

THE GRAND APPROACH: SACRAMENTO'S CAPITOL MALL

In 2014, the City of Sacramento began preparations to replace the existing street lights that line Capitol Mall. These lights were installed in the 1960s as part of a major redevelopment project and have reached the end of their useful life. The City determined the lights and the mall itself are historic resources. While it was impossible to repair the 50-year-old lighting fixtures, the City found replacements of similar design. As part of an historic preservation effort, some of the original lights will be installed in a street light museum on Front Street and a sample will be stored at the Center for Sacramento History. In addition, the mall and lighting fixtures were photographed to archival standards and stored at the Center along with the sample fixtures. This article was also prepared at the request of the City to be added to the collections of the Center and the Sacramento Room of the Sacramento Public Library, in an effort to disseminate the history of the mall.

Introduction

Capitol Mall is more than streets and sidewalks, but also the buildings that flank the street, all planned to complement the importance and stature of California's seat of government. These include the Capitol Building itself (constructed in the 1860s), the roundabout and entrance court formed by State Office Building No. 1 and the Library and Courts Building (completed in 1925), the State buildings framing the mall between 9th and 7th streets (1950s), the Federal Courts and private commercial buildings (1960s), and the Tower Bridge forming the western terminus (built between 1935 and 1936 using federal public works funds). The landscape design present today, including the sidewalk widths, grass median, light standards and signals, and trees, was planned in 1962 and completed in 1965. It reflects the long-desired grand approach to the Capitol as perceived through the modernist redevelopment vision of the nation's 1960s urban beautification effort. All other efforts (either previous or after) at enhancing the mall have failed, largely due to lack of funding and coordination between the various government entities that have jurisdiction on the mall.



Capitol Mall, January 10, 2014.

Viewed from the Tower Bridge, the Capitol is emphasized by the width of the street and the symmetry of trees and lighting fixtures.

What is Capitol Mall?

Capitol Mall is a gateway mall that stretches from 9th Street to Front Street. The mall's design consists of a lawn median, tree-planted landscaping strips, sidewalks, and the building set-back. The street itself is 100 feet wide with an additional building setback of 40 feet on each side, creating a 180-foot-wide visual framework terminating at the State Capitol building.

Sacramento's Capitol Mall has long been a part of Sacramento's grand design, especially after the establishment of the city as California's capitol. For well over a century, planners have envisioned a mirror of the great capitols throughout the world, especially our own in Washington, D. C. Capitol Avenue has been called "the Pennsylvania Avenue of California" and the gateway to the Capitol. Today it reflects over 100 years of design effort.

While today it is a minor avenue, before the construction of Interstate 5, Capitol Avenue was the main highway into Sacramento. Visitors arriving from San Francisco on eastbound Highway 40 crossed the Tower Bridge and were presented with a long view toward the State Capitol Building.

It was originally known as M Street, and then as Legislative Route 6, a highway funded in 1910 that connected Sacramento with cities to the west. This route entered Sacramento on the I Street Bridge until it was moved to the M Street Bridge in 1926, which was replaced with the existing Tower Bridge in 1935. Other routes marked along Route 6 included U.S. Routes 40 and 99. This route was designed as part of Interstate 80 in the late 1950s.

The bypass freeways planned (I-80 over the Pioneer Bridge and the northern bypass of the city) affected Capitol Avenue as well with the redesignation of numbering in the 1960s. As State Route 275, the Division of Highways was responsible for construction on this segment between the Tower Bridge and 10th Street.

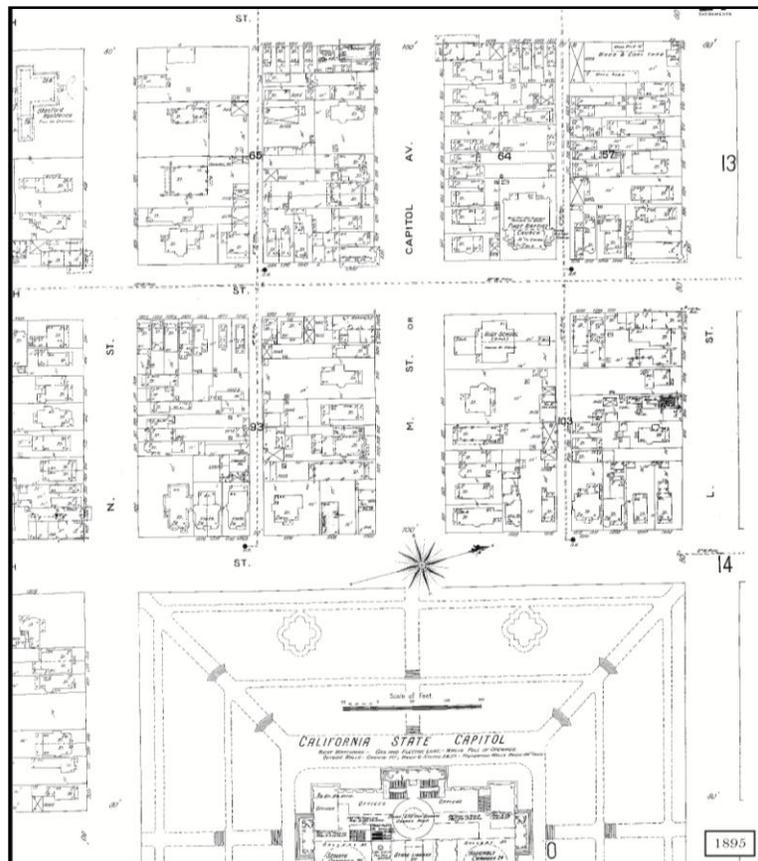
In 2006, Caltrans relinquished responsibility for Capitol Avenue from the Tower Bridge to 10th Street to the City of Sacramento. Since then the City has been in charge of maintenance and jurisdiction.

State Capitol Mall Development - Origins

The Capitol of the State of California was permanently located in Sacramento in 1854, after brief stays in Monterey, San Jose, Vallejo and Benicia. In 1860, the Legislature appropriated \$500,000 to construct the Capitol on the condition that the city would donate the land bounded by L, N, 10th and 12th streets. The City moved quickly and managed to acquire and transfer this land to the State within five days. Flooding in 1861 and 1862, however, slowed construction. By 1869, the State Supreme Court had moved into a partially completed Capitol, which wouldn't be dedicated for another five years. Within just a few years, the legislature recognized the need for future expansion and increased government holdings for the Capitol complex to its present 10-square-block size in 1872.

California's capitol, as with many other states, was intentionally designed after the appearance and design of the nation's capitol in Washington, D.C. That city's mall derived the roots of its appearance from a design put forward by Pierre Charles L'Enfant in 1791. L'Enfant envisioned a grand avenue one mile long and 400 feet wide that would terminate at the Capitol building at one end and a monumental statue of George Washington on the other. From its earliest establishment, Sacramento strived to achieve a visual parallel between the grandeur and importance of the state's capitol to that of the nation's.

