

04

COMMUNITY FORM

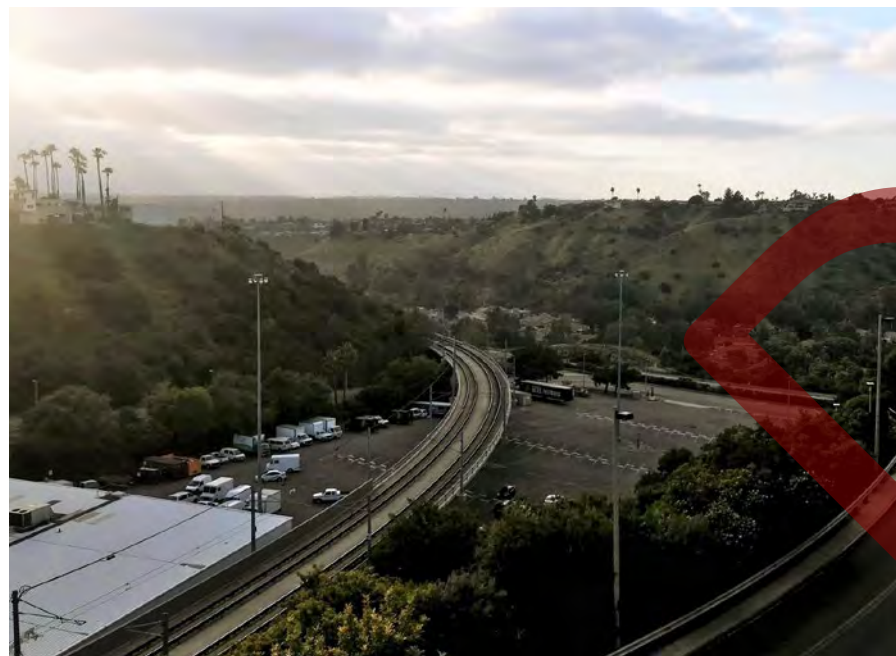
- 4.1 Landform and Natural Features
- 4.2 History of Urban Form
- 4.3 Development Patterns
- 4.4 Residential Buildings
- 4.5 Commercial Buildings
- 4.6 Active Public Realm
- 4.7 Community Form Summary



4.1 Landform and Natural Features

The sense of place within the College Area is largely characterized by the landform and natural features of the community. As shown in **Figure 4-1**, the College Area community sits upon a mesa with a network of bluffs and canyons, which significantly contributes to the overall urban form. In particular, the northern and western edges of the plan area have significant topography changes which slopes down to the roadways below. Single family houses typically sit on top of the mesas with vegetation in the steep canyons. While much of the steep canyons are open space, most of it is private property and inaccessible to the public. The result of the canyons and mesas on the urban form is single-entry roadways that commonly dead end in cul-de-sacs which are commonly found in the residential areas.

The College Area community sits upon a network of steep hills, bluffs, and canyons which is a major contribution to the overall urban form.



Steep slopes, bluffs, and canyons gives a unique form to the College Area community.

4.2 History of Urban Form

The College Area community is predominantly developed with single family houses in subdivision patterns that are reflective of the hills and canyons within the community. Mature and well-maintained landscaping in residential neighborhoods, as well as wild native vegetation on hillsides and canyons, are defining characteristics of the community. Mesa views of the mountains to the east, and down into small finger canyons, are also defining features of the community.

The College Area community was largely un-built until the early 1930s. The area started to develop—first with the State Teachers College, later to become San Diego State University (SDSU)—in 1931 and then with suburban-style development between the 1940s–60s. The State Teachers College initially occupied a site of 125 acres, with an enrollment of just 150 students. The location of the College in the area, combined with the natural eastward expansion of the City along El Cajon Boulevard, resulted in steady growth of the community over the next three decades. The postwar desire for suburban living and the completion of Interstate 8 in the late 1950s further contributed to the growth of the community and SDSU.

These suburban areas have largely remained unchanged since this time period, while the need for student housing resulted in high-density apartments and dorms adjacent to the campus. This difference in housing approach has essentially created two communities: the University campus and the



Aerial image of the San Diego State Teacher's College (now SDSU campus) in 1931. Photo credit: San Diego State University Library, University Archives, Photograph Collection

single family residential neighborhoods that surround it. Historically, commercial activity within the plan area is focused primarily along El Cajon Boulevard, which was retrofitted for the automobile, and still contains stretches with street-facing retail space, such as the intersection of El Cajon and Collwood boulevards.

