



**BLOCK 22:  
NEIGHBORHOOD IN TRANSITION**

*Christine Crown  
Sandra Kilcollins*

Material culture and landscape constitute, as it were, libraries on the land. We must care for these sources, help catalogue and map them, and preserve them for the undeciphered information they contain. Historical geography's vigilance in protecting genuine landscapes is no less vital than protecting documentary archives from replacement by myth and historical fiction.

*Earle et al. 1989, 176*

Historical geographers have long been interested in historic preservation and other issues affecting evolving patterns and processes of the American city (see, for example, Datel and Dingemans 1980; Jackson 1980; Arreola 1992). Despite the ongoing work of these scholars and others interested in preserving the quality of life and landscape in urban areas, many communities continue to pursue a rather haphazard and reactive approach to local historic preservation efforts. As a result older structures are often demolished or moved to new locations with little consideration or prior planning, often destroying the character and architectural integrity of older neighborhoods.

Most communities pay homage to the past by selecting one or two significant structures, either of grand architectural design or associated

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*Christine Crown has a Master's degree from the Department of Geography and Planning at California State University, Chico, and is currently a GIS technician there. Sandra Kilcollins is a graduate student in the Department of Geography and Planning at California State University, Chico and teaches sixth grade at C.K. Price Intermediate School in Orland, CA.*

with an important historical event or figure. These structures are carefully renovated and returned to an "authentic" state. They may even be inhabited by costumed actors recreating a romanticized vision of a sanitized past. In California, schoolchildren and tourists visit Sutter's Fort, the prison island of Alcatraz and the mission of San Juan Bautista to be exposed to the past. Many cities preserve the homes of socially or economically prominent early citizens, as shown by Chico's Bidwell Mansion, San Diego's Alvarado House and the John Muir House in Martinez.

Occasionally a neighborhood or district has been chosen as representative of an era and maintained or reconstructed in a historically "pure" manner. Visitors to Sacramento or San Diego's Old Towns or San Francisco's Pacific Heights Victorians are seldom aware that they are experiencing an idealized view of the past, not necessarily a realistic one. The urban designers of such projects have established homogenous building and zoning guidelines which guarantee a frozen slice of time, in which all structures and accompanying fixtures (such as fire hydrants) are of the same period and style, even when this type of unity rarely, if ever, occurred in real life (Ford 1984).

This type of historic district ignores the reality of a cityscape in which construction occurred continually over a period of time to meet the needs of a variety of residents. The results of changes and additions over time are most often a heterogeneous blend of neighboring structures reflecting the needs, esthetics and social position of their owners and builders. From a geographical point of view, it is the examination of an authentic neighborhood in which the patterns, distribution and evolution of its structures are studied, which reveals an accurate picture of its history. Unfortunately, mature neighborhoods consisting of a variety of styles or of less prosperous structures are not generally deemed to be of historical significance by community members or preservationists.

The continuing vitality and importance of landscapes of the past are often viewed with ambivalence by local residents. On the one hand, a certain respect and reverence for the past is felt, but on the other hand, old buildings can be viewed by many as a constraint to progress (Ford 1984).

In January of 1994, a representative of the Chico Heritage Association approached the Department of Geography and Planning at California State University, Chico to request assistance in cataloguing houses on city block 22, located immediately adjacent to downtown Chico. The structures were scheduled for demolition by the city to provide additional parking for the Municipal Center. The purpose of this study was

to document the changing composition and character of city block 22: a neighborhood in transition.

### Study Area

Located approximately 90 miles north of Sacramento, the city of Chico contains 80,000 inhabitants within its urban area according to the 1990 U.S. Census. Block 22 is located in a section of town known as Old Chico and is a part of one of Chico's earliest residential areas. Old Chico, defined by Big and Little Chico Creeks to the north and south, Orient Street to the east and Sycamore Street to the west, was laid out in 1860 by the town's founder, John Bidwell (Figure 1).

Block 22 is surrounded on three sides by residences, small businesses, and a church. Several buildings housing municipal functions are located on the remaining side. The residences date from the late 1860s to the 1940s and represent a variety of architectural styles. Some structures have been converted from residential to business use. In some cases the architectural integrity of the structure has been maintained by individual owners. Many reflect modifications in varying degrees.

The city occupies several other structures in the immediate vicinity, including two small cinder block buildings located within block 22. Expansion of the city center is planned to bring city functions under one roof, and utilization of the present parking lot for the new structure will necessitate relocating parking facilities. Block 22, immediately to the east of the designated expansion, was selected by city officials to be the new parking lot because of its easy access to government buildings and its proximity to downtown Chico.

