

Along 5th and Russell: Reading the Davis Landscape

ANNIE MIYADI



WRITER'S COMMENT: Amidst winter quarter lockdowns, I was socially and physically isolated in my room. That was when my landscape architecture class forced me outside to complete a field study project that revolutionized my perspective on the world. I traveled a 5 mile stretch in Davis. I stopped at regular intervals to sketch, take notes, and pose questions about my surroundings. I began collecting potential narrative threads, hints of past stories woven into the spaces I typically overlooked. Then I took these threads and ran with them – researching, investigating, and interrogating what I had seen. I came to realize that the built environment of Davis is a historical chronicle of how the town has expanded from its agricultural roots, how it is intertwined with UC Davis, and how all of this is shaping the city's future. My field study and subsequent research taught me about the city I live in, the language of landscapes, and the fact that the mundane is never as dull as it seems.

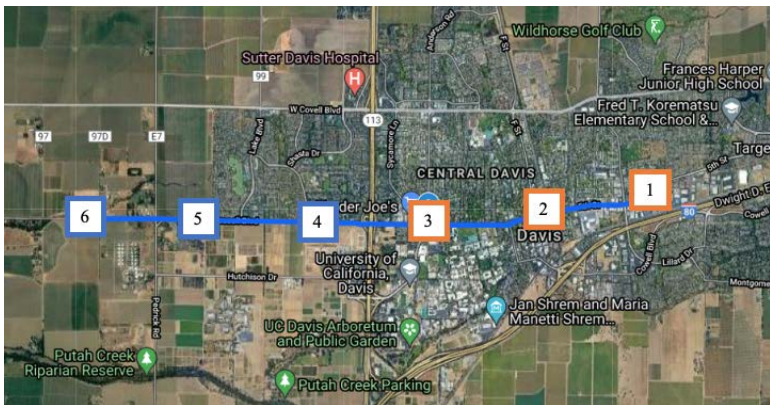
INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: The ambitious goal of this assignment is to change how students interpret, understand, and experience the world around them. After their first field visit, students often return to the classroom frustrated saying there is nothing to see or say about the landscape they visited. Annie embraced this challenge. Her enthusiasm for learning the secrets of a place – who lives and lived there, why it looks the way it does, what was there before – came through clearly. Motivated to learn as much as she could about her new community of Davis, and as a convenient reason to escape the pandemic-induced confines of the dorm, Annie exceeded

the requirements of the assignment by repeatedly visiting study sites, researching their histories, and producing beautiful annotated-sketches of the places. Her newly acquired skill of reading the landscape will serve her well in future coursework and as a design professional.

—Patsy E. Owens, Department of Human Ecology

When I plotted the course of my transect, classes were entirely online to combat Omicron. I was trapped alone and miserable in my dorm. Amid this social and physical isolation, I decided that I would use my transect to force myself to explore and get to know Davis. My transect is divided into two halves. This is the suburban portion (stops 1-3), traveling westward along Russell/5th Street.

During these stops and in the research I conducted afterwards, I learned about Davis's expansion (past and present) and the stories underlying seemingly bland structures. Throughout my travels I was fascinated to look more closely at the landscape surrounding my new home base. I was able to develop both stronger observational and research skills, all whilst I began learning the vocabulary of a previously hidden language: the landscape.



Stop 1: the Davis Police Station

Considering the continuing tension between students and police over the pepper spray incident, I could not resist choosing the Davis police station as a stopping point. When I visited the station at the far east end of my transect I was struck by its subtly complex architecture and quiet surroundings, in contrast to what I had heard of its rocky history.

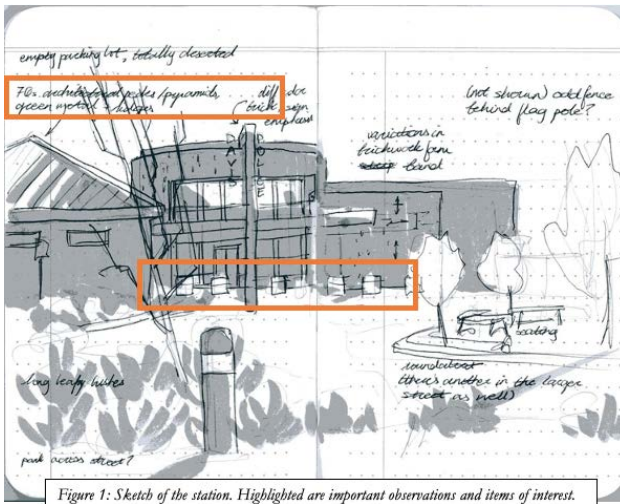


Figure 1: Sketch of the station. Highlighted are important observations and items of interest.

