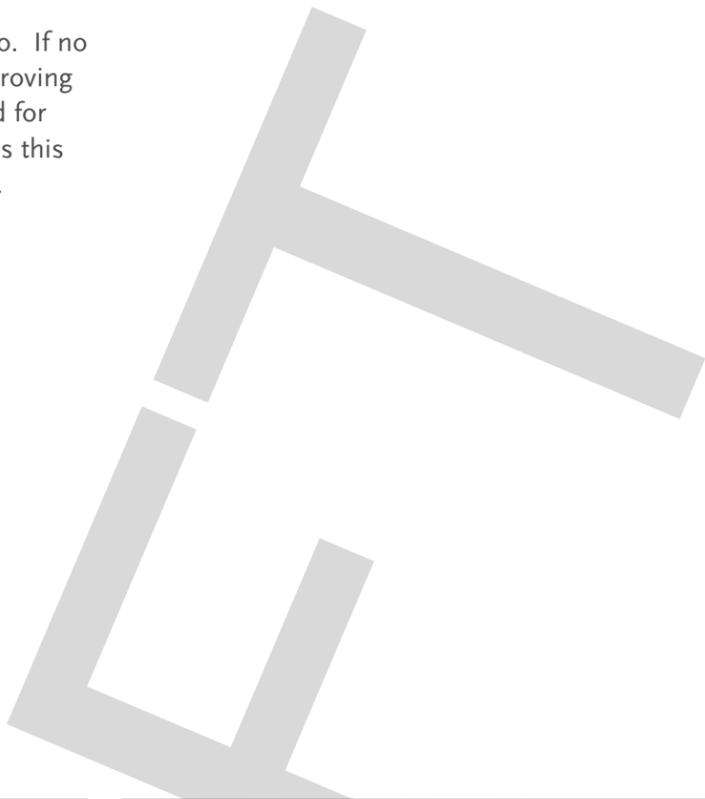


CHAPTER 4: THE FULTON MALL

Revitalizing the Fulton Mall is key to revitalizing Downtown Fresno. If no provisions of this Specific Plan were implemented other than improving the function of the Fulton Mall, it would mark a huge step forward for the future of the Downtown economy. This is why the Plan devotes this special chapter to the past, present, and future of the Fulton Mall.



A view of the Fulton Mall at its opening. Credit: Fresno Historical Society Archives.



A civic celebration in Mariposa Plaza. Credit: Joe Moore.



A farmers' market in Mariposa Plaza.



Fulton Mall patrons sit beneath one of the trellis structures. One of several mosaic installations is seen behind the bench.

4.1 PEDESTRIAN MALLS IN AMERICAN DOWNTOWNS

In 1959, Kalamazoo, Michigan, installed the nation’s first downtown pedestrian mall. In the 25 years that followed, an estimated 200 or more pedestrian malls were installed in other cities across the United States.

The reason was clear: The shopping malls that began appearing on the edges of American cities in the 1950s were a hit. Business on Main Street showed signs of slowing down, and merchants became nervous about losing their customers for good.

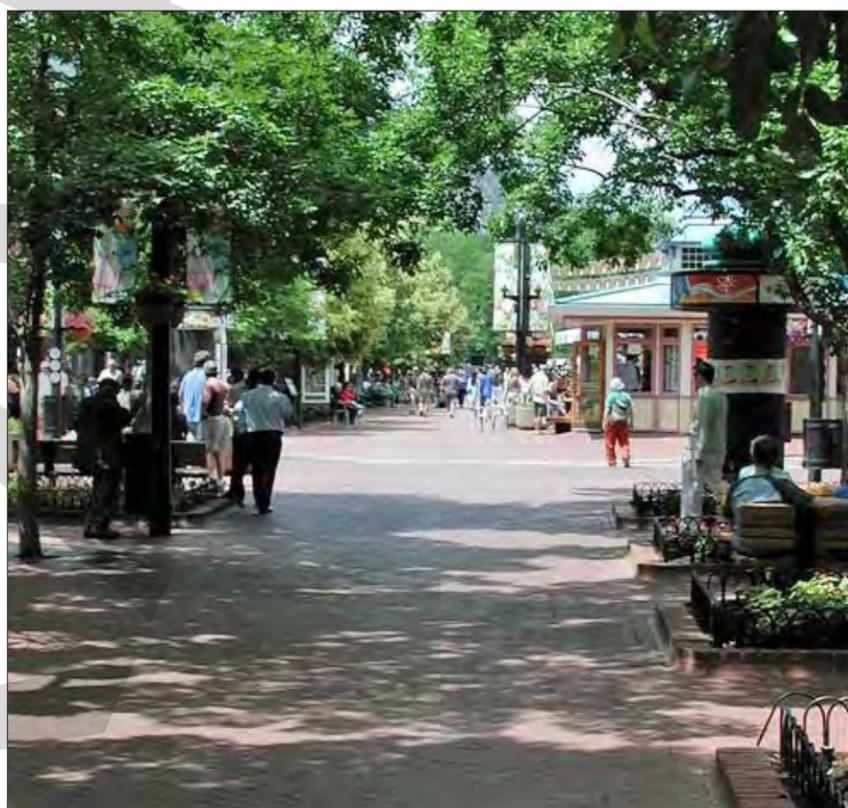
Cities that followed Kalamazoo’s lead thought they had the solution: bring a slice of the suburban mall to the central business district. Remove the “gritty” combination of vehicle traffic and foot traffic found on a traditional urban street. Almost overnight, Main Street would turn from the epicenter of downtown’s hustle and bustle into a refuge from it.

