

Monterey Street Redesign: A Pedestrian-Only Corridor on Lower Monterey Street, San Luis Obispo CA

Noah Christman
BSCR Student
City and Regional Planning Department
Cal Poly San Luis Obispo

Noah discusses his senior project, done with colleague Nai Saephan in spring 2004. Their study allowed them to develop an urban design scenario for Monterey Street, downtown San Luis Obispo, considering higher density and mixed-use development, in a transit oriented pedestrian-friendly environment. His method included the development of elaborate design scenarios in SketchUp, a CAD program increasingly popular among CRP students.

The San Luis Obispo Historic Downtown is, arguably, the city's primary draw for pedestrian-scale shopping. The area not only attracts residents of the city, but also residents in other parts of the county, as well as visitors from elsewhere in California and the nation.

Long the dominant retail corridor through the heart of the city, Higuera Street plays host to a weekly farmer's market on Thursday evenings, effectively closing off several blocks of the street to all but pedestrians and creating a dynamically animated atmosphere rarely found elsewhere. However, while Higuera Street flourishes, the rest of the downtown seems to slumber. This lack of vitality is apparent even during daylight hours. None of the adjacent streets in the downtown have been able to properly mimic Higuera Street's success, but it was not exactly clear how things progressed to that result. Such was the focus of this project; undertaken by City and Regional Planning undergraduate Nai Saephan and myself, to understand why the remainder of the downtown seemed to live in the shadow of the neighboring Higuera Street and establish a proposal to rectify this apparent deficiency.

Focusing on the downtown portion, of Monterey Street, it was found that the area lacks any positive, cohesive character that would set it apart from the surrounding areas. There is great potential for the district—ease of access, Mission San Luis Obispo, and the County Government Center all help to contribute to the city's draw of visitors. Tying these elements together to create a unified area, however, poses a problem. The lack of restaurants and retail shops, serving as main destination uses for visitors, make the area less attractive to pedestrians. The current uses on the lower Monterey Street area do not encourage the window-shopping atmosphere as effectively as Higuera Street.

Our project attempted to establish lower Monterey Street as its own distinct portion of the downtown. While staying

with the overall atmosphere of the area, the project aimed to create a unique character that serves as a draw for visitors of all ages, accessible through several modes of transportation, and providing a destination location for both residents and visitors alike.

ANALYSIS AND CONCEPTUAL WORK

A thorough pre-design analysis of the project site was performed, identifying key present aspects of both the built and natural environments, including strategic view corridors, zoning and land use, and pedestrian and vehicular traffic flow. Case studies, including Pasadena, California's Paseo Colorado, and Bethesda, Maryland's Bethesda Row, were used to provide a much broader urban design framework in relation to the project area.

The information from these analysis stages was sieved and resulted in a series of principal concepts that would help to belay our vision to Monterey Street and lead into the design portion of the project. These concepts, drawn from the site analysis, case studies, and our own experience/background provided the foundation for design, and included such things as a pedestrian-oriented experience reinforced through traffic calming measures surrounding the project, infill and mixed-use development along the street, and the inclusion of pocket parks and increased street furniture.

FINAL DESIGN PROPOSAL

Perhaps the most conspicuous alteration made to lower Monterey Street in the proposal is the establishment of a pedestrian-only corridor, running the length of the project area. Ultimately replacing all automobile traffic on the street, the pedestrian corridor provides a unique place for those visiting the downtown to experience. Highly influenced by other pedestrian-only projects, such as 3rd Street Promenade

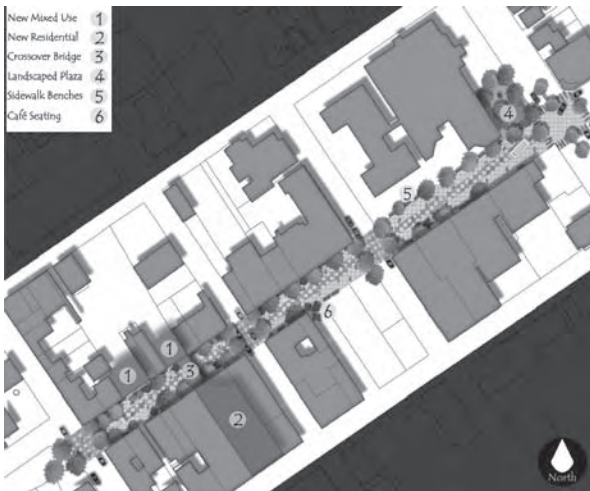


Figure 1. Plan view of the final design for Lower Monterey Street, showing the dedicated trolley lane designated by a difference in paving. Note the distinctly paved intersections at cross streets, the plaza on the corner of Monterey Street and Santa Rosa Street, and the street furniture along the corridor that include benches and table seating.

in Santa Monica, California, the pedestrian paradise provides the basis for the new aspiring character of the area. By shifting the presiding emphasis of the corridor from the automobile to the pedestrian, the area consequentially becomes much more appealing.

