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# OBSERVING AND INTERPRETING EAST PALO ALTO

by Allan B. Jacobs

## PREFACE

It is possible to tell a lot about a city or neighborhood just by looking. Clues that are visible in the physical environment--everything from houses and stores to people to doorbells--can often be pieced together to tell the history and dynamics of an area: when it was built; for whom; the physical, social and economic changes that have taken place; who lives there now; what major issues and problems exist; whether the area is vulnerable to rapid change; and even something about how the area may change in the future. You may not be able to tell everything you would like to know about these questions, but you can tell a great deal.

Increasingly in recent years, quantitative data and qualitative surveys--census reports, traffic studies, opinion polls, and the like--are used to assess existing conditions, growth, and

change in the urban environment. Without challenging the importance or validity of those research techniques we believe it is equally important to cultivate our skills of observation. For in reality, people who live in urban environments, including policy makers, urban planners, designers, and other professionals, take clues from the physical environment every day, whether consciously or subconsciously. Often they act, appropriately or not, on the messages gained. The more consciously systematic the process the better. It is possible, we believe, to develop the process of reading the urban environment into a deliberate, analytical technique. That is the subject of this current inquiry.

The purpose of this project is to develop and test a technique for observing and diagnosing change in the urban environment. As a first step, some case study "experiments" have been conducted, one of which is reported here. They involve a walking field trip by one to three observers in an urban area that is unfamiliar to them. A staff person in a local planning agency has been asked to choose an area that is urban, can be walked in two to three hours, is well known to people in the department or community, and for which data is available. The observers are given only a street

map on which the area they are to observe has been delineated. Two to three hours are spent in the area observing and interpreting what is seen. Short discussions with people on the street are permitted but these are not to be a major part of the inquiry. If someone says, "hello," or asks a stranger what they are doing, the field observer might well respond and a short exchange can take place; it is permissible to ask an occasional question of a passerby.

At the end of the walk the observers are permitted up to an hour to mull over and summarize what has been seen and to think about what it might mean. A general analysis of the area--its history, changes that have taken place, who lives there now, current issues and trends, and possible future issues--is presented immediately after the walk and mulling over period to people who are supposedly knowledgeable about the area. Usually they are members of the local city planning department staff. Notes of the presentations are taken.

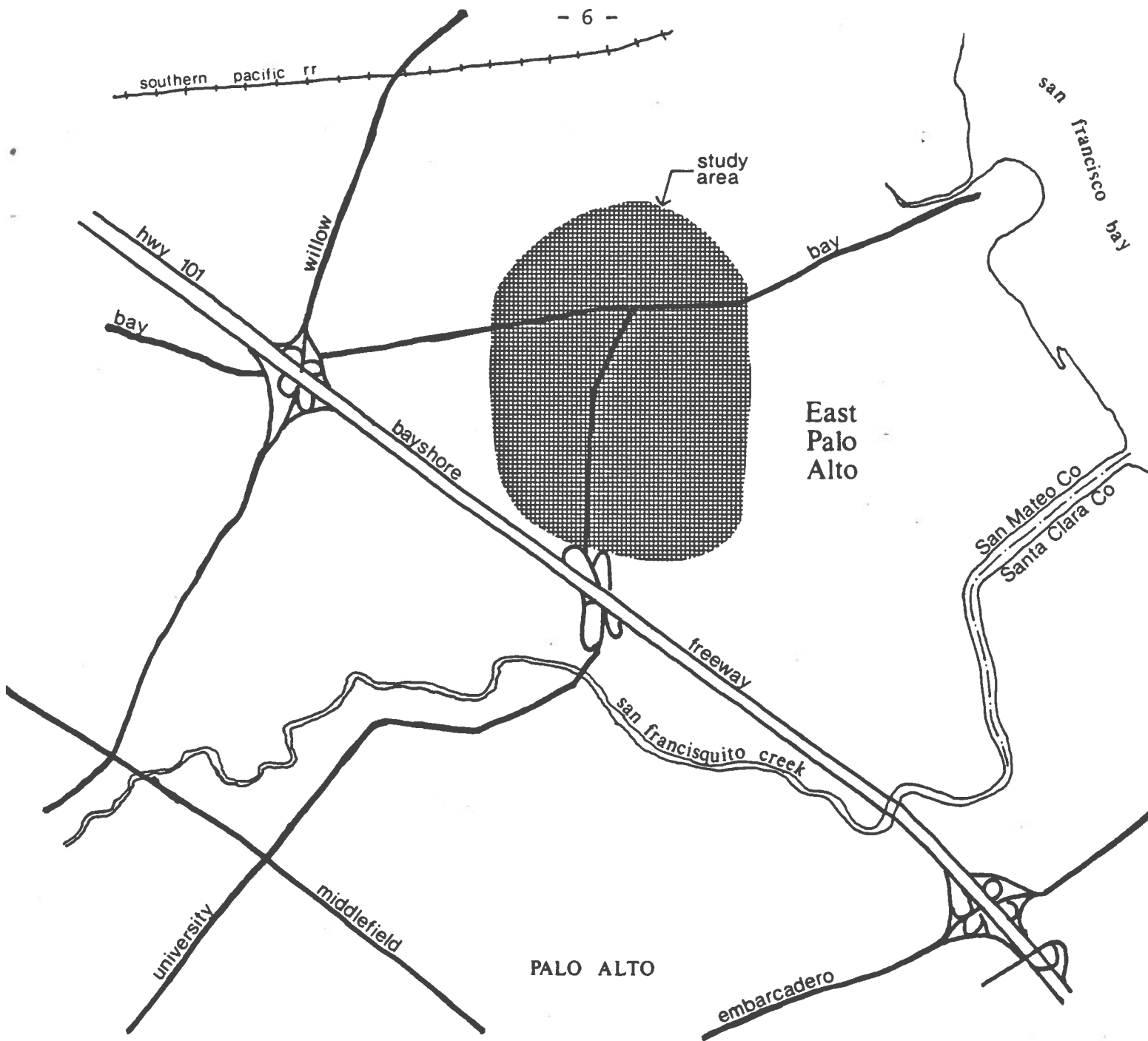
Comparing the conclusions to both the staff members' knowledge of the area and with other available data, the field observers can assess the extent to which they were correct in their

diagnosis. They can also determine which physical clues were most revealing and reliable, how clues were combined to help draw conclusions, the importance of personal knowledge, and some of the limitations and pitfalls of the method. The evaluation of the case studies becomes the basis for developing the observation process into a conscious analytical technique for analyzing change in cities.

