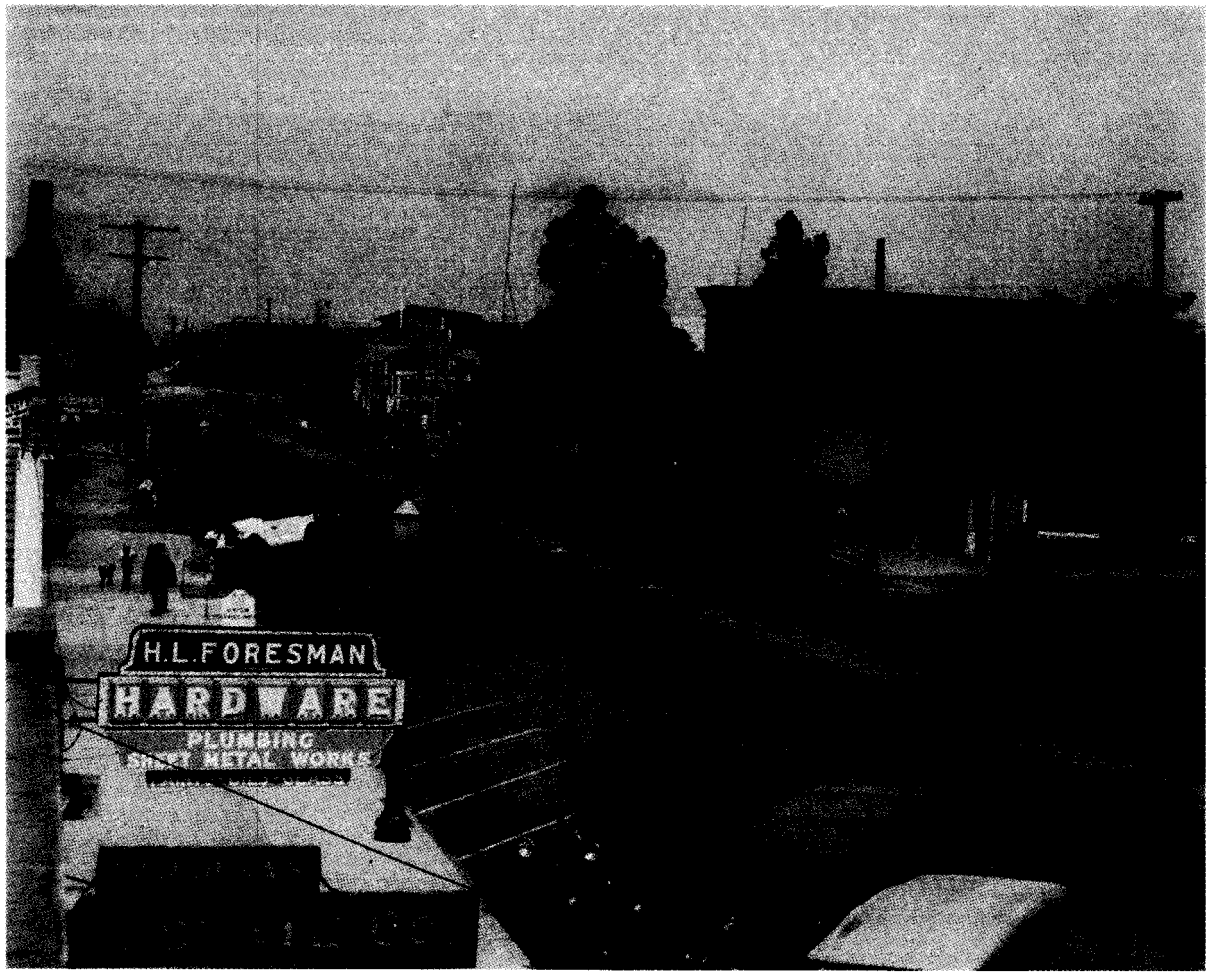
San Dimas

Design Guidelines
Town Core



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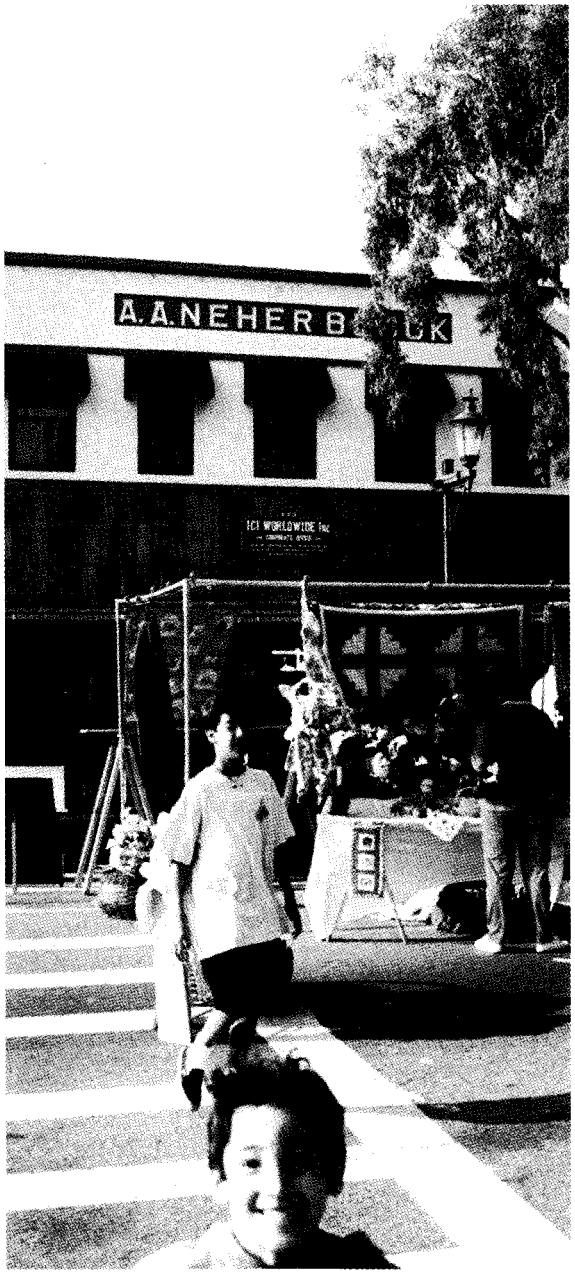
Downtown



