ABSTRACT

At the heart of Silicon Valley, San José is the largest city in Northern California’s Bay Area. Historically a crossroads of passenger rail transportation, the city is about to receive two transformative urban interventions: the arrival of California High-Speed Rail and the extension to San José by Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), the region’s backbone mass transit system.

Anticipating the advent of BART and High-Speed Rail, planning for the expansion of Downtown’s historic San José Diridon Station has been underway for well over a decade. The City has a lot at stake: Diridon Station is poised to anchor Northern California’s preeminent opportunity for transit oriented development, a new 21st Century downtown district and San José’s next Great Place.

Each of San José’s three future BART stations offer unique placemaking opportunities. Within a walkable mile east of Diridon, BART’s Downtown Station anchors the core of Downtown’s emerging vision of “24/7” livability. East of Downtown, and a world apart, is suburban Alum Rock Station: here, the public has articulated a vision of a new transit-centered community reflecting the values and traditions of the district’s Portuguese founders.

Drawing on past and current work by many (including the author) on conceptual planning and urban design of San José’s future High-Speed Rail and BART stations, this paper explores and reveals evolving visions for each station area and – more importantly – how these visions work together in service of a greater vision. Each station’s vision is a unique expression of a common objective: leveraging BART’s and High-Speed Rail’s energies to catalyze and sustain a connected realm of inspired urban places.
I. IN THE VALLEY OF HEART'S DELIGHT

The city of San José (see Fig. 1) forms the center of a sprawling urban region at the southern end of San Francisco Bay, 40 miles southeast of San Francisco. With over 1 million residents, San José is Northern California’s most populous city, surpassing San Francisco, Oakland, and Sacramento, and the largest city geographically with an area of 180 square miles. At the core of this generally low-density city is a relatively dense, compact, and eminently livable downtown.

Through most of its history, San José served as the business center of one of California’s richest agricultural districts, the orchard-filled Santa Clara Valley. Following World War II, the valley began a transformation still unfolding today, from agriculture to the world’s preeminent center of technological progress, known world-wide as “Silicon Valley.” The home to many of high-tech’s legendary companies, San José styles itself the “Capital of Silicon Valley” even though nearby smaller cities such as Cupertino, Palo Alto, and Mountain View host many of the very biggest and most visible names in high-tech – Apple, Google, and Facebook, to name a few.

All of this is about to change. Even as this paper is being written, Google has cast its eye on downtown San José. Google’s “why” is not hard to discern. Downtown is a potent blend of all the urban qualities that attract knowledge workers and cultural creatives: quality public realms, higher education, a diverse and growing nightlife, rapidly-developing residential opportunities, distinctive architecture, extraordinary cultural diversity, and a vibrant arts scene and “maker culture”. Something else may also have attracted Google’s attention. By virtue of history and location, downtown San José enjoys the Bay Area’s best access to regional public transportation and more is on the way: the transformative arrival of BART and California High-Speed Rail.

![Fig. 1 – The city of San José, as located in the Bay Area and Sacramento urban regions.](image)

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1 Just as the Santa Clara Valley is known today as “Silicon Valley”, it was styled by promoters as “The Valley of Heart’s Delight” during its agricultural heyday prior to World War II.
The Meeting of Many Modes

Downtown San José’s historic Diridon Station (see Fig. 2) has always been a crossroads of rail transportation in the Bay Area. Historically, travelers on the north-south corridor linking Southern California to the Pacific Northwest have changed trains at Diridon to travel up the Peninsula to San Francisco, a function served today by the Caltrain commuter rail service. Today (see Fig. 1), Caltrain and Amtrak’s intercity trains are joined by regional commuter lines extending to the Central Valley cities of Sacramento through the East Bay, and Stockton through the historic Niles Canyon and Altamont Pass. In 2005, Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) light rail service reached Diridon with completion of a branch linking San José to the city of Campbell.

Fig. 2 – Diridon’s historic Cahill Depot, constructed in 1935, and present-day Diridon district viewed from the air with downtown San José in the background.

