Reflective Essay

I began my transect project by plotting a course with stops evenly spaced out but located on sites which appeared to contain promising potential leads. I walked from the east end of Davis to the west over the course of two days, taking careful notes throughout. At my pre-designated stops I took numerous photographs, sketches, observations, and questions alike. At my first stop at the police station I assumed the building was constructed in the 1970’s – a presumption I quickly discovered was made in error. At my second stop I wondered what was happening on the inside of 434 G Street. And at my third stop I was curious about the relationship between UC Davis and the city and what the intersection would have looked like in the past.

Stop 1: the Davis Police Station

The first place I went to for answers to my questions was, of course, the Internet. Cursory web searches revealed surface level information about my stop’s contemporary presence. But I quickly reached a roadblock. While I was able to find basic information about the history of Davis’s police department from the city’s website and digitized annual reports, I was unable to pin down precisely when the building on 5th Street was constructed. From my later class visit to the map room in the basement of Shields Library I found maps of Davis from 1870, 1960, 1975, and 1984 all of which did not show the contemporary police station, or even development in its general area. What I wanted most to find was a photo of station when it was newly constructed. I realized that I had to dive further.

When my search through the online archives of the Aggie and Davis Enterprise proved fruitless, I decided to begin looking through the library’s storage of historic microfiche. I had never used microfiche before (I had never even handled film before) but found the process to be quietly mesmerizing. I knew that the station was constructed in the early 2000’s, and from that I extrapolated that I would need to look a couple years prior to that for articles about citizens contesting its location or for announcements over building delays. Because of this I began looking at microfiche from May of 1998. For fun I also examined some of the library’s earliest Davis Enterprise microfiche: scans from 1900 (when it was still known as the Davisville Enterprise). Then in Diemer’s “Davis From the Inside Out” I read that on December 31st, the Davis Enterprise publishes a list of the year’s most important local news developments – including new buildings. This narrowed my search field significantly. Because Diemer’s book was published in 2000 and made no mention of a new police station I began looking at Davis Enterprise year end rankings from 2001 onwards. Sadly this proved fruitless. Though I did not find precisely what I was looking for through my examination of historic microfiche, I found it nonetheless powerful to see a fuller picture of what Davis was like decades ago. Headlines about 9/11, which occurred only a month prior, dominated much of the scans from 2001. Articles about war in the Middle East appeared juxtaposed throughout gripes over rising home prices, complaints over water (classic California), and fears over an acceleration in development. Though I was unable to incorporate this research into my final paper I found it rewarding nonetheless. Highly opinionated opinion columns over the dangers of city expansion may not stand as a credible academic source in city planning, but it does flesh out a picture of concerned Davis citizens who care greatly about their town and its future.
Figure 1-4: Clips from the Davis Enterprise, late 90’s to the mid-2000’s.
My failure to divine answers from reels of microfiche lead me to look elsewhere for answers about the police station. Because my previous interactions with the library’s Special Collections and Archives had proven so fruitful I decided to further explore stored primary documents. I searched the Online Archives of California, Calisphere, and the UC Davis Library catalog to find photos, maps, and any other primary sources I could get my hands on about the police station and its history. I had never before gone through physical archives to find information. Though the online research engines were complex to use it was well worth the time spent carefully searching through the collections. I struck gold with the City of Davis collection – boxes 18 and 4 had a treasure trove of information about the F Street joint City Hall, Fire Department, Jail, and Police Station. Again I found yet more fascinating information I lacked the time and space to discuss. An initially humorous letter from the architect of the building, P. L. Dragon, to city attorney N. D. Thomas about needing more funds struck me differently after realizing that it was sent in 1938, at the tail end of the Great Depression where architects were likely still struggling to recover and reliant on government-funded WPA projects like this one. I found pure enjoyment in watching how an extended conversation over the course of several months about filing cabinets (and the pros and cons of upgrading them to a handsome green color) developed. The scribbled accounts on sheets of aging paper, the small typo corrections, and the carefully saved magazine cut-outs of desired furniture all brought real life and humanity to historical figures who would otherwise have felt amorphous and lofty. Likewise examining Paul Dragon’s lovely handwritten blueprints and designs felt powerful. It filled me with a renewed passion for my major in landscape architecture.