SAN DIMAS MARKETPLACE - 1994

Downtown San Dimas is a prime example of the traditional American town center, dominated by a short but prominent main street. While the town with central square is also common across the country, the "main street" downtown is most common and ranges in size from one or two blocks to several miles in length.

"Main Street, of course, is much more than a place name to Americans. It is a state of mind, a set of values. It is what has defined the heartland of the nation for generations. The general appearance of Main Street is easily conjured. In railroad towns it ran parallel to the industrial axis along the tracks or, less often, at right angles to it. It was usually not more than two or three blocks long, wider than the rest of the town's streets, and open to farmland at either end. The business premises usually were on the ground floor ... upper stories, if they were ever built, were rented out to professional people." (Spiro Kostof, *America by Design*).

This image of Main Street symbolizes the best of the American townscape. It is an image so deeply imbedded in American hearts and minds that it has been replicated at Disneyland as an iconic slice of traditional American life.

Bonita Avenue is "Main Street" in San Dimas. It is the literal and symbolic center of the town, representing its earliest and most recent attempts at creating community.

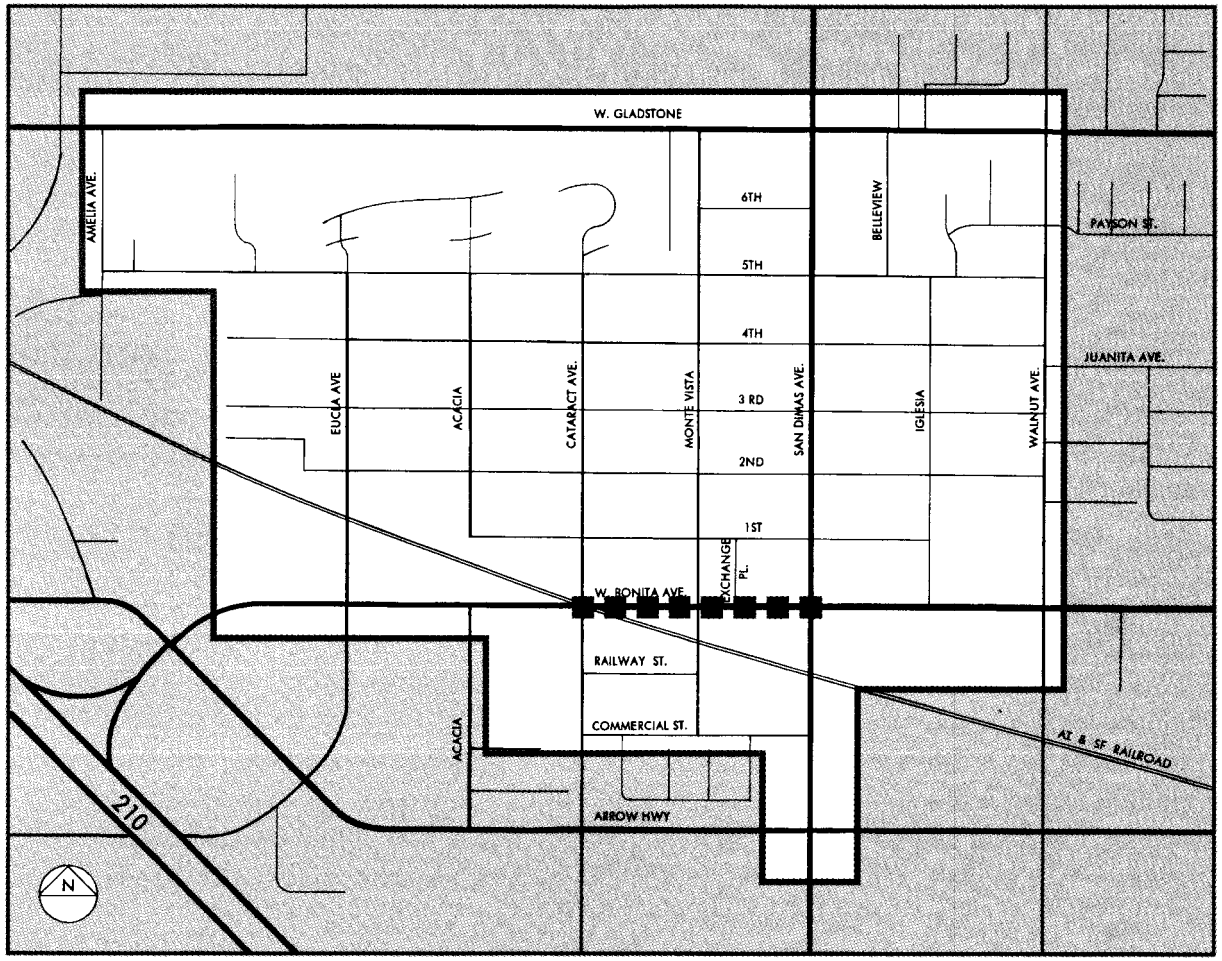
Bonita Avenue has its counterparts in many other Southern California towns. Bonita Avenue, however, runs east-west rather than north-south and thus is unique in the San Gabriel and nearby valleys. Bonita Avenue runs from Arrow Highway to downtown Claremont. It is a regional as well as a local thoroughfare. This has traditionally encouraged traffic to pass thorough San Dimas, and brought welcome visitors and shoppers. This has been furthered by the 210 freeway, which carries regional drivers to destinations west.