Recognizing the importance of the appearance of the Capitol building to its stature, the City planned the view from its front doors to the then-main entrance to the city - - the Sacramento riverfront embarcadero and the M Street bridge - - to be 20 feet wider than other city streets, which were 80 feet wide. This allowed a gateway effect for arriving visitors with a long and sweeping view up M Street to the Capitol itself.



Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1895. This 1895 map of Sacramento shows the early plan of M Street (Capitol Avenue) as a grander street, 20 feet wider than all other city streets (Source: Sanborn Fire Insurance Company 1895).

Early 20th Century Plans

In 1907, a public and formal case was made for improving the mall by Professor Charles Zueblin of the University of Chicago. Zueblin gave a series of five lectures on Town Planning in the Assembly Chamber of

“California, rich, proud, progressive, may well take a part in doing something that will make worthier her Capitol and the setting of its Capitol Building.”

Charles Robinson, 1907

the State Capitol at the invitation of the Sacramento Women's Council. Zueblin's talks inspired the City to hire Charles Mulford Robinson, a nationally recognized City Planner, the following year.

Robinson concluded it was important to create a plan for the development of the Capitol complex. He urged that the State and City should both contribute financially to developing the mall. He wrote that:

. . . a Capitol City . . . should be . . . more of the grandiose, the spectacular and splendid. To secure the execution of these plans, insofar at least, as they affect the setting of the Capitol Building, its dignifying and emphasizing, there is coming also to be recognized the justice and appropriateness of the State's cooperation with the City. The whole nation takes financial part in the beautifying of Washington, because Washington stands for the nation. . . And California, rich, proud, progressive, may well take a part in doing something that will make worthier her Capitol and the setting of its Capitol Building. But the City must do so much as to show itself deserving of such aid.

Robinson was certainly influenced by the "City Beautiful" movement. Originating in Chicago in the 1890s, this national modernization trend emphasized improving the healthfulness and beauty of cities. This movement had even influenced the evolution of the Nation's Capitol Mall. For instance, an adaptation of L'Enfant's original plan inspired by the City Beautiful Movement replaced the 400 feet wide "grand avenue" with a 300 feet wide vista containing a long and broad expanse of grass. Four rows of trees between two paths or streets would line each side of the vista. Buildings housing cultural and educational institutions constructed in the Beaux-Arts style would line each outer path or street, on the opposite side of the street from the trees. The Beaux-Arts and Neoclassical Revival buildings popular in the movement would soon be expressed in new State office buildings along the mall, as would the expression of symmetrical grass and tree landscaping along the street.

With Robinson's recommendations in hand, the Legislature appointed a State Building Commission in 1911 and adopted a building construction program. The City passed a \$700,000 bond issue in 1913 with the purpose of acquiring and deeding to the State two blocks bounded by L, N, 9, and 10th streets for the first Capitol extension buildings. While funding and a world war slowed the progress, these first buildings known as State Office Building No. 1 and the Library and Courts Building were completed in 1925. Thus the expansion to the west of the Capitol had begun.

Emphasis on viewshed and landscape design also continued. In 1913, Charles M. Goethe convinced the Chamber of Commerce Committee on City Planning to hire Dr. Werner Hegemann, a German city planner, to study the Capitol's growth and expansion. His report submitted that year discussed expansion of public buildings and of the mall itself. He wrote:

The treatment of the streets in Sacramento . . . is such that even walking on the sidewalks of "M" street the Capitol Building cannot be seen . . . If the City, as is

planned, will take the two blocks west of Capitol Park . . . treatment of these two blocks, and everything touching the Capitol grounds, is of the greatest importance for the future of Sacramento.

Outside expertise continued to make the case for a grand approach to landscaping. In 1916, perhaps the most prominent city planner in the United States, Dr. John Nolen of Cambridge, Massachusetts, gave a report to the Sacramento City Commissioners (the equivalent of today's City Council). He also emphasized the importance of the State cooperating in the effort through funding, chastising the State by writing that:

Sacramento is an illustration of a city that might easily become a worthy expression of the pride and glory of a great state. One of its main functions, after all, is to serve as a State Capitol. This applies, first of all to the settings and approaches of the Capitol Building . . . Sacramento, like many other State Capitols in this country, will remain a city of only ordinary public convenience and appearance until the State embraces its peculiar opportunity and assumes its logical responsibility.

With the documents of these four consultants in hand, a State Capitol Planning Commission was created to report to the Governor. The Commission urged for a City plan, including enlargement of Capitol Park and the extension of State buildings west from the Capitol.



View of Capitol Mall from the Dome of the State Capitol Building, circa 1935. Here the Library and Courts Building and State Building No. 1 flank the traffic round-about, the beginning of the extension of the mall to the west. Note the extensive build-up of private structure west of 9th Street (Source: Sacramento Public Library).

Moving the Vision West

Planning moved forward envisioning a mall down M Street in 1928. Governor C. C. Young pushed for renaming M Street as Capitol Avenue. He echoed the idea of creating a grand entrance to the capitol, writing that this could be accomplished by, “widening the thoroughfare by 20 feet on either side, a new bridge and park area down the center” to create “the Pennsylvania Avenue of California.” He remarked, “Such a wide street approach to Sacramento opening into beautiful Capitol Park together with the city’s beautiful trees, would be something of which Sacramento could be well proud.”

In 1929, the city planning and landscaping firm of Harland Bartholomew and Associates of Saint Louis, Missouri, created a master plan for Sacramento with a grand landscaped mall flanked by two lanes of divided traffic leading west to the river. Monumental public buildings were envisioned on both sides of the avenue. The western terminus of the mall included a round-about encircling a monument or obelisk.

