

## An Incredible Time-Capsule View of One Downtown's Development

May 13, 2015

U.S.

Can tearing up a noted artistic zone be a path to civic success? City leaders say yes, while some of their citizens say no.



Does the 1960s version of tomorrow seem like yesterday? [Victor Gruen Associates documentary, via YouTube](#)

You never thought there would be so much to say [say about Fresno](#)? Join the club!

When my wife Deb and I rolled through town a year ago, at the suggestion of Fresno-downtown [publican and booster Craig Scharton](#), we had no idea that a place we'd known mainly as the business center of California's fertile-but-troubled Central Valley would turn out to be a microcosm of so many economic, environmental, cultural, political, and other predicaments in modern America.

## The people, organizations, and ideas reshaping the country

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But it is revealing in all those ways, as we've tried to explain in recent posts. For instance, "[Creating California's New Bohemia](#)," "[Reinventing High School](#)," "[California's Centers of Technology](#)," and "[How Nice Downtowns Got That Way](#)."



This may be the end for now of our Fresno chronicles, so it's a place for two "on the other hand" notes. Both involve what is now [the centerpiece](#) of urban-recovery efforts: bulldozing [an artistically ambitious](#) but commercially stagnant pedestrian-only mall, so it can be re-opened to traffic.

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1) *An incredible time-capsule film.* Exactly 50 years ago, Fresno was celebrating the inspiring opening of this very mall. The [video below](#), described on the [Streets MN site](#) and in this earlier [CityLab post](#), is a period piece worth watching as a complement to the last stages of *Mad Men*.

Nothing about this video could be created now. Just take the tone of the announcer's voice: This was once the dominant tone in newsreel narration, but not an American alive sounds this way. The first few minutes of the film—which was shown in toto at the White House as part of Lady Bird Johnson's civic beautification campaign—vividly if ham-handedly describe what sprawl was already doing to distort and destroy American cities. (And speaking of ham-handed, notice the shift in background music, from the ominous "urban decay" theme of the opening minutes to the chipper "bright tomorrow!" themes that follow.) The film, juxtaposed with modern scenes, is like the civic version of the movie *Boys n the Hood*, with the aging process extended much further.

The improbable-drama part of this video is that what it is presenting as the mid-1960s solution to sprawl, an elegant art-filled pedestrian mall, is precisely what is now identified as yet another aggravating and sprawl-intensifying factor. Additional surreal note: The film shows the groundbreaking of the Fresno Fulton Street Mall by the then-governor of California, Pat Brown. Fifty years later, Pat Brown's son Jerry came to Fresno as governor for groundbreaking on a high-speed rail station that is part of the redevelopment plan.

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2) *"Historic and aesthetic value" being cast aside.* As I've mentioned in previous posts [like this one](#), Fresno's current plan is poignant. The circa-2015 idea of what it takes to save downtown means undoing the circa-1965 artistic and high-minded ideal of how downtown should look.

I've said that, on balance, I'm convinced by the 2015 version. Ray McKnight, a former chair of the Downtown Fresno Coalition, writes to say that I am wrong, wrong, wrong. Since I've given the other side so much space, I quote him in full.

He begins by saying that he generally agrees with my writing:

*That is why I am deeply disappointed in your blogs about the plan to convert Fresno's Fulton Mall into a street. It appears that you made no effort to interview anyone from the sizable group of community members who are opposed to the mayor's plan. Perhaps the people you confined all your attention to while in Fresno failed to inform you about this opposition, an opposition so dedicated to the Mall that it has expended tens of thousands of dollars challenging the CEQA and NEPA environmental reports on the project.*

*The people you relied on for information while in Fresno perhaps also failed to tell you that Fulton Mall*

was created because Fulton Street was already failing as a retail center.

