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Norma J. Lang Prize for Undergraduate Information Research

Title

Transecting Russell Boulevard

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Author

Klein, Jacob

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Transecting Russell Boulevard



Jacob Klein

Professor Owens

LDA 002

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Introduction

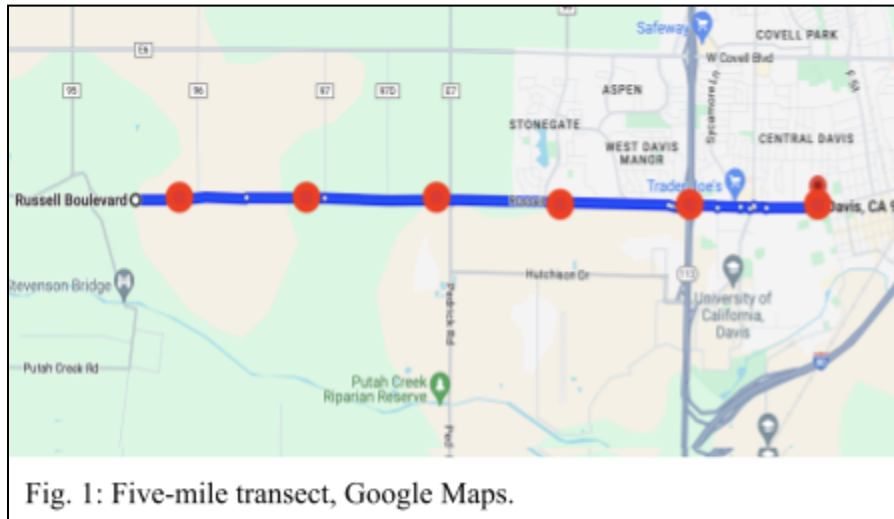


Fig. 1: Five-mile transect, Google Maps.

I selected the Russell Boulevard transect because it extends through various land uses, from agricultural to residential to university. I took an Uber to the first stop, allowing me to take a sneak peek of the entire transect before engaging with the physical landscape hands-on. Then, I walked the entire five-mile journey to experience the separation between each development type.

My first stop, Fairfield Elementary School, was founded 51 years before the city of Davis was incorporated. My second stop, the intersection of County Road 97 and Russell Boulevard, is home to a native garden and a large almond orchard. My third stop, Village Homes, seamlessly transitions from the agricultural stops to the residential stops. My fourth stop, the freeway overpass, includes concrete and loud cars. At my fifth stop, Frat Row and Howard Field, Russell Boulevard bisects a residential area and a grass field.

In each area, at least one thing surprised me; I added an in-depth analysis of each thing I discovered in its relevant section. By traversing along the transect and immersing myself in the history, I learned how to critically assess a landscape using key concepts from this class.

Stop 1: Fairfield Elementary School (38.547204, -121.840795)

Jaywalking across Russell Boulevard to a strip on the other side of the road, I peek over a fence and see the yard of Fairfield Elementary School. I can hear birds chirping and vehicles speeding. I smell a floral scent wafting nearby, quickly overtaken by the smell of a skunk. I see a large open space for a field resembling the agricultural landscape, but just with greener grass. The landscape feels like a unique blend of natural and built landscapes, which I assume is conducive to learning. I count more than three different kinds of trees around the edge of the school, creating a natural border between properties. The height of these trees makes me wonder how old they are and if they are older than the school itself.



Fig. 2: Fairfield School yard, looking north.

In the yard of Fairfield School, I can see a hand-painted mural painted on the wall with a poem: “The field is big where the children play. Out in the back where the horses neigh. Everybody knows your name. Life is all a learning game.” I quickly realize that the community deems horses and the field, both of which are impressions of nature, to be important. I assume that the designers of the mural wanted to highlight the area’s rich agricultural history.

The specific type of fence used enables me to visualize the yard's history. I notice a backstop fence in the northwest corner of the large grassy expanse. I know that backstop fences are a type of chain-link fence typically used behind the home plate of a baseball or kickball field. However, I see no such playing field in the yard. Where the bases would be located, I see nearly a dozen garden beds carefully arranged next to a concrete wall with a mosaic that reads:

“Fairfield Elementary 150.” Because this art wall appears fairly new, it likely refers to the 150th Anniversary of the school, which would have occurred in 2016. I hypothesize that the garden beds adjacent to this wall replaced the baseball or kickball field that once stood on the land to beautify the school leading up to this event. Upon further research, I discovered that the Davis Food Co-op gave two small grants to Fairfield School in 2003 and 2005 to fund the construction of the gardens (DavisWiki). Today, the backstop fence is the only thing that remains from the sports field at Fairfield School. Although land use frequently changes over time, small clues can reveal the past function of a landscape.

