

### **Back to the Future: Downtown San José Past, Present, and Future**

Downtown San José has a long history as the commercial, cultural, and civic heart of San José. This chapter provides context for the Design Development Framework (DDF) within the historical evolution of Downtown San José, and the lessons it provides to create a vibrant future.

While the region has been inhabited since pre-Columbian times, modern occupation of the Downtown area began in the late 1700's. Downtown's history is rooted in public transportation, including an electric streetcar system that circulated throughout the city center starting in the nineteenth century. Through the middle of the twentieth century, the Downtown area thrived with a mix of retail and commercial uses and many visitors. Downtown's retail hub rapidly declined after the 1960s when suburban development, including shopping centers, proliferated throughout the South Bay, enabled by the newly created Santa Clara County Expressway system.

The following pages contain a series of historical maps and images that document and illustrate the importance of the VTA block within Downtown's historical framework. One of the key goals of the DDF is to provide dense mixed-used urban development adjacent to the future Downtown BART station to help restore vital and historic links between public transit and lively urban communities. The DDF draws upon historically successful strategies to create vibrant public spaces – including integration of a central plaza and connecting pedestrian paseos – in order to entice people to walk, interact, and further activate the area. The DDF also respects historic and current urban frontages, which is especially important along Santa Clara Street.

## 2 Historical Context

### 2.1 Santa Clara Valley's Original Business Center

Prior to the 1950s, Downtown San José was the main business, civic, and social center of the agriculturally rich Santa Clara Valley, also known as “Valley of the Heart’s Delight”. Like many historic downtowns in the United States, Downtown was the city’s primary shopping district through World War II, including for local farmers and visitors from outside the area.

During this period, First Street was one of the principal commercial streets: J.C. Penney was at the corner of First and Santa Clara streets and (heading south) was Hart’s, Blum’s, Woolworth’s, Hale Brothers, Goldeen’s and Sears, Roebuck and Co.

In 1887, the first City Hall was built in the middle of what is today Plaza de César Chávez, one of the oldest public spaces in California – a space that also housed on its perimeter California’s first State Capital (see Fig. 2-04).

### 2.2 Driving Growth Outward and a Declining Downtown Center

As farmland was converted to subdivisions and office parks, the Valley of the Heart’s Delight eventually became the Silicon Valley, and San José’s Downtown became just one node in a series of walkable town centers between San José and Palo Alto, 16 miles away. San José’s pro-growth machine was focused more on annexation and outward suburban growth rather than the vitality of Downtown.

San José’s population ballooned from 95,000 in 1950 to 450,000 in 1970, and what was once a 17-square-mile city mushroomed to 136 square miles. As San José grew both in size and population, the notion of what comprised the city expanded and dispersed to the point where the historic Downtown became much less of a focal point for commercial and civic activity



Fig. 2-01 Funding for the Santa Clara County Expressway System was secured in 1961. This photo shows the Interstate 280 and Highway 87 in the 1970s.

