

**The Process of the City:  
The Evolution of Space in Merced, California**

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Generally speaking, we view space as an objective fact fundamental to the physical configuration of objects. We are confident that places like California, The San Joaquin Valley, the city of Merced, and the nice but affordable neighbourhood of apartments on R Street exist. However, those spaces are not objective, but instead subjectively projected onto the physical world. There is no natural law that dictates whether a piece of land falls under the jurisdiction of Merced or Atwater, nor where California should be separated from Nevada. Certainly, there is no reason why a given neighbourhood must, by nature, be rich or poor, integrated or segregated, or well-maintained or dilapidated and litter-strewn. The unique characters and distinct spaces we consider immutable are all subjectively created by the interactions, activities, and visions of the human populations who live in and around them.

Although we tend to agree on spatial demarcation at the level of cities, states, and geographical regions, the more minutely we examine a space, the more clearly we see that one space has at least as many ways of being organised as there are people to observe it. Far more often, there are many more ways of mapping a space than simply one per person. In her atlas of San Francisco, *Infinite City*, Rebecca Solnit attempts to tackle that very issue. She writes, “Every place is if not infinite then practically inexhaustible... Any single map can depict only an arbitrary selection of the facts”.<sup>2</sup> Even preposterously detailed maps cannot depict every aspect of a space, and even an inconceivable number of such maps could never show all of the intricate relationships between those aspects. She therefore sets out to create a variety of maps, which, taken together, form a cubist view of the ideal form of a map of San Francisco. If we are willing to set aside the pursuit of the perfect map that truly shows the world as it is in all of its intricacies, we can construct maps that make useful arguments about how space is divided, what defines the character and purpose of those divisions, and what is important both to the inhabitants of a space and to the cartographer. It is with that goal in mind, that I commenced this project.

My project is relatively straightforward. In order to better understand the city of Merced, I have explored the city, mapping my discoveries from memory and a few basic field notes. As the maps developed, I began to understand the different districts of the city, how they fit together, and what makes them stand out as individuals from the rest of the city. As my sense of Merced became more concrete, I began researching the city more closely to understand not only what the districts of Merced are, but also how and why they came to be.

In my work, I have come to the conclusion that Merced is best understood in terms of three districts: The Administrative District to the south of Bear Creek, the Commercial District defined by the area between Bear Creek and Yosemite Avenue, and the UC Campus District defined by UC Merced. These three spaces each have distinct personalities and purposes in

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<sup>1</sup> The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*, (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2010), 2.

Merced at present, however, they also exist in time. Each district expanded the city to the North and changed its identity in response to specific historical stimuli.

### **The Modern City**

My inquiry into the development and evolution of Merced began with my realisation that Merced does not have a centre and a periphery, but rather three centres, each peripheral to the other two. Each of the three districts serves an important role in the overall functioning of the city. The Administrative District contains the apparatus of government and the primary means of travel. The Commercial District is central to supporting the population of Merced, and in many ways makes up the difference between a town and a city. The UC Campus District provides opportunity both for students in the San Joaquin Valley and for the industries that cater to students.

The three districts are divided geographically. The UC is separated from the rest of the city by a hinterland of pastures and fields and the Commercial and Administrative Districts are separated by Bear Creek. However, these features are not immutable, fundamental barriers. They are boundaries we have created by choosing to observe them as such. In his book about Chicago, *Nature's Metropolis*, William Cronon finds it necessary to distinguish between, “‘First nature’ (original, prehuman nature) and ‘Second nature’ (an artificial nature that people erect atop first nature)”.<sup>3</sup> Landscapes and spatial features we perceive as natural are often just as unnatural and manmade as any urban development. Moreover, Cronon warns that, “The nature we inhabit is never just first or second nature”.<sup>4</sup> First nature can take on elements of second nature. When looking at the natural boundaries between the three districts of Merced, it is important to emphasise that their ability to do so is fundamentally a feature of second nature.

Bear Creek is a natural body of water. However, it has also been directed to flow in a particular way and it has been transformed from a feature that merely exists to one that defines a boundary. It is a feature of first nature that has been imbued with features of second nature. The relatively open space that separates the UC from the city is not rugged wilderness, but rather well-kempt agricultural and pastureland cut by straight, well-maintained roads. The geological divisions of Merced are a convenient euphemism used to divide the city, not because they must, but because they provide a convenient location to embody what is actually a social phenomenon.