As I walk east on Russell Boulevard, I see the other side of the property. I see a large gate with the school's name. This sign is an example of marking territoriality, as explained in class. The school name displayed prominently provides visitors with a striking entryway. This is important for both the local area and the student, as the size could help with the memorization of names and places. Another sign at the



Fig. 3: Entrance to Fairfield School, looking west.

entrance of Fairfield Elementary School reads: “Established May 7, 1866.” Immediately after reading this, I began thinking about the Davis landscape 158 years ago.

In the 1860s, Francis E. Russell and his wife Lucy lived on an 815-acre estate in Davisville, now known as Davis, California (Lewis, 663-664). The Russell family donated the area of land on which Fairfield Elementary School was built in 1912 after the original building was deemed outdated (Rifkin; Ternus-Bellamy). All five Russell children attended the school at its original location. The most famous graduate of Fairfield School was William O. Russell, the


second son of Francis and Lucy (Lewis). He was elected to the Yolo County Board of Supervisors in 1898 and 1910, serving over thirty years until he died in 1943 (Rifkin). Russell Boulevard was named in his honor.

While this historical context is essential, there is still much to discover about Fairfield School today. The K-3 school has fewer than fifty students enrolled in a given year and has only two classrooms and as many teachers (Ternus-Bellamy). Since residents who reside west of Road 98 get priority enrollment, there is an extensive waitlist for families with children who live in the more urban parts of Davis. This reminds me of a concept discussed in class. As people moved away from rural areas, the countryside became a popular destination for vacations and hands-on exploration. Similarly, families in Davis seek to expose their children to what they deem an off-the-grid experience. As a result, Fairfield School is a desirable place for Davis families to enroll their children because of the unique, rural opportunity it offers.

Initial Site Visit

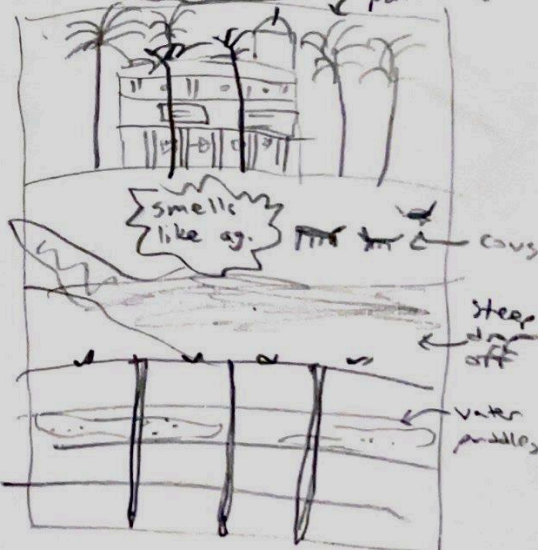
Fairfield Elementary School 1/24/24 67° Sunny (partly cloudy)
2:42 PM

- mural on wall: "The field is big where the children play. Out in the back where the horses neigh. Everybody knows your name. Life is all a learning game"
- hear birds chirping + vehicles speeding
- chain link fence → keep kids in and people from the outside out



FAIRFIELD SCHOOL
DANS JOINT UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
ESTABLISHED MAY 7, 1886

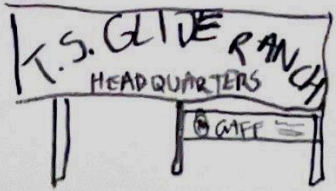
- as I walk from this site + the next, I smell a floral scent, immediately followed by the smell of a skunk
- across the street I see wide open space filled with grass
- in the distance, I see a large estate surrounded by non-native palm trees
 - the estate has a tank house like we discussed in lecture



1.5 T.S. Glide Ranch 68° non-native palm trees
1/28/24 3:05 PM

smells like ag. cows
steep drop off
water puddles

- there is a large ditch to the North of the area which prevents cows from leaving
- a barbed-wire fence prevents entrance and exit



T.S. GLIDE RANCH
HEADQUARTERS
GIFT

Fig. 4

Stop 2: County Road 97 x Russell (38.547194, -121.822171)

Walking down Russell Boulevard, I can hear birds chirping, cars speeding, and bikers talking to each other as they pass through the public road. A designated bike path exclusive to bikes and pedestrians provides a barrier between vehicles and commuters. I wonder if this was



Fig. 5: “Roadside Native Planting” garden, looking east.

always the case in the area or if it developed more as the urban parts of Davis expanded.