Figure 5-7: Davis City Hall correspondence, cut-outs, blueprints, and other forms. (City of Davis collection boxes 4 and 18)
Though I never managed to find the “perfect photograph” I was searching for of the 5th street police station right after its construction, the stories I unearthed about the history of Davis’s municipal buildings were more meaningful and powerful than I could have predicted.

**Stop 2: 5th and G Street**

My Internet research at 5th and G Street produced general information about a Mars Wrigley office at 434 G Street and the USDA offices nearby. I found more information about it through a conversational interview with Mars employees working at their cacao greenhouses located UC Davis – Allison was particularly helpful in explaining their goal of developing a high level biosafety site for conducting IPM research.

Based on the rather sparse maps from Davis’s early history I had low expectations for primary source photographs and knowledge about the intersection. The information I was able to dig up on this stop was also generally more sparse because it was privately and commercially held, thus lacking the wealth of carefully archived public records that Davis’s police station had. I doubted that such a small field would have been of particular note until its incorporation in the city’s downtown. Therefore I was pleasantly surprised to find not one, but two photographs of the intersection of 5th and G in Lofland and Haig’s book “Davis California: 1910’s – 1940’s”. In other classes I have broadly studied the development of agriculture from horse drawn ploughs to computer controlled leveling and mechanization. And I have grown up hearing my parent and other folks around me complain how my hometown has gone from a farm area to an increasingly metropolitan suburb. Seeing photographs of the same area in Davis change from its inception to the present day, yet still retaining its connection to the area’s agricultural roots made me wonder what my hometown could have looked like had it retained its historic orange groves.

![Figure 8: a stack of some of the books used during my research process.](image)
Stop 3: Anderson and Russell

One of the challenges I encountered throughout my research was that many of the books I was encountering were about UC Davis and not about the city of Davis. Rather than viewing this as an obstacle I needed to overcome, I realized that this was a strong indication of how closely intertwined the two of them are. During this stop I was finally able to utilize many of the aerial photographs I had found of Davis. I fond both photographs of the UC Davis College of Agriculture gate in Dingeman and Scheuring’s book about UC Davis. The 1964 aerial photograph of Davis was the only one included in my transect which I got to see a physical copy of in the Davis map collection. All of the others were published in various other books of campus. I found synthesizing maps, traditional photographs, aerial photos and sketches together to be astonishingly exciting. Determining the perspective each photo was taken at and identifying salient landmarks was a wonderful experience. I used the distinctive overhead appearance of the Aggie Villa (a fork/horseshoe shaped neighborhood), the Segundo housing complex (four offset buildings surrounding a green), and the Quad to orient each overhead image of campus. After trying to explain why these photographs are fantastic to my friends, I quickly realized that not everyone was able to interpret or enjoy them as much as I did. Hence why I added annotations pointing out where Russell Boulevard and where my third stop was. I found these vivid graphic demonstrations of the changes in Davis to demonstrate the city and university’s development more clearly than any (albeit enjoyable) books or historical records. As an architect in training it was crucial for me to communicate knowledge through strong photographs, maps, and other visuals rather than relying on the written word alone.

Conclusion

I was fascinated by the plethora of different primary resources available which brought me fresh insight into the history of Davis. What I wish I had better been able to discuss within my report was how completing this research helped me feel more connected and tied to the place I now call home. I see the buildings around me as havens for stories and past lives and history which is powerful and meaningful. Often the research I conducted told the stories of public officials and high level university faculty because that is the sort of knowledge which is archived and saved. The picture of Davis I sketch with my transect report is that of a macro sort of land-expansion based perspective which captures the development of the city from an impartial birds-eye perspective. While this approach is grounded in fact, its broad strokes paint over those who all too-often fall in the cracks of history. In the future I hope to do more research about the experiences of people of color, especially the indigenous populations and Japanese-Americans, in Davis.

Though my transect and subsequent research may be limited in scope, completing it has given me the toolkit I need to do more complex and detailed research in the future. It is common for histories of Davis to err on the overly expansive side, covering all of the city’s history from its conception to the present. I appreciated how being restricted to a single east-west road forced me to think more carefully about spaces which I might have otherwise dismissed as historically unimportant. I look forward to revisiting the library’s general stacks and special collections in the future!

Note: Please see “Works Cited” in my full report for the citations for images and sources used in this.