

Shaping a Vision for Old Town Newark

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This article describes the MCRP first-year studio project for Newark's Old Town, considered by the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) as one of the region's Priority Development Areas. In collaboration with the city's Community Development Department, the proposal includes a vision and a development strategy to revitalize Old Town through mixed-use, development opportunities, and vibrant and memorable environments.

The development of Bay Area cities that are in the sphere of influence of the greatly accelerated job growth in Silicon Valley has varied. It has depended on many factors including relative distance from concentrations of highly desirable and well-paying opportunities in the Information Technology industry. Low housing inventory throughout the region has driven up prices to unprecedented highs bringing national attention to the housing crisis in the State of California. It has made it virtually impossible for families with even moderate incomes to afford a median priced home or absorb the escalating rent increases. And the regions traffic congestion problems continue to worsen.

The City of Newark, in the East Bay, surrounded by the City of Fremont and is conveniently located at the eastern entry to the Dumbarton Bridge that links it to the heart of Silicon Valley. It has experienced growth in business, an increase in hotels and the hospitality industry, a leasing up and repurposing of vacant industrial space, and a strong growth of higher end residential development, but one falling short of meeting affordability needs. A renaissance of retail growth and new housing is in process at the revitalized NewPark Mall at the Eastern edge of the city on highway I- 880. And areas along SR 84 on the northern edge of Newark have seen growth in medical-related industry and suburban-style single-family housing development.

Old Town Newark, located along Thornton Avenue (a three to four-lane arterial road) that cuts through the city and links SR 84 to I-880) between Elm Street to the West and Cherry Street to the East has languished as a commercial and retail venue. Historically, Old Town growth was based around the train station, constructed in 1870, near the intersection of Thornton and Sycamore Street (now a major arterial two lane collector that parallels the railroad which cuts Newark along its West side. The hotels, shops and industries that populated this area formed the historic economic and commercial core. Today Old Town languishes, serving as a neighborhood center. Many businesses and industries have moved out leaving behind underutilized parcels and vacant lots. Old Town has been identified by the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) as one of the Priority Development Areas (PDA) in the region, located as it is within an existing com-



Figures 1 & 2: The project area (above) and existing conditions (below) along Thornton Avenue, Old Town, Newark.



munity, within walking distance of transit, and designated for more housing by way of city adopted plans and studies (Figures 1 and 2).

The City of Newark Planning Department’s contract with CRP challenged thirteen CRP first year graduate students in the Spring 2017 CRP 553 Project Planning and Design Studio-Lab and their instructor Professor Hemalata Dandekar to develop pre-planning insight, urban design concepts and development strategy for Old Town. The work was to be completed within the time frame of the ten-week Spring quarter. Rising to this challenge the groups investigative and design work was undertaken in three phases of discovery and visioning.

Phase One: Study of existing regulatory and design factors underlying the site. This included analysis of planning documents and the implications of regulations for site development, individual lot survey and documentation of lot conditions, and interviews and surveys of community members and businesses.

Phase Two: Development of concept plans organized around three discrete design themes and priorities:

1. The Historic Group - featuring concepts that surfaced and reinforced the underlying historic significance and character of Old Town (Figure 3).
2. The Design Group - featuring investigation of architectural styles to complement the existing buildings and activities (Figure 4).
3. The Housing Group - featuring investigation of the optimal capacity of the project area site to support housing units, both mix and types, to address the need for housing in Old Town (Figure 5).

These concepts were complemented by Thornton Avenue streetscape redesign and road dieting in order to accommodate multi-modal traffic, reduce vehicle speeds and create a “bikable” and pedestrian friendly environment. The visions offered by approaching the site through the lens of history, design and housing complemented each other and helped highlight key elements that would inform the final concept designs.

For Phase Three, the project area was divided into five design blocks. The solutions for each block contributed to an integrated overall redevelopment vision to create a diverse housing mix, a central plaza and performance space surrounded by commercial, retail and housing as a “heart” to Old Town, a Hispanic-themed Mercado complex to resonate with existing ethnic diversity, an “upscale” residential block and a civic area featuring a library, museum, and other public improvements yielding an east gateway into Old Town.

To provide vibrancy to Old Town, its heart and focal point is a pedestrian-scale plaza named Old Town Square. Created as the neighborhood centerpiece, it is designed as a cultural and commercial center, providing space for eating, shopping, socializing, and a venue for community gatherings.



Figure 3: General concept proposed by the Historic Group.



Figure 4: General concept proposed by the Design Group.