I immediately notice a verge, or a carefully planted strip of land between the road and the sidewalk. This is a “Roadside Native Planting” garden, according to the official metal sign installed at the main access point. “Drought Tolerant Plants from Around the World” and “Drought Tolerant Plants from California” are the first two sections I notice. These species include currant, artemisia, and sage, all of which thrive in xeric conditions. I wonder how this garden came to be and

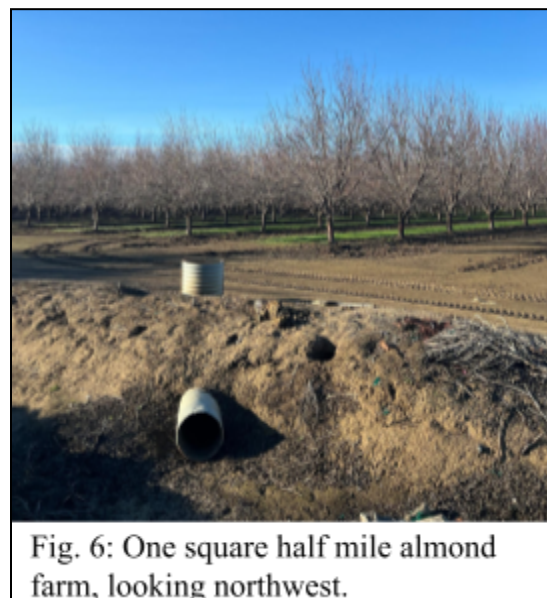
who has been taking care of it, given that it is in a fairly remote part of Davis. I think this strip of land may have been saved and never developed when Russell Boulevard was first built.

Later, I found out that this is the Verge Experiment, a garden created by Patricia Carpenter, the Garden Ambassador for the chapter of the California Native Plant Society that serves Yolo County (CNPS, *Patricia*). While the California drought-tolerant native plant project began at the beginning of 2018, it grew considerably during the pandemic. Carpenter lists more than sixty California and nearly seventy foreign species that are currently or have been planted at the verge on Russell Boulevard (CNPS, *Verge*). Gardens like these are essential in California, as

the state has experienced multiple droughts in recent decades and was in a “drought state of emergency” for years between 2014 and 2017 (USGS).

Beyond the agricultural aspect of the garden, I was drawn to the subheading on the sign written in Spanish: “No Discing, No Spraying, *No Arar, No Herbicidas.*” I wanted to know if there was a Spanish-speaking community in Davis. Online data provided me with a few key indicators. According to the most recent population estimates from July 2022, 14.2 percent of the 67,048 people who live in Davis are in the “Hispanic or Latino” demographic; this means approximately 9,520 “Hispanic or Latino” people reside in Davis (Census). While this research sheds light on this population in Davis, it does not fully answer why the sign was translated into Spanish. Upon further investigation, I found a study by the Pew Research Center that found 75 percent of Hispanic- and Latino-identifying people in the United States speak Spanish (Mora and Lopez). Extrapolating that figure, I calculated that approximately 7,000 Davis residents, around 11 percent of the city’s population, speak Spanish. In my research, I also discovered why the sign was installed. The garden was nearly sprayed with pesticides mistakenly by a worker who did not speak fluent English (CNPS, *Verge*). As a result, Carpenter worked with the County to install the official signage that has since prevented mishaps.