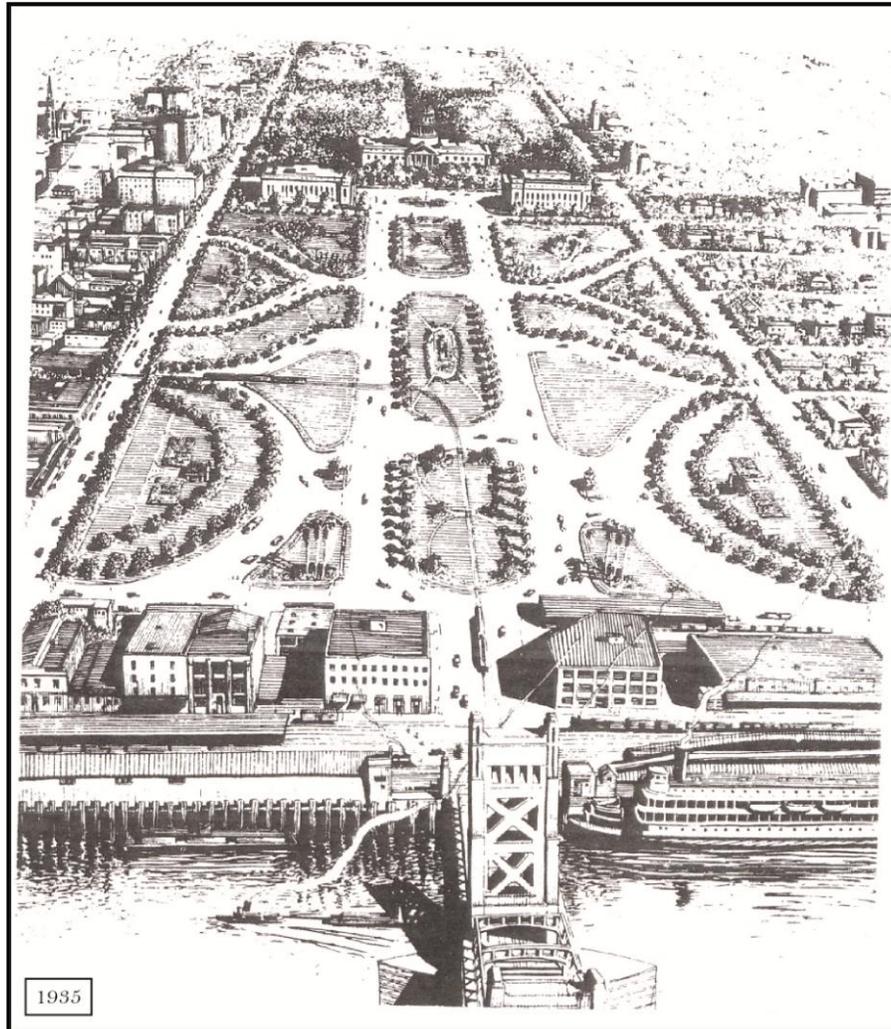
“Such a wide street approach to Sacramento opening into beautiful Capitol Park together with the city’s beautiful trees, would be something of which Sacramento could be well proud.”

Gov. C.C. Young, 1928



Birds-Eye View of the 1929 Bartholomew Plan for the Capitol Mall (Source: Sacramento, City of 1957).

This grand plan was made even grander in the vision of Frank Snook, the former chief of the Division of Motor Vehicles. He instigated a movement in 1935 to greatly expand Capitol Park west of the Capitol buildings in a grand symmetrically planned landscape bounded by L, N, 2nd and 9th streets. The supporters of Snook's plan hoped to use federal funding from the Public Works Administration. While highly popular, funding was not forthcoming and the plans were dropped.



Frank Snook's 1935 plans for the expansion of Capitol Park (Source: Sacramento, City of 1957)

Throughout this period, private property between the Capitol and the Sacramento River continued to develop into well-established neighborhoods, restaurants and commercial properties, including night clubs and gas stations. While a wider street than others in Sacramento, it was in no way grand or an impressive gateway to the State's seat of government.

Redevelopment in Post-War America

At the conclusion of World War II, cities throughout the United States experienced unprecedented growth. Many were unprepared to plan and control this growth and turned to the federal government for assistance. The response was a series of programs that sought to deal with the decay in urban centers and the exploding trend in suburban development. The Housing Act of 1949 focused on what was often referred to as slum clearance. The Housing Act of 1954 provided aid for urban renewal and planning. The final of the three major provisions was the Highway Act of 1956. All three would play an important role in Sacramento's redevelopment.

Over time, this funding, which had originally been intended to deal with residential issues, gradually shifted to a decreasing percentage of housing development, allowing local governments the ability to seek federal funding for non-residential projects. Numerous cities used this provision in order to demolish existing neighborhoods, building public areas and highways in their place. This movement reached its peak between 1958 and 1963 when urban renewal programs had a major effect on city planning and development across the nation.

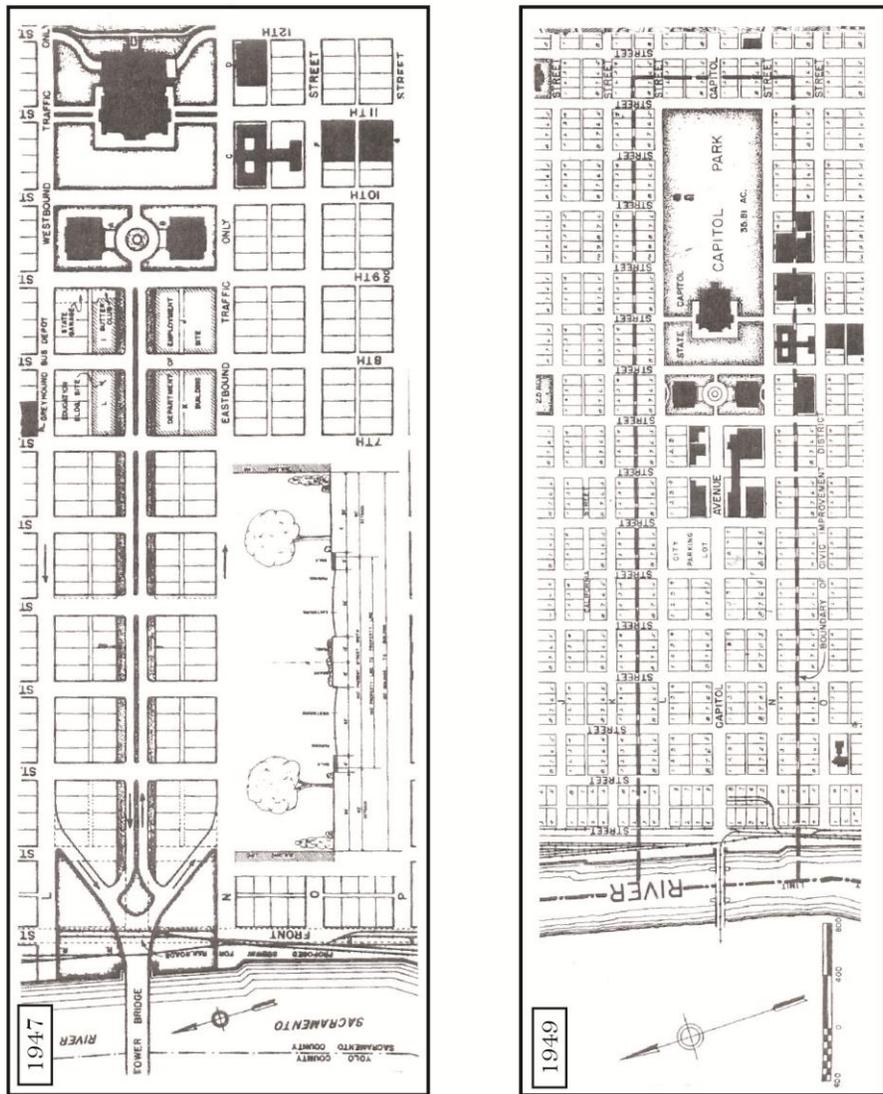
Cities often targeted aging areas next to central business districts, which were developed to create multi-purpose projects that included housing, hotels, offices and government centers. As neighborhoods usually occupied by lower income residents were being demolished and their occupants displaced, protests and concerns over social justice and inequality would grow. Sacramento's redevelopment effort would ultimately follow the same course of events.

