
National City

Fall 2015 • HONOR 113 – SEM: Connection and Commitment: Ways of Seeing Everyday Life

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Field Notes: Community arts center - very cute, family friendly, creates a safe, welcoming feeling and is very bright and visually appealing.

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Disclaimer

This report represents original student work and recommendations prepared by students in San Diego State University’s Sage Project for the City of National City. Text and images contained in this report may not be used without permission from the San Diego State University.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank Dr. Kristen Maher for giving Honor 113 the tools necessary and the opportunity to work with the Sage Project and National City. She created this project with student leadership and responsibility at the core of our research. With a relay of instructions from the city, Dr. Maher brought us onsite to begin observations through an ethnographic lens. Her years of experience and expertise helped us become better observers and helped us find patterns as we observed, leading to the addition of one more important section.

Next, we would like to thank Brad Raulston, Executive Director of Community Development, for initially planning this project. We thank Armando Vergara and Gilbert Gonzalez for reviewing our project’s findings and presentations in class. And finally, we would like to thank the Weber Honors College at San Diego State University for purchasing a group membership to the Fulcrum App, without which our observations would have been nearly impossible to record.

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About the Sage Project

The Sage Project is a partnership between San Diego State University (SDSU) and a local government in the San Diego region. Students, through their course work, engage in meaningful real-world projects and contribute to pressing social needs in a community in SDSU’s service area. Students from across the University assist local governments with partner-directed projects that address their livability and sustainability goals. SDSU students and faculty connect with high-priority, high-need, highly interdisciplinary community projects, thereby generating interest and fresh ideas that create momentum and provide real service to the community. Each year, the Sage Project at SDSU engages hundreds of students from diverse disciplines who invest thousands of hours assisting communities in our region as they seek to build a more equitable and sustainable future. The Sage Project is part of the Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities (EPIC) Network, and is based on the highly successful and award winning Sustainable City Year Program at the University of Oregon.

About National City

National City is a highly urban community of about 60,000 residents in south San Diego County. It is the second oldest city in the county and boasts a rich history, a diverse community, and is known as one of the most walkable cities in San Diego County. Located just south of downtown San Diego and just north of the US–Mexico border, the city is flanked by freeways and is home to large-scale industries. National City is a mid-size city that faces big city challenges, and, like many municipalities, the city is challenged to meet community needs and new demands of sustainability. By providing new ideas and human capacity, this partnership with the Sage Project will help National City implement sustainability concepts and practices into projects that will improve livability.
Executive Summary

In October 2015, Dr. Kristen Hill Maher's class conducted a project designed by redevelopment director, Brad Raulston, to observe elements of safety, visual appeal, and way-finding in particular areas of the city, as well as parking usage surrounding Southwestern Community College. We collected a total of 305 unique observational records. Each section in this report correlates to one of the above topics, offering our findings and recommendations for National City to address any concerns that arose from our observations.

The safety section recommends:

• more selective and decisive graffiti control within key public places
• eliminating litter throughout the city by installing more trash cans, and
• using abandoned buildings from past businesses as temporary community center or as sites of murals.

The recommendations in the visual appeal section overlap with some from the safety section, including installing more trash cans throughout the city and implementing alternative scenery.

The way-finding group recommends fixing signs along 8th Street to reflect accurate directions for pedestrians, changing sign placement to minimize blocking from nearby trees, and minor adjustments in sign placement to minimize confusion. This group also made specific recommendations to make the city more accessible for disabled people, including improving maintenance of disability signs, marking disability accessibility more clearly, and creating more effective detours around construction zones.

On the basis of their observations of parking usage surrounding the college, the parking group recommends regulating parking time limits for street parking and advocating carpools.
Introduction

In this project, the students of Dr. Maher’s Honor 113 class collaborated with National City staff to make observations in National City with four goals in mind. The class was split into four different groups, each with a specific focus. One group observed how safe particular areas within the city felt and what cues made them draw those conclusions. A second group focused on visual appeal to identify where the city had developed appealing aesthetics and where these might be improved. A third group focused on way-finding, observing how easily one could navigate the city. The observations of the first three groups focused on the area along National City Boulevard, bounded by 8th Street, 12th Street, and D Avenue. The final group examined how people utilized on-and off-street parking surrounding Southwestern Community College. All observations made in this report are original observations made by students of the Weber Honors College at San Diego State University (SDSU).