In the years since 1959, most downtown pedestrian malls in America have failed and have been removed. In fact, only an estimated 30 of the original 200 remain today. Virtually all of those that remain have been redesigned to better support commercial activity by guiding pedestrian behavior toward storefronts, accommodating public transit, or both. Some have even been redesigned to accommodate vehicle traffic if desired in the future.

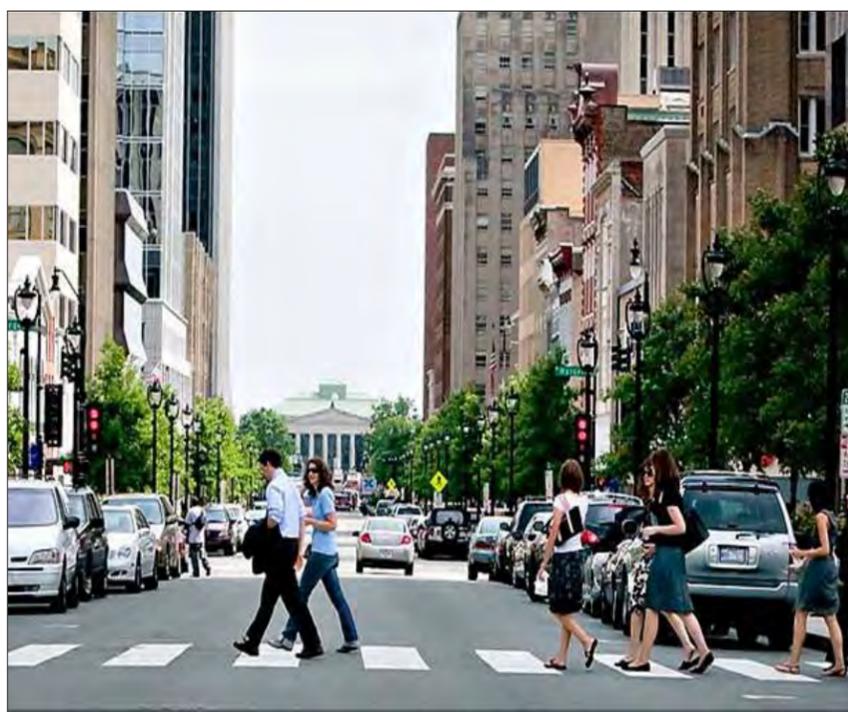
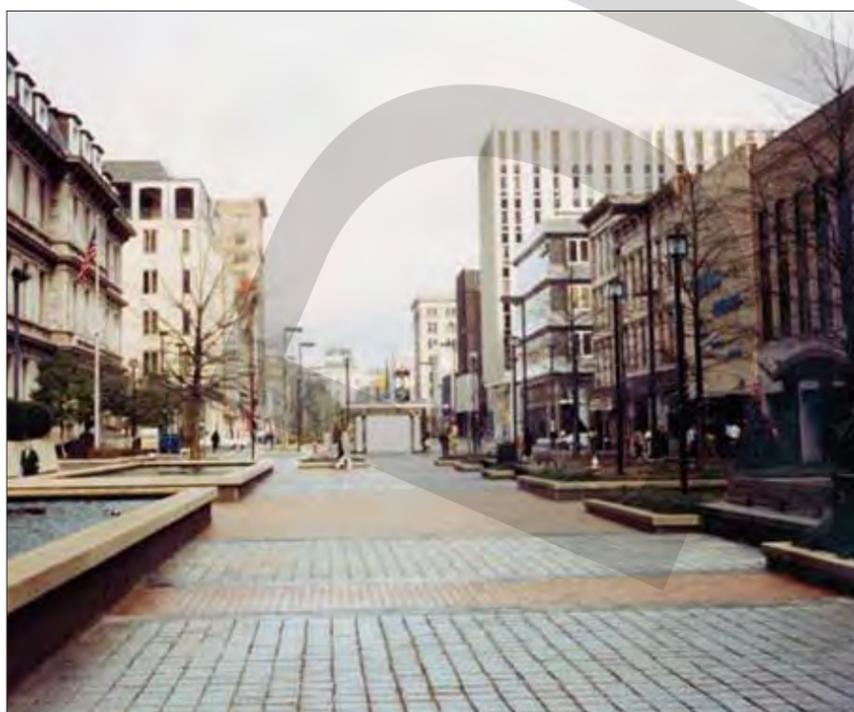
Of perhaps ten or fewer downtown pedestrian malls that remain and are successful, most are located in a university setting (such as in Madison, WI, or Boulder, CO, or Burlington, VT), near a state capitol (such as in Denver, CO, or Madison, WI), or in an area with otherwise very heavy foot traffic (such as in Miami, FL, or Santa Monica, CA, or Brooklyn, NY).



