

# Downtown Land-Use Change: A Historical Geography of Fresno, California's Central Business District, 1860–2010

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## **Abstract**

Fresno, California, has dramatically changed from a small agricultural community in the early 1800s to a sprawling metropolitan area 200 years later. While the city continues to expand, its downtown has suffered. Urban sprawl has caused residents and businesses to locate farther away, while the downtown struggles to survive with limited functions and a poverty stricken population. By investigating primary sources, this paper documents the history of Fresno's downtown, from its humble beginnings and prosperous expansion to its present-day revitalization efforts.

URBAN SPRAWL AND SUBURBANIZATION has left many downtowns abandoned and blighted. Once a concourse of retail, manufacturing, and office functions, many downtowns are now desperately holding onto sundry administrative functions. The plight of many downtowns is often correlated with hegemonic ideologies of development and city life, particularly those associated with advancements in transportation. The transitions from horse and carriage, to streetcar, to train, subway, and finally, the automobile, have led to the decentralization of both business and population. It highlights the inefficiencies of obsolete downtown models and requires a reformation of downtown planning.

According to Robertson (1995), the “heyday” of U.S. downtowns began to abate after the 1920s, with continued decline after World War II. Deterioration increased with the rise of the automobile and shifting retail land-use (Robertson 1995). Obsolete buildings, congested roads, difficult access,

and increased crime rates coupled with lower land prices outside the city core, left downtown development projects precarious and less alluring than in previous decades. There remains a consistent lack of discourse between planners and developers. Planners are often aspiring for a livable city, while developers are often seeking a rapid return on investment. The citizens are left in the middle—wanting a clean, safe, prosperous downtown, yet sometimes unconvinced of the taxpayer costs versus the benefits.

Fresno, California, has undergone this classic growth and decline pattern. This article historicizes the evolving land-use change of Fresno's CBD from a thriving district, to a district of decline, to current revitalization plans.

## Methods

As an urban history case study, research methods relied heavily on qualitative historiographic methods of investigating primary sources such as documents, photographs, and textual material. Records researched were held at various institutions including historical societies, several county and university libraries, and special collections. Additional information was gathered through extensive field investigations of the area and special permissions to enter historic properties.

## Early History

Early in its history, the San Joaquin Valley was dotted with a bantam, white indigenous tree. According to legend, the Spanish called this little tree “Fresno,” which roughly translates to ash tree. Fresno receiving its name from this source is unsubstantiated, however, as the only documented reference to the word “Fresno” prior to development is the Fresno River (Walker 1941). Fresno Slough, settled by the mouth of the Fresno River in the early 1800s, was the first community to adopt this name. This small mining hamlet consisted primarily of saloons, dance halls, and frontiersmen. In 1858, valley resident John Butterfield, placed a stage station approximately seventeen miles south of Fresno Slough. Fresno Slough residents saw this stage station as a strategically better location for business and moved—taking with them the name of their community. This thusly became the original settlement of Fresno (Smith 2004).

During the mid-1800s, the Central Valley was a vast grassy plain with little sign of fertility. Its primary occupants were sheep and cattlemen. Agriculture scripts sold by the state lured investors and homesteaders. The San Joaquin Valley Land Association, known as the “German Syndicate,” bought 80,000 acres and divided the land amongst them to settle. A local well-known res-

ident, A. Y. Easterby, also purchased land and built a thriving wheat farm east of the San Joaquin River (Elliott 1973).

In 1869, railroad investors were constructing a railroad through the valley and speculating on sites for new town development. Leland Stanford, a former California governor (1861–63), was the director as well as one of the investors of the Central Pacific Railroad. As he traveled through the valley, he encountered the farm of A. Y. Easterby and was impressed with the thriving wheat farm he had grown from the barren earth of the valley. Stanford, seeing the great potential for fertile agriculture in the valley, decided to build his town near Easterby's farm. The Contract and Finance Company (a subsidiary of the Central Pacific Railroad) bought 4,480 acres from the German Syndicate near Easterby's farm and surveyed it into 320- by 150-foot blocks with 25- by 150-foot parcels and 20-foot alleys. The parcels are said to have sold for \$60 to \$150. The new town site was formally named Fresno Station in 1874, was later incorporated into the city of Fresno in 1885 (Clough 1984), and flourished as an agrarian society.