California's First Post-War Redevelopment Project

As happened elsewhere in cities throughout the country, planning for California's Capitol development paused during World War II, only to resume with great intensity in the years of expansive population growth after the war. The State began to increase its staff to handle the new challenges of rapid population growth, including establishing a full-time (year-round) government. In 1945, the City Planning Commission hired H. H. Jaqueth and Edward Welch, a planning engineer, to study future government construction focused along the mall. Their report, "Grouping of Public Buildings on Capitol Avenue," included specific recommendations for development, including width of paving, building setbacks, landscaping, building designs and parking. Before this time, all new State buildings and major additions had been constructed to the east and south, in the vicinity of Capitol Park.

While not adopted, the plan set the stage for a report made two years later by Glenn Hall, another City planning engineer. His 1947 report suggested a 40-foot building setback, building height limitations, appointment of a Capitol Mall Committee, the use of Redevelopment funding to acquire land and the creation of a "Civic Improvement District" around the mall and Capitol Park. City Council adopted Hall's plan on October 29, 1947 at a

joint meeting with the City Planning Commission. The Civic Improvement District was created in 1949, with its boundary extended all the way to the Sacramento River the following year.



Two 1940s City Plans for Capitol Mall (Source: Sacramento, City of 1957).

Left: This 1947 plan shows the suggested 40-foot building setback adopted by City Council.

Right: The dotted line indicates the Civic Improvement District surrounding Capitol Park all the way to the river.

The Federal Housing Act, passed in 1949, together with the California Redevelopment Act passed in 1945, provided funding for redevelopment. In 1949, the City Planning Commission started an urban redevelopment survey of what was named the “West-End,” including the Capitol Mall area, the first post war-urban renewal project in California.

The West End, once a thriving residential and industrial area close to the city’s transportation network centered on the Sacramento River and the railroads, had fallen into

decline during the 1920s and 1930s. This decline increased as World War II ended, as more city residents moved to new suburban development and industrial zones grew elsewhere. As property values dropped and properties aged, leaders began to view the area as less than fitting for the gateway to the Capitol building.

The Nuetra-Alexander Plan

The survey of the West End led to the City Council designating a 60-block area as “blighted” and establishing it as Redevelopment Area No. 1 as of February 3, 1950. Four months later, a preliminary report by Richard J. Nuetra and Robert Alexander (two internationally known architects from southern California) was adopted by the Planning Commission and City Council with plans for future development of the mall as part of redevelopment, following Glenn Hall’s suggestion. The Nuetra-Alexander report laid out the first comprehensive plan for the blocks surrounding the State Capitol and stretching to the Sacramento River. They wrote:

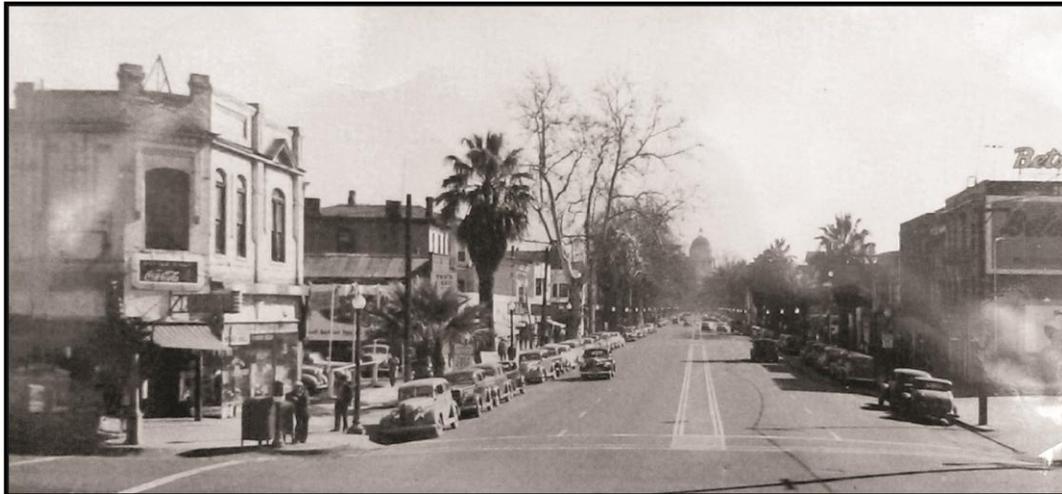
Ever since the earliest city planning studies of the State Capitol, it has been proposed that Capitol Avenue should be broadened and landscaped to form a fitting approach to the Capitol Building. The redevelopment of the central part of the City can certainly assist in advancing this worthy proposal . . . The Master Plan proposal to connect Capitol Avenue to the Tower Bridge with diagonal approaches to L and N Streets is recommended providing Front Street is first closed to traffic or redesigned to pass under the Tower Bridge Level and that Second Street pass under the mall. Combined with the conversion of L and N Streets to one-way traffic, going west and east respectively, this redesigning will improve the movement of traffic from the bridge and will tend to reduce unnecessary traffic on Capitol Avenue.

Their recommendations for Hall’s 40-foot building setback along the mall were adopted by the City Council on August 24, 1950, under Ordinance No. 1529-Fourth Series. This literally set the stage for the beginning of the current landscaping and design of the Capitol Mall as it exists in 2014. With this in mind, new state building construction would be planned to move westward from the Capitol, rather than to the south.

Moving West with New State Building Construction

The expansion of the State government buildings worked together with the national movement of urban renewal (including the availability of Federal funding). Sacramento’s leaders and planners’ long held vision of a gateway could proceed under new redevelopment laws. Because they lacked control over the private property lining M Street starting at the river, the street had developed on its own and was lined with private homes, gas stations, retail stores, bars and restaurants of varying ages known as the West End. Redevelopment, also known as urban renewal, gave government agencies the power to seize private property for public purposes. By declaring the West End a blighted area, a redevelopment zone was created

that allowed for the transfer of this property to government control. This would give planners a clean slate to finally achieve a viewshed they felt complimentary to the Capitol.



M Street, Capitol Avenue, View West from Third Street, circa 1945 (Courtesy of Center for Sacramento History). In both the day (top) and night (bottom) views, the Capitol Building is visible, as intended by City planners, although the street does not have the appearance of a grand gateway to Sacramento.

The massive project drew national attention in planning journals. *Architectural Forum* would later write:

Visualize first, one of the strongest and most stable cities in the nation that is also the Capitol of the State of California. Visualize too, almost 200 acres of land extending from the existing Central Business District and the State Capitol buildings to the Sacramento River to be wiped clean of almost all building and made available for new construction.

Modernism in the post-war period led to major changes in the architectural styles of government buildings. The Beaux Arts ornate elements of previous public buildings gave way to economic efficiency, functionality and practicality. The large, often grand, lobbies were replaced with views to outside plazas, which acted as exterior gateways. In this way, the landscaping of Capitol Avenue would be even more inherent in the design of the buildings that would surround it.