The College Area community was largely un-built until the early 1930s. Higher density housing is clustered around SDSU and single family residential neighborhoods surround the campus. Commercial activity is located on auto-oriented shopping centers, mostly around El Cajon Boulevard.



View of the campus expansion in 1948, with additional development underway in the background. Photo credit: San Diego State University Library, University Archives, Photograph Collection

Figure 4-1 Topography and Natural Features



4.3 Development Patterns

Due to the topography changes of the bluffs and canyons, much of the College Area community consists of curvilinear streets that dead-end into cul-de-sacs or loops that stem from a few key corridors. These key corridors, which include Montezuma Road, El Cajon Boulevard, 70th Street, and College Avenue, act as the major community spines. There are a few places where a grid-like pattern appears, including along Madison Avenue, Rockford Drive, and the eastern portion of El Cajon Boulevard. The grid pattern generally spans around 600 feet by 300 feet in size, although varied in block size and orientation. Most of the plan area consists of single family lots that typically range between 5,000 to 15,000 square feet. Multifamily and commercial buildings typically have larger lot sizes and building footprints than single family households and are mostly located along the three key corridors. Multifamily and commercial lot sizes range significantly, from 4,000 square feet on the low end to 150,000 square feet on the high end, depending on land use and location. SDSU has a major presence within the plan area, and its pedestrian-oriented campus is made up of extensive blocks and expansive building footprints.

Figure 4-2 (page 40) shows building footprints and block patterns in the community, and **Figure 4-3** (page 41) takes a detailed look at six unique development patterns in the College Area. Following is a description of each development pattern:

Much of the College Area community consists of curvilinear streets that stem from the key corridors of Montezuma Road, El Cajon Boulevard, and College Avenue and dead-end in cul-de-sacs or loops. The three key corridors—Montezuma Road, El Cajon Boulevard, and College Avenue—act as the major community spines.

1. The University Blocks development pattern largely consists of the SDSU campus and its immediate environs, and is generalized by large building footprints and a centralized campus without many through streets for cars.
2. The Alvarado Hospital Medical Center development pattern is around the Alvarado Trolley Station and consists of large institutional buildings. Steep hills disconnect this area from the neighboring single family homes along the southern edges.
3. The El Cajon Boulevard development pattern shows the larger commercial building footprints that front El Cajon Boulevard with smaller, single family homes directly behind. The commercial buildings generally front along the street with parking lots either behind or adjacent to the main structure.
4. The Residential Curvilinear Streets development pattern shows how development reflects the topography changes of the bluffs and canyons. The buildings in this area are largely detached single family homes with small building footprints.
5. The Residential Canyons development pattern follows the same topographic conditions as Residential Curvilinear Streets except that the building footprints and lot sizes are larger, and the canyons take up more space.
6. The Residential Grid development pattern looks at the eastern portion of El Cajon Boulevard, which follows a grid-like pattern of streets. Here, some of the blocks contain alleys that bisect the blocks in an east to west direction. Larger commercial and multifamily building footprints with ample surface parking are located along El Cajon Boulevard, while the rest of this area consists of smaller single family homes. The large building and smaller structures along Saranac Street, between 68th Street and 69th Street, is a charter school which takes up entirety of the block.



Development Pattern #1: View of the walkable SDSU campus.



