

Fresno's Downtown Revival — The Atlantic

James
Fallows

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A beleaguered city shows the path toward revival.



City of murals (James and Deborah Fallows)

I'll confess that as of a year ago, I had not given much thought to Fresno. When I was growing up in Southern California, I was aware mainly of L.A., San Francisco, Berkeley, and Newport Beach. In the reporting years since then most of my attention was on the stretch of California from San Jose all the way northward to the Embarcadero. I was aware of the Central Valley mainly as the place where the food came from, and as the setting for *American Graffiti*.

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As my wife Deb and I [have chronicled](#) over the past few weeks, after three visits, Fresno has become another of our new Favorite Cities—along with [Greenville](#), [Sioux Falls](#), [Allentown](#), Duluth, and on down the list. Some of the reasons include [innovative public schools](#), an arts scene with ambitions to become California's [next bohemia](#), tech startups that take advantage of the city's location [in the middle](#) of one of the world's major agricultural zones, and an ambitious plan [to remake](#) what is now a [very tattered](#) downtown.



Herewith three more notes:

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1) **Tech Training as a Crucial Part of Re-Knitting the American Fabric** . Everyone knows that research universities are crucial for creating valuable new industries, and everyone is right.

But I've come to think that community colleges, trade schools, and what used to be dismissively called "vocational education" are just about as important and deserve much more mind-share and support than they currently get. These are the main ways that people who are not going to be biomedical researchers, or federal judges, or corporate bigshots can still earn decent livings, through the modern counterparts to the lost, 1950s-era paradise of large-scale, high-wage factory jobs.

What are the modern counterparts? They're mainly not low-skill, low-wage jobs in retail, food service, or delivery functions. Instead they are skilled technical positions: people able to repair anything from an aircraft engine to a gas pipeline, those able to program 3D printers or lab-testing machines, many of the non-MD members of the growing medical-industrial complex. Where schools that teach these skills exist, and fit well into the local social and economic ecosystems, they do something to offset the relentless pressure on middle-income jobs. That's what we've seen and described in [Mississippi](#), and in [Maine](#), and in [Georgia](#) and [South Carolina](#), and elsewhere in [California](#) and [across the country](#).

Bitwise [SOUL program](#) students

This is happening in Fresno too. [Bitwise Industries](#), which I've described previously as a tech incubator, is also very active with the local public schools, and with Fresno State, and with other civic groups to connect people at many stages of life with improved tech-skill opportunities. The group shown at right are part of its SOUL program, or [School of Unlimited Learning](#), for high-schoolers.



When I visited Jake Soberal, Bitwise's co-founder (with Irma Olguin) and CEO, in the company's Mural District headquarters, people who appeared to range in age from their late teens to much, much older kept trooping into the building for coding classes. Some of them, Soberal said, were part of the long-term unemployed. "This is the most significant thing we do," he said of these adult courses.

"Most training programs take people from being out of the line, and put them in the back of the line," he said. "They get people all trained up for a poor job. We want to get them ready for the front of the line, for jobs in the highest growth industry on the planet," by which he meant anything requiring coding skills. "If we can do it here"—a chronically depressed community with many things working against it—"it can be a case study for other places." You can read his manifesto for remaking the local employment structure, in the form of [an open letter to Fresno](#) from Bitwise's co-founders.



Dear Fresno,

This is a story about how you change a city. This is not make-believe or hyperbole. It's a plan. Our signatures at the bottom aren't there because that's how to close a letter, they're a pledge to our city and to you.

Here's our plan: Begin with one.

Take the girl ricocheting her way through high school, wondering if her *thing* really exists. She's not popular or

Beginning of the Bitwise open letter to Fresno.

I don't know whether this strategy will succeed. I can say that it's similar in passion and approach to efforts we've seen work elsewhere.

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2) The Beautiful, Doomed Artistry of Downtown .

As described [before](#), many of Fresno's hopes rest on renovation of its still-structurally-elegant but now economically bombed-out historic downtown.

