

Envisioning a Future for Dinuba: Revitalizing Downtown and the Railroad Corridor

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During the Spring Quarter 2018, a graduate and an undergraduate studio run by Hemalata Dandekar and Vicente del Rio, respectively, collaborated with Dinuba, a small town in California's Central Valley. Responding to a request from the city manager, the students were charged with envisioning how to redesign and revitalize the city's downtown and the abutting under-developed and under-utilized railroad corridor.

Reflecting Cal Poly's learn-by-doing philosophy and CRP's pedagogy, during the ten-week period of Spring 2018, two studio classes, graduate studio CRP 553 Project Planning Lab and undergraduate studio CRP 203 Urban Design II collaborated with the City of Dinuba, California to develop concept visions for the city's downtown and adjacent railroad corridor. These studios, part of the graduate and undergraduate core curriculum, are offered in the MCRP program's first year, and the last quarter of the BSCR program's second year respectively. The graduate studio traditionally engages in client-driven projects sponsored by a local jurisdiction or a private party. The objective is to envision development possibilities, design concepts, and implementation strategies at the scale of a specific plan. The undergraduate studio generally does not have external sponsorship or a real-world client.

Having received a request from the City of Dinuba to contribute with the city's efforts in re-envisioning the downtown, the instructor/authors of this article decided to have the graduate and undergraduate studios collaborate by assigning complementary projects to the two groups which were differentiated in substantive content and complexity, and addressed city blocks that were adjacent but separated by the the railroad tracks that traverse and divide the city north-west to southeast. (Figure 1).

Located about 180 miles north of Los Angeles and 200 miles south of San Francisco, the City of Dinuba encompasses approximately 3.42 square miles of mostly flat land in California's San Joaquin Valley, at the northwestern corner of Tulare County. Tulare County is the second-leading producer of agricultural commodities in the United States, and raisins are a major product in the Dinuba area where 40 percent of the world's raisins are grown and dried. Not surprisingly, most residents are employed in farming or agriculture-related activities, and the city's top five employers are Ruiz Foods (America's leading frozen Mexican

food manufacturer), the School District, a tree farm, Walmart, and a Best Buy distribution center. From 1990 to 2010 Dinuba's population doubled to 21,453 of which 87% are Hispanic or Latino; the median family income is \$38,008 and the poverty rate is 27%. The largest neighboring cities are Fresno to the north and Visalia to the south. The biggest tourist attractions, nationally famed Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks are nearby.

Figure 1: Dinuba Downtown and the graduate and undergraduate study and project areas.





Figure 2: A view of L Street where Dinuba's downtown features new streetscaping. Most of the downtown area, however, is underutilized, has few social and economic attractions, and displays poorly maintained alleys and overall poor connectivity.

But, being slightly off the main entries to these national draws Dinuba has not captured much of the tourists traffic to these destinations.

Incorporated in 1906, Dinuba has maintained its small-town charm. Its downtown—covering only a couple of blocks—is very walkable with several attractive historical buildings. Its community is very engaged, and appreciates the downtown. Due to its physical characteristics, social composition, location, and good regional connectivity, the City of Dinuba has a great potential to, on the one hand, advance the development of its residential housing stock and, on the other, to become a portal to Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks. The City of Dinuba is working hard on a series of strategic redevelopment and urban design efforts, particularly aiming at community development, revitalization of the downtown and the abutting railroad corridor, improving accessibility, and implementing actions to forge a strong regional identity.

The student work developed in the two studios contributed to this city effort by envisioning sustainable, walkable, and socially and culturally appropriate concept development plans and projects that were responsive to the city's General Plan and to local needs and opportunities. Their ten-week effort culminated in the development of pre-planning insights, development strategies, and urban design concepts, for the City of Dinuba. The graduate studio focused on Dinuba's downtown core, while the undergraduate studio focused on the railroad corridor abutting and parallel to the downtown, but separated from it by the railroad tracks. The students went on a field trip to the city following an initial week-long in-class investigation of existing information, data, plans and land-use regulations applicable to Dinuba in general and in particular to their study areas. The graduate



Figure 3: Partial view of Dinuba's railroad corridor showing vacant and underutilized properties. The undergraduate studio focused on the redevelopment of this corridor, repurposing existing buildings and introducing new attractions and mixed-use development.

class spent two days in the city meeting with city officials, conducting meetings with several stakeholders at the Dinuba Vocational Center, scoping the city through a windshield survey, and studying several aspects of the downtown by walking, observing, and completing interviews and surveys to assess local development patterns and wishes. The undergraduate class spent one day conducting a windshield survey of the downtown area and an on-foot survey of development patterns in the railroad corridor, and its relationships to the rest of the city.