The case study that follows presents the urban area pretty much as it was observed and experienced in the field. The text comes from notes that were taken, sequentially, as the observers walked the area. Considerable editing and expansion of the precise words that were jotted down has taken place, but only for the purpose of communicating the experience. The intent, then, is to communicate to the reader via text, maps, sketches and photographs, what was observed and how the observer was thinking about and using what was being seen as a basis for conclusions and speculations about the history, evolution, present state, and possible issues of the area. As a result there is a certain stream of consciousness feeling to some of the descriptions. Conclusions (such as, the houses are poorly maintained) do not always follow the reasons for those conclusions

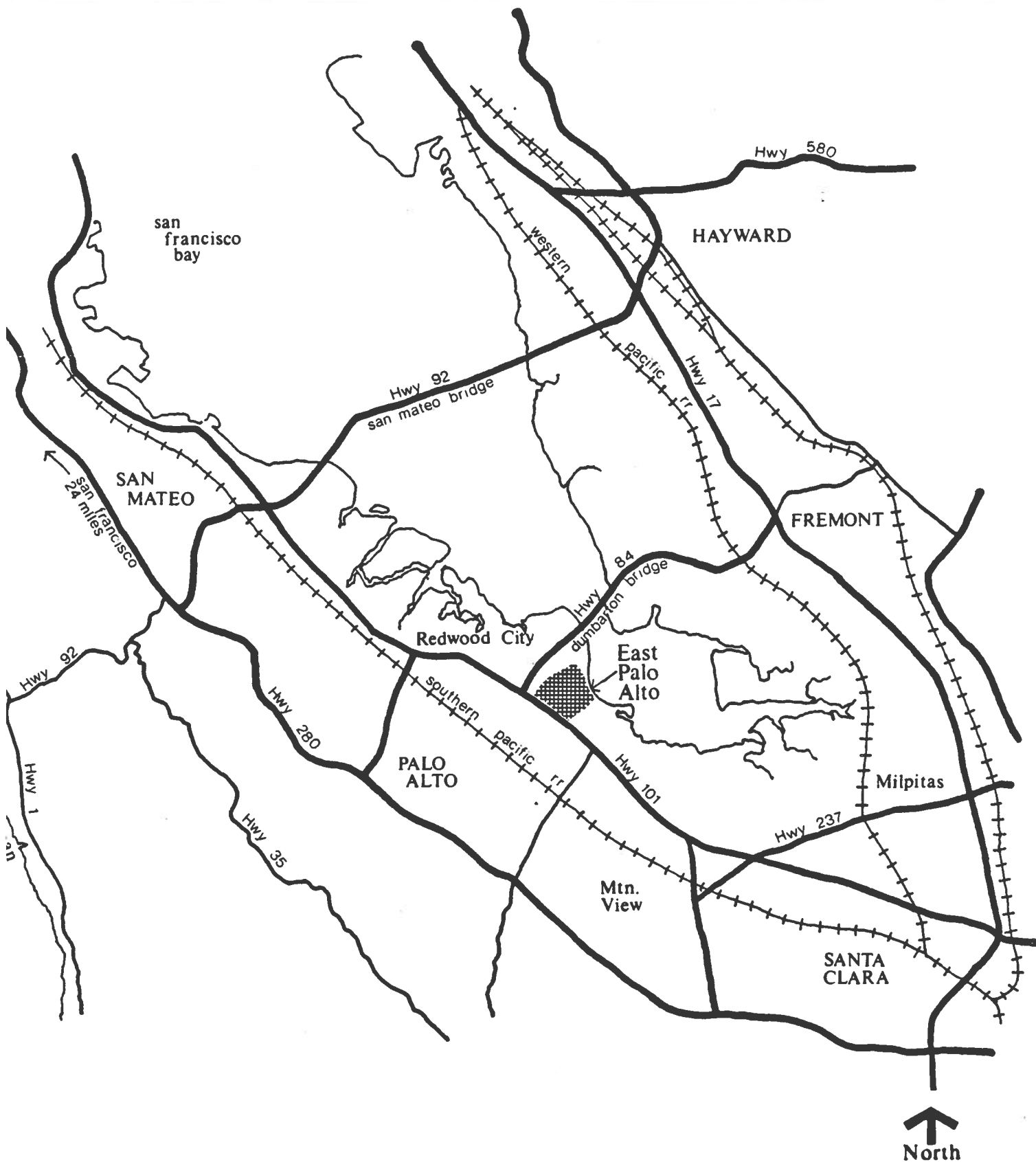
(perhaps missing materials, flaking paint, broken windows). An idea may seem to come from no place, without warning. That is the way field observation often works and it is that experience that is being conveyed.