Its regional role limits the possibilities for Bonita Avenue as a community center. Some main streets serve almost as plazas, with easy pedestrian movement crossing the street and are even closed off for civic functions on special occasions. Such uses have been limited on Bonita Avenue since there is a reluctance to discourage through traffic.

Ultimately, the success of Bonita Avenue as the actual and symbolic heart of San Dimas must rely on its role as a community center rather than as a regional thoroughfare. Any future traffic plans should consider this issue.

These design guidelines provide the formal tools to reestablish Bonita

Town Core Areas Map



Legend

Guidelines Area Boundary

Frontier Village

Avenue as the community center of San Dimas. The essential elements of a revitalized "Main Street" already exist on Bonita Avenue. The most significant and attractive architectural qualities have been identified, and are the basis for renovation and new construction. Their successful implementation will improve the character and increase the cohesion of Bonita Avenue, and add to its attraction as a center of community identity.

The American downtown is defined not only by a dominant open space—be it a street or plaza (square)—but also by a greater density of buildings relative to the surrounding town fabric. In San Dimas, an uninterrupted file of buildings and numerous two-story structures distinguish Bonita Avenue from the surrounding pattern of low-scale and dispersed residential and commercial/industrial buildings. In the 19th century, such density was unnecessary—there was plenty of open land to fill. But, buildings were built side by side, nonetheless, in order to suggest something of the sophisticated urban environment of the distant eastern coast.

The physical density of a downtown encourages an intensified social and economic life not found in residential zones: shopping along the street, stopping in a cafe for a bite to eat, resting on a shaded bench. All these are activities that encourage frequent interaction and reaffirm a shared sense of community.

In San Dimas, as in many American communities, the shopping center or mall has displaced the downtown as the center of commercial and social activity. While Bonita Avenue may remain symbolically and physically the downtown of San Dimas, its role in the community has been diminished. It is possible and desirable to turn the trend around. The mall or shopping center can never provide the community identity of a downtown. Additionally, the proximity of a thriving historic downtown to the central residential area will be a further advantage in this age of increasing traffic, smog, and high gasoline prices. It will take not only civic guidelines, but also greater expectations and effort on the part of our citizens and merchants.

However beautiful the architecture and landscaping of our downtown, without vital commercial activity, it will be unable to compete with its more recent commercial neighbors. A downtown is the product of gradual development over time by a collection of individuals striving to make small businesses work. In contrast, the shopping mall is an aggressive consumer concept designed by large marketing corporations. The success of San Dimas will depend upon a successful marketing strategy to complement the design strategies outlined in these guidelines. Such a strategy can be developed and led by the Downtown Merchants Association, with support from the City and Chamber of Commerce.

The introduction of the western theme was our first attempt at responding to the decline of the downtown. By recalling another era, the Frontier Village attracted not only admiration within San Dimas but tourists from without, as well. Such symbolic traditionalism is appealing and attractive; it is an approach quite common in city-planning circles today, and San Dimas was indeed in the forefront of such thematic developments.

However, Bonita Avenue is not Main Street in Disneyland, and the buildings of our downtown are not just icons but a substantial part of our community. Serious thought and effort must go into their design and commercial context. It is important that the downtown be given priority by the City when considering new alternative shopping centers in proximity to the downtown, at least until the downtown is vital enough to compete on a level playing field with its competition.

Along Bonita Avenue

Between the A.T. & S.F. rail crossing and San Dimas Avenue, along both sides of Bonita Avenue, is the traditional Downtown of San Dimas. East and west from the historic center recent development has replaced the earlier groves. This newer development is of a different scale, quality, and pattern from that of the traditional historic Downtown. This change of scale east and west of the downtown disturbs the pattern of pedestrian activity and is largely what makes these areas unfriendly for one on foot. Development along the north side of Bonita Avenue, east of San Dimas Avenue, to a large extent follows the traditional pattern, though there are gaps and the development is of a different quality. The Puddingstone Center on the south side of Bonita Avenue does not relate to the pedestrian scale of the historic Downtown. Most buildings in the Puddingstone Center are set back from the street and the pedestrian is confronted with a parking lot.