*I have noticed that the Downtown Partnership website makes the shockingly dishonest claim that before 1964 Fulton was “a vibrant Main Street that was open to cars, people and bikes.” The facts are that Fulton was failing as a retail center as businesses were moving to Manchester Center and other places to the north. It was that failure that prompted business and civic leaders to engage Victor Gruen to devise a plan for the downtown in order to reverse the trend. If Fulton Street was failing then, why should it succeed now when there are several popular shopping centers to the north that attract shoppers?*

*The put-in-the-street proponents studiously ignore the fact that it was poor governmental decision-making that failed to stop the decline of the downtown and prevented the Mall from being a success. An important part of Gruen’s plan for the downtown was the creation of a large number of housing units. That was never done. Only in recent years has there been some effort to create housing in the area around the Fulton Mall.*

*Another significant blow to saving the downtown was the the City’s reversal of its planning policy. The policy of centralization was changed to a policy of decentralization, as city government supinely submitted to leap-frog development to the north. After Manchester Center came Fashion Fair, then other large shopping centers that accompanied urban sprawl to the north. Failure to complete the Gruen Plan and reversal of planning policy sealed the fate of downtown Fresno as the region’s retail center. Fulton Mall is the scapegoat, not the cause, of the downtown’s decline.*

*You might want to look into the history of Operation Rezone, the FBI’s investigation several years ago into the corrupt collusion between city officials and developers in Fresno. Those bad-old days may be in the past, but developers still exert a great deal of influence in City Hall. Just recently an organization of developers was successful in getting the draft General Plan to define infill development as covering substantially the entire City. So much for “offsetting” urban sprawl.*

*The map you include in your blogs, which you say hangs in Mayor Swearengin’s office, shows the futility of the plan to revive Fulton as a “main street.” When the population of Fresno was around 130,000 and centered around Fulton, everyone could go there to shop. Now there are a half-million people in a sprawling metropolitan area, and shopping malls with free parking offer more convenient parking.*

*There is no guarantee that turning Fulton Mall into a street will bring more business to the area, but it is certain that the effort will destroy one of the main achievements of Garrett Eckbo, a world-renowned figure in 20th-Century landscape architecture. [JF note: [as described in this post](#).] Through our efforts, Fulton Mall has gained recognition as a historical resource. When in 2010 the National Park Service determined the eligibility of the Fulton Mall for the National Register of Historic Places, it cited the Mall’s importance as a work of “master landscape architect, Garrett Eckbo, whose career as both teacher and practitioner helped transform the field of post-war landscape architecture.”*

*When that announcement was made, City Hall ignored it. They had tried to prevent it by sending a delegation to Sacramento to speak against it when the nomination was being considered by the state’s Office of Historic Preservation. City Hall only began to mention the recognition of the Mall as a historical resource when it could support their applications for federal grants. The City has never attempted to capitalize on wide-spread attention and recognition for the Mall and make the Mall an asset and tourist attraction. No other part of Fresno’s built environment has been given that much attention—and yet we have people who want to eliminate it!*

*As an example of the recognition of the value of Fulton Mall among reputable experts, I will quote*

*Charles Birnbaum, Founder and President of The Cultural Landscape Foundation: "The Mall is a masterwork of Garrett Eckbo's professional career and is potentially significant as a National Historic Landmark, both as the work of a master and a rare surviving example with a high degree of design integrity." The context of that quotation is of special interest. It comes from Birnbaum's report when he was a consultant in the early stages of the Fulton Corridor Specific Plan.*

*Many cities may have abandoned their pedestrian malls, but it is doubtful that they had the historic and aesthetic value of the Fulton Mall. To my knowledge only two other pedestrian malls have been given recognition as national historic places: the Downtown Mall in Charlottesville, designed by Lawrence Halperin, and Lincoln Road Mall in Miami Beach, designed by Morris Lapidus. A common feature of those two and the more than a dozen other existing pedestrian malls is that they are praised and promoted on city websites. We can contrast that with the treatment of Fulton Mall by the present and at least two former city administrations: neglect and denigration.*

Noted. We heard enough to understand that these questions are divisive and contested. I've been in favor of the Fresno plan because it resembles what we've seen work elsewhere. And although it sounds lame to end this way, I will end by saying: We'll hope, and see.

- Previous James Fallows Post [Et Tu, QZ? The Boiled-Frog Watch Returns](#)
- Next James Fallows Post [What It's Like When Your City Goes Broke](#)

## U.S.

### The Texas Biker-Gang Massacre

Nine people are dead after a fight among bikers escalated into a gun battle involving police and outlaw organizations that seemed ripped from another era.