The Graduate Studio Challenge

The graduate studio, conducted by Dr. Hemalata Dandekar, included sixteen MCRP students¹ and concentrated on planning for Dinuba's downtown, an area of approximately 54 acres containing the historical core and abutting the railway. The early city grid which related to the railroad is a result of late 1800s sub-division for a settlement of families engaged in farming. It prevails in the downtown and railroad district. The historic architecture that has fortunately remained intact in the downtown provides a testimony to the city's origins as an agriculture outpost and a rail stop. The newer grid morphology of Dinuba is angled from the old and presents a challenge to make the downtown accessible to passing traffic. The challenge for the students was to plan for a vibrant and walkable downtown featuring a mix of residential, retail, office, institutional and open space uses.

The studio work was performed in three general phases: 1) assessment of context and problem (including background re-

¹ The MCRP students in this studio were: Erik Anderson, Miles Barker, Devin Ciriaco, Kent Harrison, Edgar Hernandez, Sarah Howland, Madilyn Jacobsen, Justin Klaparda, Erin Kraft, June Lai, Cara Meche, Mark Pasanen, Leeza Segal, Dustin Stiffler, Elizabeth Yee, and Qijun Zeng.

search, on-site lot-by-lot and surveys, and interviews with various stakeholders and community representatives) and SWOT analysis; 2) identification of four zones for specific planning and design thematic concepts; and 3) development of concept vision plans for the zones. Each of the proposed four thematic zones has its own identity and provides a unique set of services.

The Downtown Business District (Zone 1) includes a tree lined entry to the downtown from the east, strengthens existing businesses and offers several new housing types. The Civic Zone (Zone 2) concentrates public/civic functions and services around a traditional city square featuring a new city hall. Zone 3 is the Downtown Main Street where a contiguous façade of upgraded, adaptively reused, or infilled buildings and activated alleyways augment Dinuba’s small town charm. Finally, the Entertainment Plaza (Zone 4) expands recreation and entertainment opportunities and offers several public plazas.

The resulting plan includes proposals for land uses, circulation, streetscaping, signage, public spaces, design guidelines and façade renovations, and activated alleyways, resulting in a cohesive urban design concept and delineating a phased implementation strategy. The plan integrates with the undergraduate studio proposal for the Railroad District, and the changes and new attractions proposed would effectively strengthen Downtown Dinuba’s identity and functional role, transforming it into a local and regional destination. The final concepts and proposals were presented by the students as a powerpoint illustrated presentation and a series of posters at a public session in Dinuba. The work was documented in the form of a final report which has been submitted to the city.



MCRP - Downtown: The Business District - Different housing types in redeveloped blocks with Dinuba’s iconic water tower as as backdrop (above), and a new corner plaza as a gateway to the Arts Corridor (below).

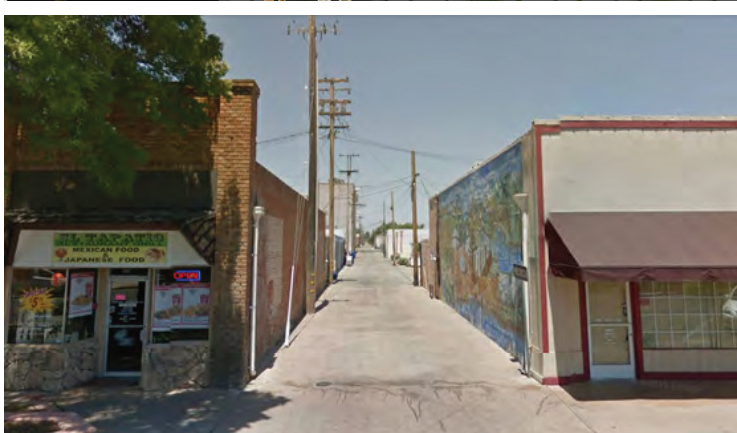


MCRP - Downtown: The central plaza in the proposed Civic Square Zone, showing the existing Vocation Center at the top left corner of this image.