Methods

To conduct our observations, we utilized a mobile data collection program by Fulcrum, which included an application downloadable to smartphones. We designed two versions of the app, tailoring sets of questions described below that allowed for detailed data collection on different topics.

Figure 1: The Fulcrum App as used by participants to log observations for safety, visual appeal, and wayfinding.
The groups focusing on safety, visual appeal, and way-finding all worked within the same app, and we referred to them collectively as “SAW,” referring to Safety, Appeal, and Way–finding. The key questions for these groups were:

1. Safety: Where do you feel safe or unsafe (and why)?
2. Visual Appeal: What spaces hold or lack visual appeal for you, and why?
3. Way–finding: How easy or hard is it for you to find your way around?

The app for those making observations on these topics prompted them to select a category for each observation, identify an evaluation of the observation—positive, negative, neither, or both—write field notes about the observation, and add a picture. The field notes included the observer’s initial impressions that they later expanded upon. At the bottom, a location was automatically generated by the students' smartphone location services, adding a pin to a map containing all the observations made by the SAW group.

Figure 2: Map of observations made by the safety, visual appeal, and wayfinding groups.
The group focusing on parking had a different prompt to address their observation needs. They had two questions to frame their observations:

1) Can the college parking structure meet student demand?

2) Where and when is parking in this area in high demand, and by whom? The questionnaire on the app then cued them to note the date, time of day, the type of parking (garage, off-street lot, on-street spaces), the level of demand at the moment, the proportion of spaces filled, and what kinds of users were apparent. In addition, they added field notes and took a photo.

![Figure 3: The Fulcrum App as used by participants to log observations for parking.](image)

In addition to completing the survey on the app for each observation, the parking group supplemented their information by directly interviewing people parking their cars or operating businesses affected by parking issues. They added information from such interviews to their field notes. After they completed each observation, its location was automatically added to a separate map.
The maps of observation locations between the SAW group and the parking group were separate from each other to minimize cluttering and confusion between the two groups.

Student observers made observations at different times of day and different days of the week between September 22 and October 3, 2015. As seen in Figure 5, 305 total records were added to the system. 65% were recorded from the SAW group and 35% came from the parking group.

There were some limitations to our methods, the most significant being the time of day. Many of our observations were taken between 2 pm and 5 pm, given that the class was composed entirely of full–time students who were not available for
observation during the hours when most classes were offered. While this timing may not have had much effect on the observations included in the SAW group, the observations made about student parking may vary from what is experienced during high traffic times at the college.

**Safety**

The safety group focused on what areas made them feel safe or unsafe, and they analyzed what cues led them to these conclusions. Many of the participants came from different backgrounds, and so they often included several different observations about the same location, since each observation would reflect the personal experience or perspective of a particular individual. In analyzing this data, they considered the differences in perspective and how their own experiences (for instance, the kinds of communities in which they had grown up) shaped their reactions.

There were three areas in particular that cued an overwhelmingly positive response in safety among the participants. These areas were Kimball Park, A Avenue between East 9th Street and East Plaza Boulevard, and Morgan Square. Kimball Park was the area that received the most positive results, with many cues that signaled that it was a safe place. Such cues included an open area, cleanliness, children playing, and good lighting. These cues were the most commonly cited categories among safety observations and play an essential role in determining the feeling of safety in an area. These observations do not reflect the actual safety, but the emotional response in regards to the safety of specific areas.

The first area in which this group recorded unsafe feelings was 12th Street Park. Observations reported a strong presence of graffiti. Graffiti can signal a feeling of danger because it tends to correlate with gang activity in the area. A park is intended for community use, but the presence of graffiti deters the community from that area because of safety concerns. We noticed a concentrated effort to cover up graffiti throughout the city, but the efforts appeared to be spread thin across a large array of areas. Instead, we recommend honing in on a few key areas of activity to keep clean. These areas could include community areas, parks, or landmark areas.

The next area in which this group recorded cues about a sense of lessened safety was along 8th Street. Along 8th street, there was graffiti present on signs and occasionally on walls. Again, the presence of graffiti cues negative reactions to safety.
However, 8th Street also received a large number of reports about trash, which also signaled a sense of danger. The most reported portion of 8th Street in this regard is on either side of the freeway underpass. Each side has an old, rusted fence that appears to have been breached several times. This breaching made several participants feel unsafe because it cued the presence of homeless people and possibly illegal dealings within the shadows on the bridge. However, behind these fences lay visible piles of trash. These piles cued a strong sense of danger as it suggests that the city did not spend much time monitoring this area. If the city does not show a noticeable presence within an area, the average adult would feel unsafe because there is nobody to protect them should a crime occur.