## The Construction of Downtown

The original surveyors laid downtown streets to the east and north of the Central Pacific Railroad tracks, resulting in a peculiar street pattern that does not align with true North and is slightly askew from the rest of the city (see Figure 1). J Street, for example, is forty-six degrees to the right of true North (Walker 1941). As the city expanded and businesses began to locate to the downtown area, a central business district emerged. At first it was an agglomeration of similar commerce such as saloons, hotels, dance halls, grocery mercantile, and livery stables (see Figure 2).

By the 1880s, land was becoming scarce and expensive, at approximately \$600 a parcel. The high cost of land led to the establishment of a new “business block,” whereby individual investors bought land and demolished any existing structures to make way for newer, grandiose buildings. These larger buildings could house several different types of industry, such as retail stores, offices, and living quarters (Clough 1984). The Grand Central Hotel, built by J. W. Williams in 1882, is an example of business block construction (see Figure 3).

During the late nineteenth century, the Grand Central Hotel was considered the most elaborate and distinguished hotel from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Local residents and visitors would assemble under its enormous porches to sit and appreciate the shade on a hot summer day, as well as

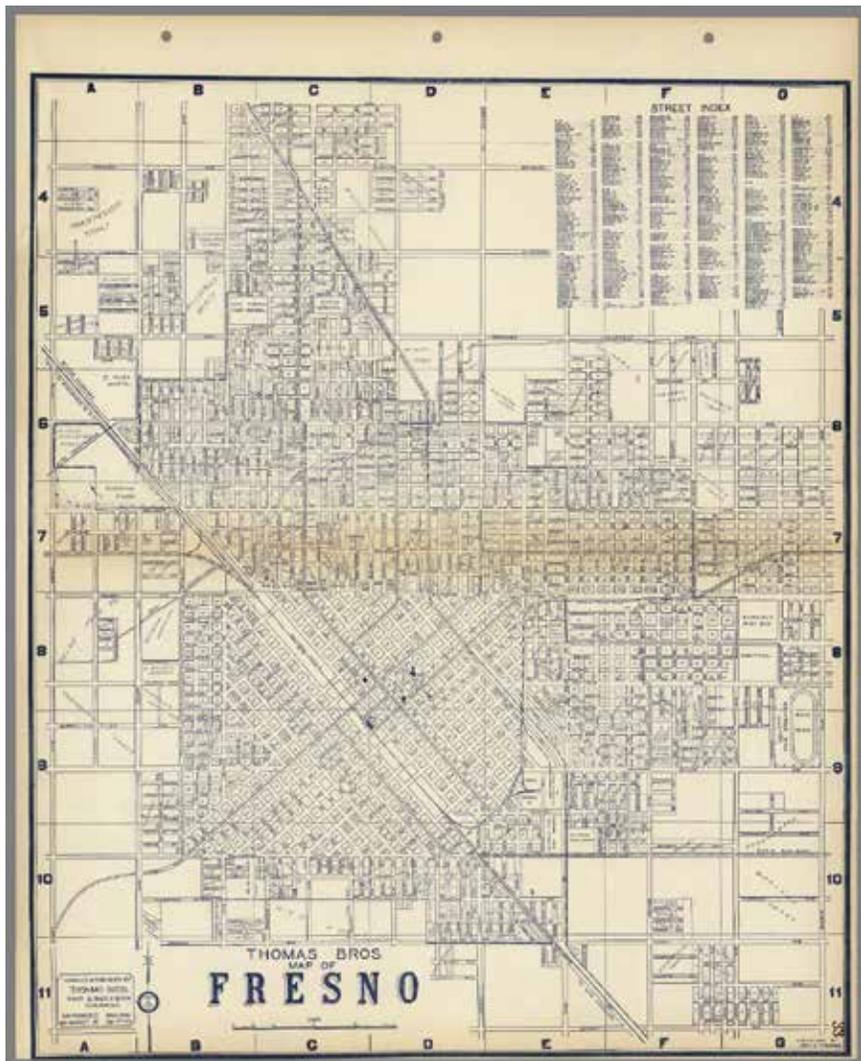


Figure 1.—Historical map of Fresno, circa 1938 (note downtown area with diagonal street pattern). (David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, Thomas Bros. Recreational and Statistical Atlas, California, Thomas Brothers.)

enjoy a variety of street activities. A few years after its completion in 1882, Fulton J. Berry purchased the hotel and owned it until 1910 (Eaton 1969).

In 1887, A. S. Edgerly created the Edgerly block from a \$25,000 purchase of land on the corner of Tulare and J Street. A three-story building was constructed that housed the post office and *The Fresno Morning Republican*. The Forsyth block, on the corner of Tulare and J Street, was soon owned by

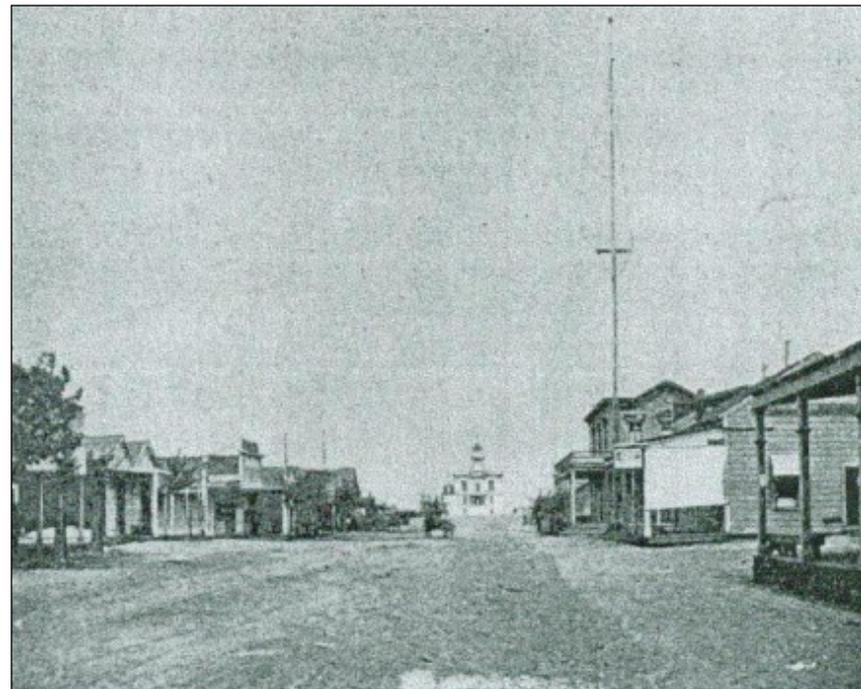


Figure 2.—Fresno Mariposa Street, circa 1877. (Fresno City and County Historical Company. Fresno California and the evolution of the Fruitvale Estate. Fresno: Pioneer Publishing Company, 1980.)

T. W. Patterson, Colonel William Forsyth, and Captain A. W. Neville. T. W. Patterson would ultimately own the land, buildings, and business interests of the four-corner section of Tulare and J Street (Eaton 1969). Industry was now flourishing and Fresno was growing exponentially. By the mid-1890s, the population had grown from approximately 500 in 1877 to 1,112 in 1890 (Walker 1941).

