



## MEMORANDUM

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Assessment Summary  
Fresno Mall Charrette  
October 15, 2010

This memorandum serves to document initial thoughts and impressions from my trip to Fresno on September 25-27. As background, some of these ideas were captured in the 15-minute public presentation made on September 27, while others were included in a Birnbaum Blog that was published on *The Huffington Post*, titled, “Modernism, Fresno and the Future of a City’s Heart” (October 8). Finally, a detailed summary is included that weighs the opening and closing of both cross streets and three blocks of the Mall.

### Background

The face of US Post War urban planning was irrevocably changed with the pedestrian mall – among the earliest, Fresno, California’s Fulton Mall in 1964. This pioneering attempt at revitalizing a city’s center was one of more than 200 urban pedestrian malls constructed in North America from 1959 to the mid-1980s. Midway through this period, educator, author and landscape architect Harvey Rubenstein, in his comprehensive 1978 survey “Central City Malls”, buoyantly declared, “*Pedestrian malls have become an exciting part of the revitalization of downtown business districts.*”

Thirty-two years later, some malls, such as that in Virginia’s city of Charlottesville remain economically viable, while others in Sacramento, CA, Minneapolis, MN, Allentown, PA, and elsewhere have been reopened to vehicular traffic. In Fresno, where the mall was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places on August 20, it is a classic case of *high integrity* and *poor condition* from a historic preservation perspective.

So, what are the options today for balancing historic values, design, and economic stability for the Fulton Mall? Pioneering landscape architect Garrett Eckbo’s design unified the original architecture and planning by Victor Gruen Associates – it was the centerpiece of Gruen’s master plan ... and an initial hit. Like other pedestrian malls, Fulton has seen its share of decline. Because of demographic and population shifts, the



mall's only real usage is during business hours. After 5PM, it's largely dormant. This is bad for retail, revenue and city spirit.

Since the big issue is how to integrate or re-integrate this pioneering modernist work into Fresno's broader revitalization efforts, this white paper will attempt to avoid the trap of complaining about the poor state of the mall's historically-significant landscape features such as planters and fountains (though collectively, these are important and unique, in the overall design). The reality is that as a designed landscape, Fulton Mall still has great bone structure, and I would suggest it's a potential National Historic Landmark. In addition, it is worth noting that before the recent determination of eligibility to the National Register and California Register of Historic Places, there were no Eckbo designations.

### **Preservation Issues and Considerations**

The issue of how to preserve and manage the Mall's significant historic design while balancing critical economic and programmatic requirements is the core question. To this end, it is worth noting that what's happening in Fresno is playing out elsewhere in towns and cities with modernist urban landscape architecture. The nation's rich and diverse legacy of modernist landscape architecture is still struggling for visibility that will result in change and continuity in equal measure. For example, two of Eckbo's designs – Ambassador College in Pasadena and the Tucson Convention Center – are in serious trouble and in the end may meet the wrecking ball. And, as we have all heard at one time or another, city planning and design decisions about the fate of such places are frequently made under unusual, sometimes secretive circumstances. Occasionally, the actual outcome isn't clear until the first bulldozer shows up. Clearly based on the response and the comments made at the public forum on September 27, Fresno's approach is different and Fresnans know the mall is important. This was echoed in Mayor Swerengin's spirited opening, when she noted that unlike previous attempts at revitalizing the mall that had thwarted Fresnans, this time is different: "There is something powerful going on here," she declared to a boisterous crowd. "We are going to be moving mountains as a community. This is monumental."



During that evening there were 8 alternative designs presented by the consulting team which ranged from “do nothing” to “restoration” or “opening the street to vehicles” with variations on these themes. Foundational to this planning process was a mission statement crafted by the community, which notes that “Fulton will be a destination for the region due to the vibrancy and vitality that exists. At the core, Fulton is built upon commerce, community, culture and connectedness and uses the values of the past in a manner that authentically resonates with the opportunities of the future.”

Following on that meeting I have had adequate time to reflect on the eight original alternatives as well as a ninth alternative which opens three of the six blocks of the Mall. Here are my broader recommendations and considerations:

*On the Significance of the Mall:*

- The Mall is a masterwork of Garrett Eckbo’s professional career and is potentially significant as a National Historic Landmark, both as the work of a master and a rare surviving example with a high degree of design integrity;
- In addition to Eckbo’s contributions, the Mall is significant for the visionary leadership of the Downtown Mall Art Selection Committee, chaired by O. J. Woodward II, and the public display of modern art that grew out of that committee’s patronage. The art was fully funded by private citizens, with the intent to provide “an outdoor museum of art.” The combination of sculpture, mosaics (drinking fountains and benches), and clock tower, which cost over \$200,000 in 1964, is an early if not the first large-scale display of contemporary art by both internationally-recognized and local artists – *and not physically attached to a museum as a sculpture garden*. Therefore, the placement of the work and their integrity of setting are of great significance.

*On the Need for Detailed Economic Analysis and Metrics for Success:*

- During the charrette process I had the opportunity to spend time with Bob Gibbs, consulting economist for the Fulton Mall visioning project. It is clear from our conversations that there is much we do not know about the economics and exactly how many streets to open. How is success measured? What are the economic models for leveraging the value of an



“authentic” modernist mall? In fact, during one of several site walks, Gibbs noted that the opening of Kerin Street between Van Ness and Fulton Street had done little to affect retail and street life. So what does this mean? It does not seem reasonable or possible to opine about the number of streets that require opening without solid, defensible, quantifiable economic analysis. To this end there may also be the prospect of phasing this work. For example, what about phasing the work so that selected cross streets are open first, then the two blocks – one at the south end and one at the north end - are opened. Following those efforts, evaluating and measuring the impact at these critical junctures could take place.