To correct this impression, we recommend the city send a team to clean up this area of trash and replace breached fences with a different style of fencing to signal the city’s involvement in all areas of the city. Replacing with a new fence style—such as a bar fence—could discourage future breaches and make climbing over the fence particularly difficult. Then, to maintain the area, the city staff may want to organize a community clean-up project to spread awareness about trash and, hopefully, create an even more mindful community to keep the city clean. Cleanliness also seemed to correlate with aesthetically pleasing areas. To this regard, we recommend adding a scenic touch behind the fence, hopefully discouraging people from further littering.

The last cue for feeling unsafe was the presence of abandoned buildings. Though it is expected of every city to have some abandoned buildings, and the presence of abandoned buildings is no fault of the city, rectifying the visual blight could be simple and effective. Many of these abandoned buildings have large empty spaces on the inside with many aesthetically unappealing and potentially unsafe features.

Figure 6: Graffiti found on a sign along 8th Street, just outside the trolley station.

Figure 7: A vacant retail space.
To rectify this negative visual cue, we recommend one of two actions. The first action is to create a temporary mural on the windows. This mural could be used as a way to block the view of the inside of these abandoned buildings while further adding to the strong presence of community art. Another action that could be taken would be to turn these abandoned buildings into temporary community areas. Small recreational centers for residents to visit, or simply a lounging area could create an aesthetically pleasing area with a stronger sense of safety that could further strengthen the community. The only negative we foresee with creating new recreational centers within these abandoned buildings is the possibility that residents could become attached to the center and might be displeased with a business occupying that space. This could force the city to devote more funds to building more spaces for other businesses to occupy in the future. While this may seem expensive in the short term, this plan has the potential to bring even more businesses with more employment opportunities to National City as demand in large public areas increase.

**Visual Appeal**

Much of the visual appeal category ties together with the safety category because a significant portion of safety cues are visual. With this in mind, many observation categories in visual appeal overlap with safety. In that regard, pursuing recommendations within either the safety category or the visual appeal category will provide a double payoff for the city. Likewise, many of the observations are relatively similar but stated through a different framing lens.

The visual appeal group approached this project with one question in mind: “What spaces hold or lack visual appeal to you?” To accomplish this task, this group would periodically stop and ask their central question in order to make an observation.

Some of the common categories that cued positive responses to visual appeal included: greenery, lights, open spaces, and cleanliness. Overall, National City held more positive responses to visual appeal, as seen in Figure 8.

Of the fifty negative responses, the most heavily noted response dealt with litter. It appeared that the city attempted to curb litter in Kimball Park and succeeded.

![Figure 8: The total data found by the group concerned with visual appeal.](image-url)
As seen in Figure 9, there are three trashcans within steps of each other. Consequently, Kimball Park is virtually litter free. However, this litter–free zone does not extend very far beyond Kimball Park, as litter is seen along busy sidewalks, in planters, and in greenery that would otherwise cue positive responses to the visual appeal.

During our observations, we noted that National City Boulevard had relatively few trashcans. The few trashcans that we found had a profound impact on the surrounding area, as people threw their trash into an appropriate receptacle. However, in the areas with no visible trashcans, litter permeated several crevices. To combat this type of litter, we recommend adding more trashcans along sidewalks or, when there are trash cans present, we suggest making those trash cans more visible and accessible.

**Figure 9:** Kimball Park has several trashcans within steps of each other.

**Figure 10:** Litter that is present throughout other parts of the city.
The next most cited category of negative visual appeal was empty spaces—especially those consisting of only dirt patches.

These dirt patches were marked as visually unappealing and cued a negative response in the safety category for some people. To deal with these dirt patches, we decided upon several recommendations given the extenuating circumstances of California's current climate. The most positive cue would be to implement greenery into these dirt patches. Something as simple as grass or full-grown bushes would add a great aesthetic aspect to these small portions of the city; according to our data, greenery has the highest positive rating in visual appeal. However, the drawback to adding greenery is the tight water restrictions in place in California due to extreme drought conditions.

Given this limitation, our next recommendation is to implement alternative landscaping, such as rocks, small pebbles, drought-resistant plants, or wood chips. These changes to scenery are visually appealing, water conserving, and can inspire community art projects.