Today, Diridon is on the threshold of receiving two more rail transportation modes that will transform it from an important – albeit modest – regional rail station to the most important public transportation hub in Northern California. BART, the Bay Area’s signature mass transit system, will extend from the East Bay city of Freemont, through downtown San José, to Santa Clara, with a station at Diridon. Linking Southern California to the Bay Area, California High Speed Rail will pass through the heart of Silicon Valley with a major station at Diridon. Travelers from all over the Bay Area and parts of the Central Valley will travel on BART and other rail modes to Diridon to access High Speed Rail. On return, Diridon will be their place of arrival and transfer, their gateway to San José and the region.

San José’s rail dominance in Northern California is shown by the following table (Fig. 3), a comparison of direct “intermodal” rail connections (where passengers can switch easily from one rail service to another) in the downtowns of San José, San Francisco, Oakland, and Sacramento (future BART and High-Speed Rail connections shown in red).

The advent of BART and High-Speed Rail is both the opportunity and the challenge facing Diridon: The investment and patronage of BART and High-Speed Rail is the catalyst that will take

\[2\] The role of California High Speed Rail in the Bay Area is described by the author in a paper presented at the 2012 IMCL Conference: “Your Life is on the (Rail) Line - Expanding the Walkable Life from City to Region to State”, in Healthy Mobility & Green Streets (IMCL eReport #67), 2012.
Diridon and downtown San José to the next level. At the same time, both modes introduce functional complexities that could, if not understood and managed effectively, overwhelm the realization of Diridon’s enormous contribution.

In the next section, this paper examines the future of Diridon Station as the Bay Area’s preeminent passenger rail nexus and the development of downtown San José’s long sought vision of station and place: the “Grand Central Station of the West.”

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Fig. 3 – Direct rail connections in San José, San Francisco, Oakland, and Sacramento

II.    DIRIDON – THE GRAND CENTRAL STATION OF THE WEST

To fully embrace the possibilities of San José Diridon Station is to answer this question, fundamentally:

*What is the vision worthy of Northern California’s premier crossroads of public transportation and the central gateway to Northern California’s largest city?*

This is a question that must encompass the pragmatic but can only be realized in the qualitative realms of architectural expression and urban place-making. The expansion of Diridon must sort-out and make seamless the relationships of the many modes of transportation that meet here and exchange passengers – in short, Diridon must work. It must then transcend the functional to achieve something else: the qualities of place that transform a solution into a vision.

Holding these two realities together as planning and design move forward is the key to achieving Diridon’s possibility, long expressed by city leaders and visionaries as the “Grand Central Station of the West.”
Delivering this vision will require the collaborative engagement of all of Diridon’s major stakeholders: VTA, BART, Caltrain, Amtrak, ACE, California High Speed Rail, and the City of San José. Among these stakeholders, High-Speed Rail and BART stand apart, two new modes that bring the most change to Diridon and the most investment to the table.

For downtown San José itself, BART is poised to make the most difference. Diridon is located on the western fringe of downtown. Passing through the center of downtown, BART will forge a direct link between the core of Northern California’s largest city and the Bay Area’s center of transportation mobility. Expressing the possibilities imbedded in this relationship is critical to Diridon’s future as San José’s “Next Great Place.”

A Seamless Passage – Addressing the Pragmatic

Diridon can best be described as “a station of stations”. Each major mode at Diridon effectively has its own station. All of these stations must fit together to form a cohesive, functional, and imageable whole while also maintaining their own distinct identities. For an intermodal transportation facility of any size and complexity, planning and design must address two fundamental areas of concern:

**Modal Requirements:** Each mode of transportation has, in effect, its own station. Each station must be sized and configured to its mode’s own physical and operational characteristics. These include basic physical dimensions and geometries (such as platform lengths, track alignments, and vertical and horizontal clearances), load factors (such as train capacities and schedules), access requirements (such as roadways and parking), and services appropriate to the mode (such as automated baggage checking for long distance trains).

**Intermodal Relationships:** The primary mission of the intermodal facility is to support passengers transferring between modes. As a “station of stations”, its program is an overlay of the station programs of each mode, with the additional requirements of passengers arriving and departing at the facility or moving efficiently between the modes when transferring. In addition, to facilitate efficient transfers, the modes themselves must coexist as close as possible to each other. All of this must be easily understood and navigated by that most important judge of all – the passenger.