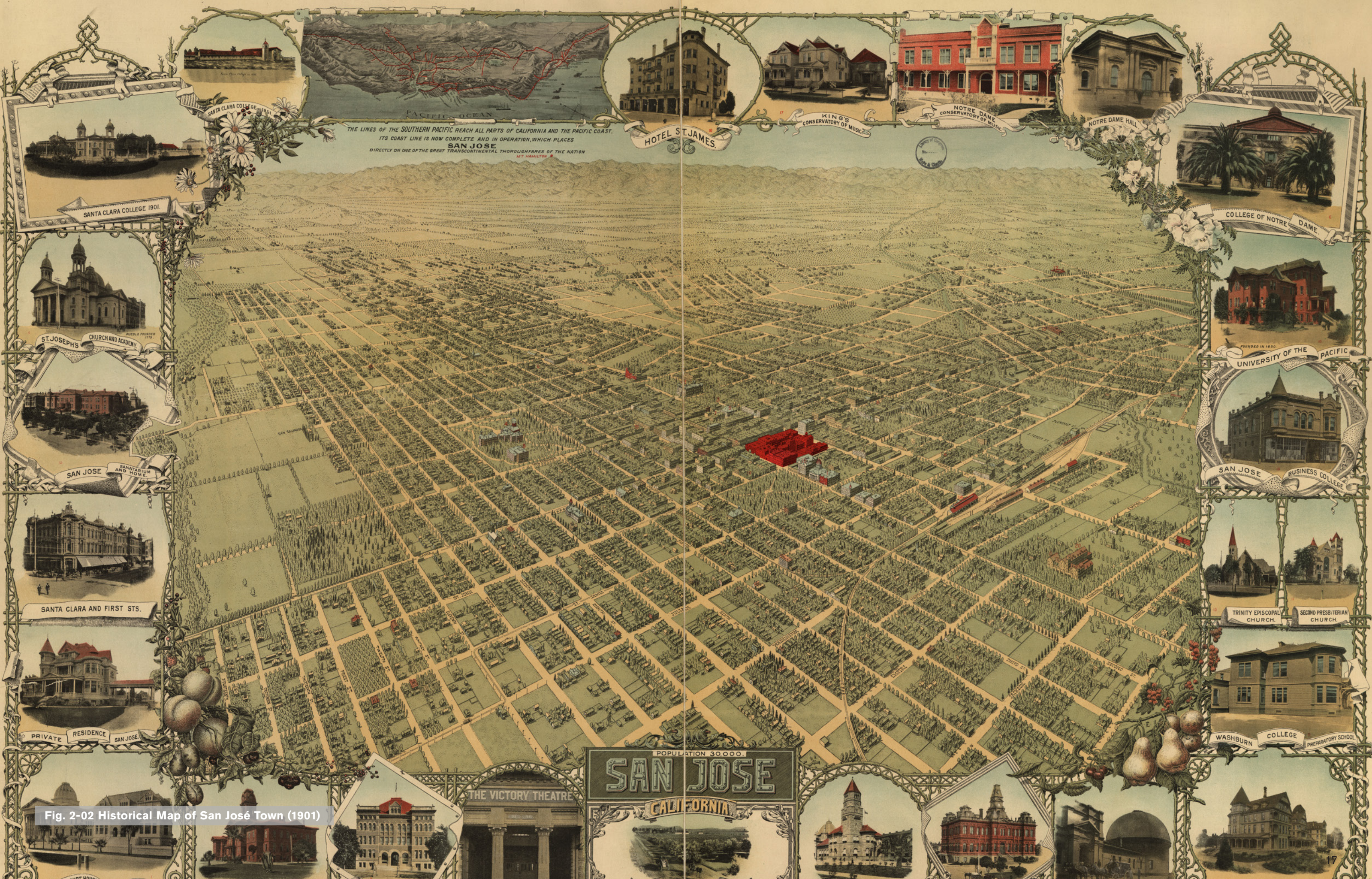
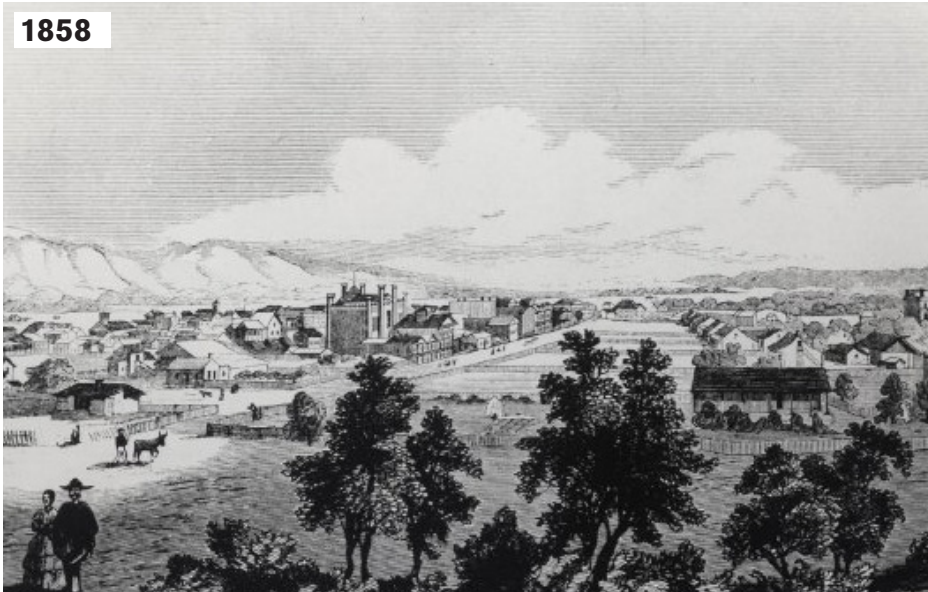
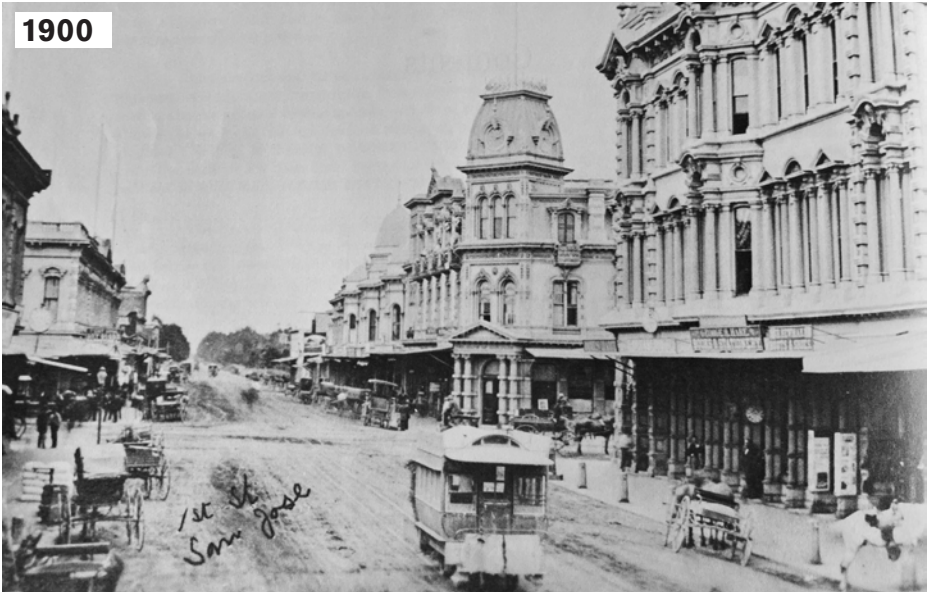