## Streets and Transportation

Around the turn of the century, as Fresno began to grow and transform from a western frontier town to a classic Victorian city, its streets went through a major change as well. It was a common practice to name streets in alphabetical order, and therefore the streets that ran in a northwesterly direction were assigned letters of the alphabet and the streets that ran in a northeasterly direction were named after the counties in California. As Fresno was becoming a modern city however, many of the prominent businessmen felt that this style of naming streets was indicative of Fresno's wild frontier past and incongruent with its modern flair. Additionally mail delivery was often

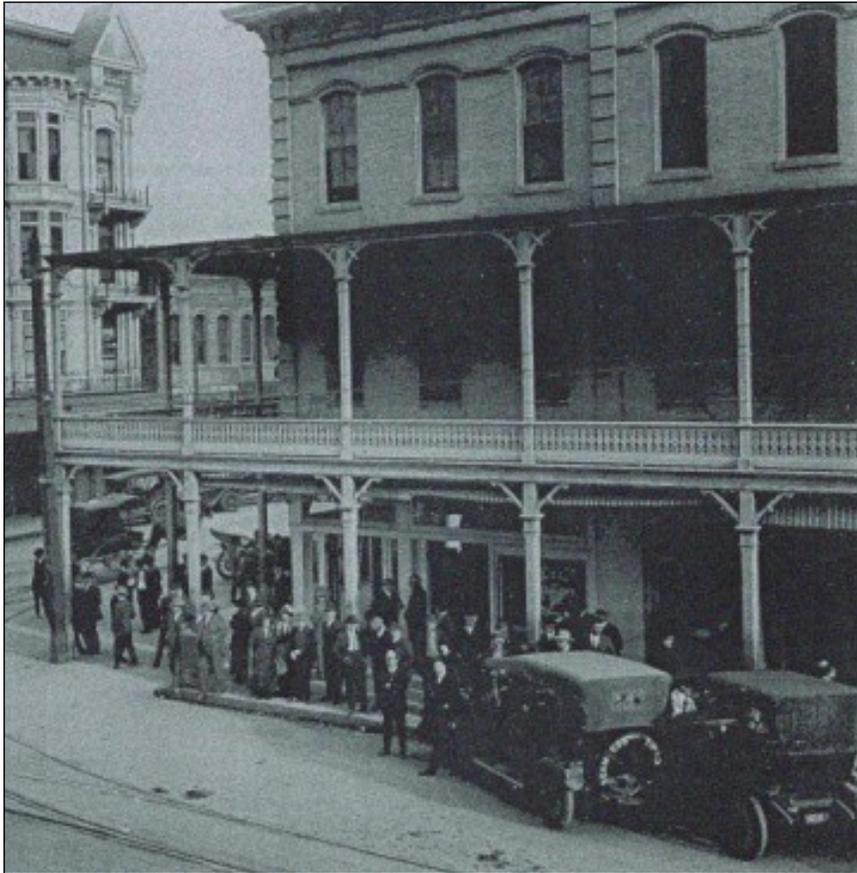


Figure 3.—The Grand Central Hotel, circa 1913. (Laval, Jerome D., As “POP” Saw It Vol. III: A Continuing View of the Great Central Valley of California as Seen Through the Lens of a Camera. Fresno: Graphic Technology Co., 1985.)

confused between J and I streets, which led to frustration of residents and business establishments.

In 1911, K Street was therefore renamed Van Ness Boulevard, and I Street was renamed Broadway. Four years later, J Street was renamed to Fulton, after Fulton G. Berry, a well-known and -loved businessman and owner of the Grand Central Hotel (Walker 1941).

Since the beginning, very shortly after the railroad was completed, Fresno has had several streets designated as thoroughfares of commerce. Fresno Street was designated to be the principal traveling thoroughfare and therefore was designed wider than other streets. The first buildings were erected

out of tents and simple, wood-framed buildings. James E. Faber opened the first store, and A. J. Massen established the first public water works (Elliott 1973; Thickens 1939). Early structures had an uncommon style for the region (see Figure 4).