The continuity of the pedestrian realm is the adhesive that can bind the Downtown of San Dimas together into a cohesive retail community. The lack of pedestrian continuity divides the Downtown into a group of discrete retail centers. Variations in setback distances, parking lots adjacent to the pedestrian footpath, road widening, new landscaping or the lack of it, and variations in street lighting, sidewalk treatments and street furniture further emphasize the discontinuity along Bonita Avenue and negatively impact the growth of traditional pedestrian environment. New development along Bonita Avenue should respect those precepts set up by the traditional development in the downtown. Public improvements should serve to reinforce those traditional precepts.

When considering the overall architectural quality of Bonita Avenue, the key issues are:

- Coherency and continuity of the street frontage within the downtown district.
- Scale and quality of downtown buildings.
- Parking strategy for the downtown shopping area.
- Landscape treatments along Bonita Avenue and the downtown area.
- Infill criteria along Bonita Avenue.
- Pedestrian linkages throughout the downtown shopping district and to nearby development.
- Public amenities in the Town Core.
- Level railroad crossing improvements.

AERIAL VIEW OF BONITA AVENUE LOOKING WEST - 1914

Thresholds

Two thresholds are identifiable as one moves along Bonita Avenue. The A.T. & S.F. rail crossing and the San Dimas Avenue intersection are thresholds because they represent a physical and psychological entry point to the downtown.

The San Dimas Avenue / Bonita Avenue crossroads is the major road intersection in the downtown. Unlike the rail crossing, no geometric disruption occurs to the traditional development pattern. The change of scale and development pattern on either side of San Dimas Avenue is largely what defines this threshold. A psychological barrier to pedestrian flow is established, which limits pedestrian movement west to east. Recent road widening and relandscaping reinforce this barrier. A gas station, a car repair garage, and a fast food restaurant further degrade the pedestrian dimension of the intersection.

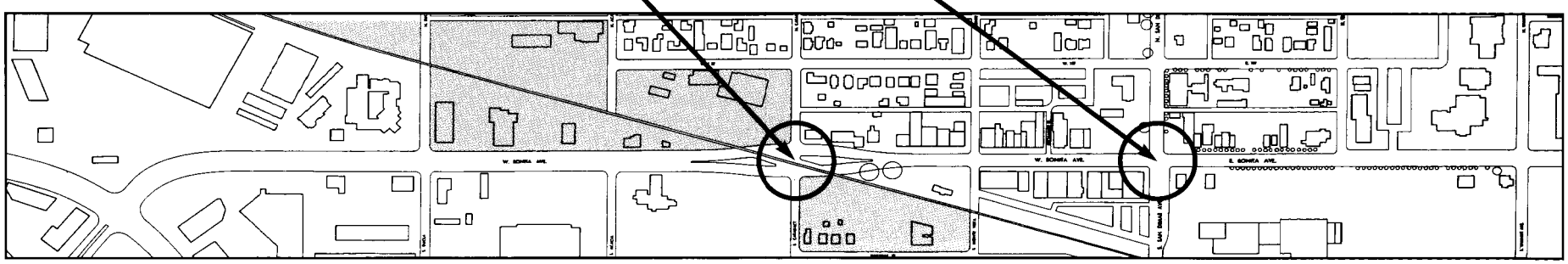
The A.T. & S.F. rail intersection is a level crossing that intersects Bonita at 15 degrees off parallel. This oblique intersection disrupts the traditional plan of development for a considerable length along Bonita. Sites adjacent to the crossing have limited access and limited development potential as a result of the change in geometry. This threshold is formidable, both geometrically and as a psychological impediment to pedestrian passage.

Sites adjacent to the Bonita Avenue rail crossing are badly shaped. Circulation to these sites is difficult. These sites provide unique opportunities for development if uses can be found that take advantage of the site geometry. San Dimas Lumber, parking, and the recreation area all to the east of the crossing are such uses. In these examples, the geometrical disruption is absorbed and the orthogonal pattern of development is efficiently reestablished. Thus, a minimum number of sites are affected by the disruption. East and south of the rail intersection at Bonita Avenue the disruption of geometry has not been taken advantage of nor is it effectively absorbed. No clear strategy for development of this area exists. These sites are visually problematic and will remain unattractive to future development until a clear pattern emerges that rationalizes and/or assists in minimizing the effect of the oblique crossing.

Future development along Bonita Avenue should strive to unify all of Bonita Avenue, from Arrow Highway to Walnut Avenue, into a coherent pedestrian oriented environment. In so doing, the threshold effects of the rail crossing and San Dimas Avenue would be reduced. Ultimately, new thresholds should be reestablished at Walnut Avenue and Arrow Highway. These guidelines concentrate on the architectural character of the Frontier Village from which an architectural strategy can be extended to include all of Bonita Avenue. A rigorous land use study should be undertaken to investigate the implementation of pedestrian oriented land use policies and are outside the scope of these guidelines.

THRESHOLD AT A.T. & S.F. CROSSING

THRESHOLD AT SAN DIMAS AVENUE



SHADED AREAS ARE PROPERTIES AFFECTED BY RAIL LINE WHERE NO RATIONAL PATTERN FOR DEVELOPMENT HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED

Downtown San Dimas

Bonita Avenue, from the rail crossing to the intersection at San Dimas Avenue, is the historic downtown center of San Dimas. The pattern and scale of development along this section of Bonita is oriented to pedestrian usage. Buildings are constructed without front or side yard setbacks. This creates a continuous edge along Bonita Avenue. Parking is provided behind in inner block parking areas, which are not visible from Bonita Avenue. Passages from the parking areas are provided along small streets, through private sites, or through retail stores.