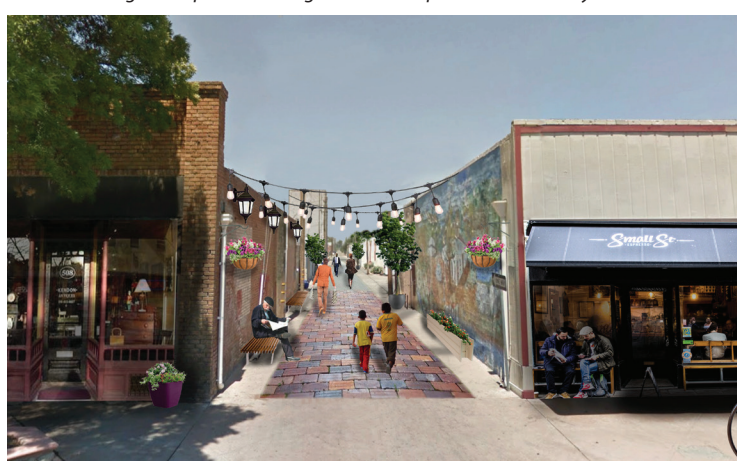




MCRP - Downtown: A vacant lot is redeveloped as a linkage and animated with food trucks and landscaping, at the Civic Square Zone.



MCRP - Downtown: The poorly maintained network of downtown alleys is redesigned to provide stronger and active pedestrian and bicycle connections.



The Undergraduate Studio Challenge

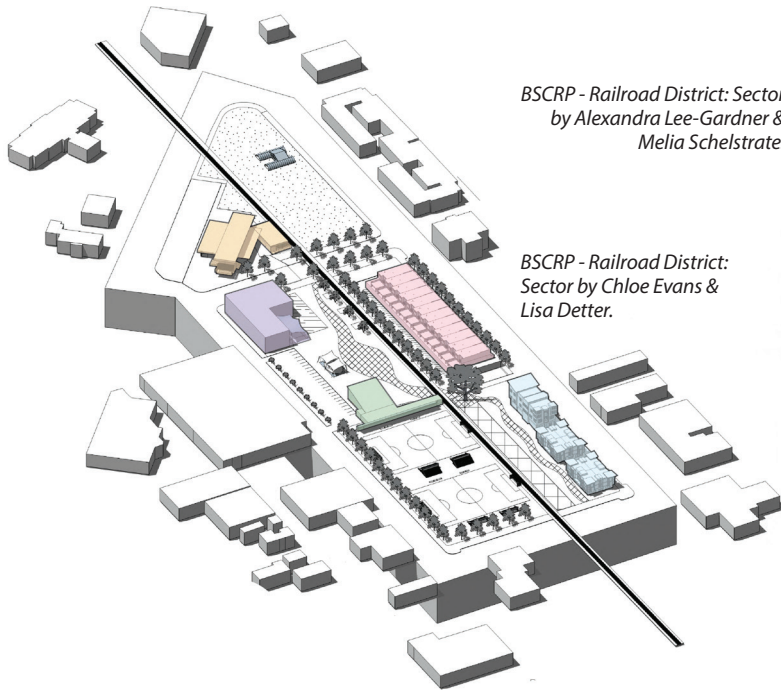
The second-year undergraduate studio involved with the Dinuba effort included two cohorts with a total of 25 students, and instructors Dr. Vicente del Rio and Beate Von Bischopink.² The teams focused on redevelopment concepts for discrete sections of the railroad corridor paralleling Dinuba's downtown and the railroad tract. Totalling approximately 54-acres, the area includes several underutilized and vacant buildings and parcels, and the railway is only modestly utilized, featuring one freight train a day. It represents a strong physical barrier as well as a visual and economic challenge for Dinuba. City officials wanted the studio to envision its redevelopment as a Railroad District.

The project's first phase included in-class studies of available on-line information, city plans and regulations as well as a one-day trip for windshield studies of the whole downtown and on-site surveys of usage, circulation, and development conditions in the corridor. An assessment of challenges and opportunities and a study of planning precedents in other cities led the class to adopt the following development principles: create a unique, themed district; use the railroad ROW as an opportunity for connectivity; encourage mixed uses, public uses, parks, and open spaces; enhance residential opportunities and mixed typologies particularly for the work force; provide for recreational and leisure opportunities; and reutilize and add value to the historical/industrial architecture.

