LOCOmotion - a cinematic approach

lisa rocci

Thesis submitted by

Lisa C. Rocci

to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Landscape Architecture

April 1, 2005

College of Architecture and Urban Studies
Blacksburg, VA

Washington-Alexandria Architecture Center
Alexandria, VA

Approved

Ron Kagawa

Paul Emmons, PhD

Jaan Holt

Susan Piedmont-Palladino

keywords: California, Carpinteria, train, landscape, cinematic, motion, perception, design, architecture


SURFLINER
Amtrak California

abstract

The landscape is not static, but perceived dynamically and should be designed for the unique sorts of movement that occur. Within the site of Carpinteria, California's Amtrak train station lies an opportunity to maximize public space through an investigation of those in motion at this place of convergence, including cars, busses, pedestrians, skateboarders, bicyclists, and trains . A cinematic process of design allows for exploration of distinct character movements and resulting unique perceptions of the site in terms of scale, rhythm, texture, color, and perceived desire or needs. These stories are then sculpted onto the land, recording physically threads of speed, moments of pause, and elements of fascination. The "new" station is presented as a movie, unveiling a landscape perceived and created dynamically through the eyes of those in motion.

table of contents

introduction

locomotion: (n) 1. the act of moving from place to place
2. the ability to move from place to place

locomotive: (n) 1. a self-propelled vehicle, usually electric or diesel-powered for pulling or pushing freight or passenger cars on railroad tracks.

loco: (adj) 1. (slang) mad, insane
2. (Spanish) crazy

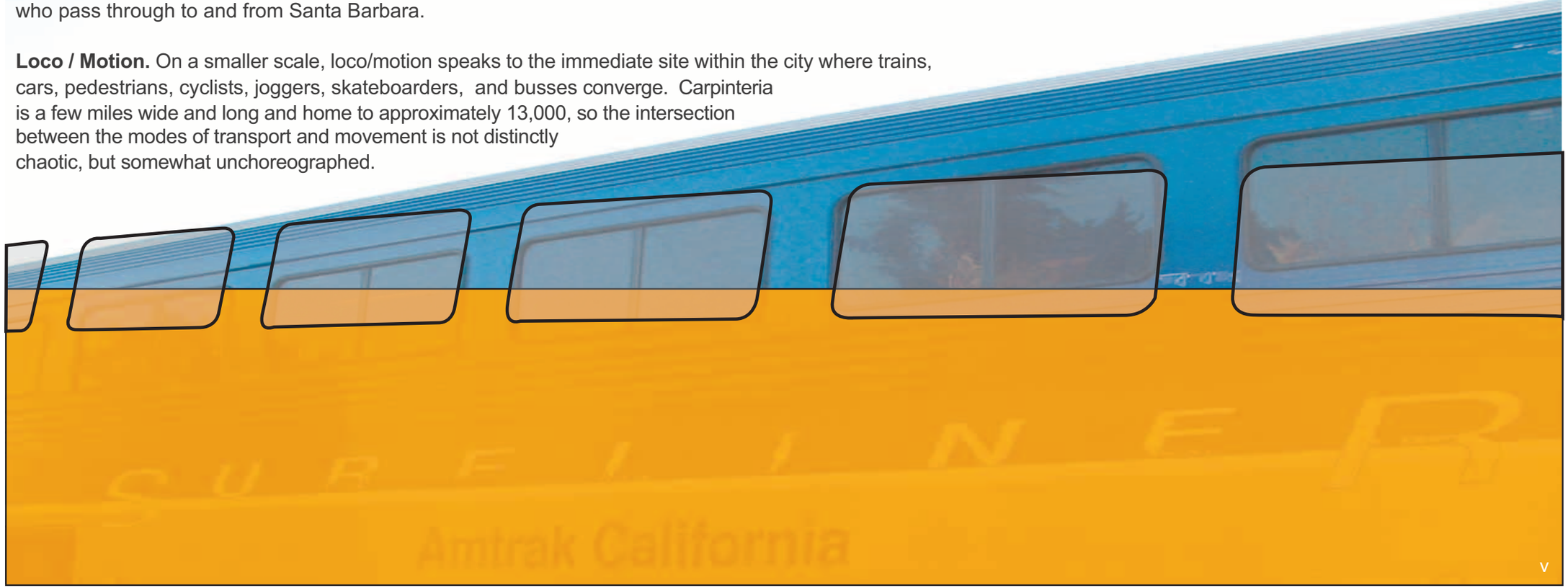
motion: (n) 1. the act or process of changing position or place
2. the manner in which the body moves, as in walking

Locomotive. This project began as a study of the existing Amtrak train station in Carpinteria, California and how it could be improved. As study has become thesis, the title describes both the enlarged view of the site and design approach.

Loco / Motion. Within the regional context of the site, loco/motion refers to Southern California's current transportation culture. Chaotic and congested this car-dominated culture has yet to successfully integrate an alternative transportation system to relieve traffic pressures. Although it is an hour from Los Angeles, Carpinteria's traffic woes are due to proximity to Santa Barbara, 12 miles to the north. As housing prices rise in Santa Barbara, the working middle class moves farther away to the north and south. As a result the mostly two-lane freeways have become increasingly impacted by traffic.

Within the last few years, the debate has waged whether to add lanes to the 101 Freeway, the only major car artery, or to increase Amtrak, bus, and even ferry services. Carpinteria, which is sandwiched between mountains and ocean will be affected by any transportation changes that impact the daily commuters and summer vacation travelers who pass through to and from Santa Barbara.

Loco / Motion. On a smaller scale, loco/motion speaks to the immediate site within the city where trains, cars, pedestrians, cyclists, joggers, skateboarders, and busses converge. Carpinteria is a few miles wide and long and home to approximately 13,000, so the intersection between the modes of transport and movement is not distinctly chaotic, but somewhat unchoreographed.



introduction

Within the space immediately surrounding the train station it seems that certain uses rule out the passage or integration of more than one type of transport, forming invisible walls. The parking lot adjacent to the station platform eliminates use of a large amount of space by cyclists and pedestrians. Train crossing forbids perpendicular movement of all modes. As well, movement of cyclists and pedestrians perpendicular to train travel is hindered by adjacent land use choices. What is “mad” about this condition is the loss of potential uses on this large site off Carpinteria’s main street due to lack of integration and limitations of singular use areas.

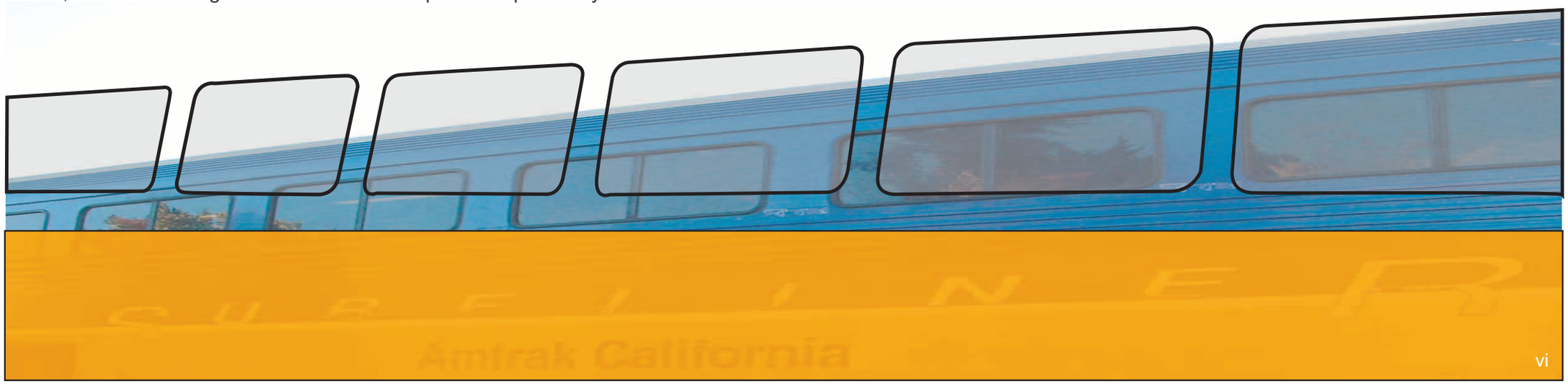
It is in this place where modes of travel and different speeds converge that I explore the argument that the landscape is not static, but perceived dynamically and should be designed for the unique sorts of movement in the landscape. I also strive to bring a more dynamic use to the train station and adjacent areas by viewing the land as “layerable” rather than sectioned off two-dimensionally. It should be noted that this project assumes an improved and more widely used commuter train and bus system than the one currently in use.

Motion. I began with character studies to put a face and story to different users who move through space in different ways. The accumulation of story details began to elicit what is meaningful to each character and more importantly, differences in perception according to speed, frame of view, travel path, physical sensation, and relationship to ground plane. It is in these visual corridors of experience that we accumulate depth of understanding of a place through each pass, touch or smell, like a mental map in which details fill in and form connections in one’s mind over time.

The eyes of the characters (driver, pedestrian, jogger, train passenger, train engineer, and skater) become lenses through which the experience of the site passes and is recorded. The design of the site is cinematic as multiple “cameras” are set to record the significance of elements of rhythm, texture, scale, detail, color, and material specific to each user along his/her path of travel.

Locomotion. Next, an editing of “scenes” together is necessary to create a cohesive, holistic story in which the lives of the characters intersect at this place of convergence. Ultimately the users overlap, traveling around, by, over, and under each other. As the train station becomes a space to accommodate crossing and lingering by pedestrians, cyclists, and skateboarders, in addition to automobiles and the train, areas of dominance within this shared space emerge. It is these moments that are emphasized through design to enhance the experience of the specific character or user.

The final design is presented as a movie in which a family visit takes the viewer through the site with each user. Each scene follows a specific character and gives a glimpse of the whole site dynamically at his/her eye level and speed, with a moment of “crystallization” when the camera stops to highlight how he/she would view the materials, scale, and surroundings in an area of the site planned specifically to accommodate that mode of travel.