Two of the original four blocks of the Kalamazoo pedestrian mall have been reopened to automobiles since the malls construction in 1959.



Boulder, Colorado’s pedestrian mall is four blocks long and largely successful because of its proximity to a university.



The economy rebounded quickly along Fayetteville Street in Raleigh, NC (above right), when the street was reopened in 2006 after 30 years as a closed pedestrian mall (above left). The reopening of the four blocks cost \$9.3 million. “With the reopening of the street, our city can come back home to Fayetteville Street,” Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker told the crowd of some 35,000 at the reopening celebration. For several years the city celebrated the reopening with an annual festival.

4.2 HISTORY OF THE FULTON MALL

From its inception at the corner of Mariposa Street and J Street in the late 1800's, and well into the post-World War II era, Fulton Street was the epicenter of Fresno's commercial and business activity. Served by the streetcars of the Fresno Traction Company and traffic on Highway 99, which was then located on Broadway Street, Fulton Street became a bustling hub of commercial activity and remained so well into the post-war era. The streetcars brought people into Downtown, but they also laid the groundwork for Fresno's northward and eastward expansion, as development sprouted along their various routes.

The completion of the Mayfair subdivision in 1947, northeast of the Plan Area, included Fresno's first suburban shopping mall and ushered in an era of development at the suburban fringe. The automobile provided easy access to spatially dispersed destinations and made it no longer necessary to locate residential, commercial, and business uses in proximity to one another. People began to move out of Fresno's residential neighborhoods and scatter into the new, northern subdivisions. Businesses followed, resulting in a decline of the Central Business District. This trend accelerated with the opening of the suburban Manchester Center Mall in 1955.

In the mid 1950's, Downtown Fresno merchants and elected officials sought to address Downtown's decline with a bold new plan to remake the Fulton Corridor. They hired famed shopping mall architect Victor Gruen to develop a long term plan to rebuild the core of the City. The plan included a recasting of the Downtown according to modernist planning principles, and its centerpiece was an 80 acre pedestrian-only "superblock" surrounded by a one way street loop (see below). Pedestrians and cars were separated from each other and so were all uses. While the Plan was never fully realized, its centerpiece, the Fulton Mall, designed by the prominent landscape architect Garrett Eckbo, opened in 1964 to national acclaim and initial commercial success. It was the nation's second downtown Pedestrian Mall, and helped spur a wave of similar projects in other American cities throughout the 1960's and 1970's.

However, after several years of stability, by 1970, Downtown Fresno business began to decline again, due to increasingly rapid growth in the northern parts of the city and the opening of the major suburban shopping mall, Fashion Fair. Shortly thereafter, the major and specialty retailers – including iconic department stores such as Gottschalks and JC Penney – left Downtown Fresno, and the Fulton Mall, known for its world class collection of public art, became home to vacant storefronts, empty office buildings, and a small collection of retailers. Various attempts at reviving the Mall, including the construction of the \$40 million Chukchansi Park, have met with limited success, while the opening of additional shopping malls, such as River Park, provide even more reasons for Fresnoans not to come Downtown.

