

LEARNING FROM CALIFORNIA: HIGHLIGHTS OF CRP STUDIOS IN 2009

HEMALATA C. DANDEKAR



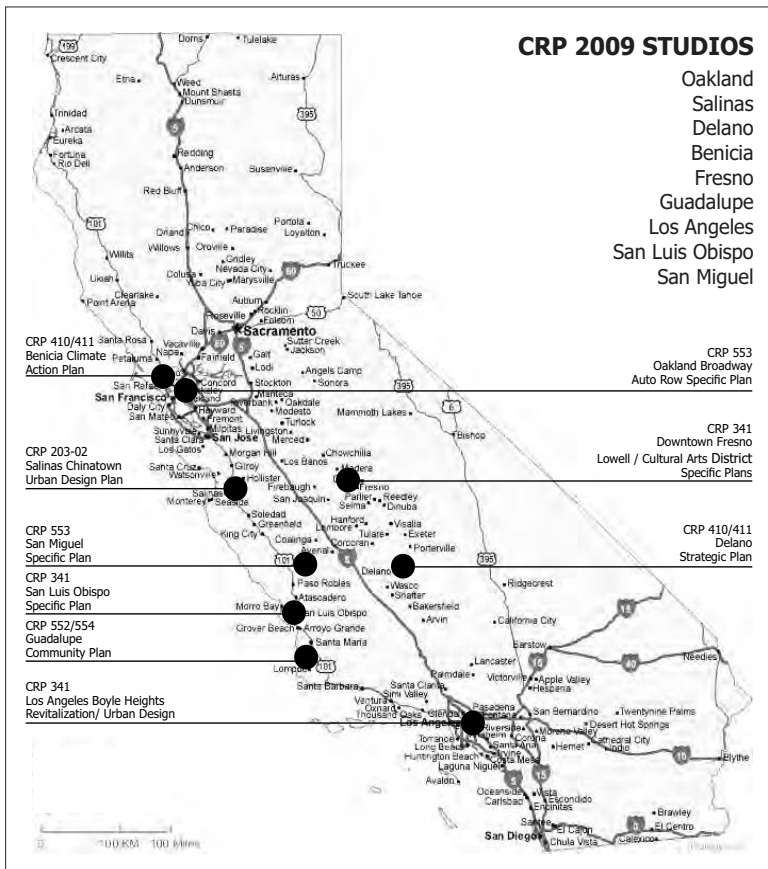
Hemalata C. Dandekar, PhD, is professor and head of Cal Poly's CRP Department. Previously she was the head of Arizona State University planning department.

CRP's department head writes about the wide variety of undergraduate and graduate studios that served California communities in 2009. From Oakland to Los Angeles, the studios covered a lot of ground, proved their pedagogical success in applying Cal Poly learn-by-doing philosophy, and helped shape better places and more sustainable cities.

One of the hallmarks of the City and Regional Planning (CRP) programs at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo has been the focus on studio-based learning in which graphic capabilities are taught as an important part of the planner's tool kit. It is an approach firmly embedded in the Cal Poly philosophy of "learning-by-doing." A focus on the physical and tangible has enabled CRP, on occasion, to offer blended studios in which students from other departments in CAED – Architecture, Landscape Architecture -- can participate and work together. Our emphasis on the environment and sustainability has privileged the material and tangible aspects of the impacts of human systems on the natural. Both these foci – physical design and the environmental – are addressed in the studio projects we have undertaken for communities in our region.

Figure 1

Communities served by CRP studios in 2009.



Our studio sequence is one of the most extensive ones offered in planning schools in the USA. At the undergraduate level consecutive studios build student's physical design and graphic capabilities and teach enabling computer tools. Students engage with a progressively increasing scale -- from site-specific plans and designs to strategic plan making at a regional scale; and complexity -- from two dimensional layouts to policy and implementation. The graduate studio offerings are more compressed, moving students rapidly through parallel components covering graphic tools but emphasizing policy and the theoretical and conceptual.