In 2001 I rode the train from Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo to Carpinteria, where a train depot had recently opened after more than 50 years of closure.

scene 1 - first arrival

anticipation

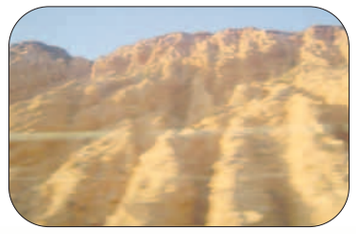
I passed Shell Beach, Pismo, and a whistle stop in Surf, California, enjoying the amazing view of the coastline to the west and mountains to the east.






train to CARPINTERIA

An hour and a half later when the train pulled into Santa Barbara, I wondered what a train station in Carpinteria, my hometown would look like.



disappointment

This is the train station in Carpinteria, elevation 7 feet above sea level.

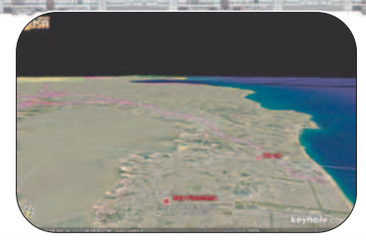
Needless to say, my arrival was anticlimactic. A platform consisting of a single long strip of concrete dumps passengers into a parking lot. What does this say about Carpinteria? It isn't a city that is all about cars, the lot isn't even full.

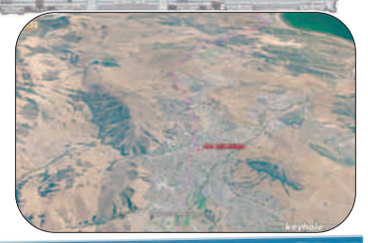
It is here, at this critical moment of arrival and departure along the tracks that a redesign begins, a reapproach to the same place with a different understanding.

scene 2 - going back

April 1, 2005. I set off on the 3000 mile journey by air from Alexandria to San Francisco. From there, I take the Starlight Express Amtrak train 4 hours south to San Luis Obispo. There begins the final leg of my journey: I board the San Diego-bound Surfliner train for the 2 hour trip to Carpinteria.

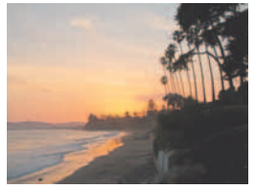
airplane-train





scene 3 - auto driver and pedestrian

Meanwhile, during my trip my mom is shopping in Santa Barbara, 12 miles north of Carpinteria, and will meet me at the station for a late lunch.

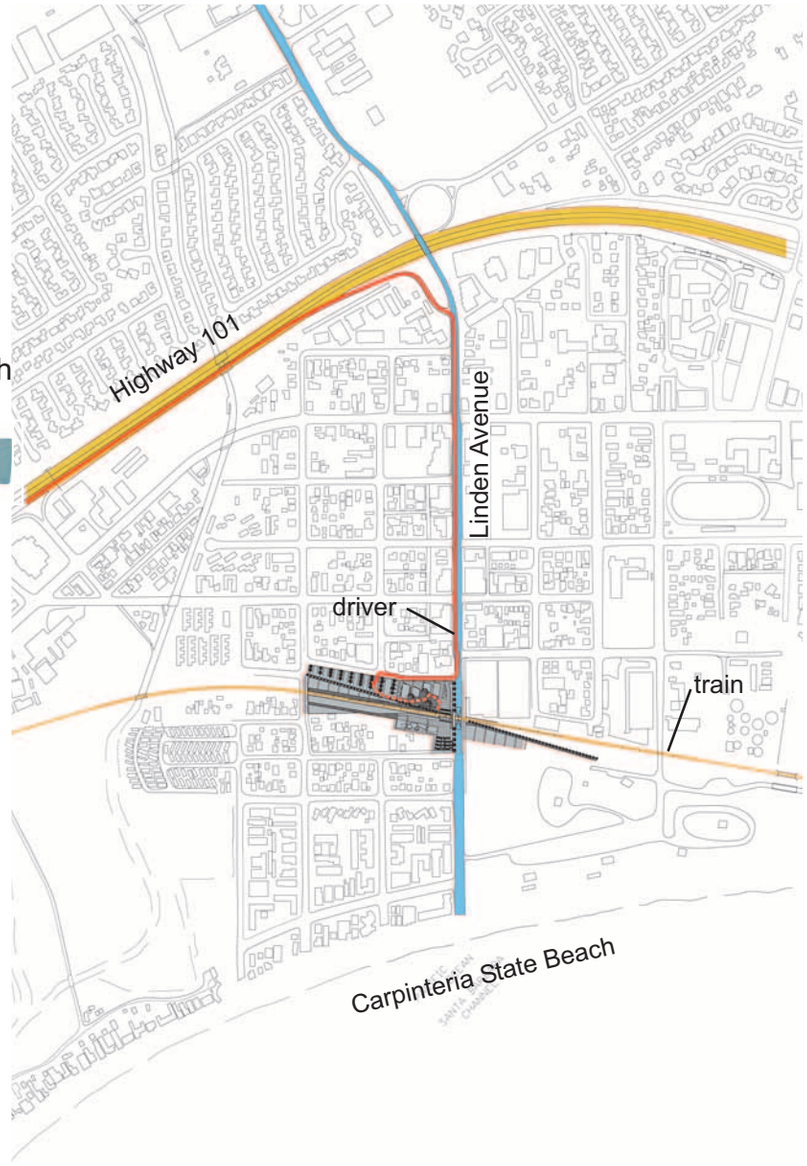


santa barbara

car

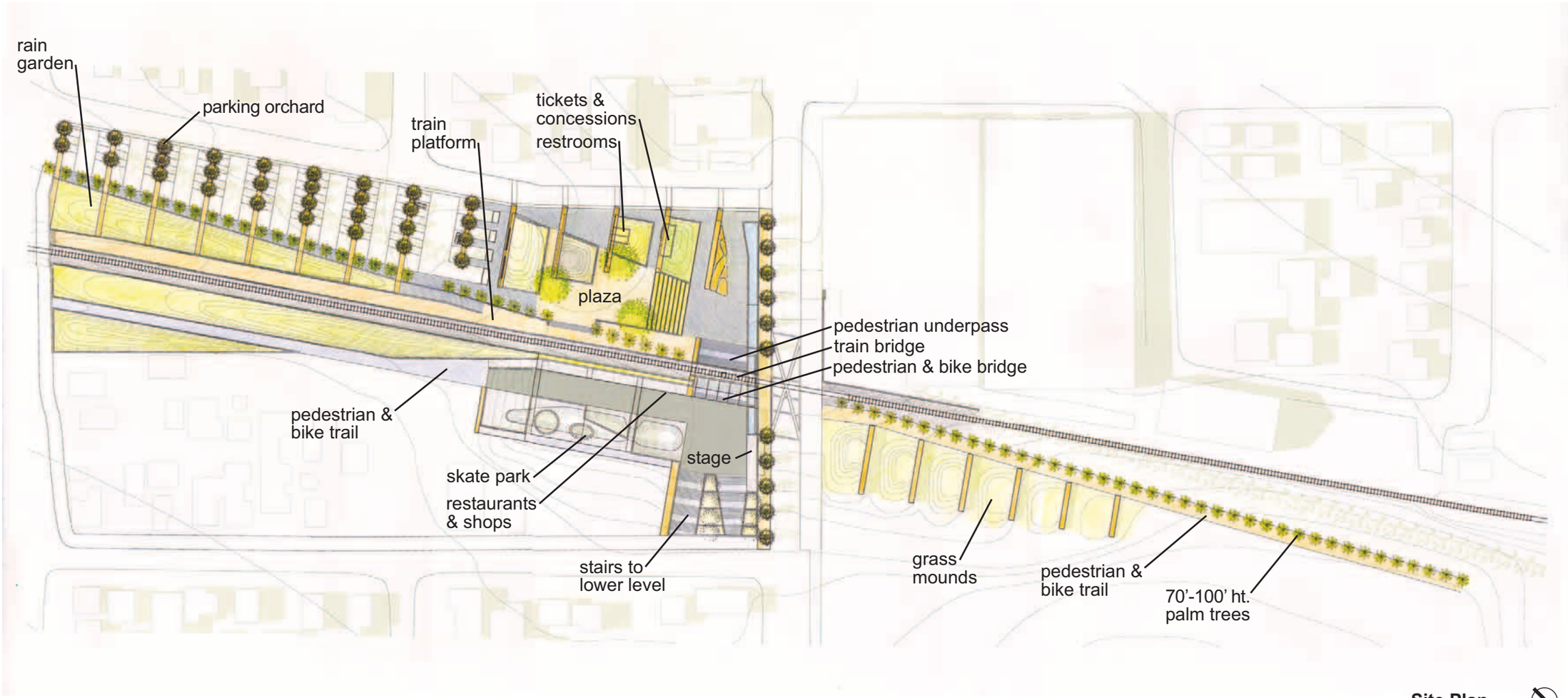
After a quick drive south on Highway 101, she exits on

This is Carpinteria's main street and economic and social center. Mom heads down Linden towards the beach and train station.