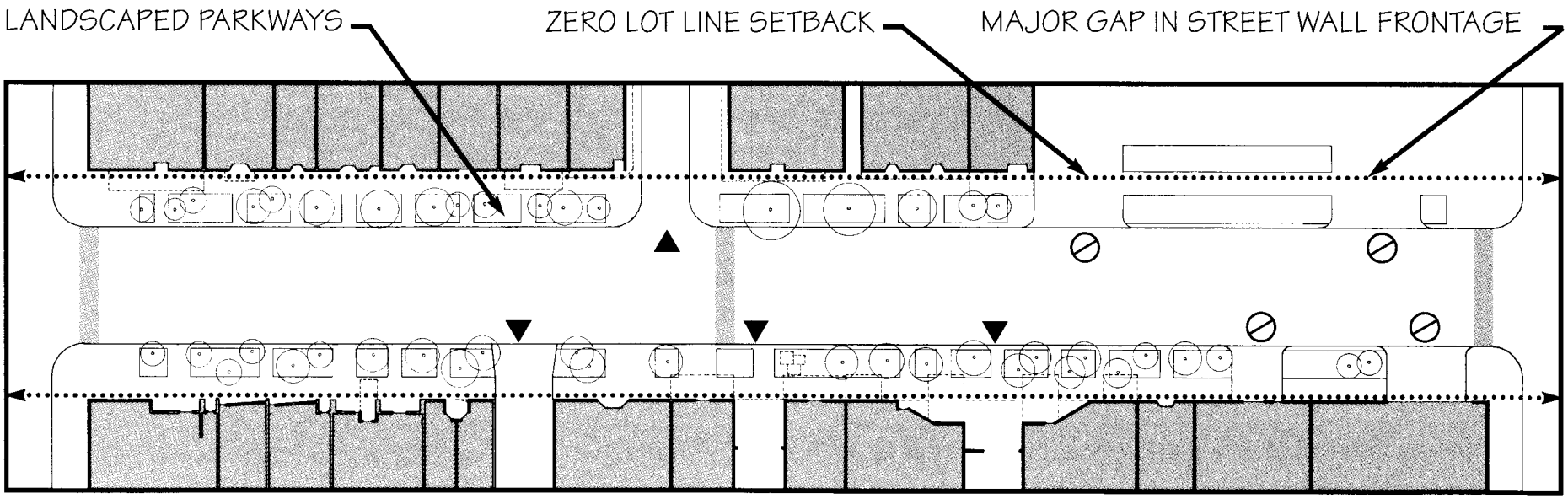
Most of the buildings along Bonita Avenue are of historic importance to the town. Building heights, proportions, and rhythms are coordinated, and the buildings work in concert to form a heterogeneous and pleasing streetscape. Many of the buildings that formed the original, historic downtown of San Dimas still exist. New construction has respected the pattern of development set up by the historic fabric and contributes to the pedestrian qualities of the district. In the 1970s, the historic building fabric was overlaid with elements of the western/frontier theme, including covered wooden sidewalks and western-style storefronts. These elements are now significant contributors to the pedestrian streetscape.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Protect all historic structures and unreinforced masonry structures from demolition in the Downtown Core.
- Encourage the redevelopment of all four corners at San Dimas Avenue and Bonita Avenue.
- Architectural review of new construction should require the applicant to show neighboring buildings for context.
- Encourage second and third floor office uses to increase the daytime population of the downtown.
- Discourage and slow the flow of through motor traffic along Bonita Avenue and encourage pedestrian traffic. More crosswalks with paving similar to that at Exchange Place and Bonita Avenue.
- Discourage the development of other local shopping alternatives in San Dimas, which draw merchants and retailers away from the Bonita Commercial core.
- Seating areas along landscape strip should be developed for use as outdoor dining areas for restaurants and cafes.
- Inner block parking improvement should continue.
- Encourage the upgrading of rear frontages to inner block parking areas with store entrances and uses, which activate these back areas for pedestrian activities (see page 35).
- Discourage parking lots in areas adjacent to the pedestrian footpath.
- Landscaping improvement should continue.
- Discourage any further road widening projects within the core area.
- Building height should be limited to 35 feet except for special features.
- Gaps in the "street wall" should be infilled with new construction. Acceptable gaps are those that provide for pedestrian access to inner block parking.
- New construction and improvements should be designed for pedestrians. First floors should maintain the existing pattern of storefront display windows.
- Storefronts should be built to the property line, except small recessed entryways are encouraged.

- New construction should join or abut adjacent buildings where possible.
- Shop front widths should be between 20 feet and 50 feet wide.
- Clear glass is the only acceptable glazing color.
- Rear entrances to retail and commercial properties from parking areas should be developed. Facades to rear parking areas should be upgraded.
- New construction that is set back from the street should be discouraged.
- New construction that is isolated and does not relate to the buildings around it or to the pedestrian should be discouraged.
- New curb cuts should not be permitted along this section of Bonita Avenue.
- Trash containers at the rear of buildings should be screened.
- New construction with blank facades to the street or rear parking areas should be discouraged.
- New construction or demolition that will create more parking lots or gaps in the street wall of Bonita Avenue should be discouraged.

Please Note: These points are further illustrated in part 2 of these guidelines.