### About the Author

- [James Fallows](#) is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and has written for the magazine since the late 1970s. He has reported extensively from outside the United States and once worked as President Carter's chief speechwriter. His latest book is [China Airborne](#).
  - [Email](#)



### Most Popular

- [Mad Men: A New Day, a New You](#)

In the series finale, some characters said their goodbyes, while others embarked on fresh beginnings.

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- **[Game of Thrones: A Pointless Horror and a Ridiculous Fight](#)**

[Spencer Kornhaber](#), [Christopher Orr](#), and [Amy Sullivan](#) discuss the latest episode of *Game of Thrones*.

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**Orr:** First, a brief victory lap. In this space [two weeks ago](#), I suggested that Bronn would be a big fan of the easy-listening Westerosi standard “[The Dornishman’s Wife](#).” And when we re-encountered Bronn tonight, what was he singing? Yep, that’s right. Readers can send in their requests for any other Seven Kingdoms chart-toppers, and we’ll see what we can accomplish. Operators are standing by.

(Also: Digression from a digression. Jerome Flynn, who plays Bronn, was trying very hard not to show off his singing voice tonight. But he was in fact half of the 1990s doo-wop duo Robson and Jerome. He gets to demonstrate his pipes a bit with this amiable cover of “[Up on the Roof](#)”; and while he’s mostly backup on “[Unchained Melody](#),” the video makes touching use of footage from David Lean’s intimate masterpiece *Brief Encounter*. I can’t help but think that this background is one reason that Flynn’s able to sell even the simplest of lines with a certain musical lilt. And now back to our regularly scheduled programming .)

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- **[Starship Troopers: One of the Most Misunderstood Movies Ever](#)**

When Paul Verhoeven’s *Starship Troopers* hit theaters 16 years ago today, most American critics slammed it. In the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin panned the “crazed, lurid spectacle,” as featuring “raunchiness tailor-made for teen-age boys.” Jeff Vice, in the *Deseret News*, called it “a nonstop splatterfest so devoid of taste and logic that it makes even the most brainless summer blockbuster look intelligent.” Roger Ebert, who had praised the “pointed social satire” of Verhoeven’s *Robocop*, found the film “one-dimensional,” a trivial nothing “pitched at 11-year-old science-fiction fans.”

But those critics had missed the point. *Starship Troopers* is satire, a ruthlessly funny and keenly self-aware sendup of right-wing militarism. The fact that it was and continues to be taken at face value speaks to the very vapidness the movie skewers.

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- **[The Texas Biker-Gang Massacre](#)**

Scores of bikers gathered at a bar-restaurant Sunday in Waco, Texas. Expecting trouble, a dozen police officers were standing by. And then: mayhem. A fight spilled into the parking lot, “initially involving just fists and feet, but escalating quickly to chains, knives, clubs and firearms,” *The New York Times* [reported](#). “Eight members of motorcycle clubs were killed at the scene and another died at a hospital.”

The shootout took place at a busy shopping center.

“There were maybe 30 guns being fired in the parking lot,” a witness [told](#) the *Waco Tribune*. “There’s a lot of people in the hospital, a lot of people shot.” All bikers, amazingly. Bikers reportedly fired at one another and at police, who fired back. No video has yet emerged and although 100 people were detained for questioning, none of the bikers has yet spoken to the press. The *Tribune* added, “other local dining and drinking establishments, including Rudy’s Country Store & Bar-B-Q, closed early as concern spread that other gang members were traveling to Waco to resume the violence.”

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- **How Fox News Is (Still) Hurting the Republicans**

Let me recommend for your weekend reading, or for your weekday reading if you're seeing it then, a detailed study by Bruce Bartlett called "How Fox News Changed American Media and Political Dynamics." You can download the 18-page PDF from [this site of the Social Science Research Network](#).

The idea that Fox News operates with different aims and by different norms from those of, say, the BBC is familiar. But this presentation is notable for two reasons.

The first is its source—for those who don't know, [Bartlett is a veteran](#) of the Reagan and Bush-41 administrations and was an influential early proponent of supply-side / tax-cut economics. He also worked for Ron Paul. Since then he's harshly criticized the Bush-43 administration, but in no sense does he come at this as a Democratic party operative.