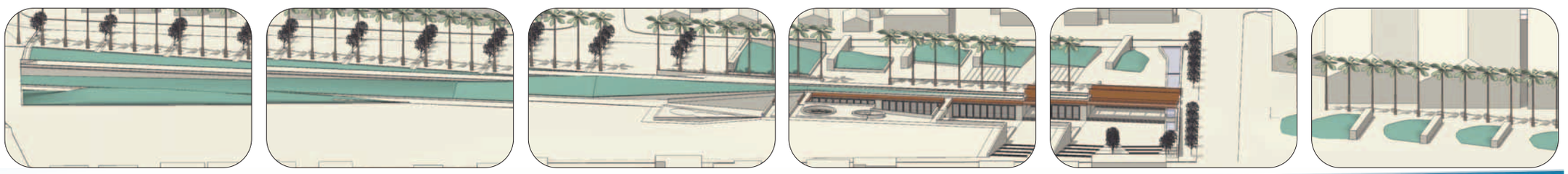
Driver's Path

1"=1000'



Site Plan

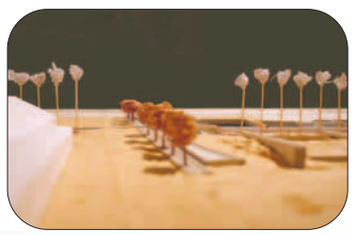
1”=150’

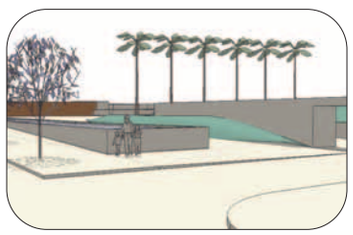


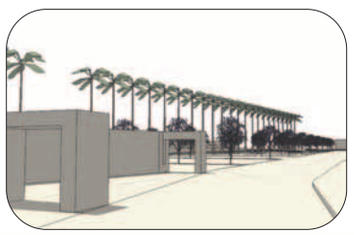
walls

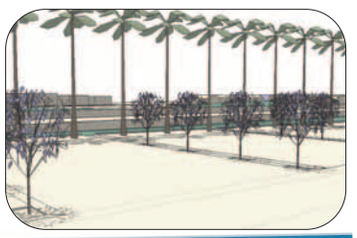
She turns the car right onto 5th Street, passes five stone walls, and heads towards the train station parking lot.

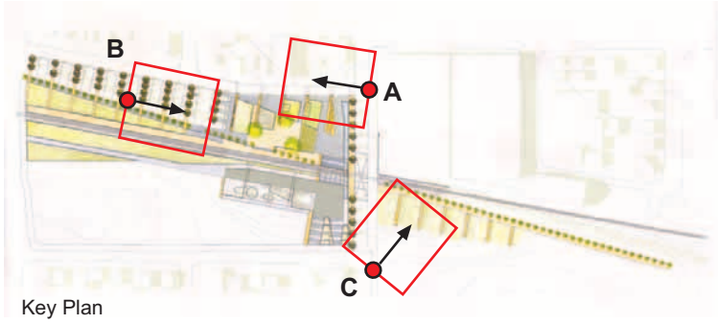
Driver's View (A, Key Plan p.9)









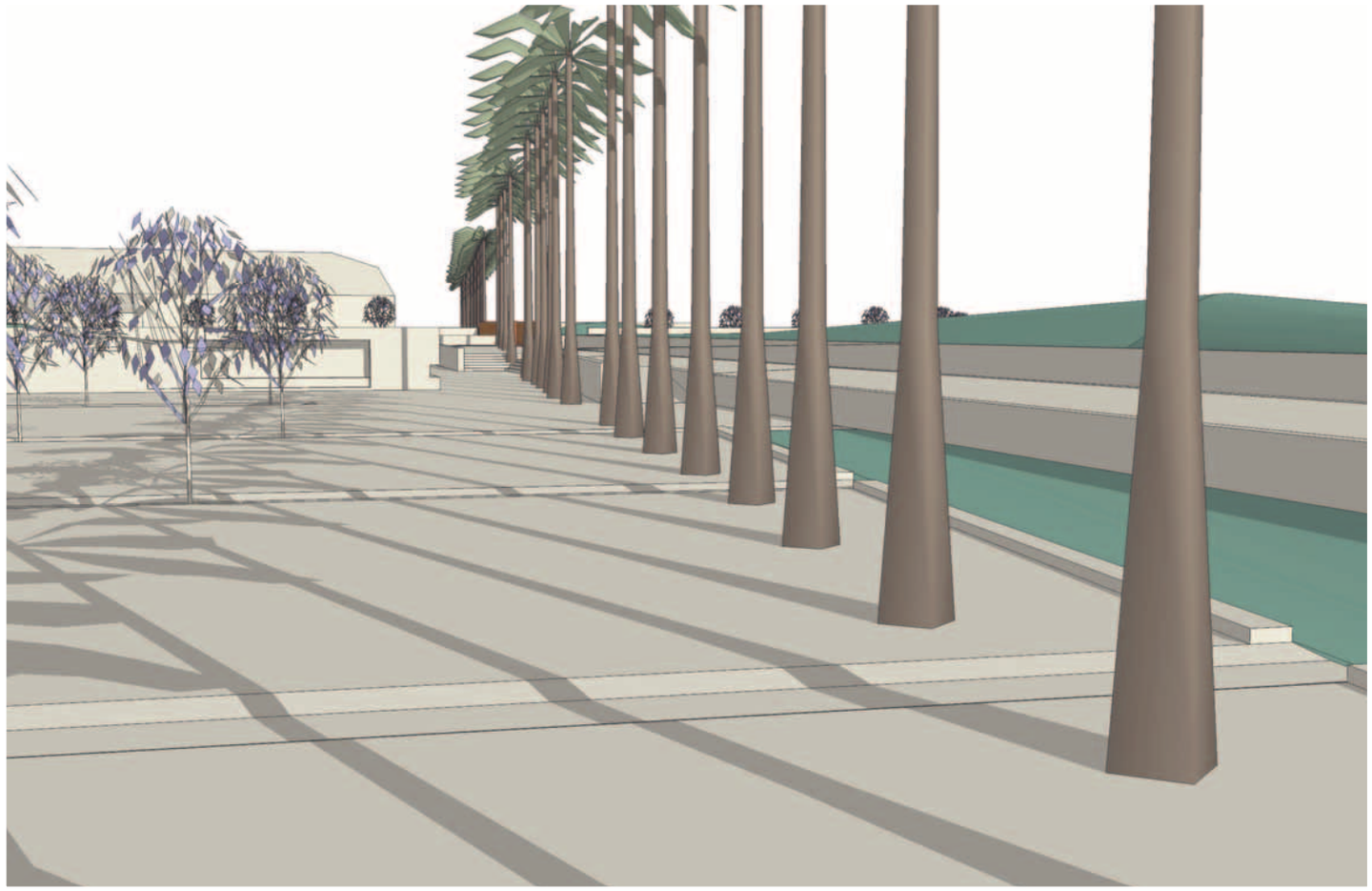


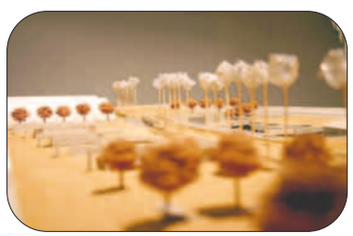
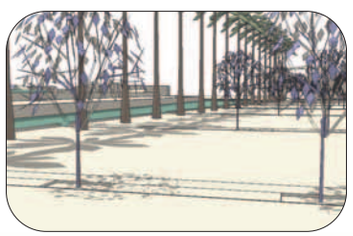
Key Plan

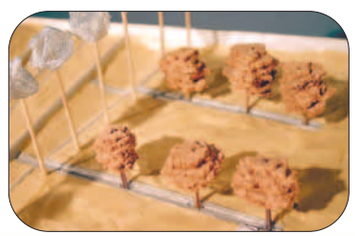
parking orchard

The car rolls over pavers, then to a stop on gravel in the shade of pistachio trees.

She notices that the rain garden is still wet from captured parking lot runoff during the last storm. While walking along the row of palm trees, just beyond the first wall she enters into the heart of the train station plaza.


Driver as Pedestrian View (B, Key Plan)



waiting space

Finally, past the second wall which houses the restrooms, Mom moves to the third wall to grab drink and train schedule. She then sits on the platform, enjoying the sunlight while awaiting my arrival.

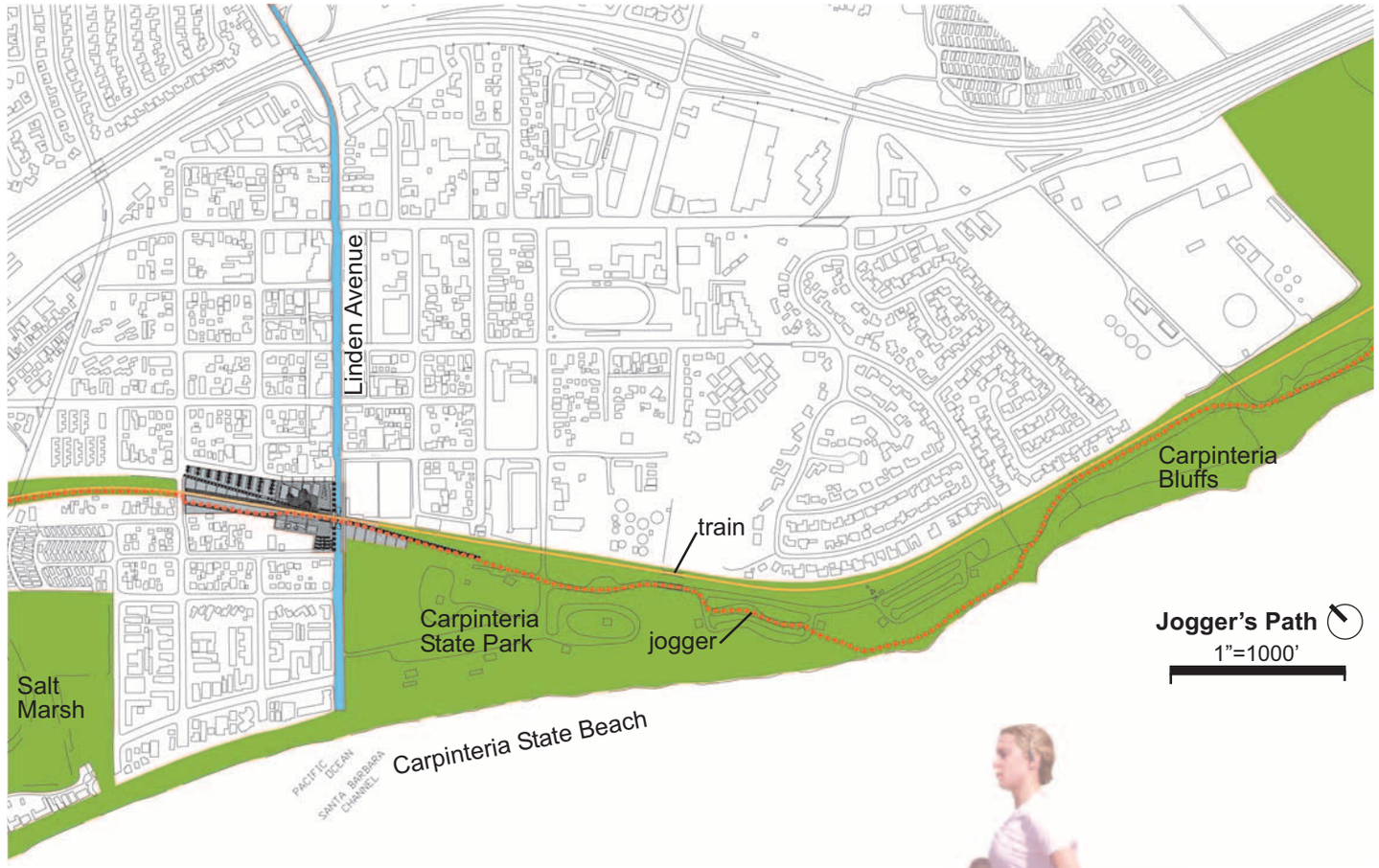
Across the tracks Lea Boyd recognizes her and waves.