### Methodology

Research originally focused on completing Historic Resource Inventory forms (HRI's) on each existing structure of block 22, excluding the cinder block city annexes located on each corner of the east side. Historic Resource Inventories are standardized forms provided by the California State Office of Historic Preservation which document the location, physical description and condition of a structure. The architectural and historical significance of the building is determined using a variety of sources, placing the structure within the context of its neighborhood and community. A 3" x 5" black and white photo of the structure's front facade is also included in this assessment.

In the late 1980s, the Chico Heritage Association mobilized and trained a volunteer group of community members to undertake the

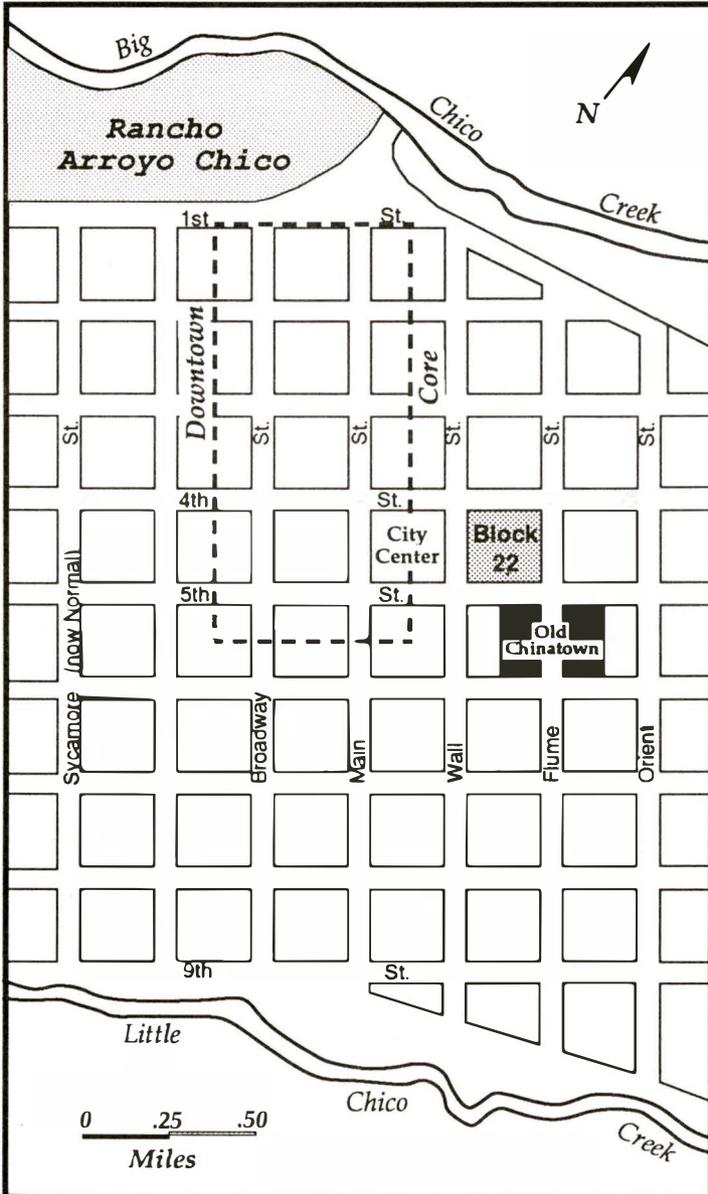


Figure 1. Old Chico

documentation of the structures of Old Chico. Those deemed to be architecturally or historically significant were targeted for inclusion. While in some neighborhoods, a significant number of structures were inventoried, in other parts of the city, only one or two were singled out. Only one house on block 22 was included in this survey.

Although field work began within ten days of the initial contact, to our dismay we found that the buildings had already been vacated and disconnected from public utilities. A phone call to local authorities revealed that demolition and removal of the structures was scheduled to begin in less than eight weeks, lending urgency to our efforts. Initial research focused on photographic and architectural analysis of both interior and exterior aspects of each house on the block.

Following documentation of the structure's physical aspects, archival research was undertaken utilizing a variety of resources including Sanborn fire insurance maps, city directories, City of Chico Building Division files and tax assessment rolls. Interviews with local residents and historians provided additional assistance and anecdotal accounts.

Existing HRI's on file with the Chico Heritage Association focused on providing portraits of individual structures. They had been completed earlier by researchers working independently. The targeting of an entire block for demolition coupled with time constraints forced block 22 researchers to combine resources and work as a single unit. This team approach not only fulfilled the original intent of completing individual HRI's but led to the development of a vertical portrait of block 22 and its changing character through time. In this way, what seemed at first to be a goal more suitable for students of history became a legitimate geographical study as the relationship of the structures to each other and as a group within the community became more apparent.