In fact, the clearest sign that the city is divided physically is the nature of its roads. In his *Plan of Chicago*, Daniel Burnham, endeavouring to design a planned city with the maximum efficiency and harmony for business interests, places particular emphasis on road widths and street plans. He specifies three varieties of roads: streets, avenues, and boulevards. Avenues, he explains, “Should be of sufficient width to draw to itself the streams of traffic passing from one point in a city to distant points”.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, avenues are streets that have the capacity to handle

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<sup>3</sup> William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1991), xix.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Burnham, *Plan of Chicago*, (Chicago, Il: Commercial Club of Chicago, 1908), 84.

heavy traffic. The principal avenues of Merced are all found in the Commercial District. Even those that transverse Bear Creek, most notably M Street, are generally wider and busier to the North. Burnham also emphasises, throughout his *Plan* that for the most part the street plan should be rectilinear for maximum order and directness.<sup>6</sup> However, Merced is not orderly. The street plan takes a marked forty-five degree bend south of Bear Creek, which clearly signals the boundary between the two districts. The UC, on the other hand, can hardly even be said to have streets. With the exception of a bus route, and basic infrastructure for going to and from the university, all of the roads are designed for pedestrians and cyclists.

The different street plans reflect the different identities of the three districts. The Administrative District was never designed with the present size and traffic of Merced in mind; its streets are older than those in the rest of the city, and they are designed to cater to pedestrian traffic idly wandering down Main Street rather than people hurriedly driving to the mall. The efficiency of movement Burnham is so infatuated with is far more important to the Commercial District. Similarly, the UC is small and self-contained enough that the idea of driving across campus is preposterous. The only automotive traffic the UC experiences on a regular basis is the busses that run between the campus and the rest of the city. We can see who uses each district and how just by the size and shape of its roads.

The geographical features and general plans of Merced are the obvious signs that there are three portions of Merced, but what really sets them apart from each other is their functions. The street plans serve broader purposes which are actually carried out by the buildings found in each district. The Administrative District contains important centres for local and county governance and infrastructure for travel. The Commercial District contains a dizzying number of large businesses and shopping centres. The UC Campus District contains classrooms, offices, and student housing facilities.

The Administrative District is set apart by the high concentration of buildings with obvious importance. The superior court, the police station, the post office, the county administrative building, and the DA's office can all be found on M Street between the railroad tracks and the freeway. Expanding our field of view out a little, City Hall is a short walk West from M Street. Legislative decisions, executive enforcement, and judicial interpretation all happen in a radius of a few blocks. No other part of Merced has anything resembling that degree of legal power. The Administrative District also contains nodes for travel both inside and outside of Merced. The freeway and the railroad both pass through the Administrative District, and connect Merced to Atwater, where the nearest airport is located. The only other major route out of the city is Bellevue, in the ruralate<sup>7</sup> hinterland near the UC district. The post office, though perhaps not as vital a piece of infrastructure as it once was, is also located in the Administrative district. Administration and infrastructure are arguably the essence of what a city is, and both are found in the Administrative District.

However, as a student exploring the city, the Administrative District was not the obvious centre of the city. The obvious centre was the commercial district. There are several reasons for that assumption. First of all, as I have already mentioned, the streets are broader and are oriented

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>7</sup> This area of Merced is too agricultural to be truly urban and too connected to the city to be truly rural. I have therefore created the term ruralate to fill this necessary lexical niche (compare Italianate, Islamicate, agrarianate)

towards the main points of the compass. My conception of a city will always be in terms of some ideal form of the orderly, efficient Modern City, similar to the one that Burnham believed in. Additionally, the Commercial district is the physical centre of Merced as I frame it. I proceeded on the understandable but incorrect assumption that whatever lies at the centre of the city must be the most important part. However, the primary reason I saw the Commercial District as the centre was because, from my perspective as a student and consumer, it is the centre. It isn't the centre of government and infrastructure, but it is where most of the things that I need can be found. When I consider going into town to get something, in almost every instance I am considering going into the Commercial District. That's where the Target is, that's where Barnes & Noble is, that's where Starbucks is. Although I have come to enjoy visiting the Administrative District, the part of the city that is most important to the daily lives of Mercedians, and particularly students, is the Commercial District.