Driver as Pedestrian View (C, Key Plan, p. 9)

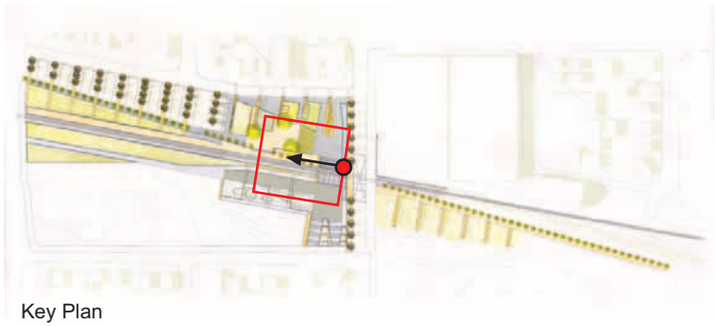
scene 4 - jogger and train engineer

In 15 minutes time, Lea jogs from the southern end of town along the path of the railroad. She notes along the way any changes in the familiar scenery at the seal rookery, State Park Campgrounds, Tar Pits (which are actually mounds), and Carpinteria Creek.

Carpinteria Bluffs



southern end of town

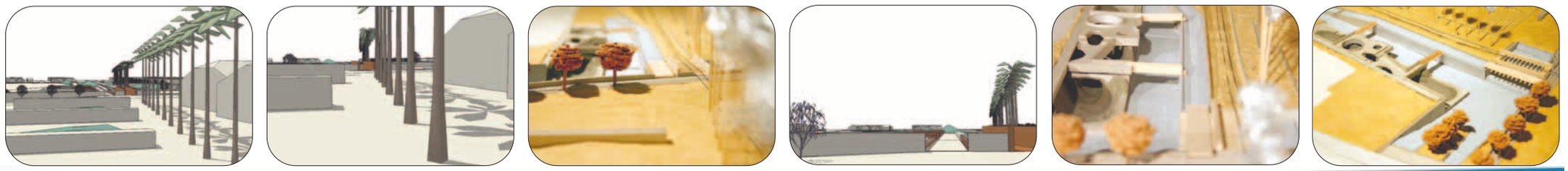


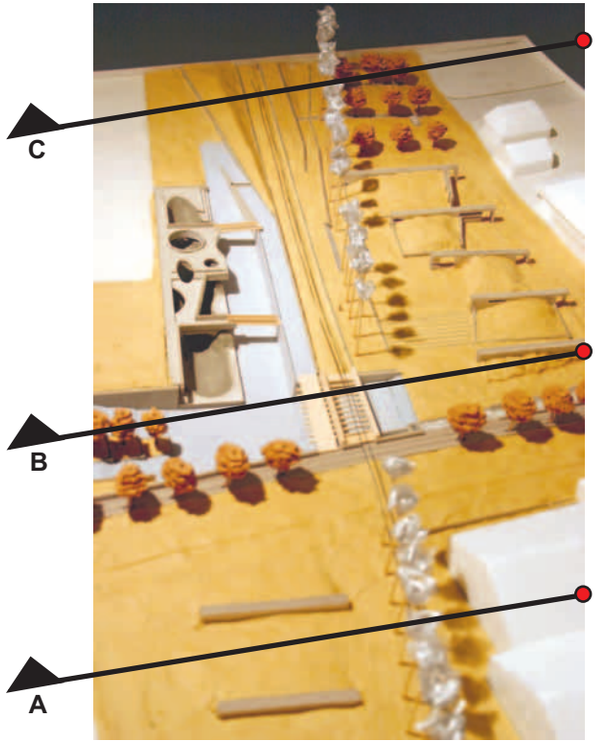
Key Plan

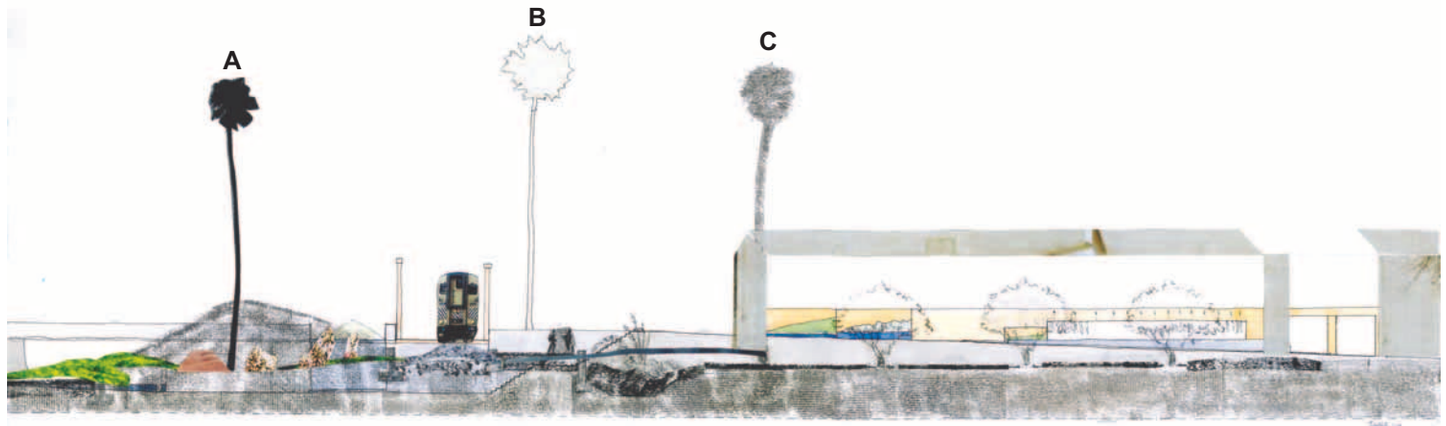
Jogger's View (Key Plan)

A quick glance both ways and she crosses Linden Avenue. Just as Lea reaches the pedestrian bridge over the lower portion of the train station, a freight train barrels by, bouncing the steel rhythmically under her feet.

pedestrian bridge





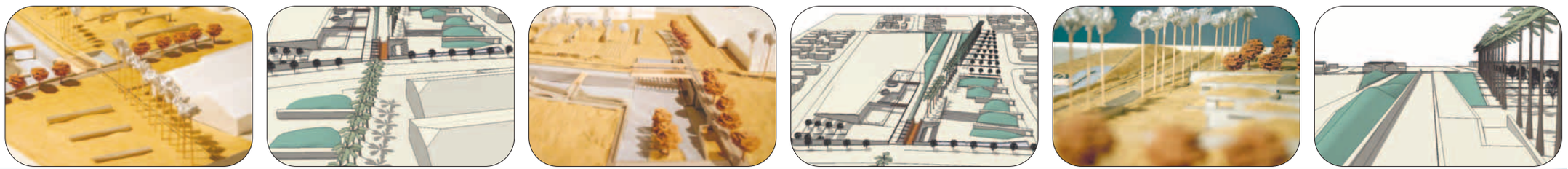


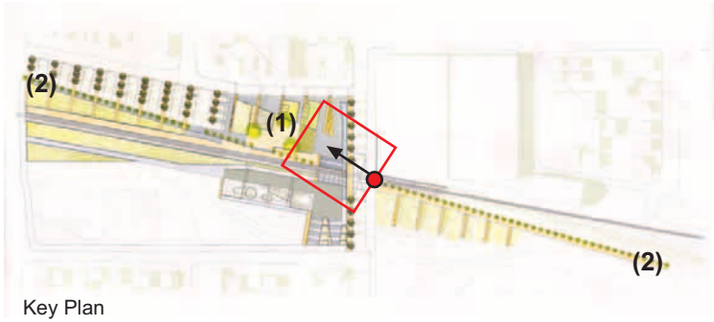
Jogger's Path Section

1"=40'

running through the landscape

Lea experiences the scale, texture, and colors of the landscape differently according to where she is currently passing through, will soon pass through or will pass through in the future. Where she is currently standing, (A) she sees the fissures in the trunks of the closest palm trees; just ahead (B), her eyes follow the trunk high up to the fronds; in the distance (C) the whole form is in view, one column after another into the distance. As she jogs down the path towards Linden Avenue (A), she feels the gravel underfoot give with each step. Ahead of her (B), the blue granite pedestrian path, silver train, and golden train platform appear as parallel lines stretching into the distance. Near the end of the station area (C), the form of fuzzy green hills rise up on the beach side of the tracks, while the contour of the landscape falls on the city side of the tracks where rain water is collected in a lush green basin.





Key Plan

Below the pedestrian bridge Lea sees the skaters and thinks of her brother Sean.

