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Lang Prize Reflective Essay

LDA 002, *Place, Culture & Community*, taught me never to underestimate a landscape because, below the surface, there is always a hidden history to uncover. Examples of concepts covered in class, from the naming of streets and highways, the usage of signs, the role of trees, and the function of fences, are worth exploring in any landscape, from unfamiliar agricultural landscapes in West Davis to familiar urban landscapes in Downtown Davis. Because of this class, I will never be able to look at a given landscape the same way again, and for that, I am immensely grateful.

As a Political Science - Public Service major taking a class in the Landscape Architecture department for elective credits, this was an eye-opening experience. I was able to incorporate the style of research and writing I have developed in my political science courses to provide a new angle in this landscape architecture theory course. This is most notable in my third transect stop, in which I explore the Spanish-speaking population of Davis.

This assignment was uniquely designed to cultivate this type of exploration of a local landscape. Students were required to select one of many predetermined five-mile transects, or straight lines of road along the landscape, to observe in Davis. I chose to examine the five-mile stretch from the 158-year-old Fairfield Elementary School, where I explored the role of education in a city and how yards play a key role in an agricultural school, to Howard Way, where I examined how the craftsman architecture style featured prominently along “frat row” defined early Davis. I used sources that were either found in the UC Davis Library or accessed via the “Get at UC” link to ensure I was using sources that were filtered for reputability.

I was interested in analyzing how this five-mile transect changed over time, comparing the evolution of the agricultural landscape in the west to that of the urban landscape in the east. Sheena Campbell, a Student Services librarian, spoke during a lecture about utilizing resources in Special Collections to investigate each transect. Following this, I visited Special Collections with my discussion section to look at nearly a dozen maps in the Shields Library map collection ranging from the 1870s to the early 2000s. I took note of each map that referenced Russell Boulevard and began to ponder the changing landscape as exhibited in various maps. I analyzed a map of Davisville from 1870, which, although it did not include Russell Boulevard, provided me with some useful information about what the town of Davis was like a few decades before it was incorporated.

Following this eye-opening experience, I conducted additional research on the history of Davis through numerous online databases that I could access through the UC Davis Library digital materials website. I retrieved an old Davis Enterprise article from 2013 that provided an overarching history of Russell Boulevard. Here, I learned that Russell Boulevard was named after William O. Russell, former County Supervisor and the son of notable farmer Francis Russell and that he donated part of his ranch to develop the school. I wanted to do more research from primary sources about Davis in the 19th century; this was one of the biggest challenges I faced in this research project. One factor was that the street was not named Russell Boulevard until the 1900s, so inputting “Russell Boulevard” received no helpful results. The only map of Davis from before the 1900s was the aforementioned Davisville map of 1870. However, the limitations of this were offset by other helpful resources that painted a picture of Davis in the 1800s. For instance, I discovered a collection of 1891 California history that included an in-depth profile of William Russell. This was an adequate resolution to the challenge.

My research on my second transect stop, the public garden at the intersection of County Road 97 and Russell Boulevard, could not have been completed without the expert help from Sheena Campbell. When she visited the lecture, she also provided information on how to conduct proper research using advanced searches and keyboard shortcuts. With this new understanding of how to do research, I was quickly able to answer my main research questions at this stop. Here, I noticed a carefully planted strip of land between the road and the sidewalk. In my research, I discovered that Patricia Carpenter planted this garden as an experiment with drought-tolerant native plants during the pandemic.

I was also curious why the “Roadside Native Planting” sign had warnings against pesticide use in both English and Spanish. I learned that there was almost an accident at the site when a Spanish-speaking contractor nearly sprayed pesticides on the garden. I used data to seek answers to the question of how many people in the city of Davis speak Spanish. Another challenge I encountered was that there is no comprehensive data regarding the number of Davis residents who speak Spanish. To account for this, I found a Pew Research Center study that found that approximately three-fourths of all Hispanic-identifying people in the United States speak Spanish. This meant that if I researched the Hispanic population of Davis, I could estimate the Spanish-speaking population. Fortunately, I used 2022 Census data that included the Hispanic population of Davis to approximate that seven thousand Davis residents, or eleven percent of the city’s population, speak Spanish. This additional research shed light on the necessity of the Spanish translation.

After conducting the aforementioned research, I decided to schedule an appointment with Sheena Campbell to explore Special Collections on a second occasion. Here, I followed up on my initial research questions and requested that she pull a handful of maps to supplement my

research on the following transect stops, especially my exploration of Village Homes. Here, I compared three different maps of the land where Village Homes stands today: a 1975 automobile map published before the development of Village Homes, a 1975 zoning map published after development, and a 1996 map of important farmland. Using these maps, I was able to analyze the impact that the development of Village Homes had on the Russell Boulevard landscape. I also compared the conversion of agricultural land to residential land in Yolo County and the city of Davis with that of the state of California as a whole. I found that Yolo County, including the city of Davis, is at the forefront of positive patterns of agricultural land conversions, as projects like Village Homes are offset by the introduction of new farmland in the region. I evaluated these resources to ensure that I was telling a cohesive story about the Village Homes land.