I was intrigued by the concrete stumps in front of the entranceway; a feature I have seen on other buildings but never took real notice of. These are called “bollards” and are a form of target hardening. Bollards are placed in front of (glass) entranceways to buildings to prevent cars from driving straight through. (Figure 2, “Bollard”, n.d.) In the Davis police station the bollards are no-nonsense concrete protrusions which may seem spartan and unimaginative, but successfully straddle the divide between a pure pragmatism and interesting architecture. It is the small details, upon closer inspection, which make the police station feel harmonious and not-entirely bland.

Law enforcement in Davis began with its incorporation in

1917, with the appointment of a city marshal and the first police facility standing on Oak Street. It was known as a “plank jail”. The first full-time and paid police officer was hired in 1927, and the location of the police station has continued to shift over time. (Davis Police Department 2013 Annual Report 7) Upon first glance, I assumed that this iteration of the Davis police station was constructed during the 1970’s, based on the architectural similarity to my 70’s elementary school. Despite a surprising amount of difficulty finding newspaper articles about the construction of the police station, it actually appears to have been built during the 2000’s by the Indigo Architecture firm (“Davis Police Department - Davis”, n.d., “Our Projects — Indigo | Hammond + Playle Architects, LLP,” n.d.) My hypothesized date for the construction of the Davis police station is further corroborated by careful examination of the expansion of Davis’s city limits.

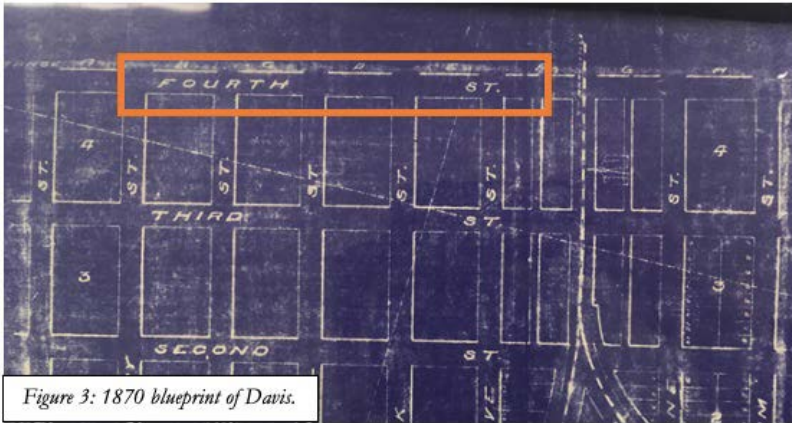


Figure 3 is a historical blueprint of Davis which essentially ends the city at fourth street—my transect runs through fifth. (“Davis”, n.d.) Logically this makes sense. Davis began as a whistlestop town (initially “Davisville”) which would have begun at first street. As the town expanded, new streets would have been added to the North, increasing in sequence. This grid-based

approach is common in American city development, and corresponds to the meridian-base approach of the Jeffersonian grid.

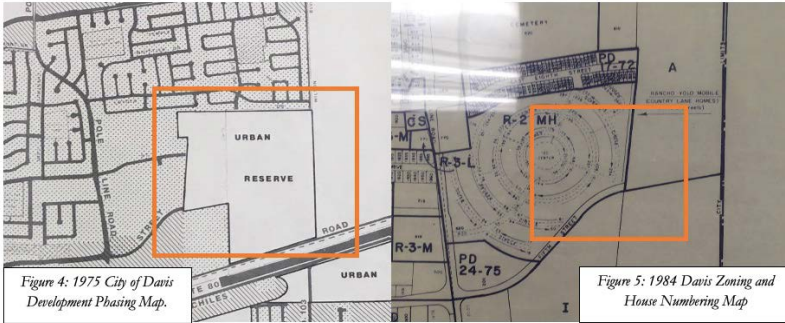
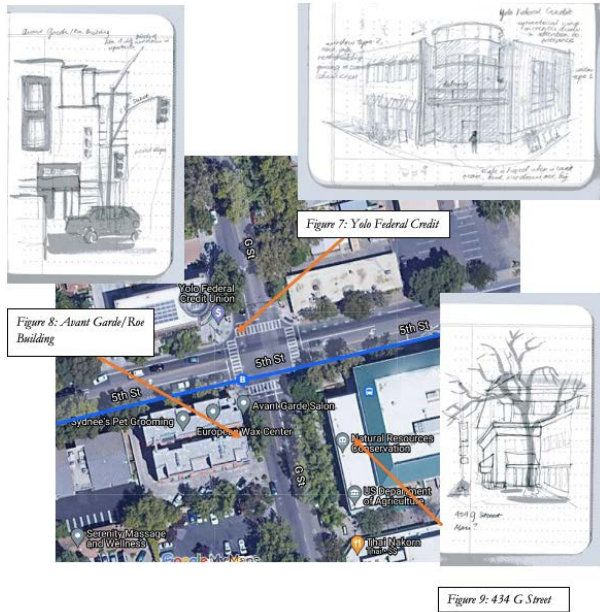