# EAST PALO ALTO-SAN MATEO COUNTY CALIFORNIA





# EAST PALO ALTO-SAN MATEO COUNTY CALIFORNIA

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SCALE

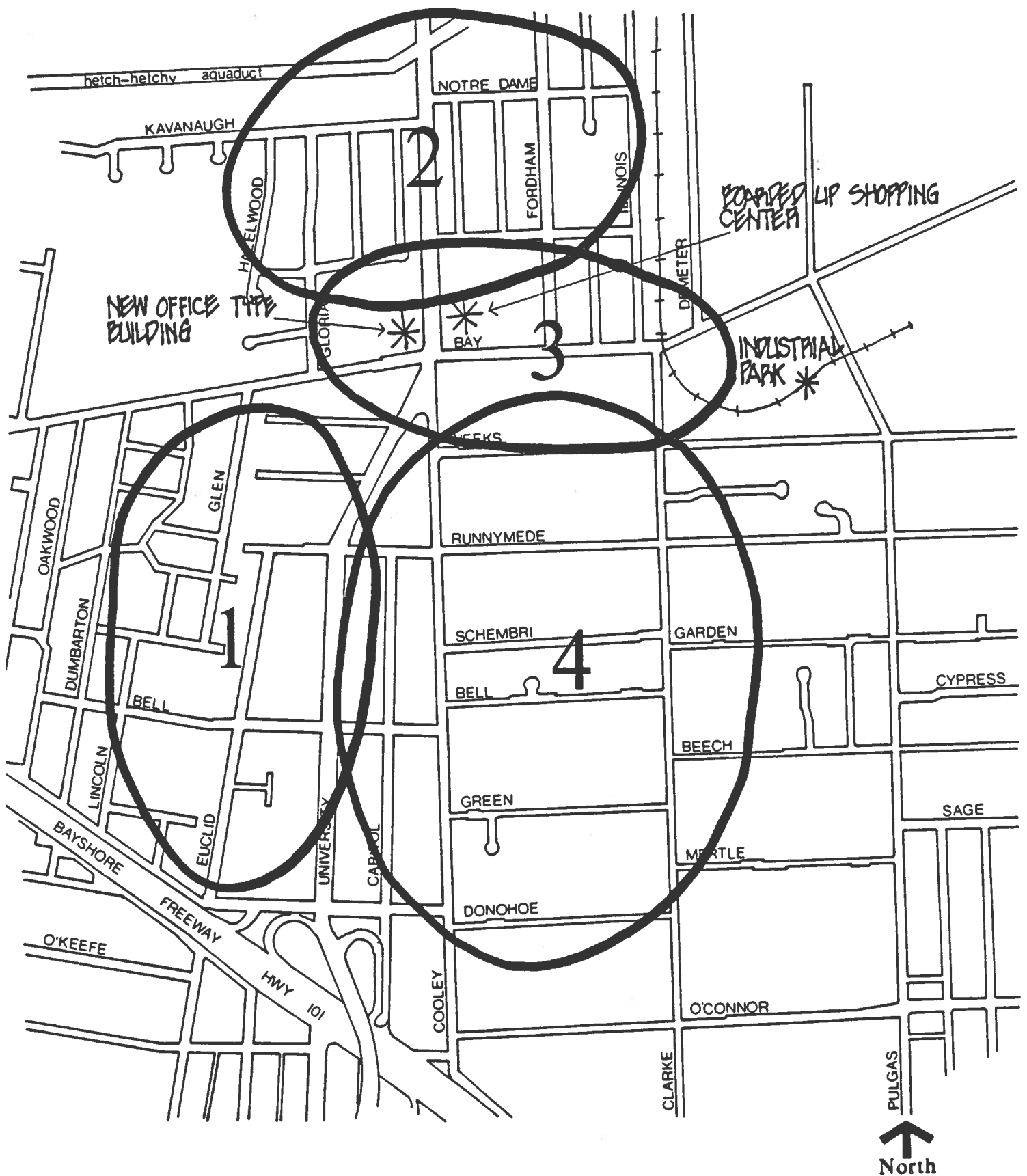
OBSERVING AND INTERPRETING EAST PALO ALTO

East Palo Alto is located in San Mateo County, approximately 30 miles south of San Francisco. It borders the city of Palo Alto, a generally wealthy community, perhaps most famous as the home of Stanford University. East Palo Alto is actually more north than east of Palo Alto. It is neither a part of Palo Alto, which is in another county, nor is it a separate city. Rather, it has the first Municipal Advisory Council in the State, a sort of halfway house between being a separate local government and not, and is an unincorporated section of San Mateo County.

The study area lies in the geographic center of the East Palo Alto Community and covers approximately 230 acres.

Allan Jacobs, Janet Linse and Leslie Gould walked the area for two hours on the morning of April 17, 1981. Jacobs and Linse walked together. Gould walked alone. The weather was sunny and mild. It was Good Friday.

None of the observers had ever been to the area previously. Only Jacobs had some minimal knowledge of it, having vague recollections that, in the late 1960s or early 1970s there were some



## AREAS WALKED IN EAST PALO ALTO

0 400 800 1200



SCALE

activist groups making a strong case for services and facilities, and that they may have wanted political independence (from Palo Alto, he thought). It was an area, he believed, of blacks, and he assumed that incomes were significantly lower than in most Peninsula communities.

Following the walk, the three observers spent about 45 minutes discussing and summarizing what they had seen and their tentative conclusions as to the history, present conditions and probable issues based on those observations. They then met, at 1:00 p.m., with two San Mateo County staff planners (who worked on an East Palo Alto Community Plan) to relate their diagnosis and to hear in turn from the staff how accurate their conclusions were.

#### Observations and Diagnosis

There is a banner across University Avenue promoting political incorporation for East Palo Alto as a distinct municipality.

The area immediately to the west of University is made up of small, single homes of varied nature. Many of them are "old" in the sense that they are of older (than post-World War II) materials and detailing and bear little resemblance to

any specific, recollected styles that could be easily identified as being of the 1930s or even 1920s. So it seems that they must have been built earlier, yet not so early to have a clearly Victorian style that might have dated them at or before the turn of the century.

Development is somewhat spotty, and there is an "agricultural feel" to the area without knowing quite what an "agricultural feel" means: perhaps some large, unmanicured lots, perhaps the lack of curbs and sidewalks, perhaps a sense of openness beyond the housing, as if to suggest that there is or was farming just beyond. Might the area have been in agricultural production prior to the turn of the century when it started to be developed with low density, single-family housing? Maybe some agricultural uses remained into the 1930s and beyond.



Housing that came later, after the first, is also small. The sizes suggest that the area is and may always have been one of moderate income people; never of upper income people.