In 1953, the new State Education Building was completed following the 40-foot setbacks, the first building since the 1925 construction of the Library and Courts Building and State Building No. 1. This was followed quickly by the new Employment and Personnel Board buildings, both completed in 1955. In 1956, the federal government started planning a new Federal Office Building on the mall covering a full block on the south side of capitol between 6th and 7th streets.

From 7th Street to the River

With a setback in place and new public buildings lining the avenue, the State moved forward with actively designing the mall. The Redevelopment Agency also began the challenge of moving the mall building development from 7th Street, where the State buildings complex ended, to the Sacramento River, through the acquisition of land, demolition of buildings and opening those parcels to major private investment for large buildings compatible and in harmony with the concept of a mall envisioned by the State as a monumental boulevard approach to the symbolic State Capitol Building. This opened the way for private development, including large commercial buildings. The end result, according to Fred Reed, Vice Chairman of the Redevelopment Agency, would be a Capitol Mall as a beautiful thoroughfare occupied by public buildings. The approval by Sacramento's City Council paved the way for federal funding by providing a loan and granting funds to proceed.

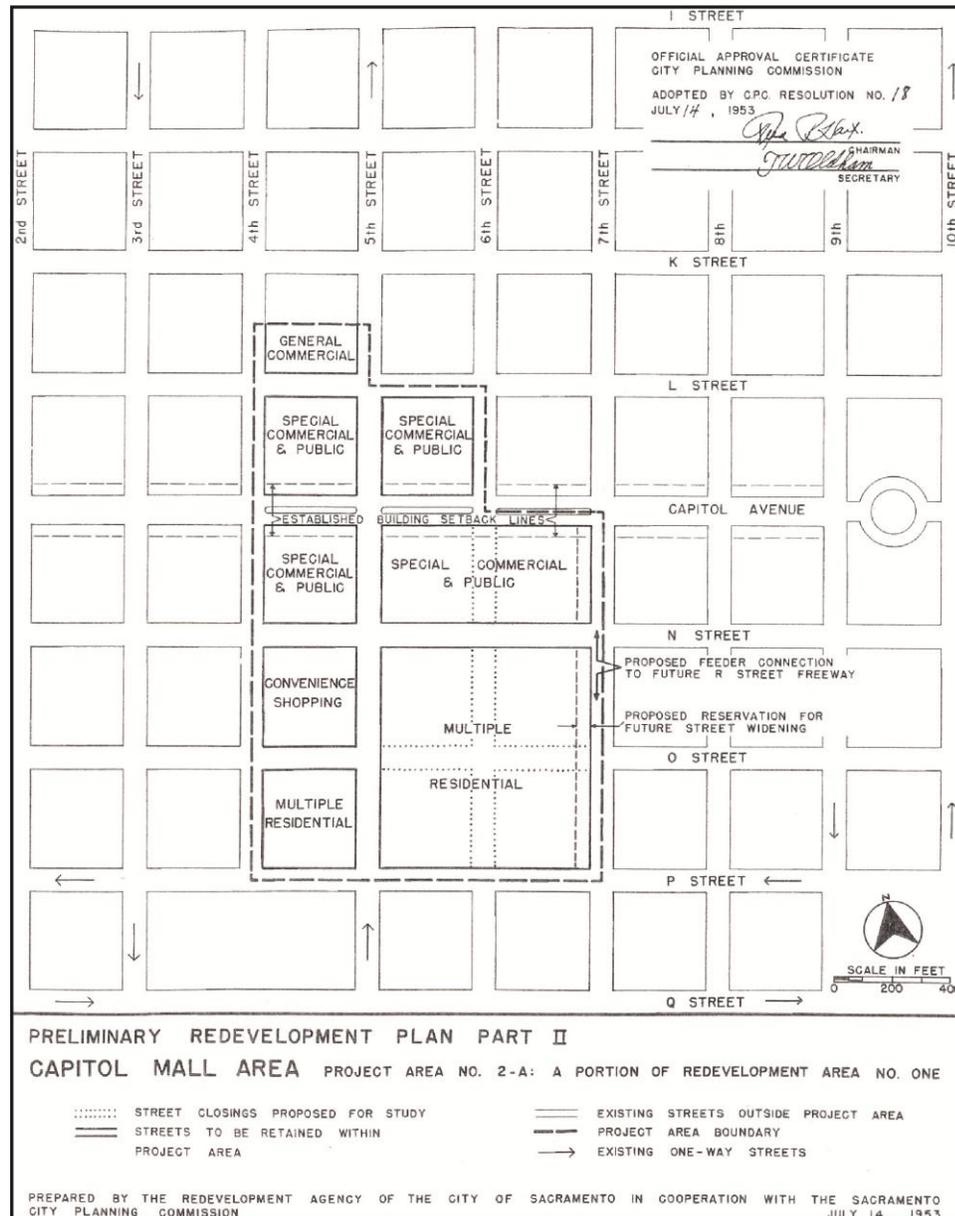
The first house razed for the project was demolished in January 1957 at a special public ceremony organized by the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency (SRA). As the public watched the 1870s building torn down, speakers described the grand future of the mall to come. It was the first of many, as "blighted" structures were purchased through eminent domain and then bulldozed in what was publicized as a "slum clearance project."

The redevelopment effort was massive, covering land north and south of Capitol Avenue. Even with extensive federal assistance under the Federal Housing Acts of 1949, financial resources required spreading this program over three redevelopment areas. The first, Capitol Mall Project No. 2-A, included Capitol Avenue from 7th to 4th streets. The second, Capitol Mall Extension Project No. 3, continued the work from 4th to 2nd streets. The third,

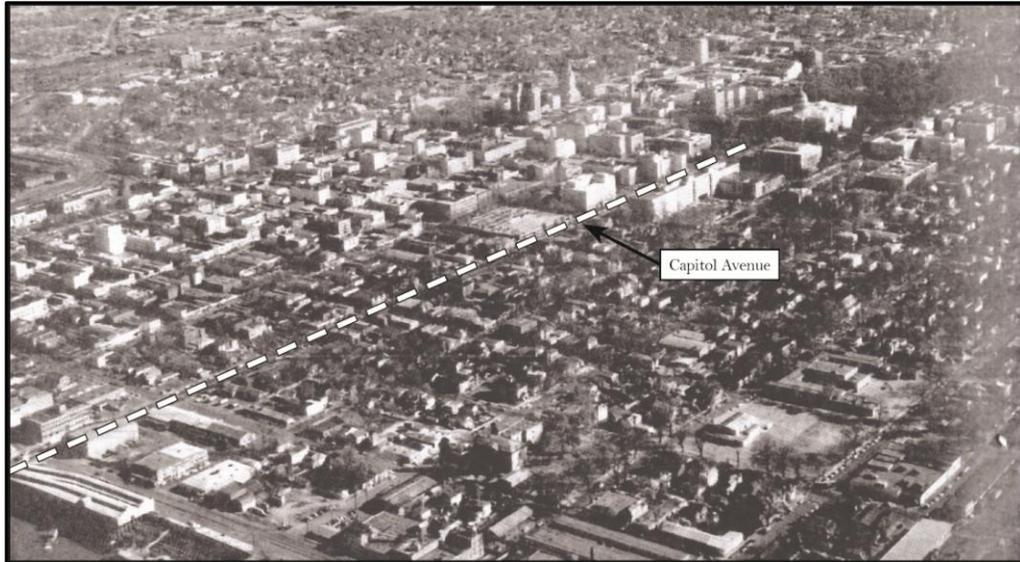
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Architectural Forum