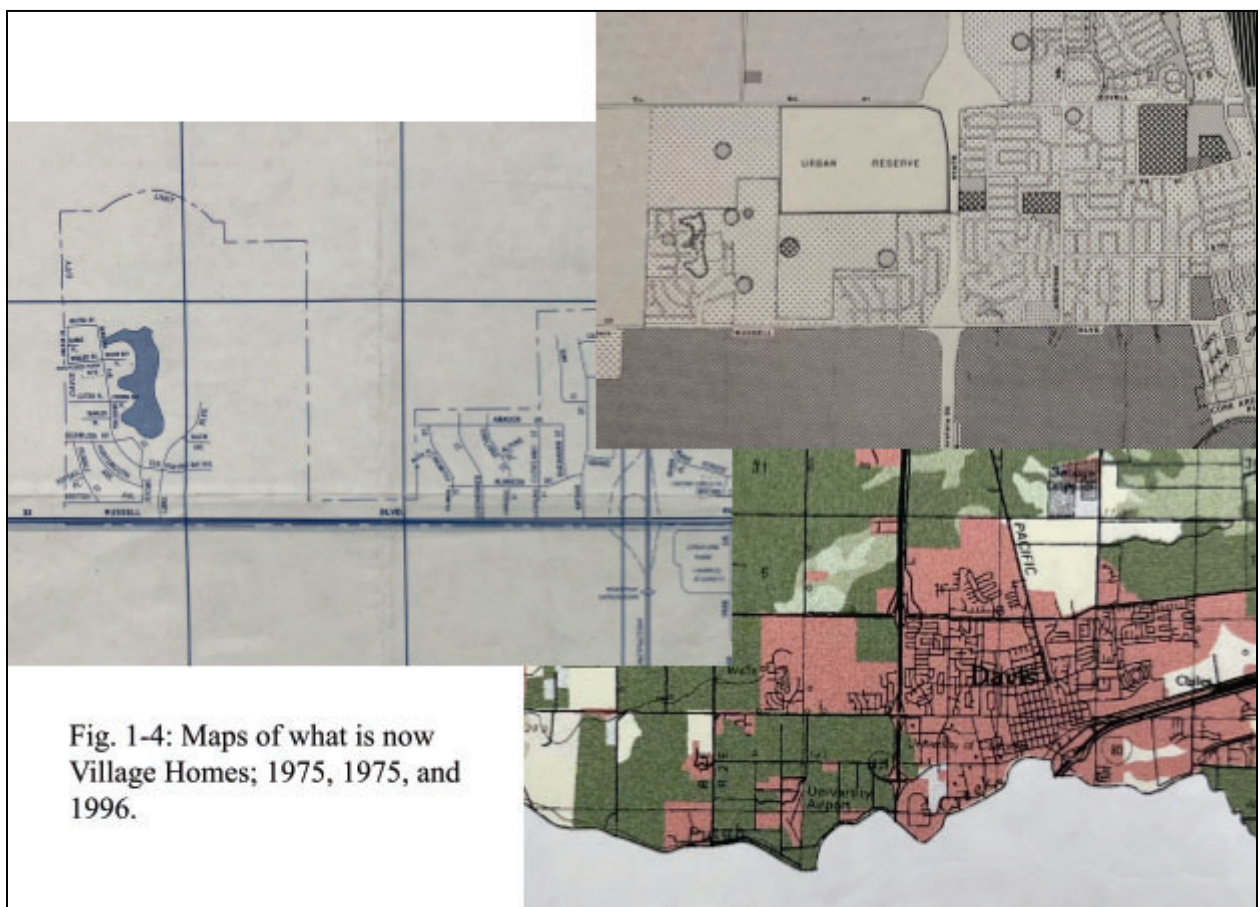


Fig. 1-4: Maps of what is now Village Homes; 1975, 1975, and 1996.

Research at my fourth and final transect stop at Howard Field and “frat row” along Russell Boulevard was also supported by library research. I explored the specific style of architecture used for a number of what are now fraternity and sorority houses along Russell Boulevard. I discovered an encompassing eighty-page report on one of these houses, 445 Russell Boulevard. The building that is now the Pi Beta Phi sorority house was built in 1923 by a famous local architect, John Jacobson, in the craftsman style. I also learned that he built nearly a dozen other homes nearby, which clarified my question about why many houses on this stretch of Russell Boulevard looked alike. This area was especially fascinating to me because it was the only landscape that did not change over the past century. Unlike the other transect stops that each changed considerably over the past century, this stop did not change at all. I wanted to know why this was the case. In my research, I found a 2013 proposal to consider this property under the National Register of Historic Places Criteria. While I was unable to find any documentation of whether 445 Russell Boulevard was ultimately designated as a historic place, a challenge, I concluded that this proposal did not succeed.

Thanks to Sheena Campbell and the map room in the Shields Library Special Collections, I was able to look at the landscape of Russell Boulevard in a new light. For one, I was given the ability to explore uncommon maps from the 20th century in person from before and after the landscape-altering construction of the sustainable development community Village Homes. In addition, I was shown the process of using the UC Davis Library digital materials website and how to conduct proper research using advanced searches and keyboard shortcuts on that site and others. Using these carefully evaluated resources allowed me to tell a clear story about the transformation of the Davis landscape along Russell Boulevard, in agricultural and rural areas. No AI tools/technologies were used in the writing of this essay.