Was a part of this area started as a second home-vacation area for middle-income, or even lower-middle income, people from San Francisco and other locations to the north? Where did that (out

of the blue) notion come from? Large (and therefore old) regularly planted trees along informal, curbless, walkless streets? The small wood houses that have a "cottage" feel? A character that was not unlike vacation homes areas to be found in the Lake Tahoe area? What would that character be?



Still west of University, along Donohoe Street bordering the Bayshore Freeway, there are marginal businesses and vacant stores. It is a single-frontage shopping street and was probably a double-frontage street before the freeway (single-frontage shopping streets didn't get built). Black residents are apparent on this side of the freeway, and there is a recollection of whites on the other side. The housing on the other side is larger and more expensive looking. It seems more than possible that the freeway was located and built in a vulnerable area, of lower and moderate income people who at the time accepted the inevitability of the freeway (as "progress") or without political voice to stop it. It is more likely that there would have been effective opposition further to the south. The shopping area has never recovered from being severed and probably never will.

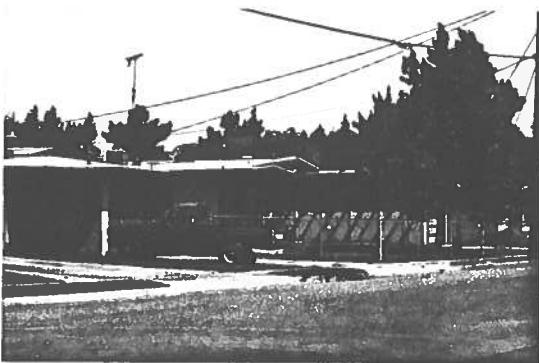
As the walk continues, a number of older

people are outside, around the houses. Repair materials and cars in front and side yards, trucks and signs of small businesses suggest many kinds of small entrepreneurships. There are enough iron grilles, dogs, and other warning devices to indicate a crime problem, yet people are friendly; they smile and offer "Hello" to obvious outsiders. No hostility is evidenced. Many roofs have been repaired, some are new. Houses have been painted recently. But materials are not always the best and workmanship is not always "professional": lightweight asphalt roof shingles; wood shingles that lap only twice instead of three times; paint that is not sharply "cut in" at windows and corners. There is a little investment of new homes, including one prefab, but few indications of homes built for a long period after World War II. Overall, this is a "nice" physical environment: lots of trees; buildings and their arrangement give a sense of peace, quite; moderate to low density. It is the kind of physical environment where young people might like to live.



The observations begin to suggest questions and some conclusions, however tentative: present residents are largely homeowner; they are people who are hustling to make a living at a lot of different kinds of work; they have mainstream U.S.

nuclear family values; crime is a problem, but its source is not from "local" residents; the rehabilitation may have been done by owners or by new or relatively unskilled contractors (minority? cheaper?). Was the rehabilitation done as part of a city-sponsored effort? If so, it was small, because there are no apparent public improvements that might have accompanied such an effort. If there is employment vulnerability here, might that result in less property maintenance (older buildings need constant caring) if there is a prolonged economic recession? Might young people (couples with both members working) find this an attractive location, which would have an upward effect on house prices? Have those pressures started?



A second area lies north of Bay Road, on both sides of University. The modest, one-story "ranch" style family houses are basically alike in plan and style, and were probably built by one or two developers. They have been painted more than once and many have undergone modest change since original construction. This, together with curbs, walks, and paved streets, all of a uniform pattern

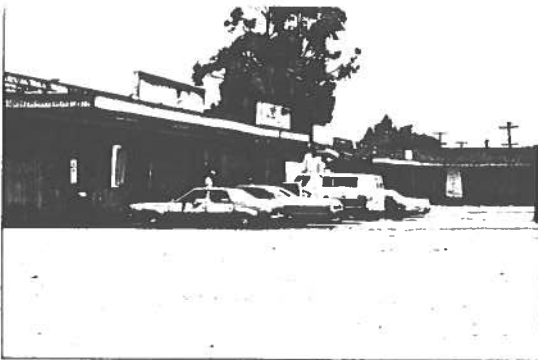
and design, indicates some kind of standard that was in effect, perhaps a subdivision code. (Might the name "Bay Road," the flatness of the land, and the low trees, indicate that the development is on filled land, that Bay once ran along the bay?) So, in any case, this area was probably developed soon after World War II for middle- or lower-middle income families, probably war veterans, and probably white.

But the people on the streets are not white now. Only black people are in evidence: young and middle-aged adults and children into their teens. The houses and lots are well-maintained. Recent painting here, too, has been by residents or not-too-skilled professionals. New roof materials are thin (if wood) or light (if asphalt). The cars are new. The clues suggest upwardly mobile homeowner families, concerned with maintenance, but without the incomes to do it as well as they would like.

It is striking that everyone seen is black and mostly of the same age. Why? Did a major, abrupt demographic change occur in the late 1950s or early 1960s, something that made the whites leave? If this was an all white area then, why is it all black now, here in this location on the

Peninsula? Maybe it had to do with the freeway or with economic conditions at that time. Those do not seem like good explanations.

University was recently widened, but it is not apparent why. The work was done in the last five (or so) years. There wasn't much traffic and it doesn't seem to be going anyplace. The widening required taking of abutting rear yards but probably not the demolition of housing. Perhaps the widening was to connect more easily with the Dumbarton Bridge to the north.



A third area is along Bay, from University to the east for about two long blocks, ending in Ravenswood Industrial Park.

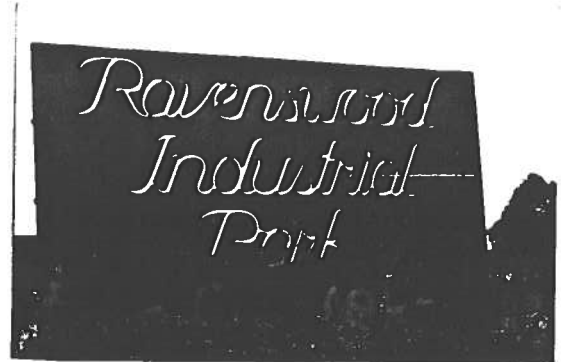


There is a new multi-story building on the northwest corner of Bay and University. A mostly-vacant shopping center is at the northeast corner. There were one or two men standing around one of the few open stores. Further to the east, the buildings are in poor condition and there are some vacancies. There is at least one multi-family residential structure of recent vintage

(the past 15 years) that is in poor condition (some missing and cracked materials, poor maintenance). A quick view into the industrial area indicated sparse, not-too-well maintained development. It doesn't seem to be "making it" the way industrial parks up and down the Bayshore Freeway display occupancy, activity, and the kind of maintenance that costs money. The road here is wide. A young black man standing at the corner of Bay and University is asked if he might tell an observer what that new building was, across the street. He looked straight ahead, as though he hadn't head, though he and the outsider were standing face to face and the question was asked twice.

