



The New Planner — Fall 2010

Revitalizing Vallejo, California: Students Investigate the Potential of a San Francisco Bay Area City

By Sarah Kathleen Peck

Located just 25 miles northeast of San Francisco, the city of Vallejo features a historic past as the state's capital and a waterfront location with a ferry terminal — and yet, in 2008, Vallejo became the first major California city to file for bankruptcy.

With this history as a backdrop, six summer interns participating in SWA Group's 2010 Summer Program devoted four weeks to intense research, analysis, and design of visionary ideas for Vallejo's waterfront and downtown. From their base in SWA's Sausalito, California office, students analyzed the complex issues facing Vallejo in order to recommend appropriate urban planning, urban design, and landscape architectural solutions that can be added to the current discourse on the city's future.

The SWA Summer Program

SWA Group began its summer program in 1972 as a way to forge stronger connections among academics, theory, and professional practice. Since then, the firm has held 37 summer programs with more than 200 participants from around the world. Many of the program participants have gone on to become full-time employees of SWA; four former summer students are currently principals at the firm.

Applying to the SWA Summer Program

Every spring, students of landscape architecture, urban design, and planning are invited to submit portfolios for consideration. SWA staff and principals review all portfolios and select six students to participate in four weeks of studio explorations and a month of paid internship in one of SWA's six offices. The program is highly competitive — in 2010, 125 students applied for six openings — and emphasizes design talent and quality of portfolios. The selected finalists represent some of the most talented and promising young designers in the country.

For complete program details, see the [call for applications](#). To view past work done by the summer program, take a look at the student section on the [SWA website](#).

The summer program begins with four week-long studios that address current topics in landscape architecture and urban planning. Under the direction of SWA principals, the students receive a new design topic at the beginning of each week, develop design ideas, and conclude the week with a presentation to regional stakeholders, including property owners and developers, city representatives, and leading design and academic professionals.

For the Vallejo project, the students were asked to explore the site, research and craft analytical diagrams, and propose different design ideas to help the city realize its potential as a vibrant, mixed-use, transit-oriented community.

Vallejo's Opportunities and Constraints

The students identified several key advantages that Vallejo has to offer. The city is strategically located in the northeastern part of the San Francisco Bay Area, with transportation connections north to Napa (by highway or train); south to Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco (by highway or ferry); and east to the state capital, Sacramento (by highway or train). Much of the infrastructure for success — including a ferry terminal with 50-minute nonstop trips to downtown San Francisco and a planned bus station with a multilevel parking garage — is either in place or being implemented.



Vallejo's location in the northeastern part of the Bay Area. Image courtesy SWA Group.

The city's extensive waterfront offers panoramic views of the former Mare Island naval shipyard and San Francisco Bay. In addition, property values in Vallejo are lower than in adjacent cities, making the city an affordable place for middle-income families to live.



Looking toward Mare Island from Vallejo's waterfront. Photo courtesy SWA Group.

The students also identified some of Vallejo's disadvantages that present opportunities for change and improvement. The city's downtown lacks a vibrant urban density and is separated from the waterfront by vast expanses of surface parking. The scale and orientation of downtown's civic buildings are auto-centric and unfriendly to pedestrians. In the 1950s, redevelopment in the downtown area resulted in "megablocks," with parking lots, large public buildings, and the wide expanse of Mare Island Way blocking access from downtown streets to the waterfront. The post-redevelopment downtown also has inadequate parkland — there is not enough public open space, and the quality of the existing parks is substandard.

Focusing on Physical Planning and Design

Setting aside the political and financial concerns that complicate Vallejo's development scene, the students focused on physical planning and design solutions for the downtown and waterfront. With this in mind, they were able to create solutions that were somewhat independent of limiting economic or political influences. Their recommendations emphasized the importance of bold visions and new ideas in the re-visioning of this important California city.

The students explored ways to reconnect downtown with the city's waterfront and neighborhoods, using open space and green linkages as positive elements for circulation, social gathering, connectivity, environmental restoration, community identity, and revitalization of the public realm. Parks, plazas, trails, corridors, and overall building massing were used as the building blocks for their urban design proposals.



The student interns on a field trip. Photo courtesy SWA Group.

The vision plans capitalized on the potential for urban regeneration through strong civic interventions and bold economic catalysts. Findings emphasized four core concepts for a new Vallejo downtown and waterfront:

- The need for strong physical, programmatic, and visual connections between downtown and Mare Island across the water.
- The existing and potential strength of Georgia Street as a core right-of-way.
- The potential to extend existing natural systems (wetlands) southward and the potential to remediate, transform, or soften old industrial sites through planting and ecological planning.
- The potential for a campus or economic catalyst that would connect downtown with Mare Island and revitalize both.



