

*In the Spring 2004, this second-year BCRP studio class embraced a community outreach project as a response to a request from the Community Development Department of Paso Robles, California. Damaged by the San Simeon 2003 earthquake, the city wanted the class to develop an urban design scenario for the revitalization of an important area of its historic downtown.*

In the pursuit of CRP's continuing community outreach efforts, students of the second-year design studio (Intermediate Environmental Design, CRP-203) faced a very complex challenge in the spring of 2004; responding to a request for help from Paso Robles' Community Development Department, instructors Zeljka Howard and Vicente del Rio led their sessions together in developing a concept for the revitalization of the area south of the downtown – nicknamed SoDo by the class. Having suffered a major earthquake in December 2003, Paso Robles also desires reconstruction efforts to encourage revitalization, mixed-use development, and a pedestrian-friendly environment in the downtown.

Although highly accessible from Highway 101 and served by the railroad, well located within the city structure, and with a strong development potential; the area suffers from “development blight” –underutilized and vacant sites, low density, and not very noble uses. The studio followed a design process in which the class was first divided into large groups for an inventory and analysis of the city history, infrastructure, assets, problems, and opportunities. In the next phase, groups of students investigated how these reflected on the project area –which included 14 blocks and a major vacant site– its land uses and environmental aspects, and how the area was perceived and utilized by the community.

After the information gathering and analysis the class discussed and proposed a program for the whole area, with sector objectives and design concepts, including the existing Court House project and Paso Robles' desire for a new City Hall and Theatre. With the analysis and programming in mind, the class was able to discuss urban design concepts for the area and to choose an alternative redevelopment plan for adoption by the whole class. Smaller design teams of 2 to 3 students then focused on how to apply the overall concepts to the streetscape as well as to each of the blocks, what included specific programming, site planning, urban design, and major architectural features for existing and future buildings.

The class overall urban design concept and the individual block designs show a very feasible scenario of how Paso Robles SoDo area could realistically be revitalized into a thriving and pedestrian friendly urban environment with mixed-use development, various housing types, employment opportunities, and new public, cultural and recreational assets. The student proposal turns Park Street into a mixed-use axis that starts at the City Park to the north, and terminates at a new City Hall, a major theatre facility, and a new recreational park to the south. The area would feature pocket parks, town homes, apartments, pedestrian-oriented retail, a children's museum, two parking structures, and the existing post office would be relocated to Spring Street.

Students were able to experiment with a wide array of information gathering techniques, such as GIS mapping, site surveys, visual preference surveys, mental mapping, and behavioral observation. They also designed using freehand and technical drawings, as well as computer programs such as Photoshop and Sketchup, a new versatile and easy-to-operate electronic modeling which produced incredible imagery.

This was a very gratifying quarter, with results reaching high levels of quality, both in terms our pedagogical objectives for the students developmental progress, and as useful products for the City of Paso Robles. The students did a terrific job and at the request of the Community Development Department they presented their work in the Paso Robles City Library at the end of the quarter in a special session of the Planning Committee. The Community Development Department, the Planning Commission members, and the community appreciated having a well thought concept plan for the area and a number of important ideas which will help them choose among the possible future directions for downtown redevelopment.



Figure 1. Image of the townhomes proposed for the blocks.

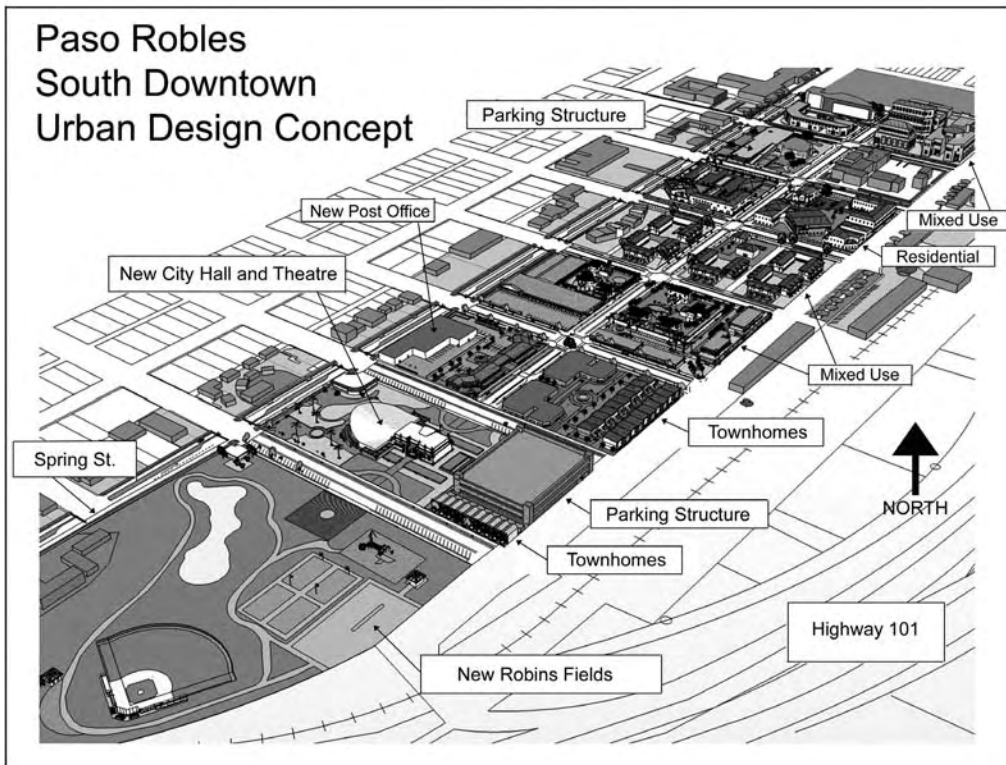


Figure 3. View of the project showing its major components and the City Park on the top of the image