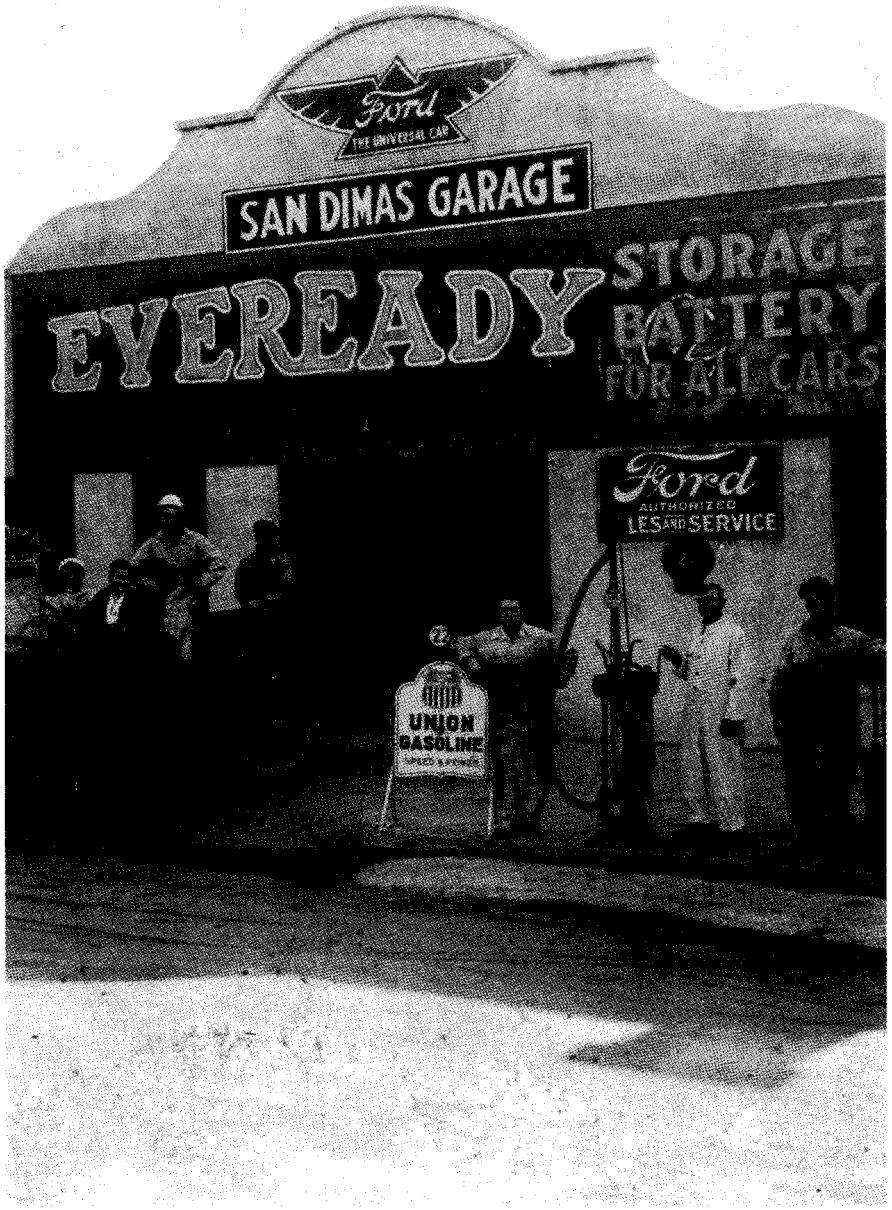


▲ ACCEPTABLE GAPS FOR PEDESTRIANS & VEHICLES

⊘ UNACCEPTABLE CURB CUTS FOR SITE ACCESS

When we arrived at the station in November 1894, I was too surprised for words. There had been no rain for months and everything was dry ... and dusty. ... I took a look around, not more than a dozen houses in sight ... and some of them were empty. To say I was disappointed puts it mildly. ... Then it rained, a real California rain. ... And what a transformation. Everything was green; the mountains were covered with snow ... it was beautiful. And I have loved it from that day to this.

Genevieve Walker (Mrs. Harry)
Written circa 1954



SAN DIMAS GARAGE, 1900s

Town Core Guidelines
City of San Dimas

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SECOND NEHER BUILDING, c1911. WEST BONITA

Table of Contents

OVERVIEW

History 2

Purpose of the Guidelines 4

Guidelines Organization 4

Using the Guidelines 4

Town Core Areas Map 5

Downtown 6

Along Bonita Avenue 8

Thresholds 9

Downtown San Dimas 10

BONITA AVENUE ARCHITECTURAL GUIDELINES

Frontier Village 14

- Height 16
- Width 18
- Setback Distances 20
- Horizontal Rhythms 22
- Proportion of Openings 24
- Roof Forms 26
- Sidewalk Coverings 28
- Storefronts 30
- Materials 33
- Color 34
- Upgrading of Rear Facades 35
- Facade Improvements 36
- Signs 38
- Special Elements 40

Analysis of Existing Building Facades: Frontier Village 41

TOWN CORE RESIDENTIAL GUIDELINES

Town Core Residential 52

Along San Dimas Avenue 54

Town Core Houses 57

- Queen Anne 58
- Colonial Revival 60
- Craftsman 62
- Spanish Colonial Revival 70
- Town Core Church and Community Buildings 72