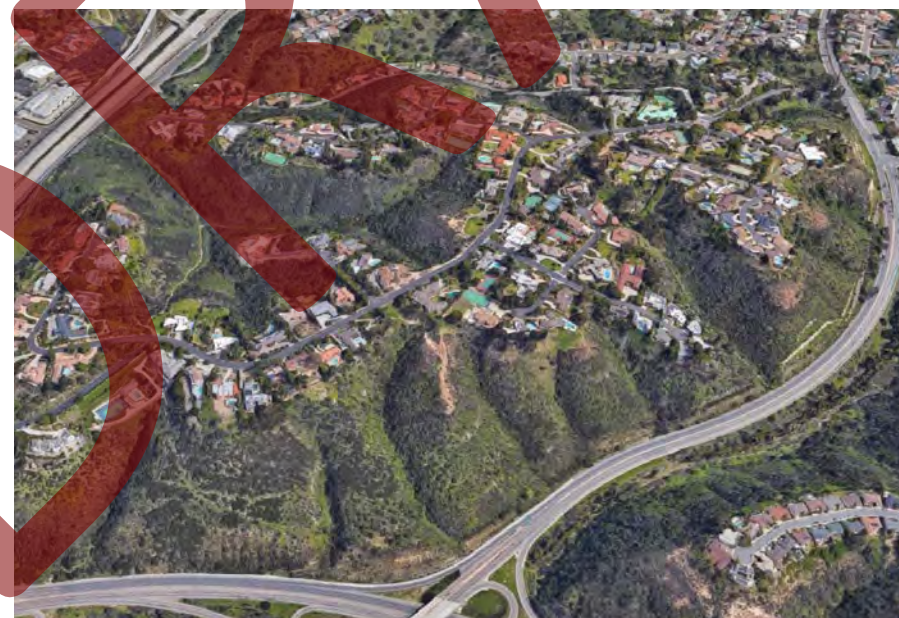
Development Pattern #2: View looking down Alvarado Road towards the trolley station and hospital (photo credit: Google Streetview).



Development Pattern #3: View looking down El Cajon Boulevard, one of the main retail corridors, which has large block and building sizes.



Development Pattern #4: The bluffs and canyons give these residential areas a unique development pattern (photo credit: Google Streetview).



Development Pattern #5: Aerial view of the residential canyons which are larger lots and more spread out than focus area #4 (photo credit: Google Maps).



Development Pattern #6: View of the residential street which follows a grid pattern. (photo credit: Google Streetview).