There is a bittersweet aspect to today's effort, because it involves—literally—bulldozing away a previous generation's attempts to save this same downtown. The December, 2014 issue of the (incredibly beautifully produced) *Landscape Architecture Magazine* has a long article called "Fresno v. Eckbo," the opening spread of which you see below:



LAM, December 2014 issue

You can read the whole article through a Zinio app [here](#). It lays out the pathos of the step the city is about to take. In

the early 1960s, Fresno commissioned the famed modernist architect [Garrett Eckbo](#) to design a modern, art-adorned, car-free pedestrian strolling-mall through the heart of the city's downtown.

For a while it was celebrated as a work of both artistic and commercial genius. But then, as the *LAM* article by Mimi Zeiger explains, the business and street life of Fresno relocated to the sprawl-malls of the northern suburbs.



The once-beautiful art-adorned mall, 50 years later: It still has the trees and statues, but almost no customers.

How could I resist including a view of this statue?

To save its downtown, Fresno is about to dig up the pedestrian mall that had been its pride and re-open it to cars. The article explains very clearly why that seems necessary, and why it is sad:

The new design is adaptive and will include removable bollards for street closures and events. It's not hard to imagine [a variety of local festivals and farmers' markets] filling the street. It's a vision for a new urban landscape shared by many mayors across the country.... "If this is successful, the street will be closed on many days," [the lead architect of the new project] reflects. "That's the irony."

It's worth reading the article and following this project.

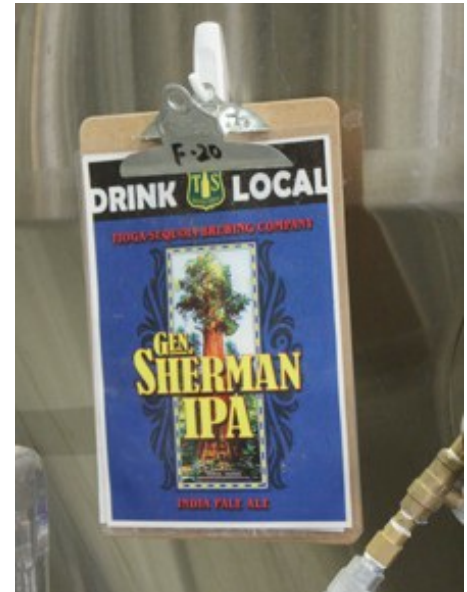
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3) A Wonderfully Situated Brewpub .

I'll say it again: One of the marks of a city-on-the-rise is a "Riverwalk" or bike path, whether or not there is actually a river. Another is the presence of craft-brew companies and brewpubs. Where there are brewpubs, by definition there are entrepreneurs. If the brewpubs stay in business it means there is a class of mainly young customers willing to come to usually downtown locations and support other businesses too.

I'm biased in favor of brewpubs as a class, but I was especially fond of [Tioga-Sequoia](#), one of the pioneers in opening a business in downtown Fresno, for these reasons:

- Its products suit my taste very well. (General Sherman IPA is its mainstay, named after a famous redwood in nearby Sequoia National Park.)





Drink Local, inside the T-S taproom

- It is local-local-local in its branding and marketing approach. (Its slogan is "The Central Valley's Brewery"; its president Michael Cruz and brewmaster Kevin Cox told us that their ambition was not to go nationwide or even statewide but instead to be *the* beer of the Valley. "And we want to show that something good can come out of this town," Cruz said.)



Tioga-Sequoia's Kevin Cox (left) and Michael Cruz

- Its branding has a campy charm, being based on the Forest Service shield also familiar from Yosemite. (For a while, the Forest Service made a show of complaining. Now some Rangers put T-S stickers on their cars.)
- Its location is sublime, adjoining the town's downtown minor-league park.

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That is enough for now. The country is big and interesting, and full of more positive experimentation, including in places like Fresno, than we had any reason to expect when we began this journey.