Today, Fulton Mall functions largely as an urban park. Characterized by relatively low levels of retail and other economic activity, it is devoid of any significant activity on weeknights after 5 p.m., when Downtown's more than 30,000 daytime workers leave Downtown. Vacancies are common among the storefronts and especially in spaces above the ground level along the Mall.

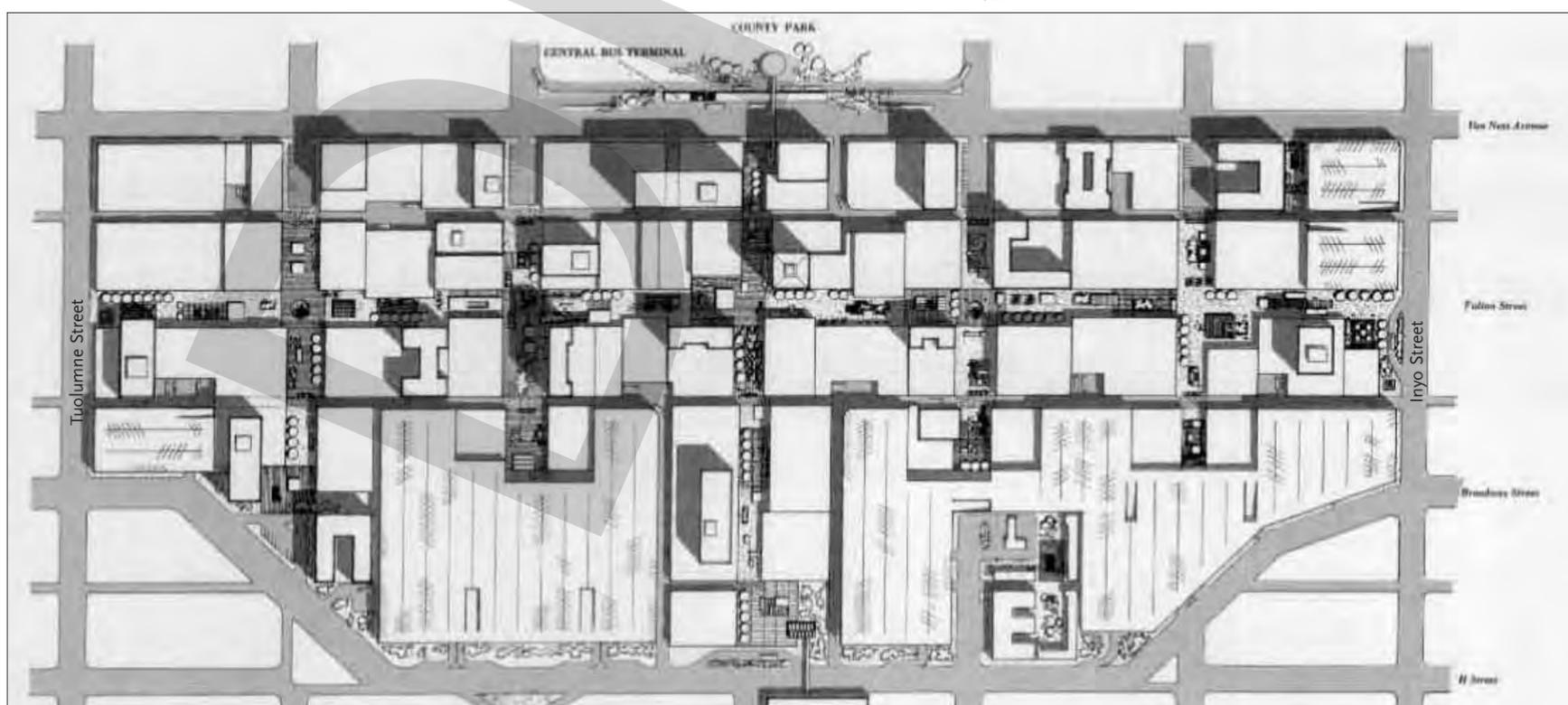
Significance of the Mall

Prior to the construction of the pedestrian mall, Fulton Street was Fresno's main commercial corridor. A large number of mid-rise and hi-rise office buildings were constructed in the boom years prior to the Great Depression, as well as most of Fresno's large department stores and clothiers, including Gottschalks, JC Penney, Rodder's, Coffee's, Walter Smith, Roos-Atkins, Berkeley's, and Cooper's. With its central location, and dense collection of retail and commercial uses, Fulton Street was Fresno's "main street" and the heart of city.