General Guidelines: Town Core 74

- New Building Works 74
- Work to Existing Buildings 77
- Dos and Don'ts Additions to Existing Buildings 78

APPENDICES

Green Plan 85

- Bonita Avenue Landscape Plan 86
- Bonita Avenue and Town Core Landscape Section 88

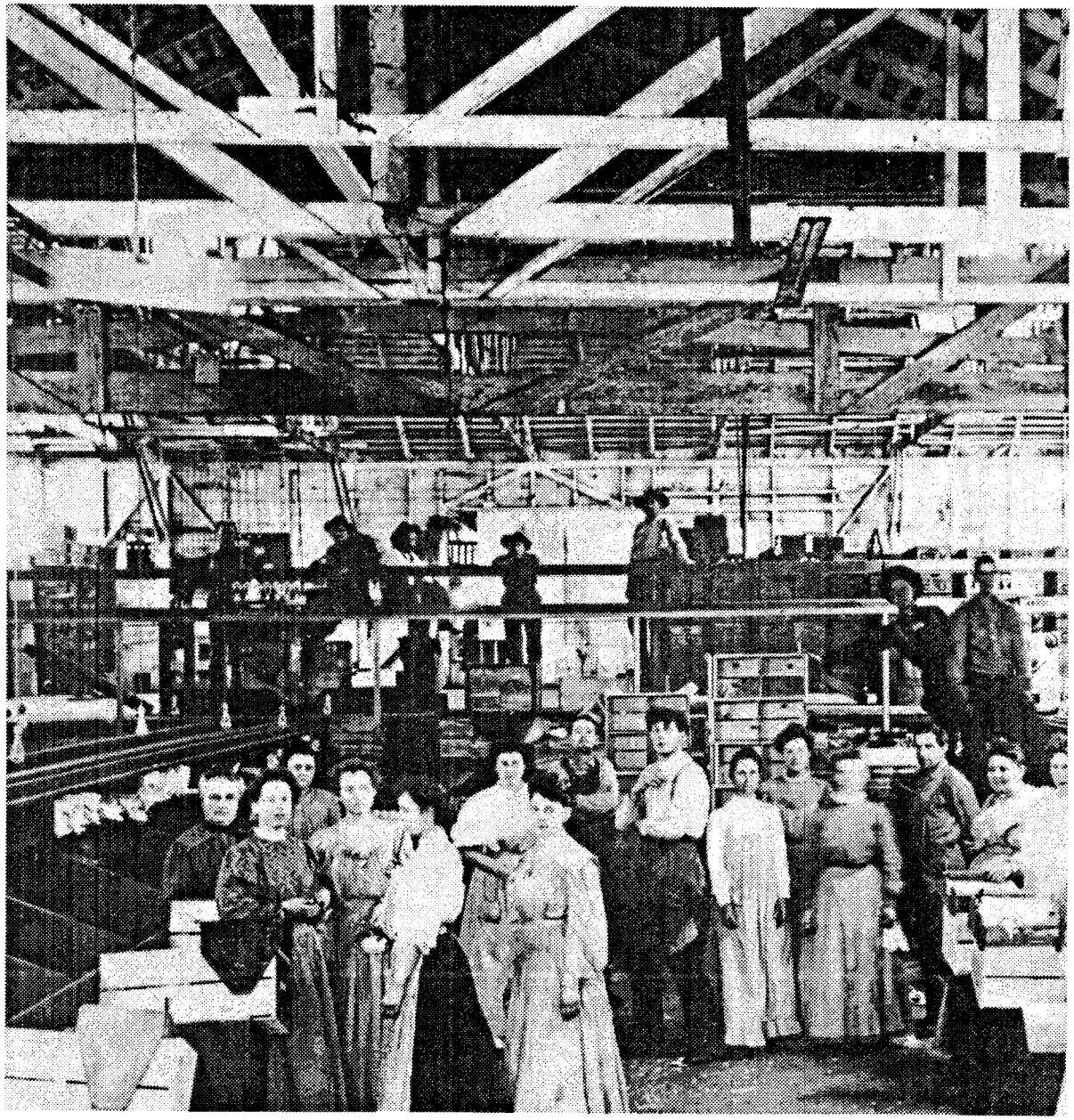
Street Furnishings 90

Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation 93

Architectural Worksheet 95

Glossary 97

Overview



SAN DIMAS ORANGE PACKING HOUSE, c1908.
LOCATED AT SAN DIMAS AVE AND THE A.T. & S.F. R.R.

History

The town of San Dimas was preceded by a waterhole known as 'Mud Springs,' once a swampy area in the neighborhood of the present-day Arrow Highway and San Dimas Canyon Road. It served as a watering place for Gabrielino Indians and padres traveling to the San Gabriel Mission, as well as a stage stop for travellers. Early explorers Juan Batista DeAnza and Jedediah Strong Smith also stopped at La Cienega (Mud Springs) where the hunting for deer, wild geese, and ducks was good.

Under Spanish rule, the area was part of the Rancho San Jose, owned from 1837 by Don Ignacio Palomares and Don Ricardo Vejar. By 1862, the area was transferred to American hands. When it became evident in 1887 that the Santa Fe Railroad would run through Mud Springs, the San Jose Ranch Company was formed. They acquired possession of most of the land north of the San Jose Hills from La Verne to Glendora, and the Azusa ditch, including part of what is now Covina. This was the whole of the San Jose Addition and all of the Dalton section in the San Jose Rancho, nearly eight thousand acres. The company assumed for itself the name of the Rancho San Jose and gave to the town the name of the Canyon, San Dimas.