Figure 4 is a development phasing map of Davis from the mid-70's indicates that the probable location of the police station was a part of the “urban reserve”, a term which is undefined and ambiguous. It also includes a road named “Wilson Boulevard” which ran between Mace Boulevard and Pole Line Road and seems to no longer exist. (“City of Davis development phasing,” 1975) My hypothesis about this “urban reserve” label is that it indicates that the land was intended to be held back for long term later development, not a part of the shorter-term phase one and two they indicated here. The archival specialist helping me explained that the city of Davis intentionally restricts the outward expansion of the city in order to keep property values high. Keeping areas in reserve for the future would have been a part of a long-term approach towards development, and very in-character for the city. Figure 5 is a section of a later map of Davis, from 1984. This closeup shows the Rancho Yolo Mobile Home Park, whose memorable concentric circles remain a distinguishable aerial landmark today. The map also indicates that the city limits end only a couple of blocks away from where the park ends. (“Zoning and house numbering map, City of Davis, California,” 1984) This is roughly where the police station stands.

Stop 2: G and 5th Street



My second stop was at a four-way intersection between 5th and G Street. This included several buildings, the most notable of which were the Avant Garde Salon, Yolo Federal Credit Union, an unnamed office space at 434, and Hibbert Lumber (see Figures 7-9). While walking past 434 G Street, I was surprised to spy a large plaque reading “Mars” and a significant amount of construction underway. It looked as though the whole floor was being replaced. I failed to capture what I saw of the building’s interior thanks to the glass’s reflection (Figure 10). For such a seemingly quiet building (Figure 11), there appeared to be a lot going on inside. What I immediately concluded after seeing the “Mars” plaque was that the building was slated to be a future office for the candy company Mars Wrigley, known for being the creators of M&M’s, Twix, Skittles, Snickers, and more. But my next question was why would a major food corporation really choose to locate themselves in Davis?



Figure 10: Sitting in front of 434 G Street

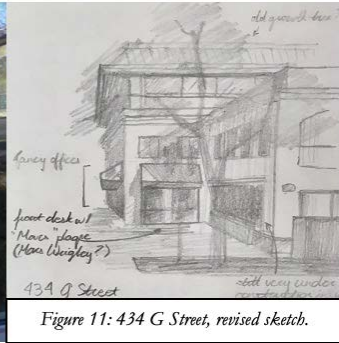


Figure 11: 434 G Street, revised sketch.

During my agriculture development and plant science classes, I received a hint as to why: the university conducts cocoa bean research funded by Mars. The partnership between Mars Wrigley and Davis began in 1974, leading to research on specific crops (such as cocoa, peanut, and mint), natural dyes, aflatoxins, and other agroecological subjects. (About MARI, n.d., Filmer, 2020) During a tour of the Mars Wrigley greenhouses on campus Allison enthusiastically told me about the company's plans for 434 G Street: the facility is intended to be a level 2 biosafety area to study integrated pest management (IPM). The location was chosen to place it within the vicinity of other Mars facilities, but far enough to protect the rare genomes they tend to.



Figure 25a-b: Interior of the on-campus Mars Wrigley Cacao Genetics and Breeding program.

Stop 3: Anderson and Russell

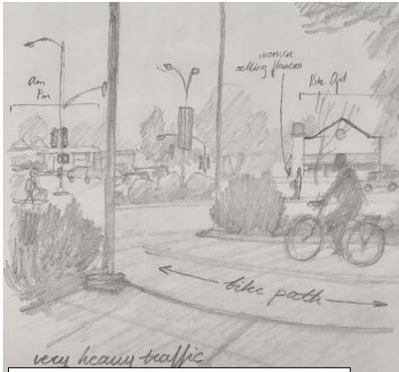


Figure 14: Anderson and Russell, revised sketch.