The area has the trappings of a "no-man's land," a hang-out for people (men) with nothing to do, a place where poor people might find housing "for a while."

But what about that new building across the street? It must represent public investment and probably has public offices and activities. Why would a private company build such a significant building at this location? So this must be a public effort directed to revitalizing this area, to bringing services to the area, and perhaps to



focus jobs in this area. It is possible to speculate that this was done in response to local pressures of the early 1970s. There appears to be no positive spin-off as a consequence of the building; maybe it is too early for there to be an effect; more likely there will be none, at least for some time.

Further south on University, a new bank and a service station are recalled. Is there any connection to this intersection? Why are they there? Who do they serve?

This is an area where almost any proposal for something new will be accepted, where private or public action is possible with little resistance, even welcomed. On the other hand, it's an area where investment is not likely to take place because of a very rundown, negative image.

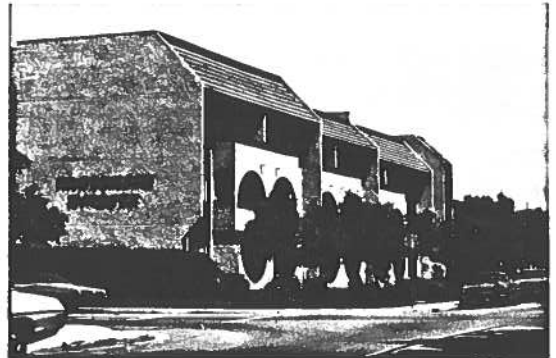
The area east of University, to Pulgas Avenue, is mostly an area of single-family, modest-sized, low-density (10-12 dwellings or less per net acre) houses. The people are black. There are many people outside. Many of the houses have

metal grates and other safety devices. There are many dogs and "Beware of Dog" signs. An observer, walking alone, was "hassled" in this area and was at one point stopped by police who asked what she was doing. They suggested she not walk the area and that she be careful of her purse.

Home maintenance in this area is similar to the area north of Bay. The housing is less "of a piece." That is, there is a greater variety of sizes, designs, ages. Lot sizes vary. There is some new, two- and three-story, multi-family housing (which, because of design characteristics seen elsewhere, suggest it is for the elderly and may have had a public subsidy involved in its construction), and there is some new "in-fill" housing. Was there public involvement in it, too? Why else would it be built here?

There is a great deal of new street paving and new sidewalks, and since some of the new walks abut stretches of road where there are no walks or curbs, perhaps these are the first in the area. For most of this area, there are no overhead wires.

There is public bus service in this area, even more noticeable than in the area west of the University.





There are a number of nurseries, reminders of earlier times. There is a small church or community center on the fringe of this area that is Asian-eastern.

It seems reasonable to conclude that there is a concentrated, public project or action program in this area as witnessed by the number of public works and publicly related buildings; the new paving, walks and curbs, the underground wires, the housing for the elderly, the visible rehabilitation, the new in-fill housing. A sign, seen later, confirms that this is a redevelopment area.

There appears to be considerable unemployment, a high burglary rate, and perhaps some of the burglary and vandalism that might occur west of University is from youth who live in this area. Indicators are the plentiful security devices, the young people that seemed to be "hanging around," and their hostility-forwardness, as directed to one observer.

The nurseries indicated a previous, not-so-many years-ago agricultural community. The diverse lot sizes and housing types indicated individual rather than tract development. The reasonable quality of the houses, the new public improvements, the location with good accessibility

to Palo Alto and to the freeway, and probably "moderate" prices would seem to indicate that this area will be increasingly desirable as a place to live, at least in its southernmost parts. There may be a concen, now, of present residents, of future "gentrification." But who might the newcomers be? Whites might be unwelcome. Perhaps other blacks or perhaps Chicanos or Asian who would (and may have already) locate at the fringes of the area. That might bring some conflict.

#### Some Modest Conclusions

Having spent two hours walking, it seemed possible to draw some general, modest conclusions about the area in question; a little of its history, how it has changed, the people now living in the area, some current trends and issues, and to speculate, a bit, on what the future might bring. They go something as follows:

- ⊕ This is a solidly black area as indicated by the people seen. Very few older whites, from an earlier stage of development, remain.
- ⊕ Something happened in the early 1960s that resulted in an abrupt change from a white to the black population. It is not clear what the "something" was.

- ⊕ The late 1960s or early 1970s saw a considerable amount of vocal, even threatening, resident activism here for services, facilities, and even for political independence, and some of this is still operative (the banner across University). The new public office building and the concentrated public program in at least one part of the area (at least, that's what appears to be the case) came in part as a result of that activism.
- ⊕ The area is improving, condition-wise. It is better than it was.
- ⊕ The area, however, is vulnerable to change and to difficult economic times. It could go downhill fast, physically, if homeowners are hit with unemployment (which may be more a likelihood for blacks than for whites). The post-World War II houses, modest to start, now 30 years old, need constant maintenance.
- ⊕ On the other hand, this is a desirable area now (except for the area along Bay, east of University) and there could be displacement by newcomers. Those would most likely be Asians or Chicanos. There could be conflicts between older residents and newcomers.