Across the street, I see an extensive farm filled with almond trees. This plot of land covers one square half mile, or 160 acres, making it the largest monocultured area I saw in all five miles of the northern side of Russell Boulevard. I notice that the almond trees have branches but no leaves, and I wonder when almonds begin to flower. Looking on



Google Maps, I notice that the layout of the landscape represents a Jeffersonian Grid, in which plots of land are divided into squares within a larger township. Almond trees have been cultivated for hundreds of years in Davis, and the almond-growing community in Davis has paved the way for almond producers nationwide. The 1897 Davisville Almond Growers Association served as an economic resource for farmers to “pool their crops and bargain for higher prices” and eventually morphed into the famous Blue Diamond brand, responsible for California being the “world leader for almonds” (Allen, 3-6). This historical context reveals how a local landscape can have considerable influence beyond its borders.

Almond orchards in California use monoculture cultivation with devastating impacts on the landscape. Monoculture or monocropping involves continuously producing a single crop in one area. This damages the soil, as its health relies on nutrients from many types of crops, which causes a chain reaction of negative impacts on the organisms that rely on the area. Bees are a key example of this. The most recent comprehensive study on the impact of commercial beekeeping collected data in the winter months of 2018 and 2019. In this investigation, the US Department of Agriculture discovered that a third of all US bee colonies, amounting to billions of bees, were destroyed in that season alone (McGivney). Because bees engage in the pollination necessary to uphold the entire food chain and human food production, these impacts were felt across California, including in the almond orchards on Russell Boulevard in Davis. Because of this, it is important to consider how organisms are manipulated by humans to control landscapes in rural areas.


Walking along Russell Boulevard on the way to Russell Ranch, I can see walnut trees. Local historian John Lofland writes in *Davis: Radical Changes, Deep Constants*, that black walnut trees are “generally used to line roads and mark boundaries” (Lofland qtd Robinson, 87).

This is one of a few stretches of Russell Boulevard that includes walnut trees. In my research, I found that Davis has an interesting history of walnut trees. While black walnuts are native to Yolo County, English walnuts are not. However, in the mid-1800s, farmers like Francis E. Russell preferred English walnuts to black walnuts and engaged in an agricultural practice called grafting (Robinson, 92). Grafting describes joining two plants; in Davis, English walnut branches were grafted to native black walnuts. As a result, farmers could harvest the specific crop they needed, while taking advantage of the species that grew better in the area.

The stop at the intersection of County Road 97 and Russell Boulevard uncovers the hidden history of the agricultural landscape of Davis in terms of native plants and farmland. Delving deeper, the effects of land preservation and monoculture expose considerable issues with this specific landscape that reflect trends in many places.

Initial Site Visit

Country Road 97 x Russell | 1/28/24 67° sunny
3:38 PM



• "Roadside Native Planting" includes a number of native species of bushes

- these species include currant + sage
- interestingly, the sign also was printed in Spanish. Is there a Spanish-speaking community here?

benefits of native plants

- biodiversity
- better for local ecosystem
- drought-resistant
- adapted to climate

- the garden also includes "Drought Tolerant Plants from Around the World"
- area experiences drought
- there is also a space devoted to "Drought Tolerant Plants from California"

- this is a primarily agricultural area, with a lot of land devoted to almond trees
- I can hear birds, cars, and bikers talking as they pass through
- there is a designated bike path along Russell that makes walking and biking the exclusive modes of transportation along the stretch, which is adjacent to the road.

rows of newly planted trees

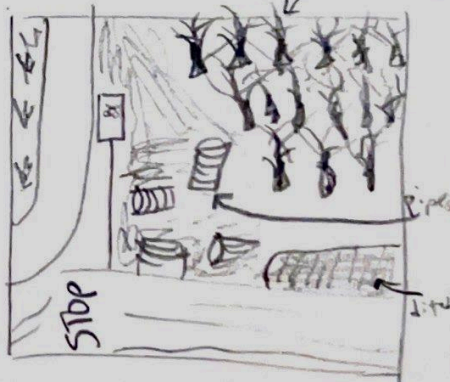


Fig. 7

Stop 3: Village Homes (38.546913, -121.785373)

Fig. 8: Village Homes field, looking northeast.

As I continue walking, I still feel mosquitoes biting me, and I am distracted by having to swat them away every few seconds. I observe the features of Village Homes. I can hear birds chirping, mosquitoes buzzing, and cars driving. This is the first fully residential stop along my

transect, so I take extra note of the handful of people I can see and hear engaged in conversation at this new landscape. I am drawn to the carefully landscaped gardens, vineyards, trees, and lawns at the site. It is interesting to compare this version of a nature-based landscape to the truly natural landscape I saw at the prior three stops. Unlike the true agricultural areas, this feels like a manufactured agricultural area, albeit an effective one. Instead of being land that was farmland for centuries, the Village Homes neighborhood was designed to evoke a specific kind of community. This is the first locality I have ever seen with a built-in vineyard.