The City’s challenge is to influence the overall design of Diridon to achieve seamless intermodal movements in a common iconic facility that celebrates all modes. BART provides the City a unique opportunity. BART’s entrances to the east of Diridon’s main station house are squarely in the foreground as approached from downtown along the Santa Clara corridor. The architecture of BART’s entrances will be defining elements of Diridon’s iconic presence.

A Search for the New – Creating a Vision

San José’s vision is for Diridon to claim the world stage. In the words of former City transportation official (now Northern California director of California High Speed Rail) Ben Tripousis, "We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to develop a transportation facility that is comparable to the best in the world."
But, what does this mean? In a world of exciting transportation architecture, what vision of Diridon would really set it apart? The answer is not necessarily found in modern transportation design – even the soaring, inspiring visions of Foster, Calatrava, and Hadid are applied to traditional models of stations that date back to the origins of rail transportation\(^3\). Fundamentally, these models define stations as discrete buildings, as architecture. What if Diridon is generated not only as a signature building but as a signature location?"

If this approach is followed, Diridon is created not as an object but as a place made up of objects, space, and connective tissue. The place Diridon is a merging of the station’s functional elements and a new community of intense urban activity, where traditional boundaries between station and city are blurred and redefined. Consider how this might apply: The station Diridon would likely express its iconic design through a soaring platform canopy or a signature station hall. The place Diridon might move its focus from the station hall to the street or to a central public square.

In this model, the intermodal elements – the old depot, the new High-Speed Rail station, the BART station – would be “addresses” on this street or framers of the public common, along with all the other uses that create and sustain urban livability. Here, new iconic possibilities arise: perhaps a great roof would cover this street or square, defining Diridon’s signature image while protecting and organizing the fundamental activities of arrival, departure, and transfer – and vibrant urban activity!

**III. A STEP BEYOND – CONNECTING DIRIDON AND DOWNTOWN**

The advent of BART creates a new unprecedented opportunity, the extension of the place Diridon to the core of San José itself. Although located on the western edge of San José’s downtown, Diridon is less than a mile from BART’s planned downtown station near the intersection of Santa Clara and Market Street. Natural and constructed barriers appear to keep Diridon and downtown separate, yet both are within reasonable walking distance of the other.

What do these conditions of proximity make possible? The answers emerge in the following discussion which builds the case that a merged domain of Diridon and Downtown really is San José’s Next Great Place, anchored and served by BART’s future stations.

**1 – Urban Rooms and Walls**

Building the case (see Fig. 4) starts with examining “the lay of the land.” The domain of Diridon and Downtown is experienced as distinct locales – “urban rooms” – divided by barriers – “walls” – created by rail and transportation corridors. The district is anchored on the west by the historic St. Leo’s neighborhood and on the east by San José’s downtown core. Bracketed by the barriers of the railway and the elevated Guadalupe Parkway, Diridon exists as the “room between”, traversed by San José’s defining natural element, the picturesque Guadalupe River.

\(^3\) Traditional models of railway stations typically include, in various spatial juxtapositions, two distinct elements with significant iconic potential: a central station building serving as the station’s “beacon” and interface with the community, and a platform area where trains arrive and depart. From the 19th Century origins of passenger rail travel to the present, the symbolic role of “gateway” has inspired a legacy of spectacular architectural achievements.
Fig. 4 – Urban Rooms and Walls

Crossing the barriers and tying the rooms together is the arterial corridor of Santa Clara Street and the Alameda, along the historic route of El Camino Real. The urban quality of the corridor is relatively high, characterized by wide sidewalks, stately landscaping, animated urban activity, and distinctive architecture.

2 – Public Transit and Special Places

The Diridon district is already endowed with excellent public transportation, providing good connections between a host of local, metropolitan, and regional mobility options. Services at Diridon today include Amtrak long-distance trains and intercity commuter lines, the Altamont Commuter Express (ACE), Caltrain, and VTA Light Rail. VTA rapid buses operating along the busy Santa Clara/Alameda corridor connect Diridon to downtown San José and Peninsula cities. These services are augmented by a variety of local transit bus lines, intercity bus services, shuttles, taxis, and bicycle corridors. BART and High-Speed Rail will only complete this picture, fulfilling Diridon’s promise as the Bay Area’s premier intermodal transportation center.