Figure 4-2 Block Pattern Details

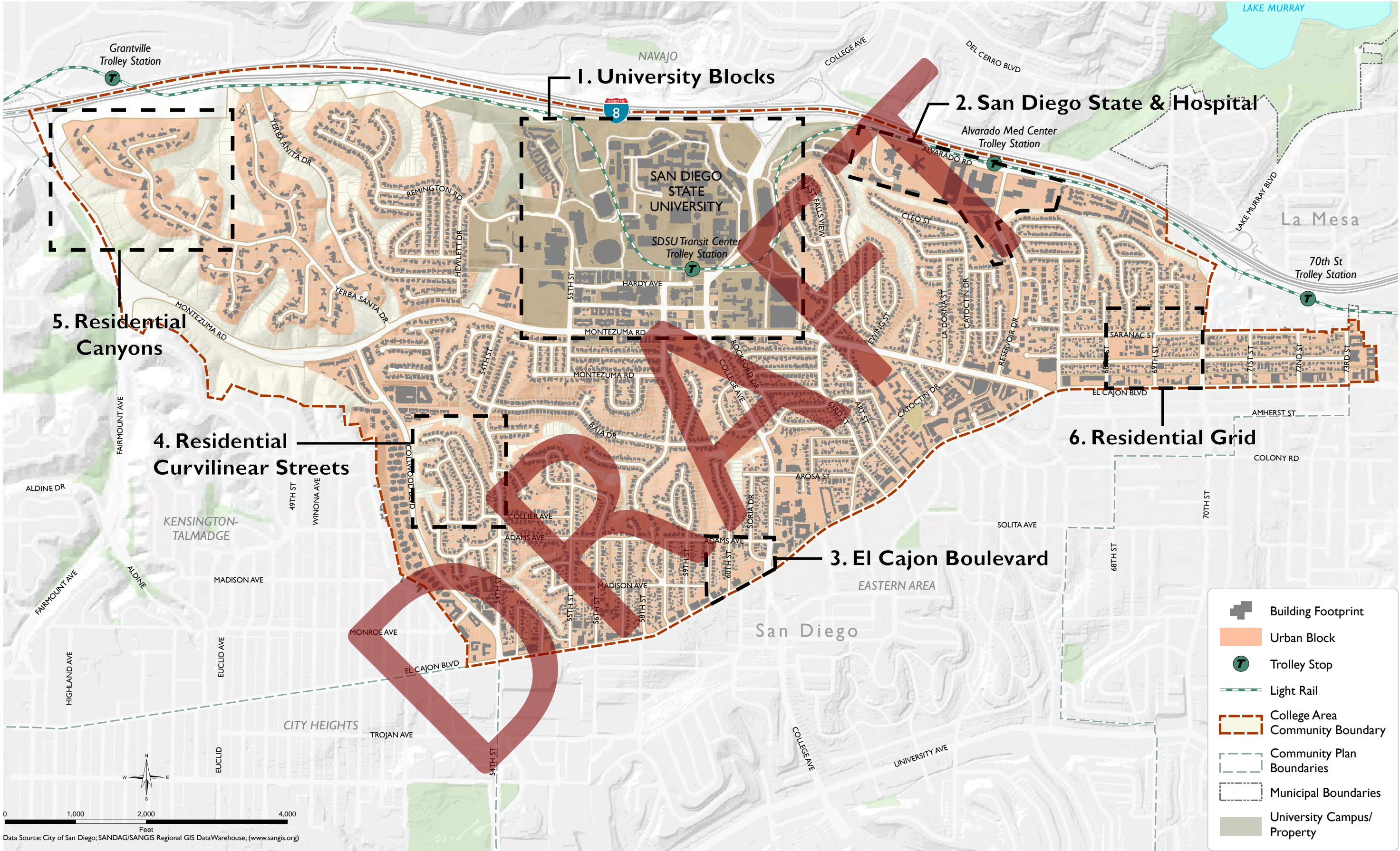
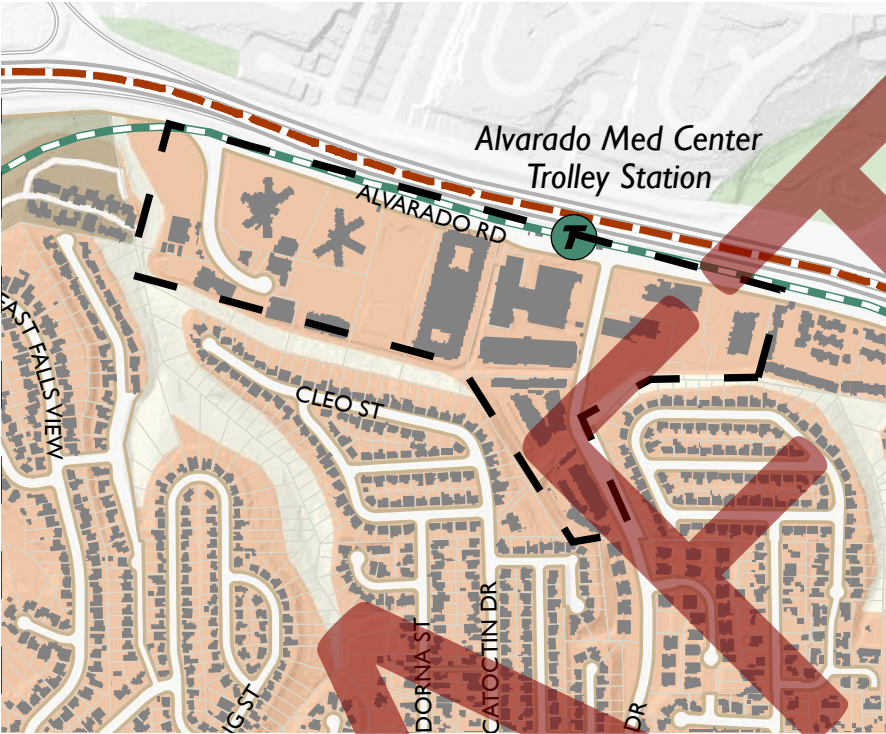