I notice a concrete amphitheater that blends in with the grassy landscape. As I walk down the concrete steps, I can imagine groups of people using this feature to put on a performance or simply interact with each other. As the sun sets, I notice the landscape change under different lighting. I quickly realize that Village Homes lacks adequate lighting. I wonder if anything on the property would be visible if I were to stay until sunset. I am curious why the streets of Davis get considerably dark at night. Later on, I learned that Davis authorized a “dark sky ordinance” in 1998, which restricted the options for lighting to reduce light pollution (CBS News). This explains why Village Homes, and the city overall, does not have a lot of lights. While declining

light pollution is good for wildlife, poorly lit streets can be unsafe and lead to instances of violent crime.

Along the primary walking path adjacent to the garden, I notice a hub for information that shows local events next to a pole that reads “May peace prevail on Earth” and a bookshelf. This area is handmade from wood and provides community resources for the residents. Because this hub is located on a central footpath, it is the ideal location for a public bulletin board. Across the path, I see a woman working at the garden. The garden appears to be very well taken care of, so I ponder how frequently this area is gardened and how many people devote their time to the garden for every resident's benefit.

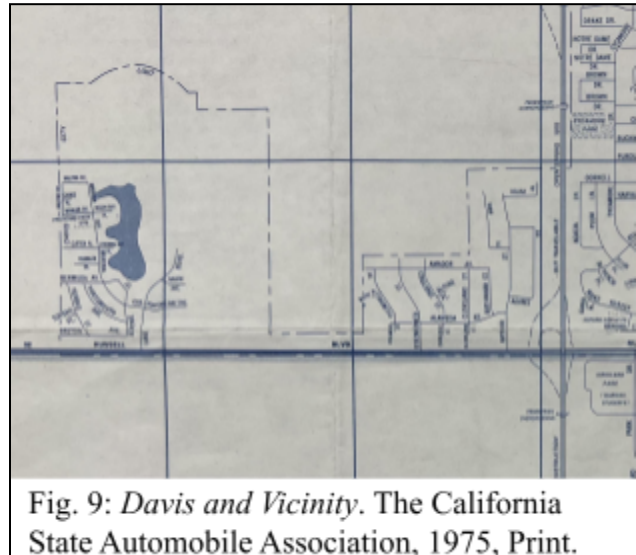


Fig. 9: *Davis and Vicinity*. The California State Automobile Association, 1975, Print.

This unique community inspired me to look into the history of this landscape. In the UC Davis Shields Library Map Room, Sheena Campbell showed me a map from 1975 that showed the Village Homes land as undeveloped and outside of the Davis city limits (*Davis and Vicinity*). Because this land was formerly agricultural, several bureaucratic procedures had to occur before the construction of Village Homes could begin. I was curious about which specific zoning changes were required in Davis. In the Shields Library Map Room, I also located an October 1975 map of land use in Davis that depicted this change. The zoning of the land had to change from agricultural to residential, and the map's legend clarifies that the pattern of distant dots refers to residential zoning (*Davis Area Land Use Map*). The area of land above Village Homes was reclassified as an “urban reserve.” According to the legal database “Law Insider,” this

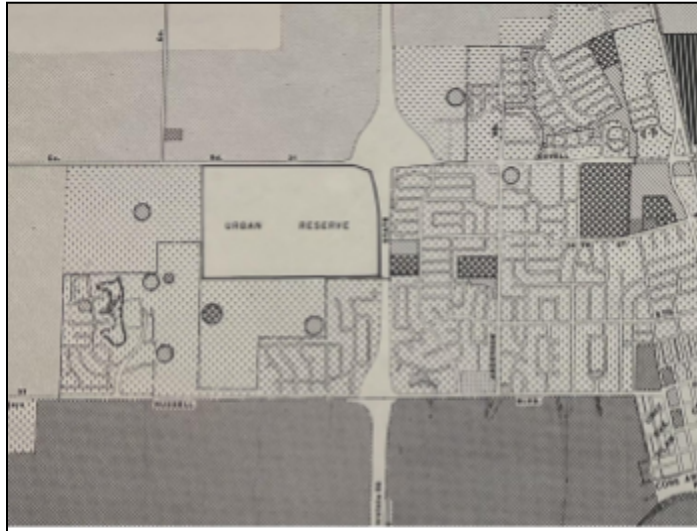


Fig. 10: *Davis Area Land Use Map*. Community Development Department, 1975, Print.