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- **How Your Cat Is Making You Crazy**

No one would accuse Jaroslav Flegr of being a conformist. A self-described "sloppy dresser," the 53-year-old Czech scientist has the contemplative air of someone habitually lost in thought, and his still-youthful, square-jawed face is framed by frizzy red hair that encircles his head like a ring of fire.

Certainly Flegr's thinking is jarringly unconventional. Starting in the early 1990s, he began to suspect that a single-celled parasite in the protozoan family was subtly manipulating his personality, causing him to behave in strange, often self-destructive ways. And if it was messing with his mind, he reasoned, it was probably doing the same to others.

The parasite, which is excreted by cats in their feces, is called *Toxoplasma gondii* (*T. gondii* or *Toxo* for short) and is the microbe that causes toxoplasmosis—the reason pregnant women are told to avoid cats' litter boxes. Since the 1920s, doctors have recognized that a woman who becomes infected during pregnancy can transmit the disease to the fetus, in some cases resulting in severe brain damage or death. *T. gondii* is also a major threat to people with weakened immunity: in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, before good antiretroviral drugs were developed, it was to blame for the dementia that afflicted many patients at the disease's end stage. Healthy children and adults, however, usually experience nothing worse than brief flu-like symptoms before quickly fighting off the protozoan, which thereafter lies dormant inside brain cells—or at least that's the standard medical wisdom.

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- **What ISIS Really Wants**

What is the Islamic State?

Where did it come from, and what are its intentions? The simplicity of these questions can be deceiving, and few Western leaders seem to know the answers. In December, *The New York Times* published confidential comments by Major General Michael K. Nagata, the Special Operations commander for the United States in the Middle East, admitting that he had hardly begun figuring out the Islamic State's appeal. "We have not defeated the idea," he said. "We do not even understand the idea." In the past year, President Obama has referred to the Islamic State, variously, as "not Islamic" and as al-Qaeda's "jayvee team," statements that reflected confusion about the group, and may have contributed to significant strategic errors.

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- **The Evolution of Bitchiness**

One day in Ontario, 86 straight women were paired off into groups of two—either with a friend or a stranger—and taken to a lab at McMaster University. There, a researcher told them they were about to take part in a study about female friendships. But they were soon interrupted by one of two women.

"You're going to say, 'I don't want my guy next to a girl with a short skirt.' But that's not because, evolutionarily speaking, your guy is more likely to cheat on you with the short-skirt girl."

Half the participants were interrupted by a thin, blond, attractive woman with her hair in a bun, dressed in a plain blue t-shirt and khaki pants, whom the researchers called "the conservative confederate."

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- **Playing the Granny Card**

Why do older women exist? What—if anything—is the true and universal purpose of the postmenopausal female? For women "of a certain age" (one wonders if a similarly condescending phrase was ever coined to describe men who are no longer nubile, or even if there is any masculine equivalent for *nubile*), it will come as no surprise to learn that science has pondered this question. Along with killer whales, humans are one of the few animal species in which females live long after they stop reproducing. One theory—the "grandmother hypothesis"—speculates that this is because humanity benefits from having built-in babysitters. Prehistorically, the hypothesis goes, caregiving grandmothers provided an extra hand to help with the grandchildren, improving survival rates and allowing the human race to flourish.

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- **Stranded: How America's Failing Public Transportation Increases Inequality**

Transportation is about more than just moving people from point A to point B. It's also a system that can either limit or expand the opportunities available to people based on where they live. In many cities, the areas with the shoddiest access to public transit are the most impoverished—and the lack of investment leaves many Americans without easy access to jobs, goods, and services.

To be certain, the aging and inadequate transportation infrastructure is an issue for Americans up and down the economic ladder. Throughout the country highways are crumbling, bridges are in need of repair, and railways remain inadequate. Improvement to public transportation—buses, trains, and safer routes for bicycles—is something that just about everyone who lives in a major metropolitan area has on their wish list. But there's a difference between preference and necessity: "Public transportation is desired by many but is even more important for lower-income people who can't afford cars," says Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a professor at Harvard University and author of a new book *Move: Putting America's Infrastructure Back in the Lead*.

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- **A Rational Defense of Sleeping Alone**

Imagine a world where everyone sleeps well, because no one sleeps together.

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