Figure 4-3 Block Pattern Focus Areas

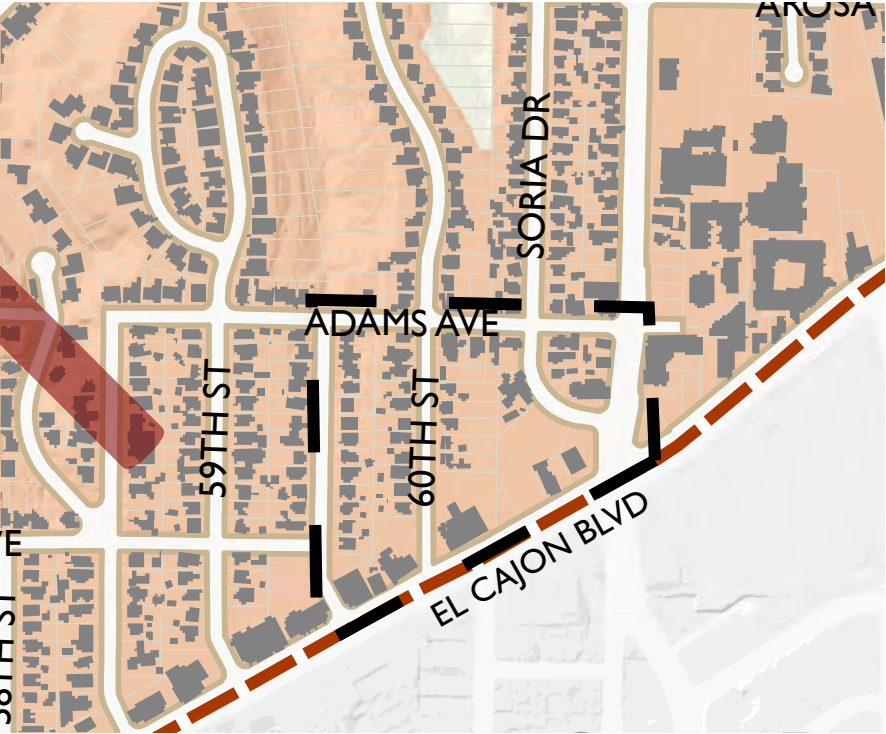
1. University Blocks



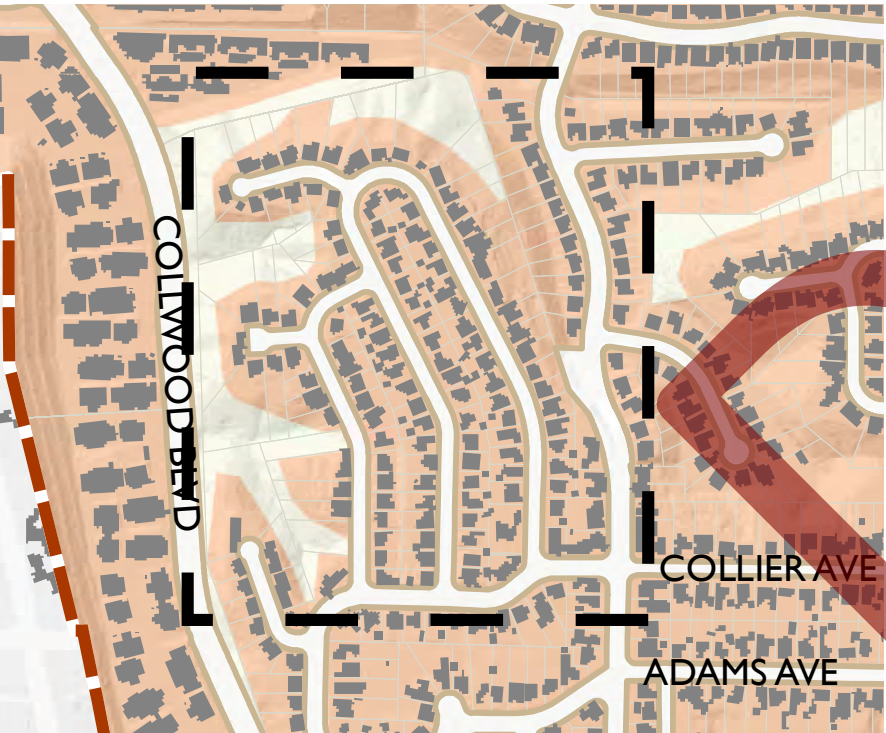
2. San Diego State & Hospital



3. El Cajon Boulevard



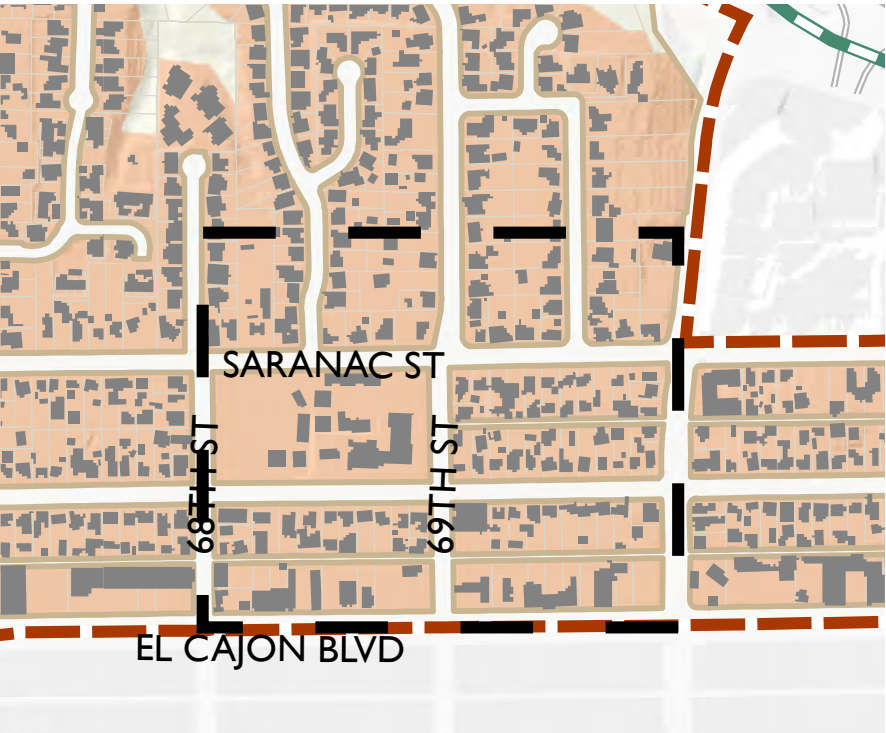
4. Residential Curvilinear Streets



5. Residential Canyons



5. Residential Grid



4.4 Residential Buildings

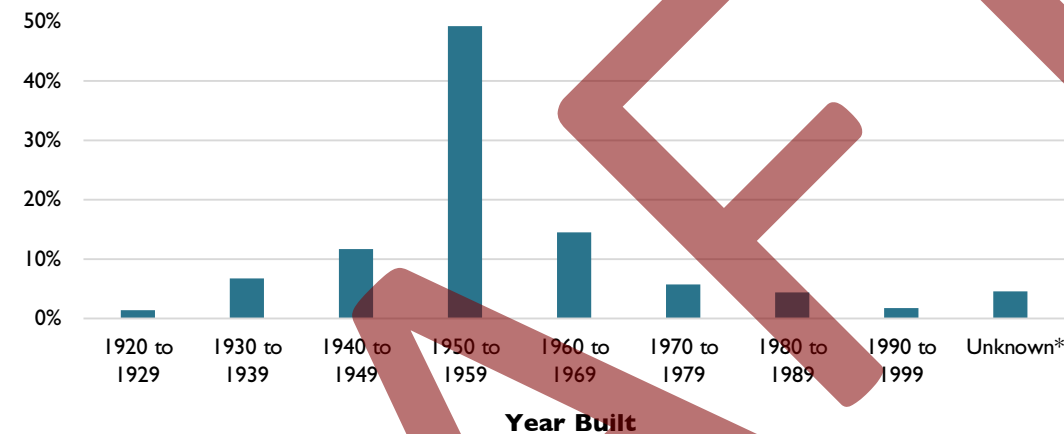
Residential buildings in the College Area community area are diverse in their design and layout. While most of the plan area consists of single family homes, there are pockets of multifamily and shared housing spread throughout. Single family houses range in styles, typically reflecting the time period in which the neighborhood developed: most are ranch-style or bungalows with a front-access garage facing the street. As shown in **Figure 4-4** and listed in **Chart 4-2**, at nearly 50%, the majority of the single family units have been built between 1950 and 1959, with an additional 14% being built between 1960 and 1969. There is a residential pocket of older houses prior to 1950 along El Cajon near the southern-edge of the College Area. It is important to note that when a property goes through significant reconstruction or rehab, then the construction date is updated which is why there are individual properties that have newer year built dates in these neighborhoods.

The majority of multifamily dwelling units are concentrated around the University, with some newer projects built along commercial corridors to help meet the demand for additional housing. There are several types of multifamily buildings in the community, including townhomes or attached single family homes, stacked flats, garden apartments, and podium buildings. Multifamily buildings range in height from two to five stories; student dorms reach up to nine stories tall. Apartment complexes typically provide common open space and amenities, such as a pool, gym, and/or community lounge.

Another housing phenomenon that is taking place is the presence of 'mini dorms' within single family residential areas, which are close to the university campus and rented out to SDSU students. Mini dorms are single family houses or additions that have been converted into multiple individual rooms that are rented out separately. The result of mini dorms include overcrowding in single family homes, lack of on-site parking resulting in excessive use of street parking, and increase in noise.

The majority of the College Area consists of single family units with pockets of multifamily and shared housing spread throughout. Nearly 50% of the existing residential buildings were built between 1950 and 1959.