### **Portrait of Block 22**

The city of Chico owes its geographical form to John Bidwell, who, after obtaining his personal fortune in the gold fields of the nearby Feather River, established a large and successful ranching operation on the north side of Big Chico Creek. In 1860, hoping to attract the development necessary to support the continued expansion of his personal enterprises, Bidwell purchased the adjoining land grant and had it platted into the fifty blocks which were to become Old Chico. Free building lots were offered to prospective settlers, as well as to churches and other civic groups. By 1869, about 2,500 people called Chico home.

The earliest existing Sanborn maps indicate that the first residences of block 22 (most of which no longer existed in 1993) were modest,

working class homes. Intermingled among the homes were a variety of outbuildings and outhouses. The 1886 edition shows ten residences ranging from a one room single story house to a large two story with its own stable.

The original fifty blocks of Old Chico were identical, each square block being divided into eight lots. A downtown core area evolved along Main and Broadway Streets, surrounded by residential areas. The location of block 22, two blocks east of Main Street, almost guaranteed its future as a part of a residential area serving those who worked downtown. Whether by intent or by accident, neighborhoods of more affluent homes developed to the north and to the west of block 22. In 1921 six of those houses present in 1888 still existed. Six more had been added including a Brown Shingle and a vernacular cottage which were later saved. The stables had been reclassified as sheds and garages. According to early city directories, the occupations of residents ranged from ranch hands, saloonkeeper and laborer to dressmaker, fireman, printer and electrician.

It is likely that the presence of Chico's Chinese community, located on city blocks 24 and 25 directly to the southeast of block 22, negatively influenced the development of the block. Brought in as laborers, first in the gold mines and later on the railroads, about 500 had gathered in "Old Town" by the mid-1860's. The Chinese were initially employed by many Chico residents as cooks and other domestic servants. Block 22 maintained its middle class nature during the early years of the Chinese presence in "Old Town". Initial reaction towards the newcomers was of curiosity and appreciation of their willingness to work long hours for low wages. By the 1870's extensive and virulent antipathies had developed toward the Chinese in Chico culminating in arson and murder. The Chinese presence almost certainly affected surrounding property owners and potential residents. Even though the Chinese eventually were displaced from the downtown area the modest nature of block 22 would be maintained (Book 1974).

### **Structures of Block 22**

Research efforts culminated in the completion of an HRI on each of eight residential structures on block 22. Table 1 lists each house, giving a brief architectural description, date of construction and general condition before the city cleared the site for the parking lot. Two of the homes, a single story structure from the mid-1880s which was razed, and a two-story showcase from the early 1900s which was sold and re-

Table 1. Residential Structures on Block 22

Address	Architectural Description	Estimated Construction Date	1993 Condition
415 Wall St.	Vernacular/Italianate	1884	Deteriorated
426 Flume St.	Vernacular/Craftsman Bungalow derivation	1906	Deteriorated
271 E. 4th St.	Craftsman/Brown Shingle	1907	Good
418 Flume St.	Vernacular/Craftsman Bungalow	1909	Fair
272 E. 5th St.	Vernacular/Clapboard Cottage w/ Greek Revival Trim	1923	Excellent
435, 445, 455, 465 Wall St.	Spanish Colonial Revival	1940	Fair

located just a few days before the scheduled demolition, will be described here to illustrate the type of information uncovered.

The oldest building on the block was a modest single story cottage of Italianate derivation, a style which is often referred to as a Workingman's Cottage (Figure 2). Located mid-block, with its straight-forward exterior, the house was typical of many such residences built for working class residents during the mid to late 1880s in Chico. On a deteriorating brick foundation the boxy, symmetrical structure maintained its original tall, narrow windows, each double-hung with four panes. It also displayed two transom windows, cornerboards and a boxed cornice. The entry portico was supported by four turned columns. The interior had been updated to circa 1950s standards; the kitchen had been remodeled, the bathroom enlarged to accommodate a claw-footed bathtub and the ceiling lowered several feet. An examination of building department records documented that the building had



Figure 2. Oldest House on Block 22

been condemned due to extensive roof damage from both dry-rot and a fire which resulted in badly charred rafters. Complete rebuilding of the roof system would have been necessary to bring it up to the current city building code.