Fig. 2-02 Historical Map of San José Town (1901)

## 2 Historical Context



1850, San José became the first State Capital and has been an important place in California history.



San José debuted its electric streetcar system in 1888, replacing the horse-drawn carts that had been the dominant mode since 1868.



View from First Street, one of the main retail streets in San José.



Downtown was the business, civic and social center of the agriculturally rich Santa Clara Valley.



In 1934, the city moved its rail tracks from Fourth Street to the west end of Downtown, where it built Cahill Station, which is now Diridon Station.



With the streetcar taken away from the city center, streets were dominated by cars.

Fig. 2-03 Historical Timeline photos (1858-2020)

## 2 Historical Context



3 years after this photo was taken, San José moved its city hall out of Downtown. This exodus removed hundreds of workers from Downtown.



In 1980 investment for adding, extending and upgrading highways was secured.



Funding for the Santa Clara County Expressway System was secured in 1961.



View of San Pedro street. Competition between city and suburbs led to a deserted city center.



When light rail opened in 1987, it wasn't met with expected success. People still preferred to drive to their jobs, which were mostly concentrated in North San José.



San José today, where a new downtown cultural district emerges.

## 2 Historical Context

### 2.2 Driving Growth Outward and a Declining Downtown Center (cont.)

Through the 1960s, City leaders continued to pursue an outward growth agenda. In 1958, San José moved its City Hall out of Downtown to a newly built office park and civic center on North First Street, nearly 2 miles to the north. Santa Clara County offices followed City Hall out of Downtown. This exodus removed hundreds of public sector and newspaper workers from Downtown. Such jobs are typically a core part of the critical mass of employees in a Downtown, typically providing a solid base of retail customers.

The challenge of keeping jobs in Downtown was not unique to San José. What makes San José distinct is that the civic functions were moved out of Downtown. Further, as the regional economy continued to shift after World War II, Downtown San José failed to evolve and retain its vitality.