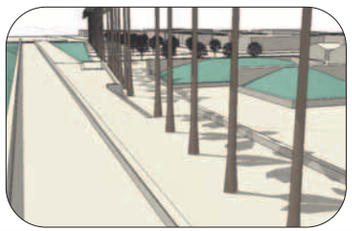
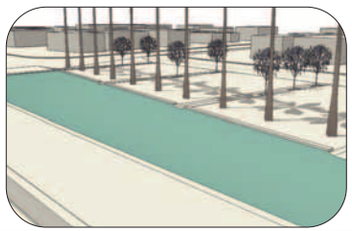
gardens

The freight train engineer catches a glipse of the colorful hills (1, Key Plan) as the line of palms (2, Key Plan) converges towards the left side of the train and seems to fly out the right window a moment later.


Train Engineer's View (Key Plan)





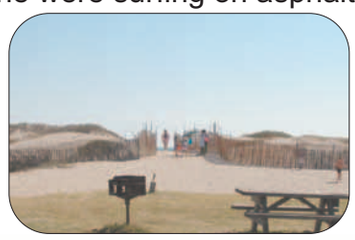
Skater's Path

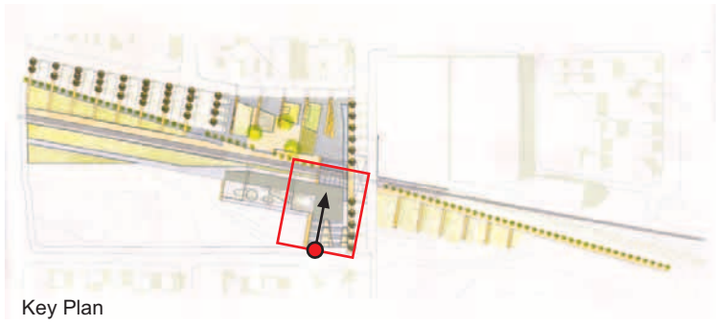
1"=500'

View of Linden Avenue

scene 5 - skater

Sean made a trip to Tarpits only to discover the surf is again flat. He knows where to go instead- the skate park at the train station. His skateboard practically knows the way there: through the State Park campgrounds and up Linden Avenue toward the mountains he rolls, weaving wide arcs as if he were surfing on asphalt.



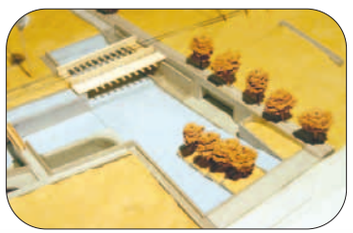


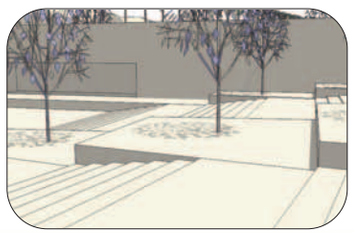
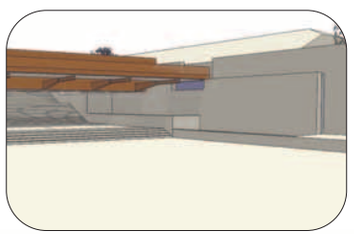
Key Plan

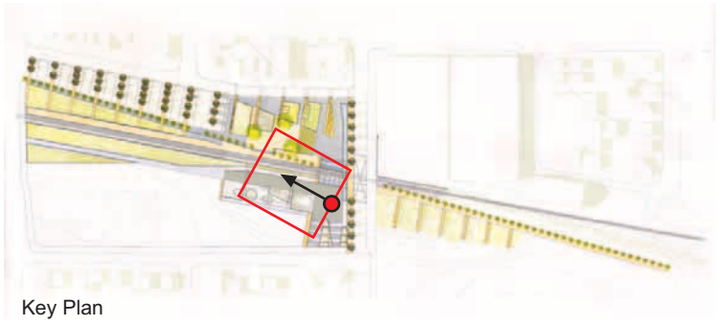
descent

Sean descends into the space by way of the stairs onto the blue cobbles below. To his right a punk band jams foriously on the community stage.

Skater's View (Key Plan)

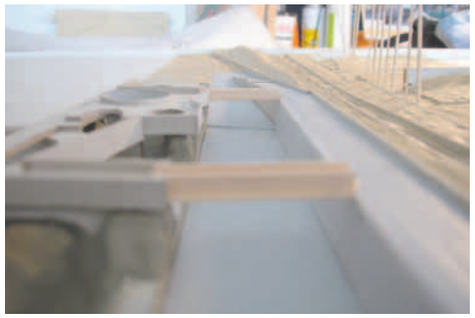



Key Plan

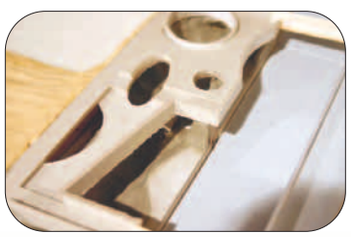
lingering

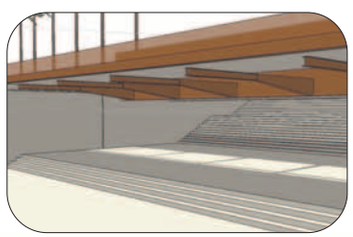
He grabs a burger and fries from Spot Burger which is located in the wall beneath the train tracks. Hearing a familiar voice from above, he waves to his sister Lea before she heads off down the path.

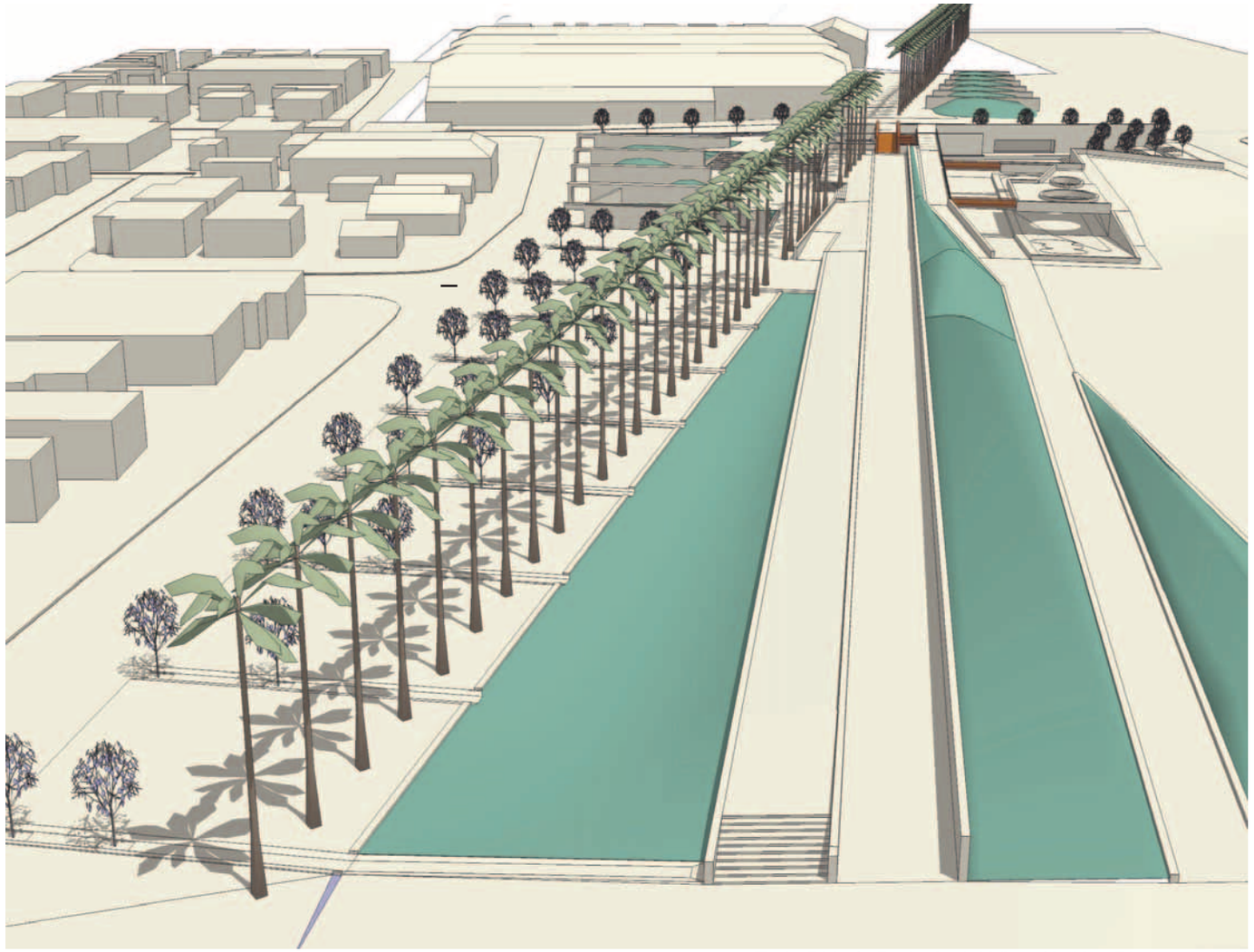


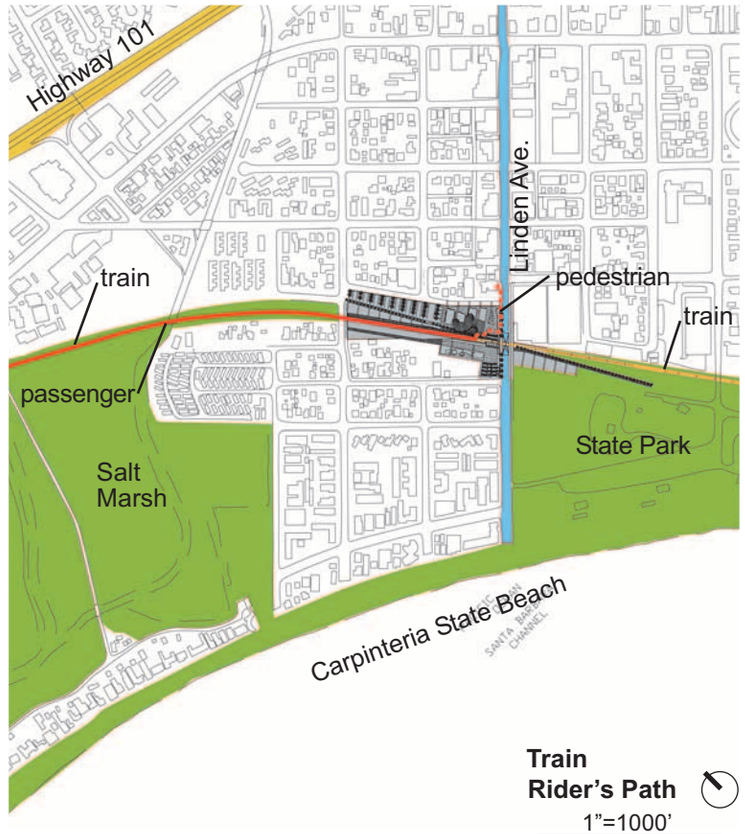
Jogger's View

Skater's View (top image; Key Plan)