Figure 4.—Early dwelling, circa 1879. (Laval, Jerome D., As “POP” Saw It Vol. III: A Continuing View of the Great Central Valley of California as Seen Through the Lens of a Camera. Fresno: Graphic Technology Co., 1985.)

The Fresno Canal and Irrigation Company later annexed Fresno Street. The downward slope of the road allowed for the creation of a canal down its center, which served a mill and later transferred water to the west of the city. Fulton Street was also developing into a main artery of commerce at this time (Walker 1941).

Modes of transportation began to progress at the turn of the century. Fresno established the Fresno Street Railroad in 1889—the first transportation system with a horse-car line to service the many establishments in the commercial district and, later, the residential streets that lay beyond the main city (see Figure 5).

The electric trolley, run by the Fresno City Railway Company, replaced the horse-car line in 1902. The electric trolley serviced Fresno until July 1929 (see Figure 6), and finally closed in 1934, due to a history of financial fluctuations as well as competition with the automobile (Hamm 1984).

### Wooden Structures to Towering Skyscrapers

The skyline of Fresno has seen elementary to extraordinary reshaping as it has grown from a small town to metropolitan city over the decades. Early buildings were constructed primarily from wood, iron, and brick. Wooden structures in Fresno easily caught fire due to natural materials and oil lamps, along with the lack of an organized municipal system (Laval 2007). Despite this, wood was used throughout the 1870s through 1890s (see Figure 7).

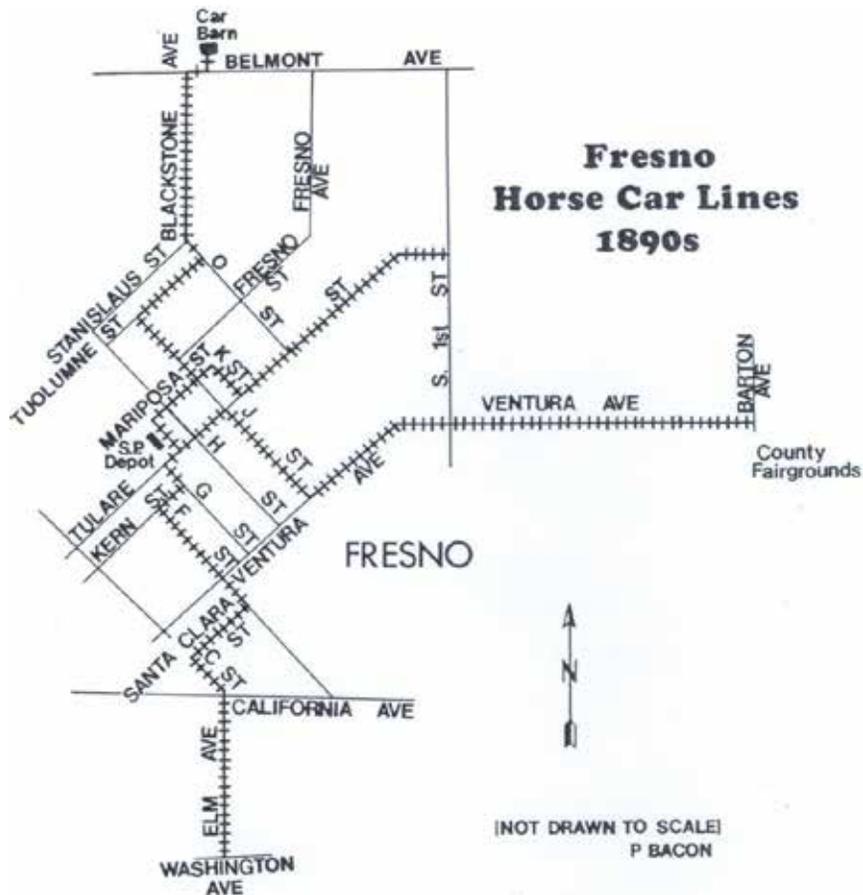


Figure 5.—Fresno Horse Car Lines 1890s. (Hamm Jr., Edward. *Trolleys of San Joaquin: When Fresno rode the rails*. Fresno: Interurban Publishing, 1984.)