designation refers to previously agricultural land set aside by a city for future urban development (Law Insider). Based on this information, I hypothesize that the land zoned as an “urban reserve” was ultimately used in a later development. Using Google Maps, I was able to confirm this prediction. Village Homes inspired other developments.

Analyzing this area indicates a scary trend across California: agricultural land is being converted to urban areas at a dangerous rate. Two government reports reveal the extent of this loss. In the early 2000s, this rate was forty thousand acres per year; in the 2010s, this rate increased to nearly sixty thousand acres per year (Thompson Jr., 19; California Department of Conservation, 3). This trend is shown in a 1998 map also located in the Shields Library Map Room. Land in Davis that was once considered to be “Prime Farmland” (green) has since been re-classified as “Urban and Built-Up Land” (red) by the California Division of Land Resource Protection (*Yolo County Important Farmland*). As more and more agricultural land is converted to residential land, issues with food production could arise.

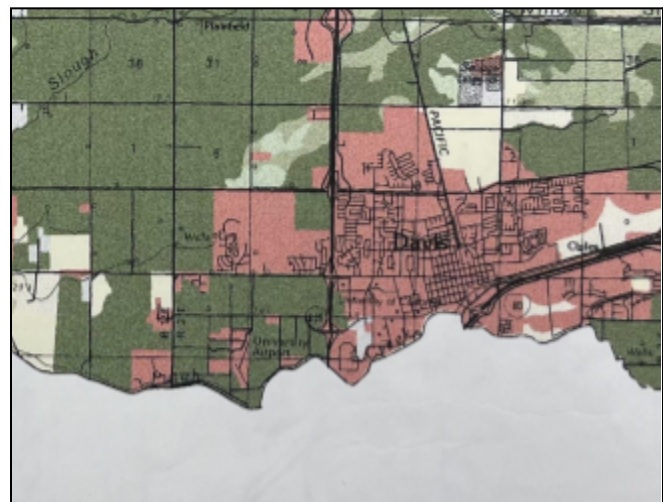


Fig. 11: *Yolo County Important Farmland*, 1996. Division of Land Resource Protection, 1998, Print.

Fortunately, Yolo County and the city of Davis have worked to reverse this trend. The California Department of Conservation reports that thousands of acres of unused farmland in Yolo County have been converted to agricultural land, including more than three thousand acres of almonds and nearly two thousand acres of olives (California Department of Conservation, 19-20). This increase exceeds that of most other counties in California. While it is essential to consider the context of agricultural land changes statewide, it is reassuring that Yolo County, including the city of Davis, is at the forefront of positive patterns of agricultural land conversions. As a result, projects like Village Homes that convert agricultural land to residential land are less problematic in a county like Yolo County that makes up for the loss of agricultural land with the introduction of new farmland.

I was fortunate to have located these maps from 1975, as the development of Village Homes began later that year and finished in the 1980s (Village Homes). This area is known worldwide for its sustainable development that takes advantage of passive solar, which uses solar panels and reflective metal surfaces to produce what Dennis Dingemans describes as “suncatcher house[s]” (Dingemans, 18-20). Harnessing the sun's power is very strategic for an area once zoned for agriculture, as it takes advantage of one key factor inherent to the landscape: the sun.

Exploring and researching Village Homes sheds light on the zoning and development of residential areas in Davis. Analyzing the sustainable features of this area reveals how built landscapes differ from natural landscapes. It is interesting to see how, if planned carefully, even built landscapes can promote environmental sustainability. And, by considering trends across California, Yolo County, and Davis, I can consider the Village Homes development in the broader context of shifting land use.