Studios at the upper level by and large have community clients. Our clients sponsor many of our studios. In addition to helping cash-starved students in studio-related costs of travel, data collection, and document production, the support has the effect of student work receiving serious consideration and expectations of accountability by the client. Rather than languish on the shelves of the planning department, which is too often the fate of student-driven work, many of our studios have filled a community need and informed and shaped policy or enabled cities to obtain professional planning expertise to address components of a general, longer-term strategy and vision. Some of the projects that were undertaken in

CRP studios in 2009 are described here (see location of cities that were served in Fig. x). They underscore our mission to be of service to community and to teach students how cities work and how to make them better places for people in ways that sustain and conserve the environment. These projects and plans are available from our web site at <<http://planning.calpoly.edu/>>

Delano Strategic Plan

Delano is a rural, agricultural community (some 46,000 residents, 70% Hispanic, with a substantial low-income population) located in the San Joaquin Valley. In Spring 2008 professor Umut Toker led BSCRIP students in the CRP 203 studio in designing an award winning (APA California Chapter Merit Award for 2009) Downtown Delano's Urban Design Plan (See Focus VI, 2009; pp. 48). Following this effort, in the Fall quarter professor Kelly Main -with help from professor Toker- continued CRP's connection with Delano, and her Community Planning Laboratory (CRP 410 and 411) prepared the Delano Strategic Plan to inform the update of Delano's 2005 General Plan. This was accomplished in a fast paced 26-week schedule which concluded in March 2009.

To develop the Strategic Plan the students reached out to an underserved minority population and also connected with the business community and city government. In addition to workshops, official meetings, presentations and flyer distribution at grocery stores, the class came up with innovative tools to elicit participation from an expanded community involving church groups, the local chapter of the United Farm Workers (UFW), and organizations that promote economic justice. The set of issues addressed was broadened to include those that often fall outside of traditional planning efforts – such as programs that would serve and, more important, be welcomed by, community youth. This broad based community participation elicited ideas to reduce costs and stimulated volunteer contributions of time and effort. Implementation-oriented and budgeted to be relevant to Delano, the practical plan elaborated ways to get change to happen, answering a community plea heard by students: “tell us how to get this done.” Students identified and showed to the community examples from similar, rural, small-town, agricultural communities of what might be possible.

Extensive engagement from a variety of stakeholders resulted in the plan being embraced whole-heartedly by the city. The Delano Strategic Plan, building on the Cal Poly student report, was presented to the City Council in March 2009. The city is moving towards adoption and implementation of sub-plans that are founded on this work. Broad-based participation in plan making promises to engender long-term social sustainability. The approach used has promise for transferability to other communities with similar characteristics of economic need, a minority-majority population, and a rural economy with its concomitant conditions. The Delano Strategic Plan won the American Planning Association 2010 National Small Town and Rural Planning Award for a student project.

Benicia Climate Action Plan

Elsewhere in this issue of Focus, professors Adrienne Greve and Zeljka Howard relate their BSCRIP CRP 411- 412 studios (Fall 2008 and Winter 2009) leading to the Draft Benicia Climate Action Plan and to a student award from the California Chapter of the American Planning Association in 2009. The student work has informed Benicia's Climate Action Plan, unanimously adopted by Benicia's City Council in September 2009.



Figure 2
The students participating in a night parade in Delano; one of the community outreach activities for the Delano Strategic Plan.



Figure 3
The Benicia Climate Action Plan.

Path breaking in addressing a planning issue that has become of foreground concern in the State of California – reducing the negative environmental impacts of urban growth – the plan articulates policy to enhance community sustainability through user-friendly, practical actions to lower greenhouse gas emissions in eight focus areas. Charts, time lines, guidance tools, and objective targets provide a model tool for similar-sized communities who wish to achieve success in greenhouse gas emission control. Significantly, professor Greve is building on this work in this year's CRP 410-411 studio sequence in executing a contract with the City of San Luis Obispo to develop their climate action plan.



Figure 4
One of the students posters showing a project for Salinas Chinatown.

CRP students first developed a detailed site inventory. This informed the work underway by Salinas Redevelopment Agency's financial consultants and helped identify key catalyst sites in the area. The students then led a two-hour workshop with community members to identify alternatives for the future of the area, and followed up with five student teams developing alternative plans. Student proposals addressed land use, circulation, public space structure, form-based codes and the connections of the area to Downtown Salinas. These were informed by interactions with representatives of the Salinas Redevelopment Agency who frequently visited the studio. The plan alternatives were presented to the agency representatives on the Cal Poly campus and video-recorded for sharing with community members in Salinas.

The Salinas Redevelopment Agency and Local Government Commission used the student work to help pick the best alternatives for catalyst sites identified by their financial consultant. This was done with a follow-up community workshop, where the agency displayed the student work and community members identified proposals they preferred for the catalyst sites. This studio both provided our students with a real-world planning experience but also helped an underserved community to develop future plans for their part of the city thus strengthening their capacity to move forward to a better future. Key components of this successful outcome were the innovative tools used to involve the community and elicit their participation in design.