Around the early 1900s it was apparent that Fresno had passed its infancy stage and was growing in maturity. The amount of construction within the city was a very strong indication of the substantial prosperity of Fresno and an evidence of the faith of its citizens. Due to the rush of construction taking place in the commercial district and residential areas, there even was a temporary brick shortage. T. W. Patterson and associates were building the new Forsyth building on the corner of Tulare and J (Fulton) Street at this time, fashioned in a mission style by architect B. C. McDonnell (Fresno 1900).

The Forsyth Building was a two-story building with a basement and an attic to help control cooling in the summer. It had an open center to allow light to penetrate into the interior. It also had an elevator—a still rather novel



Figure 6.—The electric trolley. (Hamm Jr., Edward. *Trolleys of San Joaquin: When Fresno rode the rails*. Fresno: Interurban Publishing, 1984.)

convenience for new construction. The Forsyth Building had the potential to add floors in the future. However, at the time of construction, the additional stories were delayed because the current abilities of electricity in Fresno could not generate enough energy to propel an elevator higher than two floors. An elaborate sea of marble that started from the front entrance steps and continued into the lobby would greet patrons. The ground floor was used by a San Francisco department store, while the second floor was used as offices for physicians and commercial business (Fresno 1900). The Forsyth Building was one of the central gathering areas of the commercial district, but sadly, tragedy hit in 1922 when a fire blazed through the building, destroying it (see Figure 8).



Figure 7.—Wood structure, circa 1874. (Laval, Jerome D., As “POP” Saw It Vol. III: A Continuing View of the Great Central Valley of California as Seen Through the Lens of a Camera. Fresno: Graphic Technology Co., 1985.)

From the rubble of the Forsyth Building, T. W. Patterson constructed an innovative building that still stands today as part of Fresno’s skyline. Built in 1923 by R. F. Felchlin, it was a state-of-the-art building that featured many new innovations and technology for its time. The T. W. Patterson Building was considered the largest building in the Central Valley, standing at eight stories high with abundant floor space (Stevens 2006). It featured the fastest elevators in the state, a new heating and cooling system, and noiseless corridors, and it was the first air-conditioned building in the state of California (*The Fresno Bee* 1935). In 1935, it was said that the T. W. Patterson Building was one of the most important buildings in the valley (see Figure 9). “The building might well be considered the headquarters of the army of enterprises that make up the bulk of activity here from which are issued the direction and orders that create development and progress for the valley and Fresno” (*The Fresno Bee* 1935).

Another building of importance was the Bank of Italy Building, built in 1918 on the previous site of the Fresno National Bank (Eaton 1969). The Italy Bank building is a reinforced steel structure with ornate terra cotta



Figure 8.—Forsyth Building, circa 1920. (Waiczis, Michael J., and Secrest, Jr., William B. A Portrait of Fresno 1885–1985: A Publication of the Centennial History Committee. Fresno: Val Print, 1985.)

moldings on the exterior, and was designed in the Italian Renaissance style by architect R. F. Felchlin (see Figure 10).

The interior of the building was considered quite elaborate and included a mahogany staircase, marble flooring, decorative ceilings, and etched brass elevator doors. (*Historic Preservation Review* 2010). Built during the successful 1920s and owned by A. P. Giannini, it housed several floors of banking and commercial businesses. The Bank of Italy consolidated Fresno National, People’s Savings, and National Bank. Giannini first established a Bank of Italy in San Francisco in 1902 and then expanded branches throughout California. The Bank of Italy was said to be the third-largest banking company in the nation during the 1920s. By the 1930s Giannini was an established banker, and from this foundation he created Bank of America, which later became America’s leading banking institution. Since the 1980s, the building unfortunately has stood empty. The current owner is planning on commercial and residential development, once it has been properly restored (Stevens 2006).