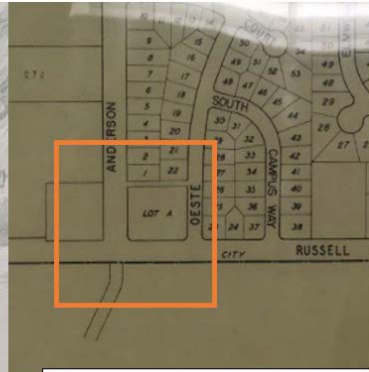
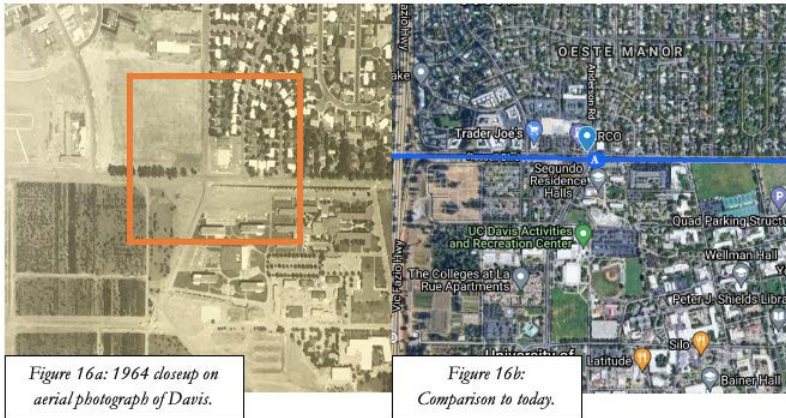


Figure 15: Closeup of 1960 map of Davis.

Stop 3 is the one I was most familiar with before the transect: the crossing of La Rue and Russell. I struggled to depict this in my sketches, but the intersection is bustling with cars, pedestrians, and cyclists. I noticed two women on the medians trying to sell flowers to the cars nearby. Groups of students on bikes and on foot crossed together, chatting whilst they went here and there. And the cars—they whizz and zoom unpredictably by (the reputation of Californian drivers is justifiably poor). (Figures 12-14) It is interesting to compare what the current experience of the road is like to what it might have been in the past. 1960's Davis looked entirely different from today. The 1960 numbering map (Figure 15) shows that land south of Russell was university property and hints at the extent of the university's research and training farmland. There was some residential, but mostly farm lots north of Russell. (City of Davis, California: including the University of California at Davis," 1960)

Two years later, the Davis university became a part of the UC system. According to the City of Davis website, this marked the beginning of several decades of population and construction boom (similar to that occurring in other parts of California) before a more environmentally conscious attitude caused growth to level

out. (“History,” n.d.) I found a photograph of Davis two years after it became a part of the UC system, and four years after the numbering map: Figure 16 was taken aurally in 1964. The four original Segundo dorms are visible in the southeast corner. (“Aerial photos of Yolo County, California,” 1964) The majority of the area is still farmland. Where the Rite Aid is located there seems to be an unidentifiable structure. But the corner where the AM PM is now was just fields. Where the Segundo Service Center and Market are there are fields. Though Figure 15 hints at the extent of rural spaces in Davis, it is the clear imagery in Figure 16 which truly drives the difference home.



Conclusion

Though Davis may appear to be a sleepy and non-descript university town, I learned from this assignment that there is always more than meets the eye. Stop 1 at the Davis police station helped me see just how much the city has expanded since its whistle-stop days. Stop 2 at the intersection of G and 5th Street gave me the chance to see how UC Davis has had ramifications on the sorts of businesses and corporations which establish a presence in Davis.

Anderson and Russell (Stop 3) was the closest to home—it helped me capture a glimpse of what UC Davis might have been like in the “good old days”.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson, quoted in a paper by Lewis, said this: “Over and over again I’ve said the commonplace aspects of the contemporary landscape—the streets and houses and fields and places of work—could teach us a great deal, not only about American history and American society, but about ourselves, and how we relate to the world. It s a matter of learning how to see.” (“The Monument and the Bungalow”, Jackson, in Calo 1989, quoted by Lewis 1998) What I enjoyed most about this assignment was not just learning about Davis, but also learning how to read a new language: the landscape itself. Rather than overlook the mundane, I have built a bigger toolbox to better view and describe the places I see—in Northern California, and beyond.

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