Our last recommendation regarding visual appeal is to feature more community art projects. The current art projects within National City have cued only positive responses in our observations. They are relatively cost effective and help to further build a sense of place and community. They also provide uniqueness to the city and require less maintenance. These projects could be specifically designed alternative scenery, sculptures, or even designs integrated into various patches, made by community participants, such as the mosaic wall adjoining Kimball Park.

Figure 11: An empty dirt lot suitable for drought-resistant landscaping.
Way–Finding

The way–finding group focused on the questions, “Do I know where to go?”, and “How easy or hard is it to find my way around?” Because this group had never been to National City before, an unbiased approach was easily adopted. Overall, National City has done an excellent job with directional signage. The print is clear, easy to read, well–contrasted against the background, and visually appealing. The use of arrows helped condense the sign into a minimalist, modern form, and the signs were successful in navigating this group from the 8th Street Trolley Station to Morgan Square.

The way–finding category saw the greatest number of negative responses in comparison to other responses, but a majority of these responses addressed similar issues in different locations. The observations described in this report are what we claim to be the most significant as they pertain to our area of observations, but our recommendations can be applied to several different parts of the city to improve overall way–finding.

The first problem this group encountered was sign placement along 8th Street coming from the Trolley Station.

In Figure 13, a sign is shown from the path which pedestrians take from the 8th Street Trolley Station to National City Boulevard. This sign misplacement restricts the

Figure 12: The overall data found by the wayfinding group.

The signs are very clearly marked and easy to follow.
In easily accessible, public spaces.
Very well kept and modern.
Minimalism makes it easy to follow.

Figure 13: View of a sign from a pedestrian’s path during navigation from the trolley station to National City Boulevard.
information that new visitors to National City may need to navigate from the trolley station to places like Kimball Park or Morgan Square because the sign was too far away to be read. To improve this specific case of way-finding, we recommend moving the sign across the street, to coincide with the path which pedestrians are most likely to use.

While walking back toward the trolley station, this group approached the sign to evaluate its ability to navigate us around National City Boulevard and along 8th Street. As seen in Figure 14, this team found that the directions leading toward the 8th Street Trolley Station were incorrect. The sign reads that the pedestrian should turn left to reach the trolley station. However, the trolley station is located on the other side of the I–5. To correct this, we suggest the city changes the arrow currently on the sign to direct pedestrians to continue walking forward through the underpass of the I–5.

The next sign this group found with potential way-finding flaws was located just beyond the intersection of National City Boulevard and 8th Street.

As seen in Figure 15, the sign directing pedestrians to Heritage Square, the Civic Center, the Library, and Kimball Park is covered by a tree. This sign is also located quite far beyond the crosswalk, possibly causing confusion for pedestrians. When we first encountered this sign, we did not know whether we should go forward and cross at a later street or go back to the intersection and cross there. To reduce confusion, we recommend that the city moves the sign to the other side of the tree, closer to the crosswalk so it is more accessible to pedestrians.

An unanticipated topic that arose as we made observations was handicap accessibility and way-finding. We found that this topic deserves more careful attention and began systematically making observations about it.

Figure 14: The same sign from Figure 13, shown to have incorrect information, directing pedestrians away from the trolley

Figure 15: A sign just beyond the intersection of National City Boulevard and 8th Street, blocked by a tree.
We found that National City positively addressed handicap accessibility in several ways. Sidewalks are wide, signs are informative, and ramps are effectively in place to allow handicapped people easy access. However, there were also some negative observations made about handicap accessibility.

The largest concern for handicap accessibility was the large presence of construction zones.

Though construction is good, as it is a sign of progress, development, and job creation, alternative routes for disabled people were either unclear or not present.

In Figure 17, Lantana Drive has in place a small temporary fence around a block of cement. This type of construction is important for maintaining the integrity of the city’s infrastructure, but the space allowed for wheelchair mobility is greatly reduced because of the planter. This can be a potential hazard for a disabled individual or even a complete barrier to their destination.

In Figure 18, 107 East Plaza Boulevard is pictured with street construction, which blocks a ramp to the sidewalk. This is another safety hazard for disabled people who rely on these ramps to safely cross streets. In a more extreme case, Figure 19 shows the A Avenue sidewalk completely closed with no clear indication of a detour suitable for disabled people.

Figure 16: Observational data from the handicap accessibility group.

Figure 17: The sidewalk on Lantana Drive is blocked by construction and a tree with no clear indication of disability access.