The districts along the Santa Clara/Alameda corridor (see Fig. 5) already provide a rich mix of all the features and opportunities that make urban life inviting and sustainable, all within a compact, attractive walkable domain. Stand-out features include the historic Saint Leo’s residential neighborhood and commercial corridor along the Alameda, the iconic Guadalupe River Park, the SAP Center arena, and downtown’s bustling San Pedro Square entertainment, restaurant and market district.
Special places and urban opportunities abound throughout downtown San José: the headquarters of world class high-tech companies, a major university, the South Bay’s premier convention center, parks and open spaces, outstanding museums and performance venues, and a growing arts community, all within a walkable setting of distinctive architecture and urban design. In response, people are flocking to live here, supported by a boom in high-quality downtown residential development.

Fig. 5 – Public Transit and Special Places

3 – Transit-oriented Development

San José is currently engaged in visionary planning of the areas served by Diridon’s rich transportation opportunities. Under the ongoing Diridon Station Area Master Plan effort, extensive transit-oriented development (TOD) is being considered for the area east of Diridon and south of the SAP Center, creating a virtual new town center at Diridon’s front door.

In news breaking as this paper is being completed, tech giant Google is proposing a development with the potential to fulfill the Diridon Station Area Master Plan’s vision with a single, audacious move: a new campus fully embedded in Diridon’s future urban fabric, not the “world apart” of Facebook’s new Menlo Park headquarters or Apple’s new “spaceship” in Cupertino. Google’s numbers alone are staggering: as high as 8 million square feet of employment and mixed-use activity in an area to the north, east, and south of the current station. A vision on this scale has the potential to create Diridon as the iconic place described above – however, the City must take the reins to ensure that Google’s raw energy is channeled to achieve the greatest public good and deliver Diridon’s full potential as San José’s Gateway and next Great Place.
If combined and coordinated with downtown’s aggressive (mostly residential-focused) new development, Diridon’s successful mixed-use build-out will complete a pattern of new urban livability, ensuring downtown San José’s future as that special place providing everything that inspired urban life has to offer.

![Map of urban planning](image)

**Fig. 6 – Transit-oriented Development**

### 5 – Crafting the Diridon-Downtown Connection

The possibilities of San José’s Next Great Place are already unfolding. What remains is to deliver the urban infrastructure that ensures downtown’s inspiring future is fully expressed. BART’s downtown and Diridon stations are defining elements of that infrastructure, the “bookends” that complete the joining of Diridon and downtown.

In this vision (see Fig. 7), the downtown BART station anchors a public realm that rivals and complements the urban qualities and amenities of Diridon. Both stations are vital intermodal centers and iconic urban gateways: in downtown, BART provides direct access to VTA light rail and rapid bus and opens its door to the center of downtown’s urban life along the Santa Clara corridor, including nearby San Pedro Square.

In this vision, the Santa Clara/Alameda corridor is transformed as San José’s preeminent Complete Street, from San José’s dramatic City Hall to the shops along the Alameda. Moving west toward Diridon, the space of Santa Clara opens up to a new public common, the heart and the setting of Diridon Station’s iconic transformation.

The vision is completed by other connections between Diridon and downtown, creating a new urban district of enhanced multimodal access and walkability. At this point, the future of Diridon
comes of age and Diridon claims the stage as San José’s Next Great Place and a model of urban livability for the world.

Fig. 7 – Crafting the Diridon-Downtown Connection

IV. DOWNTOWN – TRANSFORMATION AT THE CENTER

BART in downtown San José creates an opportunity for transformative placemaking that equals and complements Diridon’s immense possibilities. The intersection of BART with VTA light rail along First and Second Streets creates a central transportation crossroads in the heart of downtown’s most vibrant, livable, and actively growing district. At once, the station becomes a vital intermodal nexus and BART’s major Bay Area gateway for people traveling to downtown from anywhere in the vast region that BART serves. This concentration of human activity is the key to unlocking BART’s placemaking potential.

How will this potential be realized? The vision of the Santa Clara corridor as downtown’s premier Complete Street has already been described: the “spine” that anchors a new urban future already unfolding in downtown. What happens within the blocks north and south of Santa Clara is where real possibility resides. The challenge is to leverage BART’s access by concentrating new urban development and iconic public space around BART’s entrances, then shaping these opportunities to extend BART’s reach, creating vital urban connections throughout downtown.