known as Capitol Mall Riverfront Project No. 4, extended from 2nd Street to the Sacramento River. The redevelopment agency spent money for widening right-of-way from 100 to 128 feet between 7th and 3rd streets, installing sewers and drains, and installing new street lights between intersections. The State Division of Highways also invested nearly \$1,000,000 in improvements to Capitol Avenue between 10th Street and the Tower Bridge (excluding the I-5 bridge overcrossing at 2nd Street) roughly 55 percent of the total expended to that point by the federal government, the City of Sacramento and the Redevelopment Agency.



Capitol Mall plans proposed for non-State construction between 4th and 7th streets in 1953 (Source: Sacramento, City of 1953).

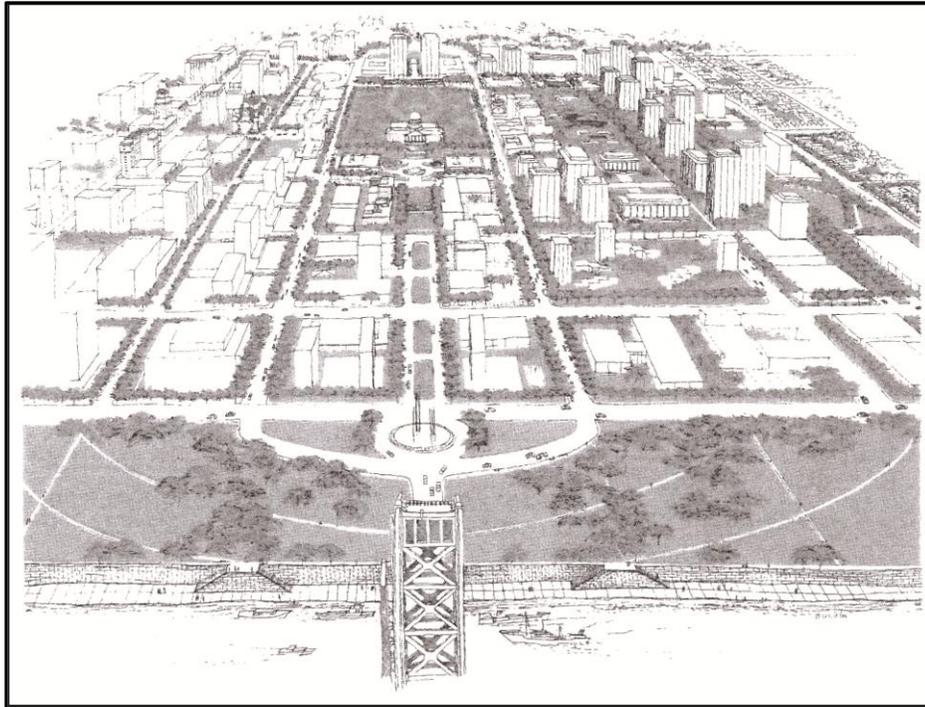


Sacramento City, circa 1957. This late 1950s aerial photograph shows the progress of the State's construction efforts on Capitol Avenue to 7th Street, but also shows the extensive private building to the west in the area zoned for redevelopment (Source: Sacramento, City of 1957).

Coordinating Planning and Design

The Capitol Mall was the most visual element of the West End Redevelopment and drew special legislative attention. In 1957, Senator Desmond introduced Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 48 that led State departments to create and adopt plans for development of the mall as a scenic promenade with a two lanes of traffic and a wide center strip devoted to vegetation.

On January 5, 1959, Governor Edmund G. Brown expressed his desire for the various government concerns, both State and City, to come together to finally design a beautification plan for the western approach to the State Capitol Building. Managing and coordinating the various agencies involved in this effort, including the State Highway Commission, complicated the issue and slowed progress.



California State Capitol Plan, 1960. This plan emphasizes the mall district, but did not foresee the construction of Interstate 5 and its implications for the mall (Source: Sacramento, City of 1960).

In 1959, the Legislature created the Capitol Building and Planning Commission with the task of preparing a “master plan for the orderly establishment of future State buildings in the Capitol area of the City of Sacramento.” The commission hired consultants in July 1960 to prepare the California State Capitol Building Plan (now known as the Capitol Area Plan or CAP), including the specific design of building locations and forms, parks and plazas, sidewalks, driveways, streets and parking facilities based on a review of current and past plans affecting the Capitol. It sought in large part to preserve the dominance of the Capitol building. It was intended to “give California a noble and monumental seat of government . . . This aim cannot be accomplished unless Sacramento becomes a great capitol city. Therefore, the plan looks beyond the confines of the Capitol complex, to its approaches and to the surrounding areas.” This plan also recommended that future large State buildings be constructed generally between 7th and 17th streets south of Capitol Park and the existing State buildings (in other words, not on Capitol Avenue).

In order to preserve a grand view, traffic routes were planned to enhance the approach to the Capitol. The newly planned Interstate 5 (I-5), one of three proposed freeways to serve Sacramento, would “be

“...give California a noble and monumental seat of government . . . This aim cannot be accomplished unless Sacramento becomes a great capitol city. Therefore, the plan looks beyond the confines of the Capitol complex, to its approaches and to the surrounding areas...”

Capitol Building and
Planning Commission, 1959

depressed so that it will not block the view of the Capitol Building that terminates the Capitol Mall axis.” This depression of the freeway’s route creates what is known today as the “boat section” of I-5. All the streets within the Capitol district were to be lined with great shade trees, except where palms already surrounded Capitol Park and the blocks to the west.