Facilitating traffic on the cross streets is achieved by two main design features. The first is the raised aspect of not only the intersections, but also the entire street area within the projects parameters. Raised to sidewalk-level, this promenade effectively acts as traffic calming device in its own right by requiring cars to cross a cobblestone-like surface before ascending into the intersection, thus increasing driver awareness of their surroundings. The second feature, and one that is rapidly becoming more prevalent throughout the country, is the use of motion-activated warning lights which, when activated by a pedestrian, flash and warn oncoming traffic of pedestrians in the area.

Another key factor of the project proposal is the continuing use of the downtown trolley throughout the site. Currently, trolley access to the site is limited to certain days of the week, and accessed much like a bus would through stops

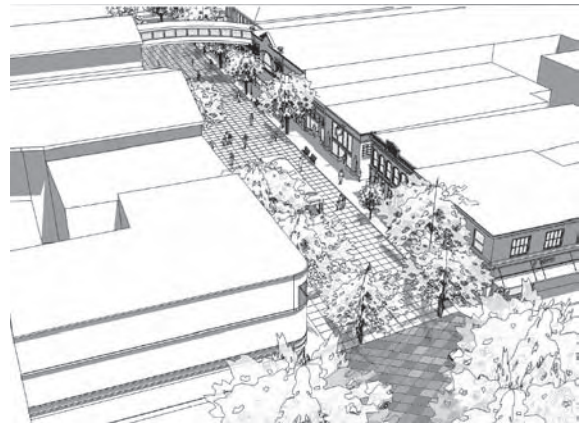


Figure 2. Intersections along the pedestrian corridor, as the one seen here at Monterey and Chorro streets, have been raised to provide a safer place for pedestrians to cross. Cross street intersections use pedestrian-detecting devices to regulate automobile traffic, allowing for a sense of continuity for pedestrians by requiring automobiles to halt for them rather than the other way around.

along its route. However, the project proposal places much more emphasis on this trolley use, and dedicates the center lane of the pedestrian walkway to its use. According to the design, the downtown trolley would be slowed, allowing for pedestrians to access it at any point along the pedestrian corridor.

Alterations to the surrounding buildings were proposed as well. It was found that a great many of the building façades along Monterey Street were seen as aesthetically unpleasant by the community, and were proposed to be renovated in the project. The present status of the site also called for infill development—two large parcels, which are currently used as parking. These parcels were proposed to be infilled with mixed-use buildings. Additionally, several floors of residential use above ground floor commercial would enhance commercial vitality in the area. The majority of buildings in the area are unreinforced masonry, prohibiting much alteration to the building structure. However, the site directly across from the proposed infill was not, and thusly a residential hotel, used for visiting professors, students, and others in the city for a limited time, was proposed. In addition to this, an overhead connection bridge was proposed

to connect the development on one side of the street to the redevelopment on the other, allowing for easier access to this residential hotel.

Lastly, the project sought to create a more unifying character for the Monterey Street area. This was established through the use of increased interplay between businesses and the street front. Examples include outdoor café seating and the utilization of street furniture, larger amounts of trees and landscaping, and cultural activities such as art and jazz festivals connecting the project corridor to the Mission. Culminating four years of planning and design education, the project was able to evoke the visceral experience and vibrant atmosphere San Luis Obispo residents desired through careful planning and design and produce a thoroughly satisfying result.



Figure 3. A major component of the final design is the trolley access—the path remains intact from its current route setup. In this case, however, the trolley is allowed a designated center lane along the pedestrian corridor. This not only continues to facilitate alternative modes of transportation in the downtown, it also serves as a valid means of transporting visitors to the area. This is a bird's eye view from the intersection of Monterey and Chorro streets.



Figure 4. Modeled in @Last Software's SketchUp, a portion of the building façade's detailing can be seen. Located at the north end of the project site, the architectural styling differs greatly among buildings. Even the level of detail can be vastly different between businesses, as seen here between the building in the foreground and those beside it.