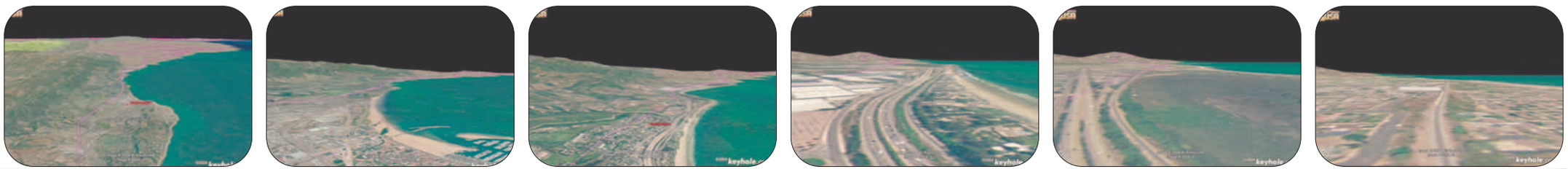


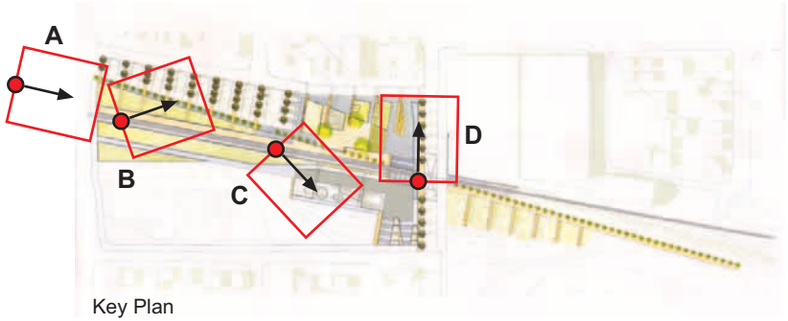


Train Rider's Path, Aerial View (A, Key Plan, page 19)

scene 6 - train passenger and pedestrian

Meanwhile, my train pulls out of Santa Barbara and careens down the coastline on the final stretch of my trip. I'm eager to see the new train station.





Key Plan

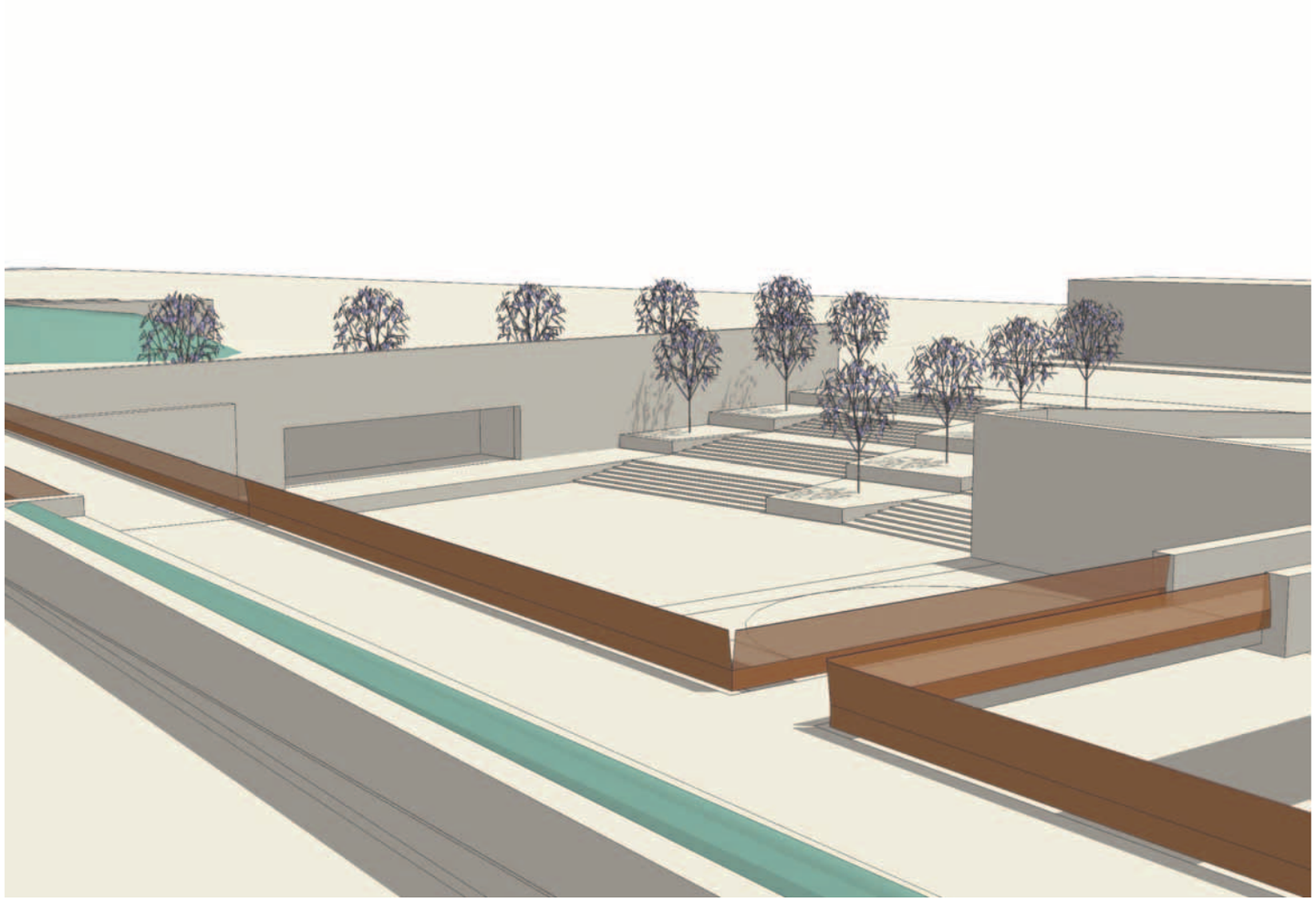

Train Rider's View (B, Key Plan)

Just after passing the Carpinteria Salt Marsh and a small bridge, a tall palm tree comes into view. One after the next, they pass my window like columns nearing the train. A golden platform stretches into the distance. Heavy stone walls give way to an open space, ready to receive arrivals. Behind the walls crouch five hills clothed in five distinct gardens; I follow the rise and fall of wall and hill as the train slows.

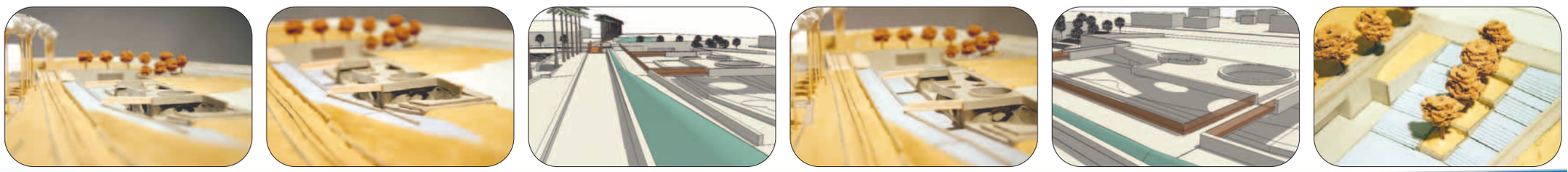
rhythm

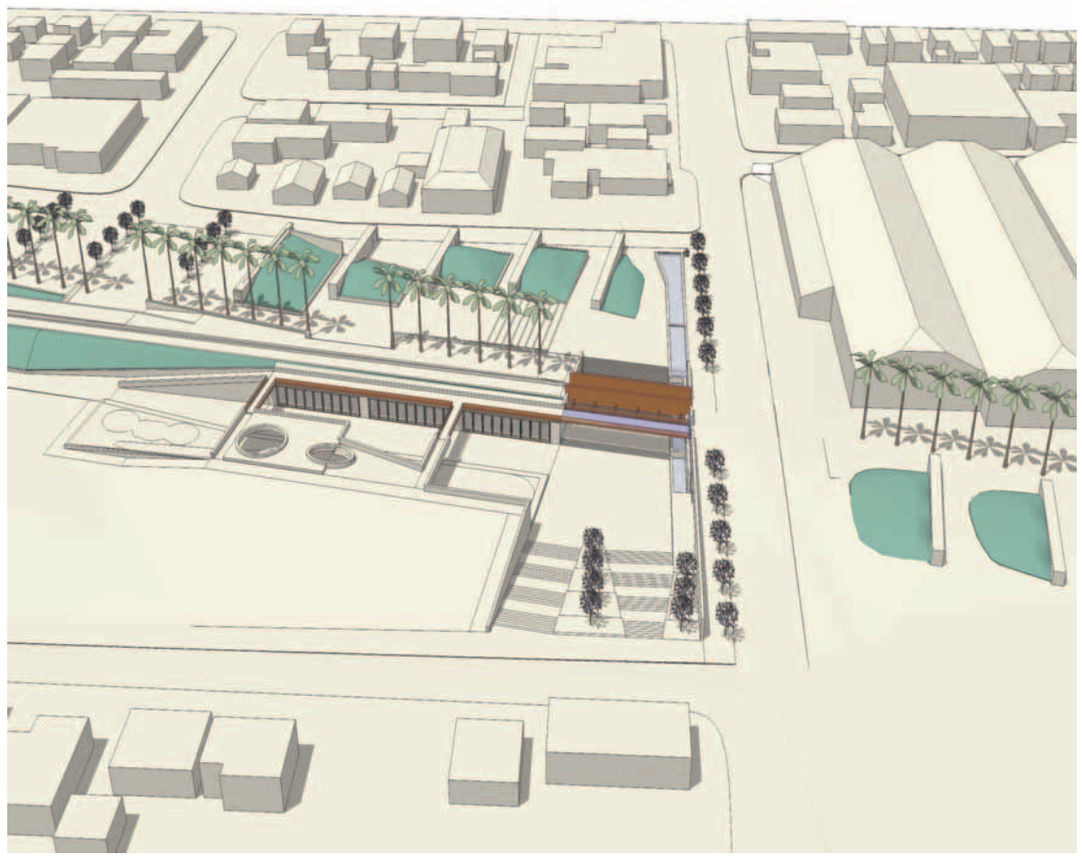
blue underworld

On my right, far below the train, skateboarders flash in and out of view through a curvaceous cavern. The area is animated with the movement of youth and those on vacation-skating, eating, shopping. meandering, laughing, talking.