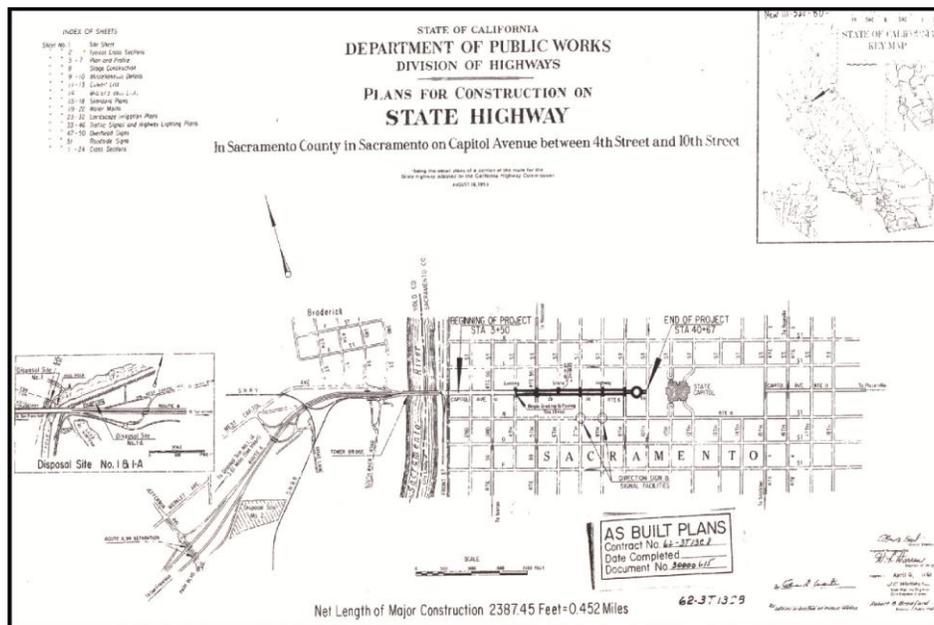
In August 1960, the Capitol Mall Committee (composed of four City Councilmembers and four appointed community leaders) met with the State Director of Public Works to try to again design an approach that would beautify Capitol Avenue from the Tower Bridge to 10th Street. At that time, Capitol Avenue was a wide expanse of pavement, now largely cleared of older privately-owned buildings that formerly lined this area. It lacked a median and street lights, and landscaping at that time consisted of mature palms scattered irregularly down its sidewalks.



Newly Completed Federal Building, 1960. This 1960 view of the new Federal Building (between 6th and 7th streets) shows a mall in transition. Many private buildings have been demolished for redevelopment. The street has yet to be reconstructed, leaving the older street furniture and spatial arrangement of sidewalks and street. Note the lack of the median and presence of parking meters and on-street parking (Courtesy of Center for Sacramento History).

The Mall Emerges

By October 1961, work was underway to widen the avenue all the way to 9th Street as part of the mall's development. The mall would have a 40-foot-wide median of lawn panels separating traffic with 180 feet between the buildings on the north and south sides of the avenue. Bare lots and construction had replaced the old neighborhoods, giving way to the SRA's plan. While the Redevelopment Agency cleared the way, employees with the Division of Highways worked on Capitol Mall itself. J. W. Wilson was assigned as the design engineer for the project with Donald Van Riper as the landscape architect. The resulting mall was a symmetrical plan of eight-foot-wide sidewalks, with an eight-foot-wide landscape strip planted with Linden trees on each side of four lanes of travel divided by a 52-foot-wide panel of grass.



State highway plans for Capitol Mall between 4th and 10th streets, 1961 (Source: California, State of 1961).

Over the course of the next 12 months, the modern mall began to emerge. By November 1962, the current design was largely in place on its eastern half. Grass medians extended from 9th Street to 4th Street, flanked by the current sidewalk arrangement, including the new street light and signal fixtures and sapling trees staked in place. With this work completed, private entities deemed appropriate to the setting and complimentary to the Capitol, such as Wells Fargo, IBM, and other prestigious corporations and financial institutions, began rapidly planning their development on the mall westward from 6th Street.

In 1962, the Division of Architecture, under the Department of Public Works, prepared a study for development of the mall at the request of the State Division of Highways. Their major concern was the continued maintenance of the approach to the Capitol from the planned I-5 freeway exit to 9th Street. This study apparently resulted in the landscaping design present today, which was done in conjunction with the construction of the freeway.



Capitol Mall from the Capitol Building dome, view west, circa 1963. In this photo, the mall has been completed as far as 4th Street (Courtesy of Sacramento Public Library).

Plans were designed based on input from leaders and State Highways got to work. Construction of I-5 in the Capitol Mall area was well underway in 1965. To preserve the view of the Capitol Building and appearance of the mall when crossing over the Tower Bridge, the section of the north-south “2nd to 3rd Freeway Route” was indeed depressed, with Capitol Avenue generally remaining at grade. To achieve this, the avenue was re-routed as excavation work proceeded. By October 1965, the mall was complete. The work on I-5 was finished and all landscaping was installed the length of Capitol Avenue, so that it appeared just as it does today.



The newly completed State Department of Employment Building, Capitol Mall, 1962. This photo clearly shows the newly installed luminaire lights, median and sidewalk, and planting arrangements (Courtesy of Center for Sacramento History).



Views of Capitol Mall. These two photographs illustrate the massive change brought about by redevelopment of the Capitol Mall. Parking has been moved offstreet and the emphasis is instead on formal landscaping emphasizing the Capitol Building (Courtesy of Sacramento Public Library).

Beautification and a New State Highway

While the design of an impressive approach to the Capitol Building had been a guiding landscaping principle since its construction, a new nationwide emphasis on beautification was starting, largely motivated by the actions of First Lady Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson, the wife of President Lynden Johnson. Johnson was a lifelong advocate for beautifying the nation's cities and highways with a favorite quote being “Where flowers bloom, so does hope.” Echoing her advocacy of beautification, the President spoke to leaders nationwide to stimulate the effort across the country. In addition to reaching the ears of the First Lady of California, Mrs. Edmund Brown, Lady Bird’s movement also resulted in the Highway Beautification Act (informally known as Lady Bird's Bill) signed on October 22, 1965.

The massive redevelopment, or urban renewal, effort of the West End, complicated funding of the additional beautification of the mall’s landscaping design efforts. City and State officials looked at potential funding sources. After the State sent inquiries to Washington, D. C. seeking funding, in November 1965, the Urban Renewal Administration responded with a letter that set forth the policies under the Urban Beautification and Improvement Program, a new program to assist communities in carrying out programs for the greater use and enjoyment of open spaces and other public land in urban areas. It was not intended for areas with “blight,” which were already covered under the Redevelopment Act. Thus the redevelopment zones created in the Capitol plan could not be federally funded using Urban Beautification monies.

The redesign of traffic routes resulting from the redevelopment plans also complicated funding. After construction of I-5, the old U.S. 40 became a secondary entrance to the Capitol. In September 1966, Edwin Z’Berg, chairman of the State Assembly Committee on Natural Resources, Planting and Public Works, presented a “Definition of Problem” statement regarding beautification of the Capitol Mall to the Transportation Agency Administrator. He stated:

The recent designation of the new Pioneer Memorial Bridge on Interstate 80 (U.S. 40) as the official route from the west into Sacramento, and the impending relinquishment as a state highway of the previous route from Westacres Road in Yolo County to 9th Street in the City of Sacramento [Capitol Avenue], brings into focus the need to develop a long-range, coordinated program to beautify and maintain the western approaches to the State Capitol. The multiplicity of federal, state, local, and private interests and plans bearing on the development and maintenance of the mall makes the formulation of such an overall program an

“As the number one state by numerous indices, and world-renowned for its natural beauty, California should ensure that the west door to its Capitol, as well as the Capitol Complex itself, reflects the beauty, initiative, and imagination for which it is acclaimed.”