- ⊕ Vandalism and crime are problems and derive from moderate- and even lower-middle income youth (not the bottom of the economic heap) from families, without much to do. This may get worse in the 1980s, with cuts in local and federal employment and training programs.
- ⊕ The bus service (with new buses) in a low density area which would not support it economically, is a result of Federal funding and Federal emphasis on transit that came with the 1970s, and citizen demands. It will likely disappear without federal subsidies, in an economic recession, and with a more conservative Federal administration. That will result in accessibility problems for some people of this area and make it more vulnerable to change from outside or physical decline.
- ⊕ Bus service notwithstanding, the area seems somewhat isolated from a larger community. Unless it is "found" by some higher income group, will isolation be helpful or not? There is a suspicion that separation will be a continuing problem here.

CONFIRMING (AND QUESTIONING) THE OBSERVATIONS

Urban planners on the staff of the San Mateo County Planning Department, Marty Boat and Ernie Vivakis, are knowledgeable about East Palo Alto, and there is some available information that can be reviewed to help verify (or not) the conclusions of the field observation. A meeting with the planners immediately following the field observation revealed the following:

- ⊕ Generally, before urban development, the area was used for poultry farming and the slogan "one acre and independence" used to promote sales, was operative in the minds of some early settlers.
- ⊕ The area west of University, north to Bay, was only lightly developed until the early 1940s (so perhaps some agricultural uses did remain until then), and part of it was indeed a second (vacation) home area. It is worthwhile to observe here that one of the two planners thought the vacation home conclusion was a bit "off the wall" until the younger planner showed him some news clippings he had found that confirmed the diagnosis, which leads to the obvious question of who knows what.

- ⊕ Route 101 did divide whites (south) from blacks (north).
- ⊕ Some black families moved into the area west of University quite early (late 1940s) and have indeed been there a long time.
- ⊕ Over the years, in this area, there have been numerous code enforcement and rehabilitation campaigns, but not a formal, "required" program.
- ⊕ The University Village subdivision, north of Bay, was built in the mid-1950s with FHA mortgage financing and low down-payment requirements. It was occupied by white, working class people who came to work in the new industries on the Peninsula. The original residents were characterized as "Archie Bunker" types.
- ⊕ There was a sudden change in ethnic composition in the early 1960s. It was the result of a conscious block-busting effort by real estate agents to stimulate sales. The method was to bring busloads of blacks from San Francisco (some not-so-respectable-looking or acting) through the area. People apparently sold quickly, fearful of a black invasion.

An attractive suburban area for black homeowners was a consequence; one of the few places where a black could own a house and yard outside the city.

- ⊕ Bay Road is a very old road leading from Redwood City to the Bay, not along it, to a shipping wharf. It was probably not filled land because Indian mounds have been found here (so it could not have been under water).
- ⊕ During the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a lot of official "concern" about East Palo Alto. There was a man in the County Manager's Office who became the de facto manager of this area and was able to funnel money to it. At that time, the County Supervisors had trouble governing this area and a Municipal Advisory Council (first in the State) was established.\* The sheriff's lieutenant was the de facto police chief.
- ⊕ University was widened in the early 1970s, Bay more recently. The Bay widening was primarily to help access to the Ravenswood Industrial park, which had not yet been

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\*State legislation in 1967 provided for Municipal Advisory Councils.

successful but which the community was and still is hopeful of launching, University was widened because it was a road considered in poor condition and unsafe. The planners did not associate these improvements directly with the activism of the early 1970s.

- ⊕ The road improvements east of University--curbs, walks, repaving--are not a part of a coordinated code enforcement rehabilitation program in this area, or a result of citizen pressure (according to the informants), but may be simply because public works has the road money available and because someone in Public Works is friendly to the East Palo Alto area. The program has been going on for the last five to eight years. (But why does a sign indicate this to be a redevelopment area?)
- ⊕ The elderly housing project that was identified is a HUD-sponsored development.
- ⊕ The new building at University and Bay is a community-oriented, public office, library, service center, called Municipal Center.

- ⊕ The adjacent and relatively new bank building was recently abandoned (more recent than the field observation) by Bank of America (as not profitable) and the structure donated for a publicly-sponsored community health clinic.
- ⊕ The focal point of crime is University and Bay, particularly at the shopping center. The sheriff is reported to conclude that trouble-makers come from outside the area and hang out at the shopping center.
- ⊕ The population of East Palo Alto is static or declining slightly (an observation that was not made or even speculated upon).
- ⊕ Household size is declining, but more slowly than in other areas.
- ⊕ There is considerable developer interest in East Palo Alto. The market is for housing. Price speculation is operative. Houses that sold for \$20,000 as little as 10 years ago sell in 1981 for \$70,000-\$80,000. People are worried about displacement and are showing up at council meetings to say so. They are trying to develop a strategy to "keep" the community.

- Other minorities, especially Vietnamese, have started to move in at the fringes of the area and there is some conflict with the black community.

For the most part, then, presumably knowing professionals confirm most of the analysis of the field observers. The differences between the investigators' analysis and conclusions and the knowledge of the local planners appear to be:

- Most development west of University was even later than had been concluded by the investigators.
- The development north of Bay Road was not on fill land, nor was it along the Bay. Rather, it led to the Bay. A name can be misleading.
- The observers concluded correctly that something abrupt had occurred to change the population characteristic of this area and thought it occurred in the late 1950s or early 1960s. They did not know what had happened. The changes came a bit earlier and were the result of a conscious block-busting effort. It could be said, on the one hand, that a better understanding of local history would be required in order to interpret the

indicators and to speculate that block-busting might have been the vehicle. But it was correctly concluded that an area had started as a resort, second home settlement, without any more knowledge of local history. And, after all, the whole point of the diagnosis is to be able to glean history from physical indicators. Perhaps in this instance the investigators deserve a 50% score: half right for knowing something happened, half wrong for not knowing what. Perhaps this last point deserves some greater attention. Starting with the block-busting that occurred in the mid-1950s, it is reasonable to assume that many of the people living in the specific area visited in 1981 were among the immigrants of that time. They, their children, and later settlers must know the recent history of East Palo alto, of how it came to be a largely black area in the white, southern Peninsula. They know, too, of the freeway that divided them from Palo Alto. Might it not follow reasonably from these developments that these people, not welcomed in the first place, isolated later, might not feel all that kindly toward neighboring white communities, might want

political independence from the county, might understand their economic dependence on a larger than "local" tax base, and still might not welcome strangers? Moves for political independence, then, might continue but with lessening intensity as the area's people come to grips with what appear as economic realities and if the larger community responds to some needs (such as the Municipal Center). But one still senses a smoldering, inward resentment in this area (at least in the newer parts) and that it will remain. Most important, however, for this diagnosis, is that none of the thoughts in this paragraph were in the minds of the field observers when they presented their findings immediately after the field trip. They came later. Why later? How much reflection is needed? Or is it just that these questions and connections develop in one's mind over time, more time than is possible under the self-imposed restrictions of field examination followed by immediate diagnosis as are being used in these case studies?