*On the Alternatives:*

Cross Streets - As discussed during the charrette, the idea of opening some of the cross streets to vehicular traffic has great merit. For example, in Charlottesville, VA, two of the cross streets along the eight block mall have successfully been opened in recent years. Here in Fresno, the most critical cross street to be opened is the central spine of the mall at Mariposa. As I suggested in the public forum, the idea of viewing the Mall and Courthouse Park as “one campus” is critical - after all, they are of the same period and Modernist in their designs. This is also timely with the light-rail proposed just west of the mall as a justification for pulling folks through the Mall.

As part of opening Mariposa between Van Ness and Fulton, the underground connection should be abandoned and the street-level cross reinstated. With the two arcaded buildings flanking this street just south of Van Ness there is a tremendous opportunity to energize the street, which is wide enough for outdoor dining. As part of this work *La Grande Laveuse* (Washer Woman) will need to be relocated.

The block moving south on Mariposa, between Fulton and Broadway, should also be reopened. As part of this work the *Clock Tower* by Jan de Swart should remain in place with the road moving around it and the *Big A* by Peter Voukos may be re-sited in this southernmost block.

Moving north, the two blocks of Merced between Van Ness and Broadway may also be opened. Further study should be undertaken as to how such sculpture/fountain



compositions as the *Rite of the Crane* by Bruno Groth and *Talos* by Lee Hansen may actually remain as part of a new road construction.

Moving south, the block of Kern between the Fulton Mall and the Stadium requires further research. Since the building envelope and the sculptural ensemble of *Spreading, Leaping and Smoldering Fire* by Clare Falkenstein have such a high degree of integrity of design and setting, every effort should be made to protect these character-defining landscape features while still acknowledging that a strong visual relationship between the Stadium and the Mall is desired.

Fulton Mall - In general, by opening the Mall to moving/parked vehicles there is a diminished integrity of design. In addition, the size and character of most of the fountains and sculpture is at a pedestrian scale and is therefore diminished when there are contiguous parked vehicles adjacent to the art and fountains. Parking bays have a significant impact on a street's appearance, making it look like any other street. These changes to accommodate vehicles will need to be viewed on a case-by-case basis, ideally guided by a set of overarching design principles that balance use, design and historic preservation. For example, "no cars will be parked within X feet of a human scale sculpture; every effort will be made to preserve canopy trees when..."

Following the development of agreed-upon principles, the following general comments regarding the ninth alternative, which opens three blocks of Fulton Mall, should be considered:

North and South Perimeter Blocks - The two blocks at either end of the Mall have suffered the greatest losses to their building envelopes, and are today surrounded by parking or buildings which ignore the original setbacks, and therefore it can be suggested that they have greater potential to absorb change. With that stated, these two end-blocks are also the locations for two unique signature linear fountain/art features that run the longest horizontal lengths of the Mall. They bookend and/or bracket the Mall while serving as gateways with *The Visit* by Clement Renzi to the north and *Obos* by George Tsutakawa to the south. As gateways, the recommended treatment in Alternative Nine of having parking flanking both sides at the entrance to the Mall at Toulumne and Inyo is the wrong arrival statement; it suggests "Street" and not "Mall." At Inyo, this situation is even less desirable because the small-scale fountain on



the north side of the street has been given over to parking and ideally should be preserved.

In sum, I think that the idea of “arrival experience” is important in the historic design and should be considered in this and any other rehabilitation solution when opening these two critical perimeter blocks. I think that opening the northernmost block at Toulumne is extremely desirable not just for accommodating a more attractive development proposal but also for connecting with the neighborhood immediately to the north, which seems to be moving towards the Mall.

In general, as stated above, when significant landscape features are surrendered to parking there should be a unified series of guidelines established that balance use, design and historic preservation concerns.

Beyond these two blocks, Alternative Nine also proposes opening an additional block between Merced and Fresno Streets. I believe that if that block was also opened the Mall may reach its tipping point and the adverse affect would severely compromise its integrity. It is important to remember that this is a very balanced design, with Mariposa and its associated plaza space in the middle, serving as the central spine. To open the block at either end of the mall and to open an additional one to north upsets the balance and is not recommended.

Finally, a note about vegetation: Due to time limitations and available information during the charrette, an in-depth analysis of trees and plant materials was not possible. However, although it is clear that many trees are in decline, some have outgrown their design intent, and other inappropriate plant materials have been introduced, a richer and deeper understanding of Eckbo’s design intent should be undertaken to guide change. For example, I believe that in much the same way that Lawrence Halprin was abstracting nature during this same period with his design for Lovejoy Park in Portland (his palette was abstracting nature with concrete and water), Eckbo was interpreting the regional plant palette through his purposeful tree selections. This historic design intent is essential in assessing which trees remain and which can be replaced as part of any rehabilitation plan.



## Closing

Today, just one month before the 100-year anniversary of Eckbo's birth, it seems fitting that a vibrant community-based exercise regarding the future of this nationally-significant Modernist landscape is underway. Eckbo would have embraced such a public process, as part of a plea for well-organized and well-planned landscapes, from garden to nature, stressing our relationship with the land without apologizing for the human presence.

I look forward to working with the consulting team and the city as this process advances and to participating in this exciting balancing act of guiding this National Historic Landmark into the future, to become a more fully-integrated, economically-viable community asset for all Fresnoans.

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