Oakland Broadway Auto Row Specific Plan

In Spring 2009 professors Umut Toker and Chris Clark's graduate project planning studio, CRP 553, collaborated with the East Bay Housing Organization (EBHO), a housing advocacy group, to develop three alternative specific plans for the Broadway Auto Row district of Oakland. The City of Oakland was considering the relocation of auto dealerships, which had come to dominate the area in the past few decades, in an effort

Salinas Chinatown Urban Design Plan

In Spring 2009, professor Umut Toker's CRP 203 Urban Design Studio worked with the Salinas Redevelopment Agency and the Local Government Commission to develop urban design plans for Chinatown. Salinas's Chinatown is a northern extension of the city's downtown but physically separated from it by the railroad. It shows the impact of lack of investment over the past decades and has a large homeless population that is provided services by a number of local non-profit organizations.

In working closely with their two governmental clients and members of the Chinatown community,

to expand to the north the revitalization of Downtown Oakland.

Organized into three teams, the students visited the project area and were briefed by EBHO representatives. Students attended stakeholder meetings and community workshops organized by the City of Oakland, got to know community members, and familiarized themselves with current issues. Their proposed plans addressed land use, circulation, and the structure of public spaces, as well as affordable housing and implementation. The teams developed affordable housing strategies for the area and identified affordable housing types and sites for potential development. Pedestrian friendly and sustainable practices were common elements of the three student proposals that were presented to EBHO representatives on campus.

Received very positively by the client, student work provided the foundation for the Summer 2009 Oakland studio, organized by the CAED and Pyatok Architects & Planners. Some planning students from the Spring Studio joined Cal Poly architecture and landscape architecture students to form interdisciplinary groups to further develop detailed, site-specific solutions for the same project area, Broadway Auto Row. Currently, the plan proposals developed in CRP's Spring studio are informing Cal Poly's student team competing in the Bank of America Affordable Housing Challenge which is addressing a project site within the same area.

Downtown Fresno Specific Plans for the Lowell and Cultural Arts districts

In the summer of 2009, twenty CRP students and five Landscape Architecture students enrolled in CRP 341, a studio led by Professor Umut Toker. Five inter-disciplinary student teams were organized to develop specific plans for the city of Fresno, in the Central Valley. The client was the City of Fresno Downtown and Community Development Department. The Lowell district plan involved a focus on housing rehabilitation, affordable housing, infill and historic preservation in the northern section of downtown Fresno, an area that has been negatively impacted by disinvestment and high crime rates. The Cultural Arts District plan involved the strengthening and development of the Fresno city core and introduced sites for key civic institutions to make it a destination for recreation and cultural activities. The focus was on revitalization and integration of the city core with surrounding urban fabric and making it a destination point for the city.

Both specific plans addressed land use, circulation, public space structure, form-based codes, sustainability, and implementation. The proposals emphasized the application of low-impact development principles and



Figure 5
Student poster showing affordable housing for the Broadway Auto Row in Oakland.



Figure 6
Student poster showing sustainability and natural resources concepts for the Lowell District in Fresno.

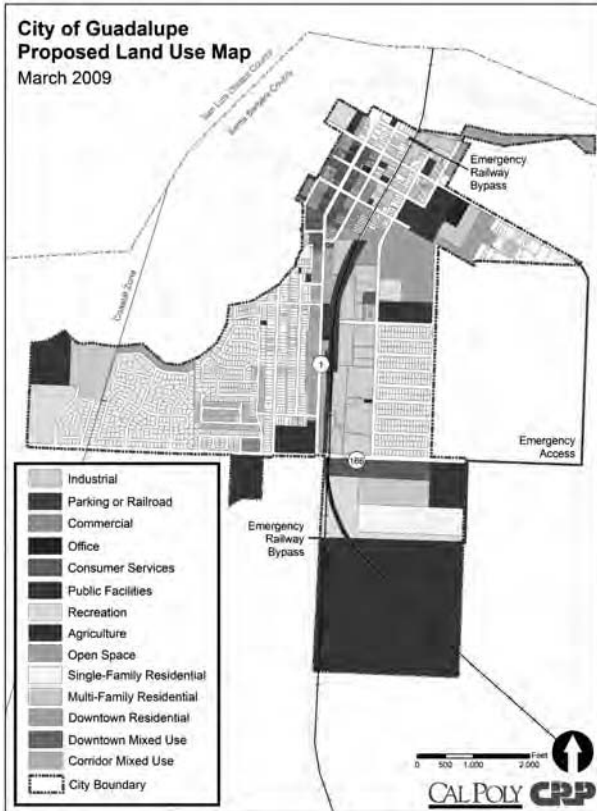


Figure 7
Proposed land use;
Guadalupe Community Plan.