Printed information, to help confirm or refute both the field investigators' findings and those of the local professionals, was immediately available from a number of sources: newspaper clippings and feature stories, an academic article and one written for a national magazine, two draft environmental impact reports for projects in the area, a 1980 draft of the East Palo Alto Community Plan, and from two air photos (1941 and 1956).

The photographs do indicate the early (pre-1941) settlement west of the University, particularly in the heavily-treed area. The early photo also shows the build-up of uses at University and the old Bayshore Highway (later removed for a freeway interchange). For the most part, the street system is continuous on either side of the old highway, but not entirely so. There are considerable signs however, in 1941, of subdivisions that have been laid out, but without housing, north of the highway. By 1956 the area is almost totally built out, though there is still some agriculture abutting the freeway and lots east of University are larger and may still be in chicken farming use. The University Avenue freeway intersection is not a complete intersection.

The printed information for the most part

confirms or is consistent with the field observations, to wit:

- ⊕ In 1851 there was a busy waterfront in this area, one that ceased when shipping to San Francisco stopped.<sup>1</sup>
- ⊕ Poultry farming started in 1916.<sup>1</sup>
- ⊕ Weekend cottages were built in the 1920s and trees were a notable part of the effort.<sup>2</sup>
- ⊕ The Bayshore Highway brought more people in 1923.<sup>1</sup> Bayshore and University had a concentration of liquor outlets and was known as "Whiskey Gulch."<sup>2</sup>
- ⊕ From 1925 to the end of World War II there was very little development.<sup>2</sup>
- ⊕ World War II veterans came to the area in 1946.<sup>4</sup>
- ⊕ There was considerable subdivision development between 1948 and 1951.<sup>2</sup>
- ⊕ Blockbusting occurred in the mid-1950s.<sup>2, 4</sup>
- ⊕ The Bayshore Freeway came in 1955 and divided the area.

- ⊕ There was a political effort in 1968 to change the name of the area to Nairobi. It lost.<sup>4</sup>
- ⊕ By 1970 East Palo Alto was generally recognized as a problem area, but one that was trying to improve by local efforts and growing sophistication.<sup>3</sup>
- ⊕ Political independence has been a continuing issue over a long period of time.<sup>4</sup>
- ⊕ The redevelopment project proposed in 1973 was for the area east of the University and called for subsidized housing, rehabilitated housing and improvements to residential streets.<sup>5</sup>
- ⊕ The environmental statement prepared for the redevelopment project notes: 200 substandard units in 1973; 48% of the housing east of University was built in the period 1950-59; only 348 units since then; development west of University is earlier.
- ⊕ Bay Road was improved in 1976 from a two-lane to a four-lane road although it was then diagnosed as having stable flow conditions and relatively satisfactory operating speeds.<sup>6</sup>

- ⊕ By the late 1970s, approximately 11% of East Palo Alto's families had incomes lower than the poverty level. About 42% of the families were receiving some form of public assistance.<sup>76</sup>
- ⊕ The median value of a two-bedroom house was \$20,150 in 1975. The average rent paid was \$174 per month.<sup>6</sup>
- ⊕ In 1975, 74% of the people in East-of-Bayshore area were black. West of Bayshore, 3% black.
- ⊕ 63% of the East Palo Alto units were built between 1940 and 1960.
- ⊕ Most East Palo Alto workers, in the mid-1970s, were employed as service workers (including private household), clerical and kindred workers, operatives, and foremen, craftsmen, and kindred.<sup>6</sup>
- ⊕ The East Palo Alto Municipal Center was finished in February 1976. It was built to provide residents with convenient access to county services in one location: public health, social services, redevelopment, probation, council chambers, branch library, Sheriff's substation, a community room.<sup>7</sup>

- ⊕ In 1976, a new owner tried to revitalize the shopping center at University and Bay. Security was recognized as a major issue.<sup>8</sup> Since then the county has decided to condemn and demolish the center and to replace it with new commercial and housing development.
- ⊕ Presently, local planners make the following observations, formally:<sup>9</sup>
  - ⊕ housing is viewed as in need of rehabilitation
  - ⊕ the residents have low and moderate incomes
  - ⊕ home prices are escalating
  - ⊕ low and moderate income residents are the hardest hit
  - ⊕ with condominium conversions, rising property values, and rising rents, there is a fear of dislocation of residents
  - ⊕ unemployment is a problem
  - ⊕ community services are inadequate; there is no adequate market.

COMMENTARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It comes as no surprise that some of the observable, physical things that were seen were more important than other in coming to understand the present, the past, and some of the current dynamics of East Palo Alto. Some things didn't indicate what the observers thought they might, while some conclusions seem to be drawn from the air, at least they are stated without apparent reason. Then, too, in some cases the indicators themselves may indicate very little directly, but questions about them, and why they exist at all are what is most important. Finally, there are questions of how important some earlier knowledge was in this case and how much it is possible to tell, or conclude, in any event, after one two-hour walk in an area.