Furthermore, the Commercial district contains the things that, relative to my ideal form of the Modern City, make a city a city. The Commercial district is physically large. It's busy. It's designed to accommodate a larger population. Above all, makes the difference between Merced as an agricultural centre and a retail centre. Cronon, in his introduction to *Nature's Metropolis*, reflects, "I realised that the human hand lay nearly as heavily on rural Wisconsin as on Chicago... By what peculiar twist of perception, I wondered, had I managed to see the plowed fields... as somehow more 'natural' than the streets, buildings, and parks of Chicago?"<sup>8</sup> What Cronon is hinting at is that, on some level, we dissociate the urban and the rural. A city that depends on the surrounding agricultural lands for more than sustenance is perceived to be hardly a city at all. Once examined, the notion is readily dismissed and, in fact, Cronon does dismiss it, but it remains an essential part of how we view cities. The Commercial District is as much a part of making Merced a city as the courts and bureaucracies, because it dissociates Merced from quaintness and ruralness.

Last to come to my attention as a centre was UC Merced. Although for most of my time at UC Merced I have only been on campus, its small size and distance from the rest of the city immediately identify it as a periphery. However, a periphery is not a geographic distinction, but rather a relationship of dependence on (and exploitation by) a centre. The more I have explored Merced, the more I have come to realise that the rest of the city relies on the UC as much, if not more, than the UC relies on Merced. The UC is a source of tremendous opportunity. The university offers local students a greater chance at pursuing higher education at a UC, and has the potential to radically change people's lives. However, the economic impact of constructing a university and introducing a population of some six thousand students (and enrollment is rapidly increasing) affects Merced far more immediately and universally. The students need off campus housing, which puts money in the pockets of landlords and real estate developers. Students are consumers, which means more sales for grocery stores, big box stores, restaurants, and theatres. It may not be a significant portion of Merced physically, or contain the things that make a city feel urban. It wields no political power. Yet the UC is the indirect source of growth, change, and prosperity in the city.

When looking at the modern city of Merced, it is clear that there is no single centre. Each part of the city provides a necessary element to Merced. Without all three, Merced would become an insignificant rural town, completely overshadowed by Atwater. And yet, Merced

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<sup>8</sup> Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 7.

hasn't always been the city it is today. Just over a decade ago, the UC didn't exist. It isn't enough to place Merced in space, we also have to place it in time.

## The Process of the City

Spaces are not just closed, static systems. They are constantly changing both as a result of impetuses from within and stimuli from without. Cities, with their high concentrations of people and general conspicuousness, tend to invite change at a far greater rate. In fact, the impetus for Burnham to create his *Plan of Chicago* was precisely that Chicago would necessarily change over time, and that, "The formless growth of the city is neither economical nor satisfactory".<sup>9</sup> He continues, saying that, "the aim has been to anticipate the needs of the future as well as to provide for the necessities of the present".<sup>10</sup> We cannot think of a city only as it is, but must view it holistically as a process of developments in response to changes. In the particular case of Merced's three districts, it must be seen that each is a chapter in the history of Merced, and derives its character from the historical circumstances in which it was created.

The oldest part of the city is the Administrative District, though to distinguish it from the current district which is codependent on two others, I will refer to it here as the Old City. For most of Merced's history, Bear Creek was not an internal division between parts of the city, but rather the Northern boundary of the city, as a 1917 map of Merced shows<sup>11</sup>. More interesting yet, the map shows some signs of how spatial divisions have changed. Although within the modern Administrative District, the highway and the railroad tracks serve some degree of purpose in separating space, they are less significant on the scale of the city as a whole. However, before Merced expanded beyond Bear Creek, the highway and railroad were the major dividing lines of the city. They cut the city into rough thirds, and even today the remnants of the divide can be seen. Between the train tracks and Bear Creek, there are residential neighbourhoods and the main park of the Old City. Between the train tracks and the highway is where the old courthouse is located. Finally, the highway was built right through where Chinatown had once been.<sup>12</sup> The highway clearly demarcated the poor, underprivileged part of the city.<sup>13</sup> Although they still bear some weight, the old spacial markers have been subsumed under divisions on a larger scale.

The Old city persisted as a complete system for quite some time, however, the Second World War reshaped the city, just as it reshaped countless others on the West Coast. With the opening of Castle Air Force Base in Atwater, Merced became a new home for airmen and people

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<sup>9</sup> Burnham, *Plan of Chicago*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>11</sup>"Route 12," *Automobile Blue Book 1917* vol. 8, (New York, NY: Automobile Blue Book Publishing Company, 1917), 86.