identified best practices. To address the area’s scarce water resources the student teams developed plant palettes for landscaping with draught-tolerant native species. The implementation and phasing strategies addressed a systematic introduction of these innovative practices. A large contingent of City of Fresno planners and community representatives attended the final presentations at Cal Poly. The work was warmly received and subsequently students from CRP have been involved in follow up work with the city through their senior projects and master’s theses.

The Guadalupe Community Plan

Guadalupe is a small, agricultural community (some 6,550 residents, 80% Hispanic, with half the per capita income of the State) located four miles inland from the Pacific Ocean in the heart of the fertile Santa Maria Valley, an agricultural region of statewide and national importance. Over Fall 2008 and Winter 2009, MCRP graduate students in professors Cornelius Nuworsoo and Jeff Hook’s CRP 552- 554 studios developed a Community Plan for the City of Guadalupe. In collaboration with residents and City leaders, the class formulated a development scenario for Guadalupe in 2030 to accommodate projected population and housing needs.

The plan, a hybrid of moderate and comprehensive growth alternatives, outlines development as focused on the main arterial/thoroughfare (Highway 1) that bisects Guadalupe. The emphasis is on stimulating and concentrating economic growth downtown and discouraging urban sprawl.

The planned scenario would increase sales tax and property tax revenues, provide jobs for residents, and create a more vibrant downtown.

To accommodate a 2030-projected population of 7,880, an additional 450 housing units were planned, and an increase from 260 jobs in 2009 to a targeted total of 690 is anticipated. Land use categories in the student plan include: a Downtown Mixed Use Designation to focus on commercial, ground floor retail and accommodating office and residential uses on upper floors; a Downtown Residential Designation to focus on residential but accommodate commercial uses on ground floor; a Corridor Mixed Use Designation – a mix of light industrial and commercial to be achieved with industrial live-work units; and, Intensified Industrial involving an increase of the allowed floor-area ratio (FAR) on industrial-zoned land and a focus of industrial uses to the east of the train tracks and west of Obispo Street.

The community appreciated the student developed Guadalupe Plan so much that the Mayor enquired about the possibility of bypassing the environmental review process and adopting it immediately! It provides a comprehensive analysis of existing realities and projected futures that will help guide city development for a community that has few resources to invest in a planning endeavor.

San Luis Obispo City and County

At the request of San Luis Obispo’s Congregation Beth David, BSCR students in professor Vicente del Rio’s CRP 341 Community Design Lab studied an area of approximately 1,386 acres located in the city’s sphere of

influence. The student teams developed alternative specific plans for a new neighborhood including the concept design for a village core, following New Urbanist principles and LEED-ND criteria.

MCRP graduate students in professors del Rio and Scott Bruce's CRP 553 Project Planning studio, in response to a request from the County of San Luis Obispo, have tested the countywide "smart-growth" vision by developing a specific plan for the community of San Miguel. The class projected the infill development and revitalization of their main street, and developed a design scenario and guidelines for growth to the east toward the Salinas River.

Los Angeles

Professor Vicente del Rio initiated an interdisciplinary effort in urban design for the revitalization of the Boyle Heights area in Los Angeles by organizing a joint studio with Landscape Architecture, with the support of the Urban Design Studio at the City of Los Angeles Planning Department. This effort to work in Los Angeles across disciplines continues this year under professor Kelly Main in her CRP 410-411 studios.

Final remarks

CRP welcomes opportunities from cities and communities to work on projects and plans that can make a difference. In their commitment to learn from the realities and needs in California, our faculty and students are eager to participate and hone their skills and insights toward developing successful plans that can help create good places, a sustainable environment, and a better future.

Over the years, the CRP department has built a very solid reputation for the quality of the products that are developed at all levels of our studios. Student work has been recognized with numerous awards and resulted in several plans and projects, which have contributed to implementation efforts, by our clients. In our several levels of studios, in their senior projects, and in their master's



Figure 8
Portion of the site plan for San Miguel.



Figure 9
Project for the Mariachi Plaza area in Boyle Heights, L.A.