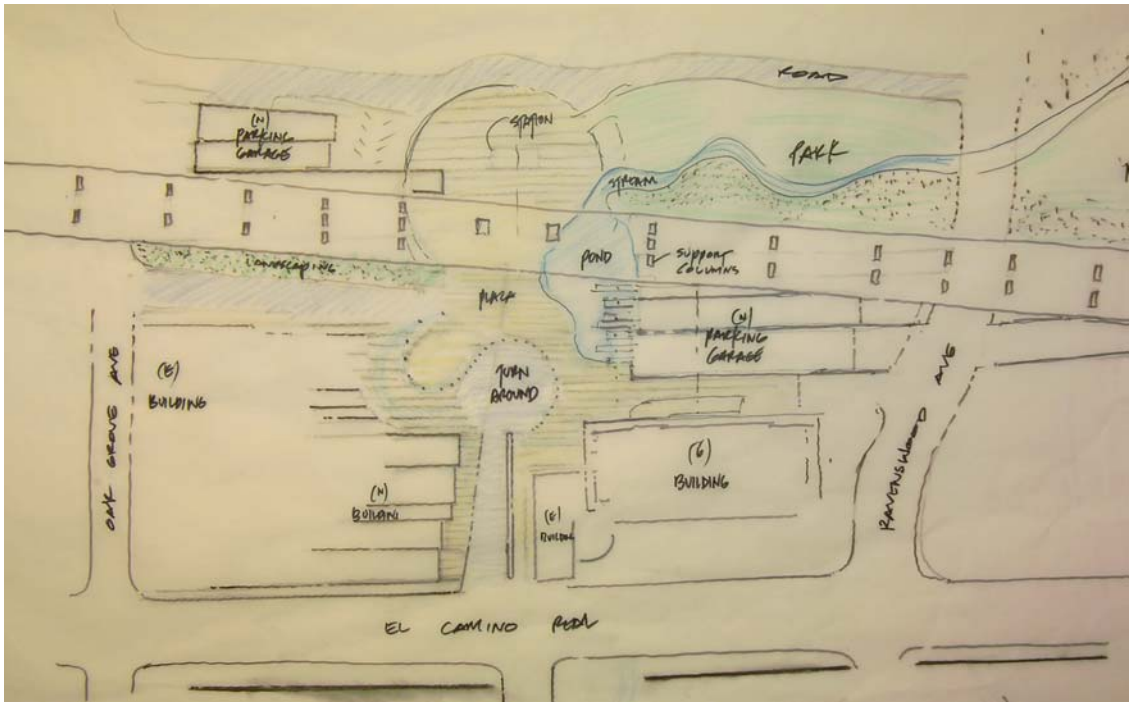
In general, the design that emerged can be seen not as a result of a singular broad stroke or large-scale urban creation, but rather a careful composition and layering of smaller scale interventions that could in fact evolve over time. This somewhat more organic approach to urban planning, originally characterized as "piecemeal growth" by Christopher Alexander in his book The Oregon Experiment is a has been considered to be a critical component in the life and evolution of healthy and memorable communities.

An alternative vision of the elevated track supported by a system of arches instead of the earthfilled walls was also sketched out and presented by one member of the team. This alternative if structural feasible along this block perforates the barrier of the tracks providing instead a number of opportunities for connecting the two sides of the tracks for people and landscape. Although not explored, a third alternative may exist in a combination of both schemes presented.

The elevated track scenario has the potential to provide a number of benefits and positive urban / community attributes. An understanding the community and seeing the elevated track not as a barrier but a source of emerging suburban landscape and identity may be critical to a successful solution.

Team members included: Torin Knorr, Team Leader, Robert George FAIA, Dianne Whitaker AIA, Ambrose Wong, John Lucchesi AIA (prepared summary report), Stan Field Associate AIA, Mike Callan Landscape Architect, Steven and Thalia Lubin AIAs, George Cintel AIA, Steven Schwanke AIA, Rick Leitzinger Associate AIA, Tom Harrod AIASCV, Andrew Wollenberg, Dalen Gilbrech, Stephen Lomica.


OAK GROVE
EL CAMINO REAL
SANTA CRUZ
RAVENSWOOD
1'=50'


ROAD
(N) PARKING GARAGE
STATION
PARK
STREAM
POND
SUPPORT COLUMNS
PLAZA
(N) PARKING GARAGE
(E) BUILDING
TURN AROUND
(N) BUILDING
(E) BUILDING
(E) BUILDING
OAK GROVE AVE
RAVENSWOOD AVE
EL CAMINO REAL

OAK GROVE
EL CAMINO
SANTA CRUZ
CIRCULATION
PEDESTRIANS
VEHICLES
TRAINS
1:50
CIRCULATION PLAN

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Ellis Schoichet, co-chair

John Stewart, co-chair

Torin Knorr, orange team leader

David Schnee yellow team co-leader

Wayne Gehrke, yellow team co-leader

Tom Gilman, green team co-leader

Susan Eschweiler, green team co-leader

Dale Meyer, blue team leader

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April 2005

City of Menlo Park Imagine a Downtown Design Charrette

The American Institute of Architects San Mateo County was delighted to be asked to participate together with the City of Menlo Park, Business Development Department on the "Imagine a Downtown" Menlo Park Design Charrette held on April 9, 2005.

A Design Charrette refers to a collaborative process in which architects, other design professionals, community members and City staff come together to create a "vision" One of the remarkable things about a Design Charrette is the amount of excitement it generates among all the participants and the virtue of exploring and resolving potential design and planning issues at a very early stage.

Participation of the AIASMC was identified as the leading group, who emphasized the need to understand the community's vision to ensure that the plans that emerged at the end of the Charrette truly reflect the values of the area.

The AIA San Mateo County is very proud to have helped in creating a vision for the Menlo Park Downtown District to become a true City Center and would like to thank Dave Johnson, City of Menlo Park Business Development Manager for granting us the opportunity to be involved with the local community.

Noemi K. Avram, AIA
President, AIA San Mateo County

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