Perusal of city directories, available from 1910 to the present, revealed Marian Gleason, a Chico Normal School student to be the tenant at 415 Wall Street in 1910. By 1915, Richard Myers and his wife Minnie were in residence. Mr. Myers was a barber for B.C. Van Nice on Main Street, one of more than seventeen barber shops in the downtown area at this time. By 1922, Minnie Myers, now widowed, was listed at a different address and the house was rented to Hallie Johnson, a cement worker, and his wife Ethel. During the Spring of 1927, a local miner, Jack Post and his wife Blanche purchased the house. After Blanche's death, Mr. Post continued to reside in the home. Sometime prior to 1965, Jack Post both remarried and retired. By 1970 his second wife, Lucille, had died and from 1975 on the house was a rental, occupied primarily by Chico State students. The last tenant, Joan Rae, operated a small retail clothing store before the house was condemned due to the earlier mentioned roof problems.

The second house this article will discuss is an early 1900 two-story Craftsman home of the type known as Brown Shingle (Figure 3).

Displaying two front facing gabled roofs and a two story bay window topped with a decorative balustrade, the structure was one of the most substantial in the immediate area and the only one of its type in this part of Chico. The exposed rafter tails and tie beams are typical of this structural form, as are the double-hung windows in which the top half is partitioned into smaller sections. The architecturally unfortunate addition of a second floor room above the front porch (presumably when the house was subdivided into a triplex) dominates the front facade and significantly alters the architectural integrity of the structure, leading to a rather top heavy appearance.

The house was built around 1907 by Chico residents Alice and Edward Malloy. The 1910 City Directory lists Mr. Malloy as a lumberman and gives a local phone number, one of few in the area. He is not listed as being an owner or manager, but it is interesting that a wage earner was able to construct such a substantial personal residence. Alice Malloy was registered to vote, but other than that the couple seems to have led a quiet life. They do not appear in any indexes of local history books or newspapers.



Figure 3. Brown Shingle House

In 1939 the house was sold to Fred and Mary Ruddy but they do not appear as residents until the 1948 City Directory, when Mary Ruddy, then widowed, occupied one of three apartments. City Directories available before 1940 indicate one tenant, those after 1945 have listings for three. Since neither City Directories nor city building records exist for the intervening years, the exact year of the division is unclear.

After the Ruddy's, most early inhabitants were service people, enjoying a location close to downtown. There were several clerks, a bank teller, a police officer and a telephone operator. Twice the name of a young man appears alone, joined in succeeding years by a wife and finally disappearing, perhaps following the Great American Dream to the suburbs.

In later years, most tenants were listed as retired, reflecting the convenience of downtown and the lower rents of a declining area. Finally, as the university grew, an ever-changing series of student renters occupied the apartments of 271 E. Fourth Street. They were vacated in late 1993 as the city prepared for demolition.

The five remaining houses included in this study were built in the early 1900s. Four, although undistinguished as to architectural style or historical significance, were typical of the surrounding area. Although structurally sound, a combination of badly done renovations and lack of general upkeep had combined to lend them a rather rundown appearance. City records indicated that the structures on the block had been purchased by the city during the early to mid-1980s. One of the four, a vernacular cottage with clapboard siding on East 5th Street caught the attention of the student researcher assigned to it. Negotiating with city officials in the final days before the scheduled demolition, he purchased and arranged to have his "new" house moved to a lot on the edge of town.

Perhaps the most grandiose building on block 22 was a large Spanish Style home on Wall Street. This Spanish Colonial Revival was an imposing presence on the block. Preserving its original four apartment configuration, the structure combined elements of the Monterey and Mission styles popular in much of California, but represented in Chico by only a few examples. In excellent condition, the building had been sold and preparations were in progress to saw it in half for removal to a nearby lot. The remaining houses on block 22 were leveled on schedule.

## Summary

Because this study commenced during the concluding days of the structures of block 22, it was unrealistic to expect our research efforts to

affect the demolition process, although there was always a possibility that the exhuming of some piece of information would justify a "Save The Block" movement. A local artist did voice her concern to a local paper, which gave rise to an article questioning the need to raze an entire block, as well as mentioning the former presence of Maidu Indians (who utilized the area prior to Anglo settlement) and proximity to the early Chinese community. The additional publicity impelled the city to retain the services of an archeologist to inspect the site and ensure that any significant remains would not inadvertently be damaged.

Chico has been successful in maintaining a vibrant and economically vital downtown, due primarily to the presence of the university but also to the continued presence of municipal and judicial functions. A strong and vocal downtown business association and active student body at California State University, Chico can also be credited to the continuing importance and attractiveness of Chico's city center. However, the price of a growing downtown is that the surrounding residential areas must be compromised in order to provide space for commercial and other public uses. By 1994, the areas adjacent to block 22 to the north and south had been rezoned for commercial use and included a vacant storefront, an architect's office, a medical clinic and a counseling center (which occupies a beautifully restored Victorian). The area to the east is still residential, and for the most part is well maintained. Inserting a parking lot into the area has not only meant the razing of a primarily residential block, but is a further intrusion into the remaining neighborhood that perhaps sends a message to remaining home owners that the area is not worth investing in (Figure 4). The block 22 research project provided a lasting record of the structures and history of the area, illustrating the changing uses and sequent occupation of a typical city block.