Edwin Z’Berg, 1966

exceedingly complex challenge. However, the very existence of uncoordinated plans and the lack of adequate cost-sharing programs to carry them out, is the best illustration of the need for such an overall approach. As the number one state by numerous indices, and world-renowned for its natural beauty, California should ensure that the west door to its Capitol, as well as the Capitol Complex itself, reflects the beauty, initiative, and imagination for which it is acclaimed.

He added that jurisdictional and financial considerations created major issues as follows:

The proposed relinquishment of the route as a state highway will reduce its status to that of a county road in Yolo County and a city street in the City of Sacramento. Although it is clear that a major continuing use of this section of highway is related to federal and state business, its abandonment as a state highway will shift the entire and costly burden of maintenance to local government. The consequences of this action will be to require local government to allocate a disproportionate share of its street maintenance funds to maintain even the present appearance of the roadway, and should this not be elected, a gradual deterioration will inevitably take place. Therefore, the end result of this route relinquishment will likely be to encourage a decline in the beauty of the mall when the long-range objective should be to enhance it.

In response to this concern, Capitol Mall was retained in the State Highway system from 9th Street to Westacres Road in West Sacramento. While this relieved the City of Sacramento from its sole maintenance and development, it did not necessarily make it eligible for Federal funding, as hoped. In response to an inquiry in Washington, D. C., in October 1966, the Federal government informed the State that it was turned down for funding under the Highway Beautification Act because that funding must be, "spent on federal-aid highways. The mall is no longer a federal aid highway. When the Pioneer Bridge was completed, Interstate 80 was moved to that bridge. The mall is therefore not eligible for any federal beautification money. Moreover, placing it permanently on the State Highway System would not in itself make it eligible, as it still would not be a federal-aid highway."

Hopes for Future Beautification

The State continued to press forward with hopes for the mall's beautification. On October 28, 1966, Z'Berg's Assembly Committee held a hearing to try to come up with a long-range, coordinated, funded program for the beautification and maintenance of the mall. Among the first speakers was the governor's wife, Mrs. Brown, who was co-chairman of the Governor's Action Advisory Committee on California Beauty, appointed the previous January. Mrs. Brown spoke, saying,

For many, many years the West Capitol Avenue entrance to Sacramento over the bridge has given visitors their first view of our Capitol. Whether the golden dome glints in the sun above the green trees or glows at night with its many lights, it is an inspiring site at the entrance to the City. This is an example of success in city planning. When Sacramento's early city fathers created this vista and placed the Capitol Building at the end they gave us a gift of a memorable experience, an experience that is repeated each time we enter Sacramento. In a civilization where the monotony of our cities is one of our great problems the impressive setting for this beautiful and historic building is a fine feature indeed. To visitors from out of state their first view says that Californians are proud of their state government. To Californians visiting Sacramento for business or pleasure it says, "this is my State's Capitol" and to Sacramentans themselves it says, "I'm home," and there is a surge of pride and affection, a sense of identity that is an essential element in any feeling of citizenship. Few cities have an opportunity for such a dramatic entrance. Far too many modern cities are entered only after driving through miles of featureless dreary slurbs [sic]. Even as one enters the downtown area of most cities there is rarely an arrangement of physical features which gives one the feeling that "now I am here." To a traveler entering Sacramento from the Tower Bridge looking down the mall has a definite sense of a moment of arrival. We want this moment to be a moment of realization of beauty as well, and we have an opportunity to make it so.

Consultants hired to refine the basic concepts adopted previously by the Redevelopment Agency proposed a,

. . . highly formal and symmetrical arrangement on a grand scale to emphasize and focus attention on a central feature - the State Capitol Building - without fanfare . . . The creation of a large, clearly expressed and differentiated space at the end of the Mall will greatly increase the strength and effectiveness of the Mall itself by serving as both gateway and terminus, thus generally completing the overall expression of the gateway approach. The monumentality of structure, the generous setback from the mall and the use of landscaping to differentiate between the Capitol and the mall itself are three important objectives essential to the presentation of sweeping vistas culminating in a panoramic view of the Capitol.

The End Result: A Work in Progress

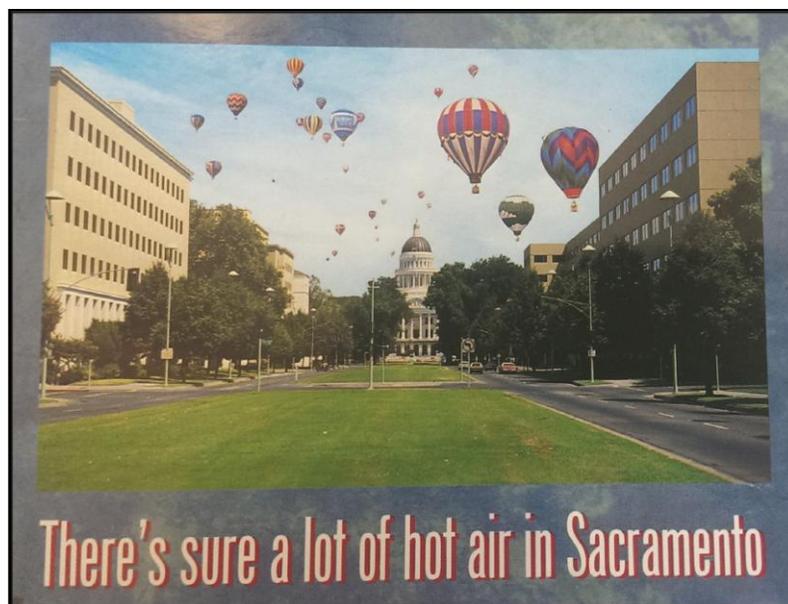
Despite the lack of further improvement, there was still public appreciation for the new mall and what had been achieved through redevelopment. The redevelopment of the West End was the first post-war urban renewal project in California. By the time it was over, it included three major federally funded phases. It also incorporated the massive effect of modernization of the state and interstate highway network, including the construction of I-5.

After decades of planning and execution, the mall reflected the dominant visual achievement of Sacramento's redevelopment efforts. When the Capitol Mall was dedicated in December 1968, the *Sacramento Union* reported that, "today as they drive across the Tower Bridge, local residents as well as visitors have a clear view of the Capitol, giving a feeling of spaciousness . . . The mall has shown the most significant and dramatic change that has been made in the community."

Since that time, little has changed on the mall. Ever taller commercial office buildings have been constructed along its western end, confirming with the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency's plans. The grass medians still open a wide view to the Capitol 50 years later, with now mature trees flanking the lanes of traffic. The vision of Capitol Mall as the Pennsylvania Avenue of California remains intact.

"The mall has shown the most significant and dramatic change that has been made in the community."

Sacramento Union, 1986



This 1970s postcard shows the Capitol Mall 10 years after its completion and exactly as it exists today (Courtesy of Sacramento Public Library).