In 1922, Radin and Kamp bought the Edgerly Building for \$500,000 and built a new five-story department store for the cost of approximately \$1,500,000 (*The Fresno Morning Republican* 1922). During the height of its operation, the Radin and Kamp Department Store was considered a “shopping mecca” of downtown (Stevens 2006). Felchlin, Shaw, and Franklin designed



Figure 9.—T. W. Patterson Building. (Laval, Jerome D., As “POP” Saw It Vol. III: A Continuing View of the Great Central Valley of California as Seen Through the Lens of a Camera. Fresno: Graphic Technology Co., 1985.)

the building in an Italian Renaissance style, complete with beauty parlor, lending library, and floral shop. The Radin and Kamp Building still stands, although vacant, on the corner of Tulare and J (Fulton) Street (see Figure 11). The current owner is planning construction of lofts on the upper floors and retail on the bottom (Lloyd 2004).

By 1937, Fresno had more than doubled in size from its early beginning (see Figure 12).



Figure 10.—Bank of Italy Building, circa 2010. (Author photograph.)



Figure 11.—Radin and Kamp Building. (Author photograph.)

### Post-War Revitalization

Fresno, like many cities, has experienced its periods of ebbs and flows in growth, decentralization, and decay. This sequence often signals the changing trends of city dynamics, and Fresno has had its share of successes and struggles throughout the decades (Kaplan 2009). Since the beginning of the century, the *Fresno Bee* has had article headlines such as “Industrial growth boom is encouraging to Fresno,” “City’s drawbacks must be altered to gain industry,” and “Chamber strives to bring new plants to Fresno.” In an effort to revitalize the decline of the downtown business district due to urban sprawl and decentralization of shopping centers to the north and east of the city, developer Victor Gruen introduced a plan to turn the already main retail street of Fulton into a downtown mall. It was a monumental plan, and the first of its kind in California and the nation. Their plan was to create a six-block pedestrian mall on Fulton, Merced, Mariposa, and Kern Streets. The project was completed in 1964 and would serve the entire Fresno Metropolitan area and the subsidiary towns in the valley. The mall featured modern art, extensive landscaping, top-notch stores, benches, fountains, and a people mover (see Figure 13). Although the plan was full of good intentions, the mall eventually began to decline with the opening of Fashion Fair Mall in a more centrally located part of town. Anchor stores such as Gottschalk’s and J. C. Penny relocated to the new indoor mall (*Downtown Fresno* 2001, and customers followed.



Figure 12.—Aerial view of downtown Fresno, circa 1937. (Aerial map 1937: University of California at Fresno State, Henry Madden Library map references.)

Even though the Fulton Mall has proven to be unsuccessful, the city pressed forward with other revitalization plans and in 2002 built the Grizzly Stadium (later renamed Chukchansi Park, in 2006). This forty-six million dollar structure on Tulare Street also has not been as successful as Fresno had hoped (see Figure 14). The bleacher section now sits just beyond the alley behind the Radin and Kamp Building (*Chukchansi Park* 2010).



Figure 13.—Fulton Mall, 2010. (Author photograph.)

The city has also tried to help revitalize the downtown through historic preservation and gentrification of its older buildings and districts. A substantial amount of Fresno’s history has been lost either by fires or progress and reconstruction—out with the old and in with the new seemed to be the theme of several decades. In 1908, *The Fresno Morning Republican* printed an article titled “Passing away of another landmark of old Fresno” (*The Fresno Morning Republican* 1908). It was not until March of 1977 that the Fresno and Clovis metropolitan area adopted the Historic Preservation Plan Element to the general plan. In thus doing, the city has been able to save several of Fresno’s historic buildings, including the Radin and Kamp Building, the T. W. Patterson Building, and the Bank of Italy Building. These, as well as others, are now on the local historic registry or the national historic registry (John 1977).