To illustrate what’s possible, the following discussion uses BART’s western station alternative between Market Street and Second Street as an example (the eastern alternative between Second and Fourth would have similar and complementary possibilities).
1 – Transportation and Walkability

The Downtown BART Station, under busy Santa Clara Street, can truly be called “Downtown’s Crossroads”. Two major VTA transit services cross at this location: Rapid Bus along Santa Clara and Light Rail split along the one-way pair of First and Second Streets. From the station’s entrances, an easily walkable quarter-mile radius encompasses most of the downtown core, including such major destinations as St. James Park, the San Pedro Square entertainment and dining district, City Hall, St. Joseph’s Cathedral, and the central Plaza de César Chávez. A half-mile radius reaches still more of downtown, including the SAP Center, Guadalupe Park, the Convention Center, San José State University, and numerous museums and performance venues.

BART arrival in San José is opportune. Today, the bulk of downtown’s activity lies to the south of Santa Clara Street – however, urban improvements and new development (with an emphasis on high-density housing) are rapidly shifting downtown’s center of gravity to the north of Santa Clara as people flock to live in downtown’s emerging mixed-use urban center. Symbolic of this change is St. James Park, a block to the north of BART. This 8.5-acre historic park – downtown’s largest formal public open space (with the exception of the Guadalupe River Park) – is about to undergo a radical transformation. Through the creative process of a recently completed international design competition, the park will change from a quiet passive, somewhat forgotten, green space to a dynamic urban common of recreational opportunities, entertainment venues, and public gardens, forming the green centerpiece of downtown’s northern renaissance.

2 – Creating Spaces, Connecting Places

Urban placemaking is really about two elements: place and connection. Downtown is full of great places, but more is possible in the realm of connection. As downtown San José’s gateway to BART’s vast system, BART’s very presence provides a new and vital connection – yet, BART’s Entry Plaza and future surrounding development can forge new connections within downtown itself (see Fig. 9), accelerating the fulfillment of downtown’s ambitious mixed-use vision.

BART’s main entrance will front the north side of Santa Clara Street in the critically-located “Mitchell Block” framed by Santa Clara, Market, First, and St. John Streets. The core of this block is already mostly clear of structures and used for surface parking, setting-up the opportunity for visionary redevelopment over time. Framed and invigorated by buildings old and new, a generous Station Entry Plaza creates a vibrant public open space for downtown San José, comparable to the Paseo de San Antonio and the Plaza de César Chávez.

Anchored by BART’s iconic Entry Pavilion, the Station Plaza forms the nexus of a vital downtown connection. To the southwest, the plaza opens-up to the intersection of Market and Santa Clara. Walking north from downtown’s core, pedestrians flow into Station Plaza, heading for BART or continuing northeast across St. John and First to a transformed St. James Park.

Historic Fountain Alley, south of Santa Clara between First and Second Streets, offers another intriguing possibility, described in the City’s 2016 San José BART Station Access Planning Study: a major station entrance and plaza opening-up directly to VTA light rail stations on First and Second, while animating a critical urban link in the midst of the City’s historic commercial district.
Combined with the Mitchell Block entrance and plaza, the access and placemaking benefits of BART are brought to downtown both north and south of the Santa Clara corridor.

Looking beyond the corner of Market and Santa Clara, this strategy of place and connection supports a vision of urban livability in all of downtown. Great cities are defined by great walks, and the paths that cross through Station Plaza join other walks in downtown – the Paseo de San Antonio, the banks of the Guadalupe River, the alleys of San Pedro Square, the stroll along Santa Clara and the Alameda – to realize all of downtown as San José’s preeminent Great Place.