Initial Site Visit

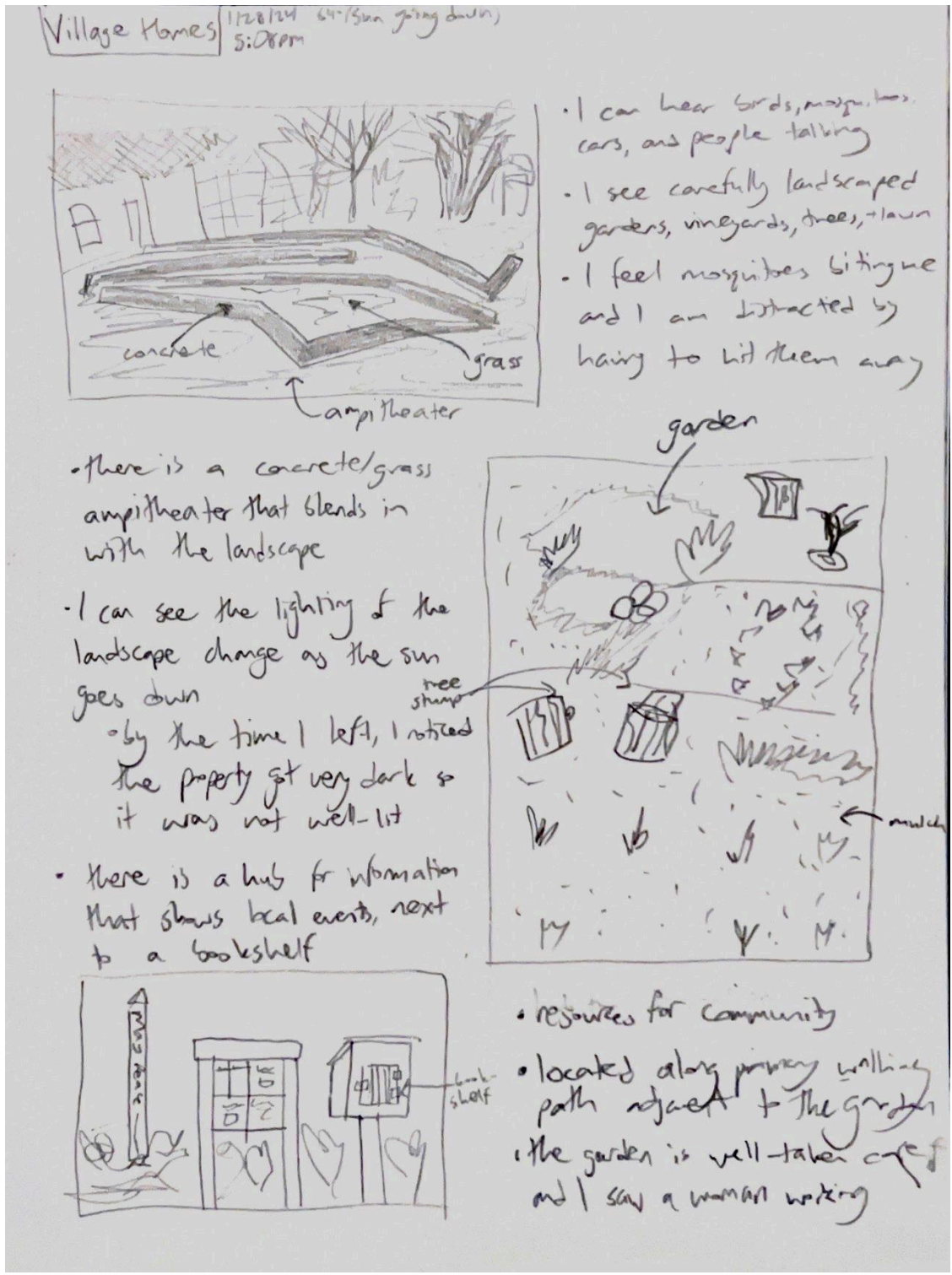


Fig. 12

Stop 4: Frat Row and Howard Field (38.545939, -121.749326)

I see and hear hundreds of cars as I continue along Howard Field. While sketching and taking notes and pictures, I make room for nearly a dozen bikers and pedestrians using the same given block of sidewalk I am on.

Walking along the row of fraternity and sorority houses along Russell Boulevard, Frat Row, I notice a very specific style of architecture. I see large houses with up to three tall pillars in the entryway. I wonder what this style of architecture is called. The Pi Beta Phi house on 445 Russell Boulevard captures my eye. In addition to the aforementioned architectural style, this building has a carefully landscaped lawn and garden. As a sorority house, I assume it is important to create a welcoming environment for members. Therefore, the presence of greenery at the entrance of the home makes sense.