Train Rider's View (C, Key Plan, page 19)

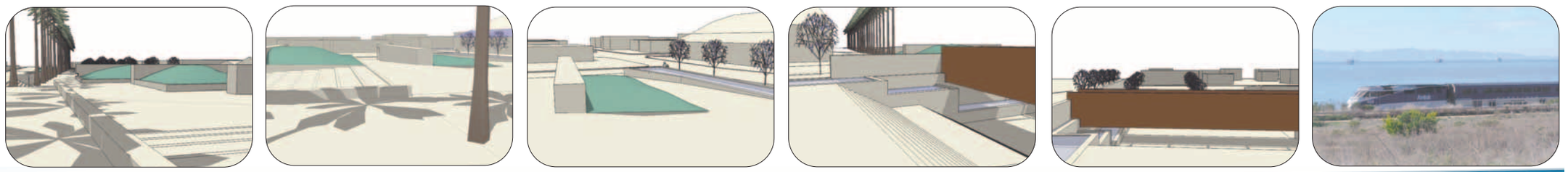




Train Rider as Pedestrian View (center image above; D, Key Plan, page 19)

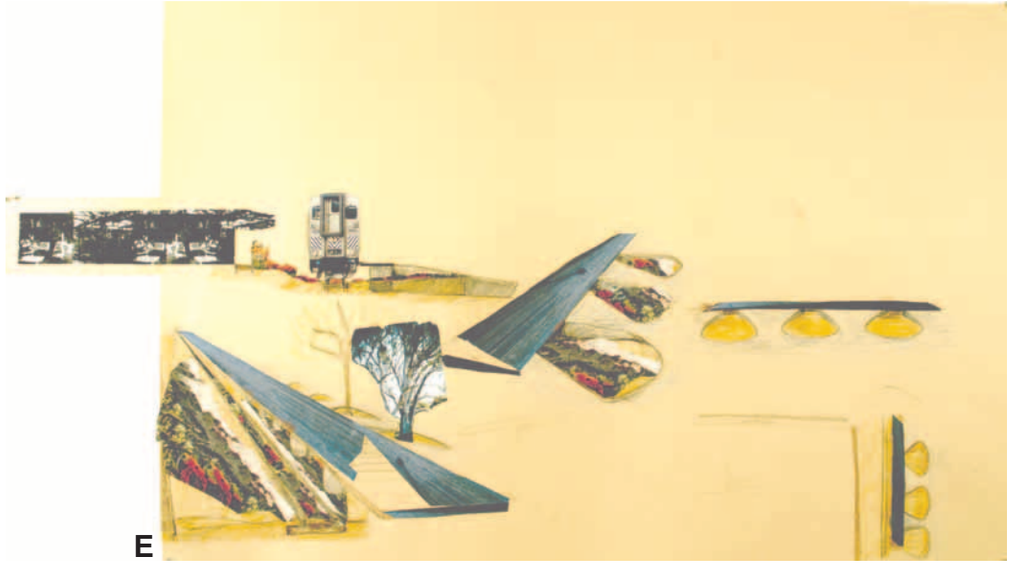
a moment

The doors release and I step off the train. Golden gravel crunches beneath my feet as I look up and see my Mom waiting in the shadow of a palm tree. Barely a moment later a horn blares and the train lurches forward. It whisks across the bridge, crosses Linden Avenue, and disappears towards San Diego. In the quiet that ensues we turn to walk to lunch following the direction of the stone walls that point us into the city.




SURFLINER
Amtrak California

B



E

process

(A) Shadow study of the site during four seasons of the year at 3 hour intervals.

(B) Site study reflecting a spectrum from regimented human time reliant on electricity and transportation (red) to seasonal rhythms (purple).

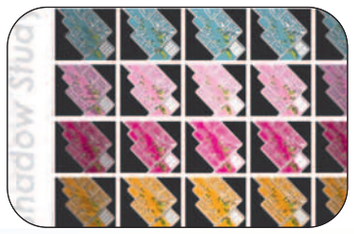
(C) Writing “stories” for each of the representative transportation characters who will use the site and where they overlap.

(D) First attempt at site layout according to a “mission” division of uses including arcade, garden, and gathering spaces.

D

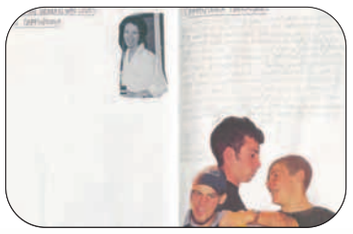
(E) Materials collages and perspectives to establish initial impressions of the sensual nature of site elements. Site layout inspiration was derived from the arc of mountains around Carpinteria and sense of distinct point of entry into and exit from the city.