The Fulton Mall is comprised of the Garrett Eckbo-designed landscape as well as the buildings that face it. Representative of several 20th Century development trends spanning over seventy years, the six blocks of Fulton Street between Tuolumne and Inyo streets have comprised an important regional commercial corridor for much of the 20th Century. Its concentration of commercial uses, including most of Fresno's finest retailers, established Fulton Street as Fresno's "main street" prior to World War II. Most of the buildings on the Fulton Mall were built prior to the construction of the pedestrian mall, many of which underwent ground floor facade renovations and modernizations after Fulton Street was pedestrianized. Seven properties have been designated by the City as historic resources.

The landscape of the Fulton Mall is the masterwork of Garrett Eckbo, one of the most prominent American landscape architects of the 20th century. It is listed on the California Register of Historical Resources, was found eligible for the National Register, and is potentially significant as a National Historic Landmark, both as the work of a master and a rare surviving example of his work 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, not physically attached to a Museum as a sculpture garden. A 2011 appraisal estimated the total value of this art collection to be \$2 million.



Victor Gruen's Plan for Fulton Street and surrounding blocks.

4.3 EXISTING CONDITIONS

A. PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

The Fulton Mall consists of six blocks bounded by Van Ness Avenue to the east, Inyo Street to the south, Broadway Street to the west, and Tuolumne Street to the north. Fulton Street, Merced Street, Mariposa Street, and Kern Street are pedestrian-only, while Fresno Street and Tulare Street continue to bear traffic, dividing the Mall into three equal portions. The Fulton Street portion of the Mall is 2,670 feet long. Together with the three shorter cross Malls, the total linear dimension of the Fulton Mall complex is 4,620 feet.

All of the Fulton Mall's right-of-ways are eighty feet wide, building to building. Ribbons of concrete aggregate eight-and-one-half-inches wide cross each right-of-way at frequent intervals, sometimes gently curving and sometimes angular, suggesting, by alternate accounts, the contours of the Valley floor or Asian rice paddies.

Interspersed throughout the Mall are the following, arranged in a harmoniously designed asymmetrical whole:

- 144 trees and a large number of shrubs and flowers in planting beds of many shapes, sizes and elevations;
- 19 sculptures;
- 80 seating areas of various sizes and configurations, 18 of which have benches with brightly colored mosaic backs;
- Two tot lots;
- 19 water features, among them pools, fountains and flowing streams; and
- 26 sculpted ceramic pipes that are part of the water features.

The high design character of the Mall is in stark contrast with its state of advanced physical deterioration. Partly because of its age, and partly because of poor maintenance over several decades, most of its design features are beginning to fail. The Mall's pavement is cracked throughout and in many locations is heaving due to interference by tree roots. Many planter walls and curbs are cracked and light pole bases are broken. Many fountains leak, and consequently sit empty, their plaster cracked, their skimmers not operational, and their lights in disrepair. Electrical vaults are filthy and clogged with debris, damaged due to leakage, and infested with cockroaches. Distribution panels are breached by roots and foliage. Most electrical boxes have missing covers and exposed wires, and some are being overtaken by roots. The state of disrepair is so extreme, that it is often difficult for the casual observer to appreciate the design value of the Fulton Mall.

Currently, maintenance funding for the Mall comes from the City General Fund and Community Sanitation ratepayer funds. In 2010, the Fulton Mall staff of seven was reduced down to two persons serving all of Downtown. In 2011 the City has made a concerted effort to combine scarce resources from different departments in new ways in order to raise the level of maintenance. An average of eight City maintenance workers spend part of their shift on the Mall every day. While not changing many of the root causes of disrepair, this effort has been successful in getting lights to work again temporarily, clean the Mall's surfaces daily, fill a limited number of fountains and keep them running, and trim the trees on an appropriate schedule.

The state of buildings along the Mall projects a similarly forbidding image. In particular, most of the seven buildings along the Mall listed on the Local Register of Historic Places suffer from disinvestment, vacancy, and disrepair. In 2010 the City of Fresno estimated that the seven large historic office buildings on the Fulton Mall, representing nearly 745,000 square feet of office space, are 71 percent vacant. Meanwhile another six large historic buildings adjacent to the Mall, representing 573,000 square feet of space, have a combined vacancy rate of 35 percent. The prospects for the Mall's older buildings, including those listed on the Local, State, and National Historic registers, are bleak in the absence of economic conditions that make it profitable to invest in restoring and maintaining them.



The Mariposa Plaza stage.



This view north of the Fulton Mall at Mariposa Street at noon on a Saturday in September 2010, looks to be vacant of pedestrian activity.