CED URBAN DESIGN STUDY STUDIES

PITTSBURG'S

RAILROAD AVENUE CORRIDOR

How could an urban arterial become a great public space? In the Fall of 2007 graduate students in Landscape Architecture and City Planning explored urban design possibilities for the Railroad Avenue Corridor in Pittsburg, under the guidance of Professors Michael Southworth and Donlyn Lyndon.

A major spine, Railroad Avenue connects the historic waterfront and town center with the Civic Center, several schools, and a proposed transit village and BART extension. The project area contains a mixture of public parks, residential neighborhoods, shopping areas, and small industrial buildings; two railroads and a highway cross it.

The studio, which was funded by the City of Pittsburg, collaborated with the AIA East Bay Chapter. The studio covered the same location in the city as the Charrette undertaken by the AIA East Bay. Under the leadership of Steve Winkel, Anko Chen, Ron Bishop and Sidney Sweeney, and in concert with Marc Grisham, the Pittsburg City Manager, the AIA East Bay sponsored the Charrette as part of “AIA150,” a year-long national American Institute of Architects program celebrating 150 years of architects working together by giving information and ideas back to communities.

THE STUDIO

Each year the interdisciplinary studio taught by Professor Southworth focuses on the public realm of cities and opportunities for creating more humane and delightful public places in both existing urban centers and in areas of new growth. Major studio objectives include:

- To develop skills in analyzing, designing, and communicating urban design problems.
- To involve the class in a real world problem, with real clients, preferably with a public client such as a city.
- To work on urban design problems at multiple scales, from small elements like parks or plazas and buildings that contribute to the public realm, to medium scale such as marketplaces or cultural centers, to larger scale such as street grids and new districts.

Views to hills and water.

By Michael Southworth

12 FRAMEWORKS
To work as an interdisciplinary team including landscape architects, planners, and architects.

To expose students to the practice of urban design and projects for the public realm through visiting professionals, case studies, and field trips to projects.

THE RAILROAD AVENUE CORRIDOR, CONNECTING MINES TO HARBOR

Beginning in the 1850s the Black Diamond Railroad, which ran north from the Black Diamond coal mines in the hills down to the waterfront, established the structure for the corridor. Since it was an industrial strip, town development avoided it, resulting in a pattern that is still evident today with few public activities fronting along the corridor and little provision for pedestrian activity. However, Railroad Avenue is the major transportation spine in the city and is one of the few streets that connects the hills with Old Town and the water. Although
The city began as a tight grid pattern, as it grew to the South, superblocks and fragmented street patterns became the norm. Neighborhoods are rather detached from it and there are several barriers to North/South movement. Walking and bicycling are compromised in many areas. Built form is somewhat incoherent, with disparate scales, gaps, and much underutilized space. Civic institutions such as the City Hall and High School are not readily visible from Railroad Avenue and the major entrance to the city from Highway 4 is weak, giving no sense of arrival or orientation. Overall, it lacks cohesiveness, vitality, and identity.

and Socio-economic Environment in the study area. In late October 2007 students and faculty participated in and helped facilitate the design Charrette in Pittsburg, which was attended by citizens, city staff, members of the Planning Commission, and many design professionals.

Subsequently, the class developed design possibilities for the Railroad Avenue Corridor and presented their work to City staff and to interested Charrette participants throughout the semester. Designs explored potentials for Railroad Avenue as a major corridor for civic life and gateway to the city. Ideas included:

- Connecting with and making visible
- Creating a Transit Village and eBART station at the intersection of Railroad Avenue and Highway 4

The class presented its final work to the very enthusiastic City Council, Planning Commission, and interested city officials, staff, and residents in February 2008. Steve Winkel summarized the results of the Charrette.

**THE FUTURE**

The studio work reveals Pittsburg’s great potential for creating fine places to live, with a landscape and community structure that enhance the lives of all who live there and come to live there. This can be achieved in a way that draws strength from the existing character of the place and makes use of resources in a way that is responsible, enjoyable and sustainable.

Professor Lyndon stresses that three things are necessary to bear in mind in reaching for this future:

- **Think always to the larger landscape,** the fall of the land towards the water; the presence and care of vegetation, the sustainable use of natural resources and an understanding of the history of the place.

- **Look always for investments that give benefits in many ways,** that nurture the place as well as meet specific needs; where each project can join with others in creating a public realm that brings people together and makes judicious use of resources.

- Railroad Avenue can become a grand passage through the city, one that draws together landscape, civic investment,
existing neighborhoods and attractive walkable developments into a coherent, livable place, one that will bring pleasure and pride to its citizens.

These altogether achievable goals will require steady, careful guidance from the City Council, the City Manager and staff, and the understanding and dedication of commissioners, citizens, merchants and developers.

**STUDENTS**

Jennifer Beckman, Jessica Coleman, Holly Dabral, Mike Ernst, Peter Frankel, Vinita Huang, Kristen Maravilla, Rebecca Sanders, Hagu Solomon

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