In this case, people were an obvious clue not only of who is living in this area now (mostly blacks), but also of an earlier population (a few older whites) and of people who might now be moving into parts of the area (Chicanos and young Asians). That's a lot of information. And there was a lot more that could be seen: age of people; that some teenagers were driving around in cars and provocative to a white, female outsider; a lot

of people to be seen on the streets and in yards; friendly people in some areas ("hellos," smiles) and hostile people in others; people hanging out at the semi-abandoned shopping center; police who gave warnings; people working on yards; some people dressed well and others less well (along Bay). Of course the people didn't exist in a vacuum. It was the overwhelming black population in all that post-war tract housing, in a particular location that led to questions of why they were living there and how that had happened. It was the observable people in relation to the homes and home businesses that led to conclusions of income, values, abilities, and even likely future vulnerability of the area. One potentially misleading indicator: all those people outside on a Friday morning did not necessarily mean high unemployment. It was Good Friday, and for a lot of businesses and people that is a holiday.

Buildings, especially housing, were used over and over again, as indicators of when an area was developed, the relative income ranges of those who did and do live in an area, whether or not an area was vulnerable to rapid changes. Age, size, and quality (including recentness) of maintenance were the important clues. Quality of materials used and the professional "look" of maintenance were

used to indicate who was doing the maintenance, their incomes, and their values. It is worth noting that none of the observers were experts of architectural history. They had no formal training in what kind of housing was built during what periods. Yet they seemed to know enough--existence or not of detailing, materials, a "sense" of oldness or newness--to place buildings in general timeframes (e.g., pre- or post-WWII) to be reasonably accurate about when things were built.

In some cases it was the existence of patterns or lack of patterns of housing development that helped tell about an area: all the houses alike, or all different, or a mix; all of a certain quality of maintenance; the absence or presence of new housing within a pattern of older stock. The sameness, size and age of the housing north of Bay helped suggest that it was post-war, modest income subdivision.

Other buildings were important indicators, too. The largely vacant shopping center raised questions about income levels and the market for what are usually local shopping needs such as food. Where that market was being provided for, however, was a question asked only in passing.

The new community center at that location suggested past (and perhaps present) community problems, citizen action, and a level of government response. The quick glimpse of the industrial park was enough to indicate that this was not a thriving employment center (but the observers did not make clear the reasons for that conclusion). The existence of the new housing east of University suggested a public program as well as who the housing was for, once it was concluded that it was subsidized housing.

In this case the observable natural environment was helpful, though less so than it might have been, in diagnosing the area. The flatness and climate suggested earlier agriculture though why that need be so is not clear. The physical remainders of an earlier land-based economy (e.g. nurseries) might have been more telling. Why the openness of the land suggested agriculture is not clear. The fact that the area is near water was not used to suggest an earlier history (except to interpret the name Bay Road incorrectly). On the other hand, the location in relation to San Francisco in conjunction with the type and layout of housing was a clue to an area's early beginnings as a vacation-second home area.

The layout of streets and the existence (or not) of paving, curbs and walks, together with housing types and patterns helped to confirm time of development, the likelihood of subdivision standards and, perhaps unspoken, the incomes of early residents. The relative newness of street and walk improvements were used as indicators of public involvement and possible citizen persuasiveness. The relative sameness of lot sizes indicated the nature and timing of land subdivision.

Yard maintenance, landscaping, and what was in the yards went hand in hand with housing qualities as indicators. They suggested ownership (better maintained), family values (kids working on yards, constant maintenance), and income levels (storage of household or business materials as well as trucks and cars). Larger trees suggested age, an indicator that can be a fooler: well cared for trees may grow fast in such a climate and gnarled limbs and gray bark may not be very old.

Those things we choose to call artifacts were used over and over again in this case. Signs (the banner over University, the redevelopment sign, business signs, beware of dog signs) were interpreted to speak to political issues and action,

government action, economic activity and status, safety and crime issues, and more. Dogs, fences and iron gates spoke to crime issues. Indeed, a sign or notice can tell an observer quickly what might otherwise take a lot of looking.

Repeatedly, it is not entirely clear in the description of the case why a particular conclusion is reached. The timing of development, the income of initial residents (what does a "small" house mean?), the reasons for a conclusion that an area was a vacation resort for a particular income group from San Francisco are but a few examples. Those tentative conclusions (maybe hypotheses is a better word) came from somewhere, right or wrong. In some cases the observer simply fails to mention what it is that was observed that led to a conclusion. Or, it may just be that the observer's mind and eye, working faster than an ability to verbalize the sequence of pictures and thoughts, just does not or cannot take the time to sort out what it is that leads one from A to B.

Certainly a lot of the diagnosis in this case came from knowledge that the observers brought with them into the field, knowledge that may have been lying dormant until called upon. The light bulb flashing on in the first area west of

University that said "resort" or "second house" was triggered by a physical environment that recalled a feeling of similar areas experienced in the Lake Tahoe area. The association could as well have been wrong. Perhaps the lesson to learn from such "happenings" is to neither discard nor accept them. Rather, it might make sense to listen to them, then to question and look for more tangible indicators that support or reject the hypothesis.

Finally it is important to understand that indicators, by themselves, may mean nothing. A small house is a small house, a large tree is a large tree, and a kid standing at a street corner oblivious to his questioner is just that. It is the relationships that seemed to matter and a constant questioning of why things are the way they are that was important. The case, as reported, rarely deals with those questions that must have been asked. In purely physical terms the area north of Bay Avenue said nothing about an abrupt change in residents that may have happened in the 1950's or 1960's. It was the constant questioning of "why," and "why here" that led to a tentative conclusion.

All of which raises other questions about

this case and the process involved in the observation and analysis. Questioning takes time. Was there enough time, as the observers walked, to raise important questions or come to conclusions? More importantly, was there enough time after the walk to let what had been seen percolate and mix with other knowledge and other associations? We suspect not, but that was the nature of this experiment, so nothing could be done. Nor are we sure that the interplay of two or three people's minds and observations are better than one, though we suspect they are, if the people are truly interested in listening to each other (even if this lessens their own ability to concentrate on the environment at hand).

In sum, though, the case does seem to indicate an ability to answer some significant questions about an area's past, present, and probable future, by observing it and by asking questions about what one sees.

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