The lessons learned from a project of this type can be applied to a variety of areas. Many communities are struggling to find a balance between blindly preserving all older structures and randomly removing them. Certainly, age is only one factor when evaluating the worth of a building. The physical structure of a city must grow and change as its functions change. According to planner Michael Kwartzler: "A mature city is not a physically aging city in which decay has been renamed patina and in which places are treated as museums rather than settings for ongoing life" (Kwartzler 1993, 186) In the perception of city officials the utilization of block 22 for parking represents positive growth for the city. With no policies or ordinances in place for preservation in the city of Chico it is left for sporadic preservation efforts by individual owners or late date protests in reaction to proposed demolition.

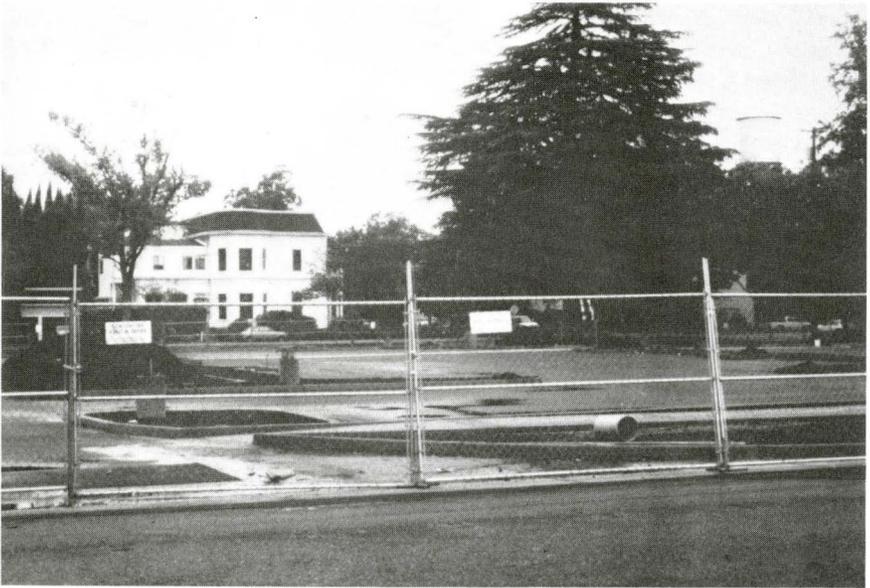


Figure 4. Block 22 — Paved over

Chico, typical of many California cities, has preserved and renovated several showcase structures from its early history. One, Bidwell Mansion, is recognized as a State Historic Park. Eight others have recognition on the National Register of Historic Places. A small, dedicated, but underfunded group of volunteers support local preservation and archiving of historical documents and photographs through membership in the Chico Heritage Association. This description of the state of historic preservation in Chico is typical of that in many other California communities. Middle and lower income heterogeneous neighborhoods have seldom been recognized as candidates for historical study or preservation. A 1985 article entitled "Preservation and a Sense of Orientation For American Cities" by Dr. Robin Datel emphasizes the need to widen the criteria by which structures are evaluated for preservation. According to Datel (1985, 130):

The broadening of preservation criteria to designate landscapes that are recent, vernacular, and associated with ordinary lives and events means that more places where daily lives are lived receive protection under historic preservation. Such designation recalls past lives in the setting and offers reassurance that people will live there in the future.

As a direct result of the Block 22 study additional projects in the field of historical geography have been initiated at CSU, Chico. Researchers and educators are currently involved in a project to develop a multimedia geographic information system (GIS) and curriculum to teach the themes of history and geography by using Chico as the laboratory. The use of a GIS will make possible both permanent archiving of historic resource inventory data and improved accessibility for students, researchers and the general public.

The fate of Block 22 had been determined at the onset of this study and illustrates just one small facet of the face of historic preservation. While the block itself was not of outstanding historic or architectural value, it was a unique and irreplaceable part of its neighborhood. The study of the loss of historic Block 22 in a little known downtown neighborhood of Chico provides only one case study among many in California's rapidly changing urban scene. One thing remains clear. Without understanding the geographic context of an area, its unique sense of place may be lost forever.



### Acknowledgments

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