Although Fresno’s downtown area has been zoned as a commercial business district, a 1990 Fresno Bee article stated that the office market was stable downtown, with little increase in commercial interests. The vacancy rate in midtown was at 9.80 percent and in downtown 29.6 percent (Nax 1990). Office vacancy was down 4.4 percent in 1993, and retail space for small business is virtually nonexistent (*The Fresno Bee* 1996).

Currently Fresno is exploring the possibility of revitalizing the downtown Fulton Corridor. As of March 2010, the consultant team of Moule & Polyzoi-



Figure 14.—Gate to Chukchansi Park. (Author photograph.)

des has been working with the city of Fresno to develop another revitalization plan. They intend to focus on areas of continuity, multi-modal, compact development, diversity types, and investment in infrastructure. Proposed ideas include open green spaces, a trail that extends through downtown, street modifications, and rezoning of certain areas in the business district. They noted that Fresno had a traditional city layout and that many cities have gone through the same decay and decentralization. This offered some hope to residents, tempered with the awareness that such transitions take time (City of Fresno 2010).

### What Does the Future Hold?

A future prediction can be difficult when so many external factors are at play. The demographics have not varied in the downtown area for several decades, and many residents envision a desolate future. However, growth stems from dreams and possibilities that often involve changing discourse. Many urban-growth projects are focusing on BID (business improvement district) projects. These projects focus on smaller-scale initiatives rather than large-scale, comprehensive projects. Several hundred BID projects have been

completed in the nation, seventeen of them in Los Angeles (Mitchell 2001). Larger-scale initiatives, such as stricter urban growth plans and citywide demolition projects, have their place, but revitalization could also mean a shift in city focus toward BID projects focusing on arts and education, green spaces, and growth and commercialization of ethnic enclaves.

A full-scale urban study following the patterns of other cities in similar positions in California would also yield potential options for Fresno, as development of California cities is tied to Proposition 13. This proposition reduces the availability of property taxes for development. Without this funding, cities have to look elsewhere and they are often left with sources such as sales tax from “big-box” retailers (Lubell et al. 2009). This can be challenging, as big-box retailers are unlikely to locate downtown, and thus the cycle of urban sprawl continues. Fresno also has the additional burden of limited developable land.

Sacramento, another valley city with limited available land, is focusing on infill projects and is almost doubling the size of its downtown in the process. Modesto is focusing on high-density development, as well as supporting regionalization of water and sewer services. Lincoln is utilizing “new urbanism,” an approach that creates almost fully autonomous enclaves. In Lincoln’s case, they are taking advantage of their agricultural roots and designing their enclaves to resemble semi-rural villages (Lubell et al. 2009).

Pitfalls can be explored as well. Multiple projects in Davis, for example, were canceled due to voter rejection or developers withdrawing due to environmental impact roadblocks (Lubell et al. 2009).

Fresno has risen from the dust of an empty plain to become a thriving metropolitan area with a population of more than 500,000. It has seen failures in the past and has triumphed over them. Fresno’s rich history, diverse culture, and abundant resources could lend themselves to fresh and new revitalization ideas that are unique from paths other cities have taken. Fresno may once again rise from the shadows of urban decay, if realistic steps are taken that build from its history, its people, and its existing strengths. Working within realms of ideals, rather than reality, results in projects that ultimately fail due to lack of resident support. Existing demographics, city politics, and the normative value of residents must be considered. For example, building high-density communal living arrangements in a city with a population that prefers single-family housing with acreage is bound to fail, without a dramatic shift in ideology. Incentives for increased citizen participation therefore must be at the forefront of any new development

project. As noted by Faulk (2006), “The revitalization process is different for each city. Projects should be tailored to the needs of the community.” Social constructivism among citizens, planners, and development, along with divergent shifts in approaches, may lead to a reification of smarter growth and a new, dynamic downtown.

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