![Map of Alum Rock Station and Portugal in San José]

**Fig. 9 – Creating Spaces, Connecting Places**

**V. ALUM ROCK STATION – PORTUGAL IN SAN JOSÉ**

Less than a mile east of San José City Hall, the richly historic, multi-ethnic community served by the Alum Rock BART Station is a world apart from downtown by most urban characteristics. The contiguous districts of Roosevelt Park, Five Wounds and Little Portugal form a low density, suburban “small town” anchored by a traditional “Main Street” of retail, commercial, service, and institutional uses stretched along a mile of Santa Clara Street and Alum Rock Boulevard.
Settled at the turn of the 20th Century by immigrants from Portugal, this primarily working-class district is now home to a diverse Hispanic and Asian immigrant population in addition to descendants of the original Portuguese founders. The district’s crown jewel (see Fig. 10) is a remarkable historic resource and internationally-recognized cultural icon: The Five Wounds Portuguese National Church. Directly behind the church, replacing a tract of industrial sites along an abandoned railroad, is the location of the future underground Alum Rock BART Station.

Fig. 10 – The Five Wounds Urban Village Center and Portuguese National Church

Roosevelt Park, Five Wounds, and Little Portugal have been the subject of intense community-based planning for well over a decade. Throughout this long process, BART has always been recognized as a transformative intervention that holds key to the community’s future growth and prosperity. An emerging vision for Five Wounds – home of the church and BART – has gained form and acceptance: a mixed-use town center in the image of a traditional Portuguese village, organized around the station and connecting BART to local public transit along the Santa Clara Street business corridor.

The community’s most current conceptual expression of this vision (see Fig. 11), is the result of an intensely collaborative planning study led in 2010 by “CommUniverCity San José”, a low-income community planning partnership of the City and San José State University. In 2013, based largely on this work, the City adopted the official Five Wounds Urban Village Plan. The plan is poised to launch a positive future for an economically-disadvantaged district of the City of San José, and demonstrates how transportation and inspired placemaking conspire to generate urban livability grounded in community pride and respect for culture and history.

As the deliverer in Santa Clara County of BART’s transformative intervention, VTA has the opportunity, responsibility, and privilege to provide the foundation upon which the Five Wounds Urban Village will be built. As station planning and design continues, VTA will be called upon to balance the requirements and aspirations of BART itself – intermodal access, parking,
construction, operations, safety – with the station’s ability to co-generate and support the local community’s vision.

VI. MAKING IT HAPPEN – THE CHALLENGE OF GOVERNANCE

The visions of Diridon, Downtown San José, and Little Portugal are complex and challenging at every stage, be it visioning, planning, funding, design, development, or construction. However, if these visions are developed collaboratively to achieve the greatest urban benefit, the greatest challenge is to wrangle successfully the interests of a myriad of stakeholders into a vision held by all. Addressing Diridon, San Francisco Planning and Urban Research (SPUR), the Bay Area’s venerable urban think tank, advocates effective governance as among key requirements for the successful development of the station and area. As SPUR notes in a June 2017 blogpost, “Remaking Diridon, Principles to Plan and Grow By”:

Remaking Diridon entails thousands of decisions, including how tall the train platform heights should be, how much developers should pay for public improvements and how high-speed rail should come into the station. They all matter. To date, each public agency has been making these decisions independently and according to their own priorities, not according to a shared vision. That won’t do. We believe remaking Diridon Station will not be successful without a consolidated public governance entity that can implement the vision over the long term.

This requirement is only heightened when this vision grows to encompass all of downtown San José. This is well understood: as I write, the city is stepping-up to meet the challenge of governance and preparing to seize an immense opportunity, long dreamed of and now very much at hand!

References

- BART Silicon Valley Extension, Phase II: www.vta.org/bart/environmentalphaseII
- San Jose BART Station Access Planning Study: www.sanjoseca.gov/DocumentCenter/View/59700
- Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace BART Station Area Community Concept Plan: www.sanjoseca.gov/documentcenter/view/924

4 BART’s extension through Santa Clara County is being developed by the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) on behalf of BART. After completion, the extension will be operated by BART as part of its overall system. Phase I of the “BART Silicon Valley Extension” project is almost complete, a BART line from the City of Fremont to the new Berryessa Station in East San José. The downtown extension, including stations at Alum Rock, Downtown San José, Diridon, and a terminus station in the City of Santa Clara, is Phase II of the project.

5 SPUR, formed in the wake of San Francisco’s 1906 earthquake and fire, has provided over a century of urban analysis and advice and is a leading voice in the national conversation for livable urbanism. Read SPUR’s blogpost on Diridon here: http://www.spur.org/news/2017-06-22/remaking-diridon-principles-plan-and-grow