Purpose of the Guidelines

- To act as a guide to the architectural rehabilitation of the historic building fabric of the Town Core and Bonita Avenue areas.

- To overview the Town Core Area and identify significant planning concepts and problems within the Town Core, and to provide recommendations for both public and private improvements.

- To identify and describe the qualities that give the architectural character to the townscape along Bonita Avenue, and to propose rehabilitation and new construction recommendations that reinforce these qualities.

- To identify and describe the various building styles that form the majority of the building stock within the Town Core, and to propose rehabilitation and new construction recommendations that reinforce these qualities.

- To facilitate the development of a mechanism that will assist by giving direction to future development and rehabilitation in the Town Core.

Guidelines Organization

The guidelines are organized into three major sections:

Overview
This section briefly outlines the history of San Dimas and discusses the intent of the Guidelines and the role of Bonita Avenue in the community. The physical parameters and boundaries that define the Frontier Village are explained.

Bonita Ave.—Architectural Guidelines
This section is a graphic analysis of the architectural form and detail that give San Dimas its unique character. Recommendations are provided for rehabilitation and new construction of downtown commercial buildings.

Town Core Residential Guidelines
This section includes a graphic description of the architecture that forms the major housing stock of the Town Core. Significant architectural styles, treatment, and features are discussed in detail. Lastly, guidelines are provided for new buildings within the Town Core Residential Areas.

Using the Guidelines

1. Check the Town Core Areas map on the adjoining page to determine if your site is within the Town Core.

2. Check with the planning staff to determine if your building is listed as historic.

3. Review the pertinent section;
   - Bonita Avenue /Architectural Guidelines
   - Town Core Residential for detailed guidance regarding site layout and building design.

4. Review the appendices for the glossary of terms, the Secretary of the Interior's 'Guidelines for Rehabilitation,' an architectural worksheet, a green plan, and other useful information.

Note: More detailed information regarding building improvements can be gained by reading *Rehab Right* by Helen and Blair Prentice. A copy of this book can be purchased at the Planning counter at City Hall. The City can provide detailed scaled elevations of all the buildings along Bonita Avenue from the Santa Fe rail crossing to Walnut Avenue. Prints can be obtained for contextual reference if the site is located along this section of Bonita Avenue.

People swarmed into Southern California from all over the United States and Europe with the opening of the transcontinental rail lines. The great ranchos and Spanish-Mexican pastoral economy were gradually replaced by a vine and citrus culture. Fortunes were made and lost; some newcomers were sold desert lots by unscrupulous "Escrow Indians" who tied oranges on Joshua trees.

The first settlers attempted to grow the crops they were familiar with (wheat, barley, hay) with mixed results due to the erratic rainfall. Seventeen wells were dug around Mud Springs and several more at the mouth of San Dimas Canyon. When citrus proved to be successful in Southern California, San Dimas and many other communities along the rail lines began to prosper. For many years, San Dimas boasted a 'frost-free' climate, and R.M. Teague established the world's largest citrus nursery, shipping seedling trees to all parts of the world.

In 1908, San Dimas also boasted the largest packing plant in the world, and the San Dimas Lemon Association was responsible for many innovations. These innovations included the first moving packing belt and the first refrigerated curing rooms. The San Dimas Lemon Association was also the first to print "Sunkist" on lemons and the first to pay the growers as the fruit was brought to the packing house instead of as it was sold.

In 1894, the town had already reached a population of 150, about half of them teenage children or younger. This figure was recorded by an early historian, Mrs. Genevieve Walker, upon her arrival in San Dimas with her husband Harry. Mrs. Walker also recorded the building stock of 1894 San Dimas: 32 two-story houses and cottages, two 'shacks,' a school, a planing mill (vacant), the Santa Fe station, and four business buildings.

The present 'Mansion at San Dimas' is on the National Register of Historic Places, and is the last remaining hotel built on the Santa Fe line between Pasadena and San Bernardino. It was preserved because it was purchased by the J. W. Walker family in 1889, and has since been home to six generations of that family. It is still in descendants' possession and is a beloved landmark.

Since the early years of this century, there have been several attempts made to incorporate. But the Board of Trade, later the Chamber of Commerce, did so well at liaison with the LA County Board of Supervisors (the governing body) that incorporation was not felt to be necessary. However, in the late 1950s, as surrounding cities began annexing areas felt to be in San Dimas' "sphere of influence," our citizens became sufficiently alarmed to vote for incorporation. This went into effect August 4, 1960.

The present character of San Dimas' historic downtown was determined to a large extent by the introduction of the "Frontier Village" concept in the early 1970s. Frederic Blitstein, then a student at Claremont Graduate School, was instrumental in planning the "Western Village" concept for the downtown core area along Bonita Avenue, from San Dimas Avenue westward to the Santa Fe tracks. This was an attempt to preserve the past for the future, and has kept the downtown core attractive and alive.

Our growth has been steady and orderly. We have been fortunate in our councilmen, city managers, and citizens. Our Civic Center, recreational facilities, comfortable homes, and commercial growth attest to this.

Martha Glauthier
Secretary and past president of
the San Dimas Historical Society