In the next phase, the district was sub-divided into two to three-block sectors and distributed to twelve student teams who came up with redevelopment and design concepts as well as preliminary programs for the short and long terms. The proposals were careful in integrating the Railroad District to downtown, and in facilitating smooth visual and physical transitions. The proposals included ideas such as: a linear park along the railway ROW featuring old train wagons as restaurants and bike paths continuing to the surrounding areas of Dinuba and linking to other towns in the region; traffic calming; vertical mixed-use; town-homes and apartments for varied income groups; a library; a community center; a museum; an incubator for small businesses linked to Fresno State University; community gardens; and recreational and sports facilities for the community. The teams organized and edited all phases of their work and the final proposal into posters and a final report that were submitted to the city.

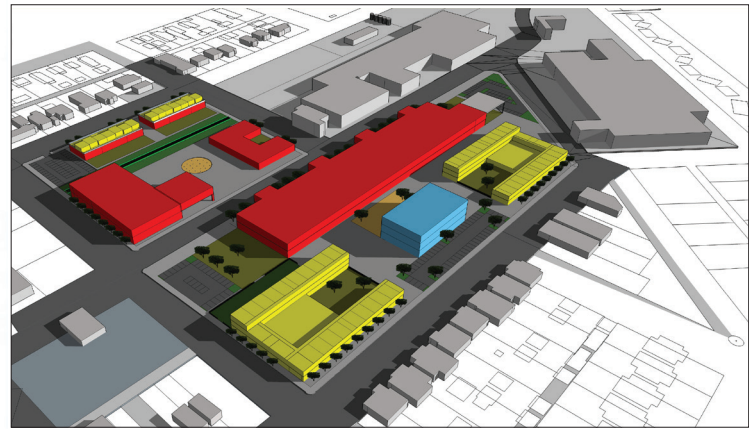


¹ The BSCR students in this studio were: Adam Wasowicz, Alexandra Lee-Gardner, Brendan Norton, Camille Frace, Camille Kelem, Chloe Evans, Chris Cortez, Chris Dedo, Clarissa Flores, Elizabeth Farin, Erik Valentine, Jack Balfour, Jeremiah Rogers, Kyle Courtney, Lane Sutherland, Lisa Detter, Madison Driscoll, Melia Schelstrate, Nick Johnston, Oscar Gake, Paul Chytla-Hinze, Shayna Gropen, Sheridan Nansen, Tessa Houseman, and Valeria Diaz.

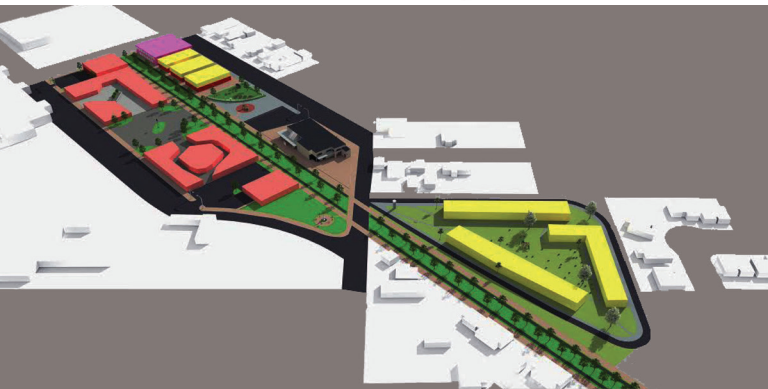


BSCR - Railroad District: Sector by Alexandra Lee-Gardner & Melia Schelstrate.

BSCR - Railroad District: Sector by Chloe Evans & Lisa Detter.



BSCR - Railroad District: Gateway to railroad ROW linear park, by Chris Dedo & Eric Valentin.



BSCR - Railroad District: Sector by Brendan Norton & Madison Driscoll.



BSCR - Railroad District: Detail of Clarissa Flores & Nick Johnston design.

BSCR - Railroad District: Sector by Jack Bafour & Valeria Diaz.

BSCR - Railroad District: Sector by Oscar Gake, Kyle Courtney & Adam Wasowicz.