San José converted two-way neighborhood streets in and around Downtown into pairs of high-capacity one-way streets in order to accommodate large volumes of vehicles for people who drove from south San José to the north through Downtown and adjacent neighborhoods. These two-way to one-way conversions were intended to protect the Downtown from being overrun with traffic, but, in practice, these changes allowed car travelers to pass through — and around — Downtown at higher speeds, thereby degrading the quality of these street for non-drivers and the quality Downtown generally.

During this period, the City Council also reversed its policy of opposing large-scale retail development outside of Downtown, and many shopping centers began opening outside of Downtown. Every new neighborhood had orchard land that was converted into a neighborhood shopping center with a supermarket and a dozen or more stores. The continued growth of the Valley Fair Mall and establishment of Santana Row created a new retail center in the center of the Santa Clara Valley that is likely to sustain that role in the decades to come.

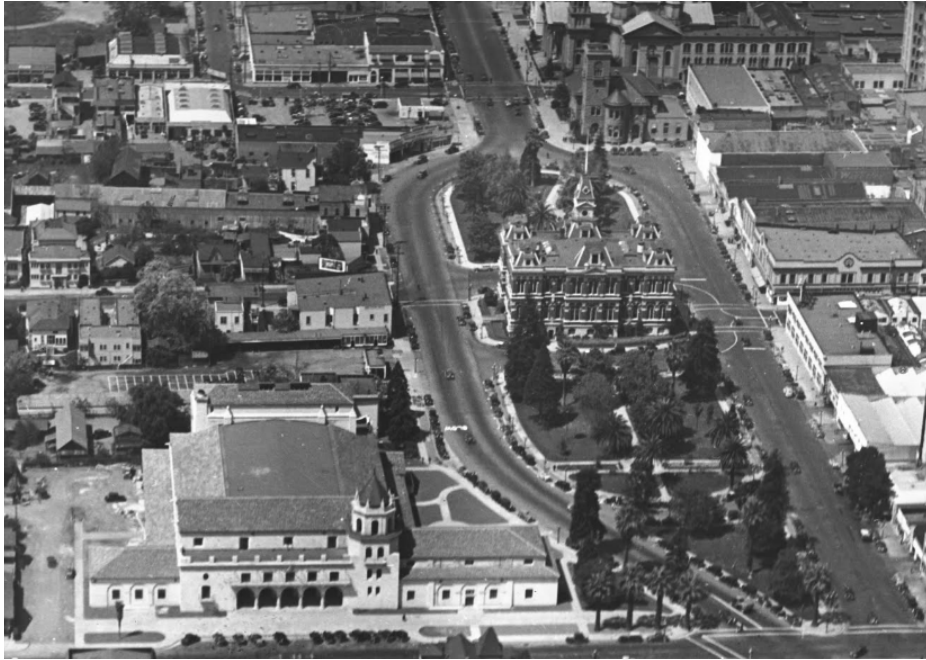


Fig. 2-04 San José City Hall, originally located on Plaza de César Chávez, playing an important role as the centerpiece of the Downtown area. (1910)



Fig. 2-05 Image shows the relocated City hall at the suburbs of San José. (1980)



Fig. 2-06 Roos Atkins and J.C. Penny, retail anchors on First and Santa Clara streets, abandoned Downtown San José by the early 1970's due to the downturn of the 1960's.



Fig. 2-07 Santa Clara County Courthouse and Hall of Records [ca. 1915], part of Saint James Square City District and National Register Historic District.

## 2 Historical Context

### 2.3 Back to the Future: Towards a New Downtown

The planned Phase II extension of VTA's BART to Silicon Valley project through Downtown San José has catalyzed a renaissance for Downtown San José. Businesses like Adobe have recently built flagship headquarters here. Historic locations like San Pedro Square have been transformed into active, pedestrian-friendly destinations. The proposal by Google to create Downtown West as a new district with high-rise mixed-use development in the Diridon Station area shows the potential for public transit paired with dense mixed-use transit-oriented development to breathe new life into Downtown San José.

By understanding Downtown's history, the VTA Block DDF aims to build upon these recent actives. Another focal point for urban life in Downtown San José will be revitalized, right at the core of where it all began over a century ago.



Fig. 2-08 Historical Sites: First Street (Left) and Bank of Italy (Right)  
Source: San José Downtown Design Guidelines and Standards, 2019



Fig. 2-09 Historical Landmark Location Map