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| <p>Zones of Land Use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ High Density - 1st floor retail ■ High Density - 1st floor corner retail ■ High-Medium Density - no retail ■ Public/civic space | <p>Potential Housing Units (645)</p> <p>Estimated based on parcel acreage and average densities of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 40 units/acre ■ 40 units/acre ■ 30 units/acre |
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The square is designed as a gathering space with a welcoming feel. Currently, the spaces in Old Town Newark that can be considered a part of the public realm are few. Therefore, the design of new public spaces must attract, not overlook, how individuals are drawn to them. To make the governing principle a reality, Old Town Square is designed with the following features and amenities (Figure 5):

- Two sides of Old Town Square have direct access to shops, restaurants, and other establishments. This allows Old Town Square to connect directly with the buildings surrounding it. By removing the barriers between the public realm of the square and the private realm of businesses, interaction is encouraged, helping enliven the square and the neighborhood.
- A stage in one corner of the plaza gives this public space utility and versatility. Possible uses include featuring live bands during farmer's markets, movie nights, and community events that require attention on a speaker or a presentation.
- Tables and chairs encourage people to relax, consume food, and mingle. Spaces to do are provided making the space inviting.
- Trees provide both shade and visual breaks along the sides of the square. Strategic placement of trees also helps direct the eye and improves the visual character.

Appropriately sized buildings around the square embody a variety of architectural styles that interact and contrast with each other to create a diverse but harmonious built environment. Their massing and architectural qualities help define the open public space and help concentrate activity within Old Town Square. Importantly, these buildings are mixed use with the potential to make the plaza active throughout the day.

Another key feature of the plaza design is that building height and density decrease with distance from Thornton Avenue. Next, to

the existing single-family residences, building heights are no more than two stories, and feature landscaped buffers. Buildings are up to five stories in height and help define the visual scale of the plaza. Frontages along two of the Square's sides provide a natural interaction space for businesses.

The design of the block is formulated to connect the surrounding neighborhoods with the Thornton Avenue corridor and also preserve Old Town Newark's history. Keeping the 'old' in Old Town is a recurring theme throughout the concept designs for all of the five blocks. The design of the Mercado Block, for instance, reflects the community demographics. The residents in the blocks around Old Town are predominantly Hispanic, and several of the business establishments on Thornton Avenue cater to their tastes and preferences. And, the Mercado Block reflects this neighborhood characteristic. The buildings feature the architecture of California's missions, and Spanish revival architecture made prominent during the 1915 World's Fair in both San Francisco and San Diego. The buildings are predominantly mixed use, and, given the proximity to Old Town Square add vibrancy to the core. As with the buildings in Old Town Square, the Mercado Block buildings also increase in height and density as they approach Thornton Avenue and their massing and intensity of use decrease with distance from Thornton.

The major feature of the Mercado Block is a central enclosed courtyard surrounded by arcades and shops provides a second focal area to Old Town. It is an enclosed space that emulates the traditional Mercado found in Latin American cities. The Mercado is connected to the neighborhood by several paseos with covered arcades that provide smaller scale places for people in the community to come together and mingle. Parking is contained in a multi level garage facing Sycamore Street, and, there is additional 'tuck under' parking for units that front the surrounding residential streets.

Figure 6: Looking from the North-East to Design Block 2, the Urban Core.





Figure 7: Looking from the South-East to Design Block 2, the Urban Core.



Figure 8: Student proposed logo for Newark.

The concepts for the five blocks of Old Town work together. The civic center block provides space for civic amenities and acts as a gateway from the east, the mixed-use residential block diversifies the housing types built in the area and offers smaller scale public spaces and the housing block acts as a western gateway and adds a range of multifamily developments to the mix. Collectively the blocks create a visual focus and core for Old Town and offer creative options to increase housing, jobs and activity in the city.

Building on the efforts of the CRP 553 Masters studio BSCR senior Gabriel Ward's senior project helps make the work of the studio accessible to parties interested in future investments in the Old Town. It adds design alternatives and options to the 3D model developed in the CRP 553 class amplify and diversify the concepts. These alternatives can assist developers with interest in this area of the city to assess feasibility for various options that meet existing needs. The visualization can encourage developments in Old Town that are feasible and benefit the surrounding neighborhoods.

The City of Newark California has potential for development of both residential and commercial spaces. It has spearheaded this

effort by implementing a mixed-use zoning district starting on Sycamore street continuing through Thornton Ave and ending on Cherry Street. This rezoning has made possible the next step in the City's transformation. But tools are needed to interest residents and developers in exploiting its full potential. Ward's model is constructed to encourage such interest. It provides design options for proposed facades and public spaces enabling developers to visualize alternative ways to meet building and zoning requirements and achieve their own goals.

The 3-D models, a design for development guidance document, and The Old Town Urban Design Concept Plan provide the City of Newark tools with which to attract development that will bring new life to the area. This partnership with the City of Newark Community Development Department has provided the CRP students with an invaluable opportunity to contribute to solve a real problem and enhance a place with great potential to meet the development needs of the region.

Figure 9: Partial views of the Mercado Block.