Fig. 13: 445 Russell Boulevard in 1924. Howard, Walter. "Walter L. Howard House." 1924.



Fig. 14: 445 Russell Boulevard, looking north.

While researching the homes on Frat Row, I discovered an eighty-page document from the Davis Historical Society dedicated to the Pi Beta Phi house across from Howard Field. This building was built in 1923 by John Jacobson in the craftsman style. Jacobson built fifteen other homes nearby, including at least three on the same stretch of Russell Boulevard, in the craftsman style from 1912 to 1936 (Historic Resource Associates, 13-19). This number explains why many

houses along Frat Row are designed similarly. I was surprised to learn that the house today looks almost identical to the photo from 1924 (Historic Resource Associates). Although the landscape around it changed, 445 Russell remained the same.

Walking along Russell Boulevard, I can see rows of olive trees lining the road. I wonder what the significance of olive trees is in Davis. Historian John Lofland says that olive trees came from Spain and, like the previously mentioned walnut trees, “line roads and mark boundaries” (Lofland qtd Robinson, 87). Since vast stretches of Russell Boulevard are lined with olive trees, this assessment makes sense in the context of this landscape.

Further along Russell Boulevard, I see Howard Field, named after Walter Howard, who owned the Pi Beta Phi house in the 1930s (Historic Resource Associates, 14). It is a designated place for UC Davis sports teams to use. In addition to a wide-open grass field, there is also a section at the south end that includes sand pits. I see the Division I women’s beach volleyball team practicing in the sand. In front of Howard Field, I notice a large metal sign that reads “UC Davis” in bold font. This area serves as an entrance to the main campus, as this Howard Field is parallel to Howard Way, the street Unitrans buses use to enter the Memorial Union bus terminal. While sketching the landscape, I see five Unitrans and Yolobus buses driving in and out of the bus terminal on Howard Way. Because of its precise location, this sign presents a symbolic entrance to the campus for those who enter campus via bus.



Fig. 15: “UC Davis” sign on Howard Way in front of Howard Field, looking southeast.

Initial Site Visit

Trat Row + Howard Field 2/28/24 12:34 PM 62° (Sunny)

- walking along trat row, I notice a very specific style of architecture
- I see long houses with multiple tall pillars
- I wonder what this specific style of architecture is called
- The Pi Beta Phi house captures my attention
- I notice the same style of architecture
- ΠΒΦ also has a carefully landscaped lawn and garden

tree tree tree
pavement
landscaping & grass

- I see and hear hundreds of cars as I continue walking towards Howard Field
- I make room for bikers and pedestrians who are also sharing the sidewalk
- Howard Field is a wide-open space that I see being used by the DI women's beach volleyball team
- they are using the sand pits at the south end of Howard Field
- in front of Howard Field, I notice a large metal sign that reads "UC Davis" in bold font
- this presents a symbolic entrance to the campus from Russell Boulevard

lights trees
HOME OF REGGIES
parking lot
[grass field]
[sidewalk]

Fig. 16

Conclusion

By exploring this five-mile stretch of Russell Boulevard, I could physically experience the transition from agricultural to residential landscapes. Each stop I encountered was significantly different from the next. At a 158-year-old elementary school, I explored the role of education in a city and how the yard plays a key part in an agricultural school. At a native garden and a large almond orchard, I studied how community gardens with native plants can contrast monocropping and pesticide use common in California, and how the Spanish-speaking community in Davis is impacted. At a renowned sustainable community, I used three maps to research how Yolo County is leading positive change toward improving the relationship between agricultural and residential land use. Finally, at a row of historic buildings and a large grass field, I examined how the craftsman architecture style defined early Davis.

After spending more than a month investigating and pondering Russell Boulevard, one main idea has emerged. At each location, I took extra steps to conduct research on the hidden history of the landscape and uncovered overlooked features of the world we live in. Whether it was an unfamiliar agricultural landscape or a familiar urban landscape, there was something at each stop for me to discover. The naming of streets and highways, the usage of signs, the role of trees, and the function of fences are concepts from this project that will never escape me. I will never be able to look at a given landscape the same way again, and for that, I am immensely grateful.

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