<sup>12</sup>Sarah Lim, "Railroad, Irrigation, and Chinese Settlement," (presentation, The Bridge is History: Water and the Humanities, Merced, CA, October 15-16, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> And though I never got around to mapping/exploring there, I am told it still is.

involved in industries ancillary to the air force<sup>14</sup>. After the war, that potential turned into a boom. As Josh Sides writes in his book *L.A. City Limits*, “During the two decades after World War II, the most rapid and significant growth in Southern California... occurred outside the corridor in the aircraft/aerospace industry... the industry enjoyed phenomenal government subsidies”.<sup>15</sup> The wars the US fought after World War II gave ample employment, not only to manufacturers of aircraft, but to the airmen who operated them and the engineers who maintained them. When airmen retired from Castle, they settled down in nearby Merced, bringing with them the economic impact of their air force pensions.

The increase in population, and the prosperity brought by Castle expanded Merced North, past Bear Creek. The Commercial District reflects the time period it was built in. The neighbourhoods just south of Yosemite Ave. are quaint and suburban. The district is dominated, not by small businesses like Main Street, but with supermarkets, shopping centres, and Merced Mall. The Commercial District is a little slice of suburbia, recognisably drawn from the idealised, whitewashed picture of the Fifties that codified suburban culture. However, the prosperity of Castle didn't last forever, and in the Nineties the base was closed, resulting in massive unemployment.<sup>16</sup> The city survived by beginning work on a new UC campus.

Building UC Merced, the final of the three districts, proved all-important. At the same time that Merced was working to save its economy by building the university, the city was also jumping on the housing boom. In fact, there persists a very high concentration of realtors in Merced, particularly in the Commercial District. In the period leading up to the 2008 crash, contractors in Merced built, “4,397 new homes in those neighborhoods, some costing half a million dollars, without asking who in a city of only 80,000 could afford to buy them all”.<sup>17</sup> The crash was the devastating result of boosterism and speculation on space. The development of the city depends on boosters, who create second nature constructs that draw investment to the city. In the case of the housing market, they emphasised the value of constructing expensive homes in Merced, on the false belief that housing investments were safer than they actually proved to be. Merced still bears the marks of the housing boom, and the Commercial District in particular is dotted with some very pleasant neighbourhoods. Fortunately, the newly built UC has kept Merced afloat, and continued construction projects involved in the 2020 Plan should bring employment as well as a new population of consumers to revitalise Merced.

Of course, the UC is not without its downsides. Though the *Merced Sun Star* discusses it in positive terms, the investment pouring into downtown Merced comes at a cost. As highfalutin developers and investors transform downtown Merced, they will most likely begin to price

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<sup>14</sup>John Decker, interview by Andrew Kuhn, “United States Air Force Veteran Looks Back on Time at Castle Air Force Base,” *Merced Sun-Star*, May 22, 2015, <http://www.mercedsunstar.com/news/article21732393.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 81.

<sup>16</sup> Decker, *Merced Sun-Star*

<sup>17</sup> David Streitfeld, “In the Central Valley, the Ruins of the Housing Bust,” *New York Times*, Aug. 23, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/24/business/24house.html>.

residents out of those neighbourhoods. In a reply to concerns about gentrification on his election campaign's Facebook page, local politician Daniel Sabzehir writes:

One of the greatest consequences of that growth that has plagued cities like San Jose, Seattle, New York, and San Francisco is gentrification. I think about it everyday and am constantly studying case studies to see how cities have avoided or mitigated its toll<sup>18</sup>

The issue of gentrification will be the problem that defines the next chapter of Merced's history, and local politics are already changing to reflect the influence the UC will have on the city.

Each district of the city since the Old City has arisen as a response to some sort of stimulus. The Commercial District arose out of World War II and the employment opportunities at Castle Air Force Base, and UC Merced arose out of the closure of Castle and the housing market crash. Perhaps the gentrification brought on by the construction of the UC will be the next stimulus to reshape the city of Merced.

## **Conclusion**

The city of Merced is composed of three distinct districts, each with its own purpose, character, and form of centrality. Though today they each fill a niche that is codependent on the others, they have not always done so. Each part of the city represents a chapter in the history of Merced and a response to historical events, both regional and national. Merced has evolved with the times, and will continue to evolve as the UC grows and new problems, such as gentrification, arise. Nonetheless, however much Merced may change, each chapter of its history will remain visible in the character of its districts to anyone willing to explore and observe the process of the city.

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel Sabzehir, "Daniel Sabzehir for Merced City Council," *Facebook*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/sabzehir4council/?fref=ts>.

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