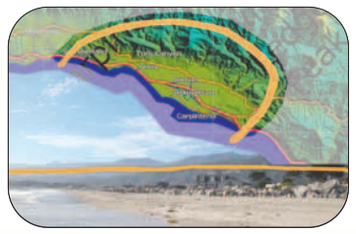
A

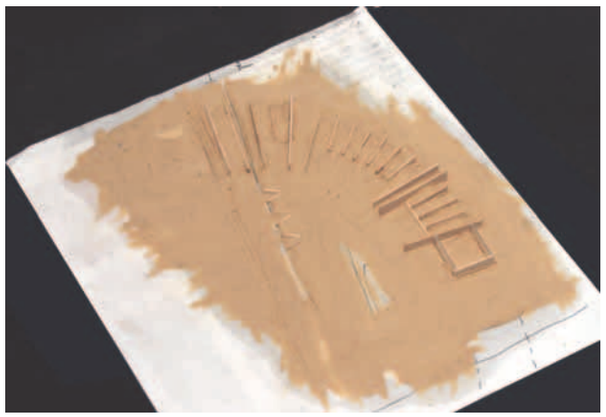


C

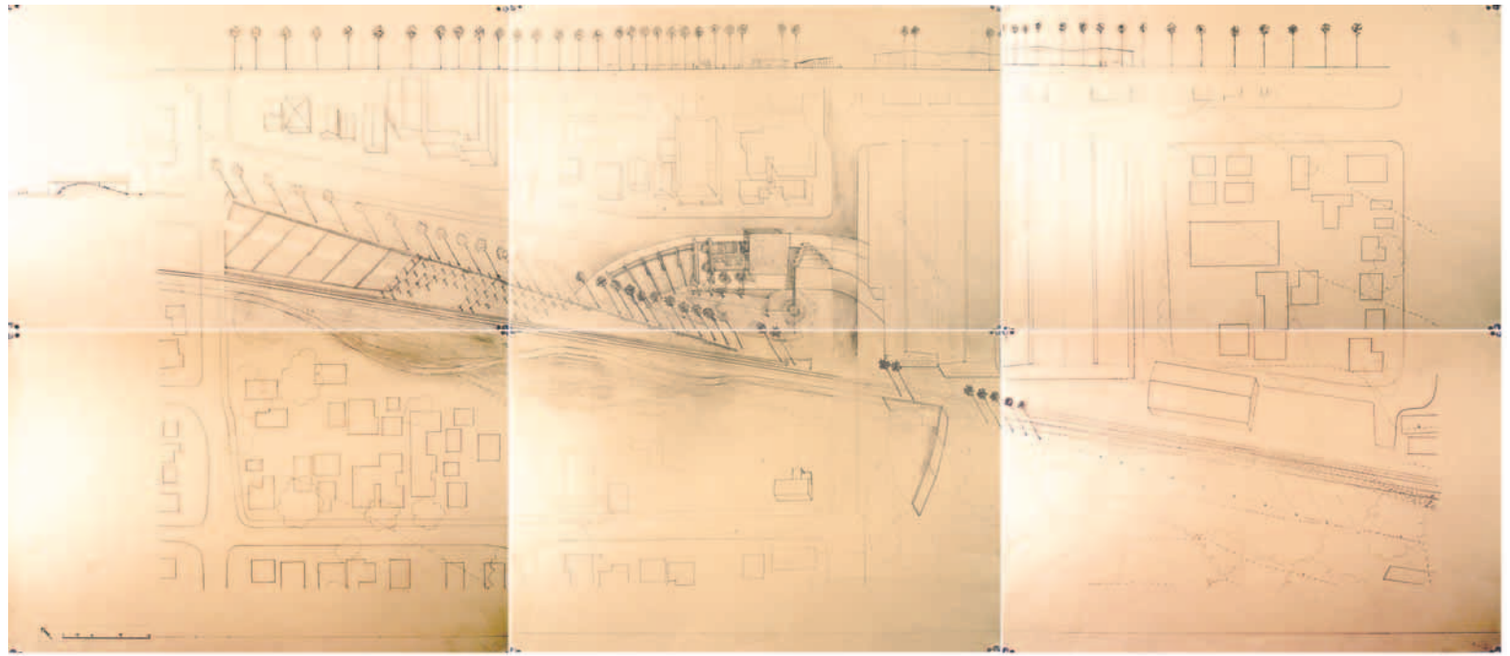
C







F

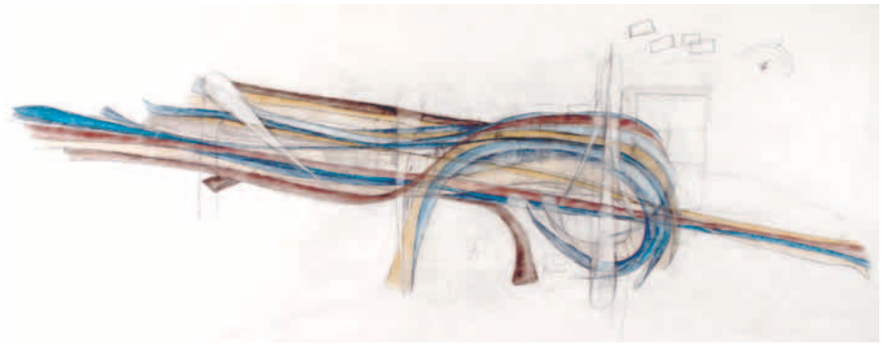


G

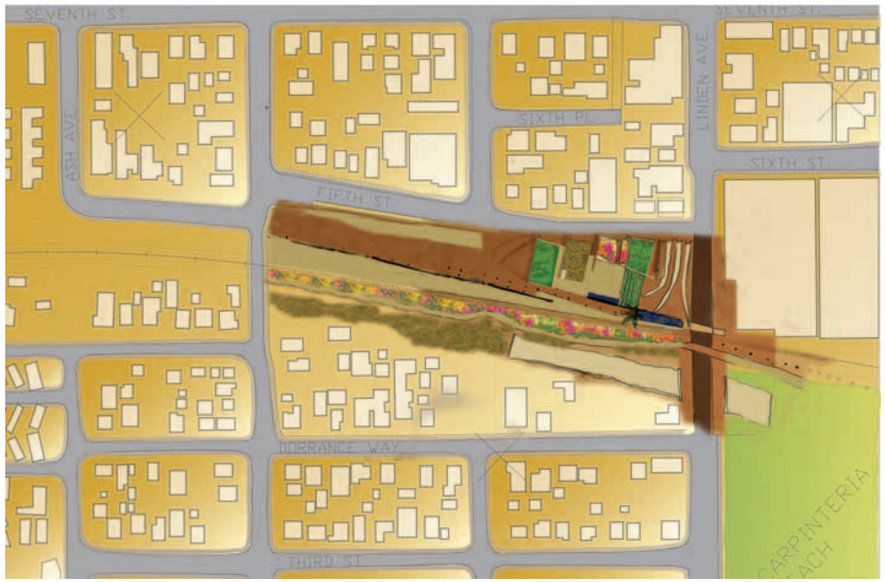
process

(F) Gestural clay model.
(G) Axon of the whole site at a larger scale. This type of drawing allowed for designing “into” the spaces by pulling and building the walls from the ground up At 9’ long, this drawing also helped to gain a better understanding of the rhythm of a long site connected to street, neighborhoods, park, and manufacturing.
(H) Photo snapshots while riding the train in California. This process birthed the idea of presenting the project in movie form and encouraged looking at the experience of the site in a frame by frame manner and emphasis on perspective of specific users.

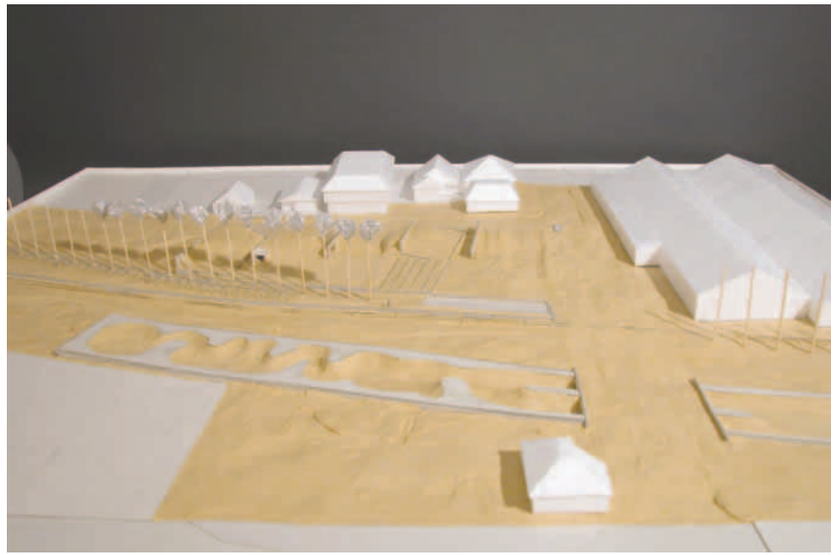
H

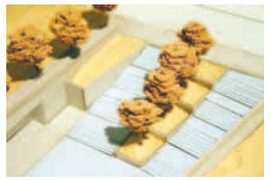


I



J





K

(K) Following the initial conceptual model, much of the designing came through sculpting the “earth,” cutting away and building on the model above. Using clay allowed for continual re-working and refinement. Snapshots represent moments in December, January, February, March and Defense.

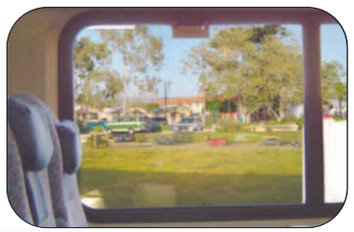
(L) KeyHole (now Google Earth) fly-throughs and Sketchup movies of the digital site model enabled me to put motion to the process by stitching together movies made in these computer programs with still photos and created imagery.

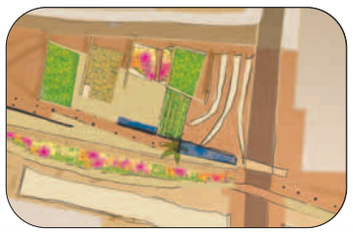
(K) Certain moments were crystallized or brought to life during the movie. Photoshop was used to overlay images of textures, people, plants, and places onto the Sketchup digital model “bones.”

process

(I) My “dark” time. Drawing of a layout idea inspired by Lee Bontecou art. Deemed a U-turn to my progress at the critique. Now I can laugh about this.

(J) Materials collage in plan exploring the visual experience of users passing through at different speeds.





L

M

sources

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Co. New York, NY. 2000.

IMAGES

All images by Lisa Rocci unless otherwise noted.

www.amtrak.com. Surfliner Route Map. (page 4)

www.californiacoastline.org. Aerial photos. (pages: 1 filmstrip images b-f, 2 all upper images)

Carpinteria Valley Historical Museum. 1936 Streamliner Train Photo. (page 1)

Ellen Sullivan. Train and Carpinteria photos. (pages: main photo on cover, 3 top photo)

Keyhole (now Google Earth). Google. Aerial satellite images. (pages: 4 top left and right and filmstrip b-f, 5 both top and filmstrip c,e,f; 6 top; 24 filmstrip d)

acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jaan for his vision for WAAC, a school that was a great fit for me and such an asset to Tech and the DC area. Thank you Ron for seeing my education through from start (school tour on September 10, 2001) to finish (what a nice note to end on, eh?). Susan, I am so greatful for your time and devotion as my mainstay committee member (I am, of course a landscape architecture student), and for your fruitful critiques that were an encouragement to my process. Paul, thank you for inspiring me to think about my project, drawing, and architecture in ways I never have before.

Jerry, you spent three-quarters of our marriage by my side every minute of grad school. You are a wonderful teacher and the most patient, sweet, amazing, devoted husband.

Ellen, thank you for going through the daily thesis grind with me to the end that we thought would never come. What a wonderful break to have so many moaments of insane laughter out in front of the school.

Amy, I missedyour smiling face so much when you left WAAC that I had to get a job at EDAW just to hang out with you more. Thank you for becoming such a great friend, I look forward to when you guys move West where you belong.

C & T, you guys are the BEST neighbors ever. Thank you for all your support, love, enthusiasm, engaging conversations, martini creativity, and endless hangout time. I could not have presented the movie without your help.

Paul, Linda, Meredith, Kristi, Annalisa and the landscape crew, did we stop laughing? What a time, good thing we made it out alive, eh?

Anna and John, thank you for your friendship and lamenting about the 'hood. E. Glendale will go down in the record book.

Jared, Claire, and Ted, my studio-mates, thank you for listening to my crazy-talk, keeping quiet when you think I've definitely lost it and answering all of my probably neverending questions. You guys were so wonderful, inspiring, and supportive to work beside in the final throes of my thesis. I (the Phantom Tollbooth) will definitely miss the LONG days in studio with you.

My Family (yes, all of you), thank you for all your love, support, and encouragement. Most of all, thank you for coming out from California to see me defend when it was so important for me to have you see the culmination of my work.
It meant so much for me to present to your proud, smiling faces.

Thank you Lord.

vita

Lisa C. Rocci was born in Santa Barbara, California and as a child bicycled, spontaneously sprinted and rode from place to place in the back of a 1976 Pontiac Trans Am. Growing up in Carpinteria, CA she mainly got around on foot and bicycle, and later a Sapphire Blue 1986 Dodge Ram pickup. At Cal Poly she earned a Bachelor's degree in Environmental Horticultural Science, navigating San Luis Obispo on foot and by Toyota 4x4. During a year-long study abroad of art in Italy, Lisa discovered the joy of beautifully planned, comprehensive public transit by riding busses and trains, and walking through Europe. During her time at WAAC in Alexandria, VA, Lisa had the opportunity to ride the Metro to and from D.C., walk to school daily, jog and bicycle along the Potomac, drive the scenic George Washington Parkway, and fly home to California a few times. Now back in California, she commutes to work by bicycle from Summerland to Santa Barbara along the Pacific Ocean, or shares a ride with her husband Jerry. She is also volunteering with carpskatepark.org in hopes of securing a great skateboarding park for the community. Lisa looks forward to the day that public transportation in Santa Barbara and Southern California becomes well-planned and accepted enough to be integral to daily life.