Figure 18: The ramp leading to the sidewalk of 107 E Plaza Boulevard is blocked by construction.
The last major concern we had regarding handicap accessibility was the visibility of signs. In many instances, signs are either placed so that visibility is restricted, or they are hard to read due to a lack of maintenance.

To fix these obstacles to safety for individuals with disabilities, we recommend the city plans construction in such a way as to not cause obstruction or, if necessary, to create more clearly marked and accessible handicapped detours. We also recommend replacing old signs with new signs in locations that are easier to find.
Parking

Our final group was devoted to parking usage surrounding Southwestern Community College, evaluating to what extent the college parking garage was meeting student demand, and to what extent students were opting to take advantage of other parking options. This group also paid particular attention to illegal parking practices by students or others.

This group divided into those focusing on street and surface lot parking and those focusing on the college parking garage.

![Figure 21: The area of observation for parking habits.](image)

Those focused on surface lot and street parking compiled a list of initial observations, then proceeded to interview people who utilized these parking resources. Initially, we noticed that the demand for most street parking was moderate to high at all times. We also noted that some of the competition for these spaces came from a nearby dealership using street parking for cars they were selling.

Most surprising, however, was that many students who used street parking also had a parking pass for the parking structure. One student this group interviewed stated that street parking was more convenient for some classes. This could mean that students using street parking don’t necessarily use street parking at all times.

We noted that parking spots with no time restraints had the highest demand for street parking, whereas areas with one–to two–hour restrictions were significantly lower in demand. This may be because college classes were approximately one hour in length, making time–limited parking spots unsuitable for many college students.
From this deduction, one potential policy response from the city would be to implement more time restrictions on street parking, if the goal is to encourage more community college students to park in the parking garage.

Street parking in front of businesses was in highest demand during the hours of 9 am to 6 pm or regular business hours. Though close proximity to a community college may increase demand for parking spaces, the high demand also reflects usage by customers, workers, and people visiting the city during these hours. In that regard, implementing more time restrictions on street parking (such as with meters may discourage not only students but also customers. Given that such restrictions could potentially harm businesses by making parking less convenient for customers, metered parking should be considered with caution.

The second portion of the parking group made observations about the Education Village Parking Garage. To park in this garage, students were required to buy a parking pass. This gave them an almost guaranteed parking spot, security, and easy access to the college. Each level of the parking garage had different demands in parking, as noted in Figure 23.

The middle level definitely had the highest demand, while the upper and lower levels had ample parking space at all times of our observations. The fact that there were empty spaces available suggests that students would not need to worry about parking access if they lacked free access to street parking. In other words, the city has the means to restrict street parking without affecting the availability of parking for students.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Level</th>
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<tr>
<td>Middle Level</td>
<td>60–70%</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom Level</td>
<td>5–10%</td>
<td>Low</td>
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*Figure 22: High-demand street parking along National City Boulevard.*

*Figure 23: The various degrees of demand for each level of the Education Village Parking Garage.*
The one drawback to regulating all street parking is the possibility of causing financial hardship for students who may not be able to afford a parking pass. Many students have already found a workaround to this expense by carpooling. To encourage more carpooling, we suggest offering more extensive carpool-only parking alternatives and to increase efforts through the college advocating for student carpooling.

**Recommendations**

This report outlines the observations and data generated by Dr. Maher’s Fall 2015 Honor 113 class at SDSU. A group of 22 students unfamiliar with National City explored the city and recorded detailed observations regarding safety, visual appeal, way-finding, and parking. Based on these observations, we offer the following recommendations:

On the basis of safety, we recommend:

- more selective and decisive graffiti control within key public places, such as the 12th Street park,
- eliminating litter throughout the city by installing more trash cans, and
- using abandoned buildings from past businesses as temporary community centers or as sites of murals.

To address visual appeal, we recommend:

- installation of more trashcans, and
- implementation of water-free or drought-tolerant landscaping to generate safety cues while remaining conscientious of water use.

To improve way-finding, we recommend:

- fixing signs along 8th Street to reflect accurate directions for pedestrians navigating to and from the trolley station,
- changing sign placement to minimize blocking from nearby trees,
- making minor adjustments in sign placement to minimize confusion,
- improving maintenance of disabled access signs,
- marking accessible routes more clearly, and
- creating more effective detours around construction zones.
With respect to parking, we recommended:

- implementing parking time limits for street parking, and
- advocating carpools among student commuters.