Student conceptual plans. Images courtesy SWA Group.

An Academic Campus as a Catalyst

One of the main ideas for downtown Vallejo was the creation of a downtown academic campus as part of the California State University system, which includes Vallejo's existing California Maritime Academy (CMA). A new CMA campus or an even more ambitious "North Bay State University" campus could catalyze revitalization of downtown Vallejo and attract diverse new urban and economic activities.

Representing top landscape architectural programs at Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, University of California at Berkeley, and University of Texas at Austin and hailing from the U.S., South Korea, and Taiwan, the students brought a range of perspectives to the issues of campus planning in urban settings. "Having a firsthand understanding of how academic campuses are integrated within metropolitan locations taught us to think carefully about how to introduce a new academic campus within the city of Vallejo," says summer intern Shannon Bronson from UT Austin.

The students carefully considered how to introduce a new academic campus in Vallejo, how the project would be phased, and what possibilities exist for new construction and adaptive reuse for both downtown Vallejo and Mare Island. The aim of adding a campus to an urban environment is not to replace the urban setting, but to fit collegiate and research activities – along with associated retail and commercial activity, student and faculty housing, and employment – within the existing context.

The design strategies examined the physical relationship between a campus and its open space surroundings. Each student selected an existing university campus to study as a prototype; these ranged from densely urban examples like NYU to more pastoral settings such as the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

"The University of Washington at Tacoma, for example, provided a great parallel for Vallejo," says Elizabeth Shreeve, an SWA principal who directed the 2010 program. "It demonstrates how a new campus, stitched into the existing urban fabric and combined with new civic activities, can re-energize the urban scene." UW Tacoma is an urban-based campus that helped drive significant economic development for Tacoma's once-depressed downtown; today, the university is situated on 46 acres and provides educational space for over 3,000 students each year.

"A thriving urban university injects vitality and spending in neighboring businesses and housing, similar to the economic impact of the University of California campuses on downtown Berkeley, in San Francisco, San Jose and elsewhere," Shreeve adds.

The students also proposed strategies for phasing and structuring a new campus. They considered what first activity or intervention would spur further activity, and how infill would proceed. They noted that a well-integrated urban campus takes time — but that the new academic uses have the potential to link the downtown and waterfront and solve some of the basic urban issues identified early in the summer program studios.

Conclusions and Design Recommendations

In the final week, the students applied all their previous analyses, concepts and design explorations to creating a tangible, physical design proposal for the Vallejo waterfront. Ideas ranged from creating a series of floating islands within a main waterfront park to building a pedestrian bridge to connect Mare Island to downtown.

Specific concepts for the waterfront area included creating a shipyard amphitheater as well as tidal marshes, wetlands, and parks. One proposal suggested lighting up the large, old cranes and industrial relics along the Mare Island waterfront — creating an "artwork spectacle" that unites the history of the island as an important naval base with its present-day location along the waterfront.



Final presentations. Photos courtesy SWA Group.

The following concepts emerged as key planning and design themes in the students' proposals:

- **Academic Campus:** Identify sites for a new California Maritime Academy and a North Bay State

University campus in downtown Vallejo.

- **Urban Density:** Increase downtown's density and urban fabric by consolidating parking into structures and improve the streetscape by encouraging pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use design.
- **Civic Open Space:** Expand civic parks, plazas, and public open elements to contribute to a more enjoyable downtown, enlivened streetfront retail, and walkable neighborhoods.
- **Transportation and Surface Parking:** Build upon the existing infrastructure and reduce wasteful surface parking lots by consolidating parking into structures.
- **Waterfront:** Add a variety of land uses and development types to the waterfront to create a destination point and central amenity.
- **Connectivity:** Create green linkages between the downtown and waterfront. Create better extended connections between downtown and its neighborhoods to the waterfront and other Vallejo landmarks.
- **Sense of Identity and Place:** Propose elements that create a stronger sense of place for downtown Vallejo, including inviting, beautiful public spaces and transformative objects of art, landscape, and structures.

Next Steps

At the conclusion of the program, the students presented their findings to local developers, architects, city and university representatives, and other stakeholders. They summarized their research and vision plans and crafted physical models and detailed site plans for different areas of Vallejo's downtown and waterfront. The hard work of four intense weeks of design explorations is now generating interest for those involved in transforming Vallejo, and may someday help to create northern California's next great university town.

The collection of work by the students was compiled into a book, available at www.swagroup.com/summer_program/



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