Chart 4-2: Residential Building Age



Source: City of San Diego; SANDAG/SANGIS Regional GIS Data Warehouse (www.sangis.org)

*Data contains a two digit year and it is not clear for structures built post-2000 and those built early 1900s.



Architectural styles of single family homes vary throughout College Area.

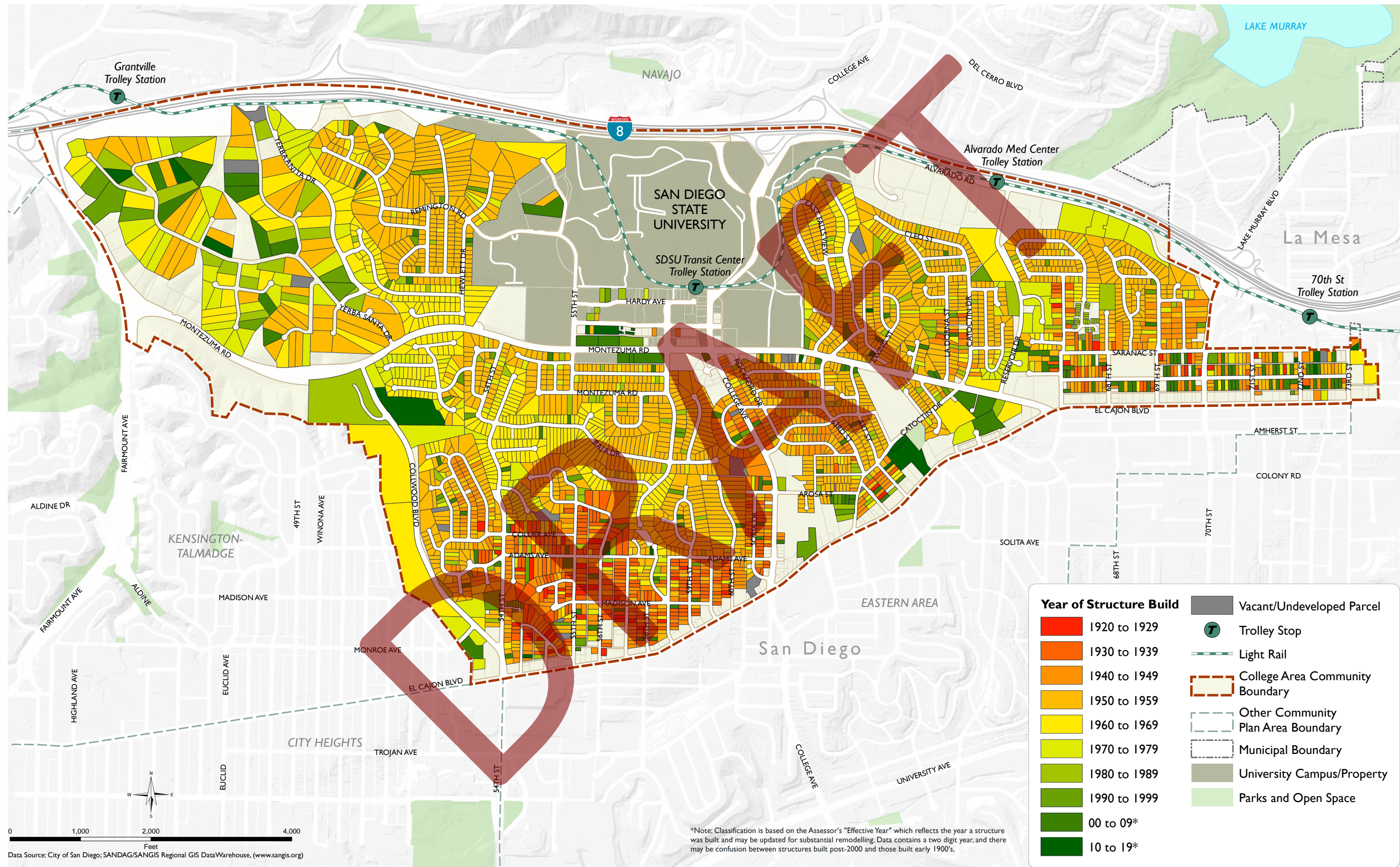


Single family bungalows with street-front garages are common.



Multifamily homes give residents a variety of housing choices, including these garden apartments.

Figure 4-4 Residential Building Age



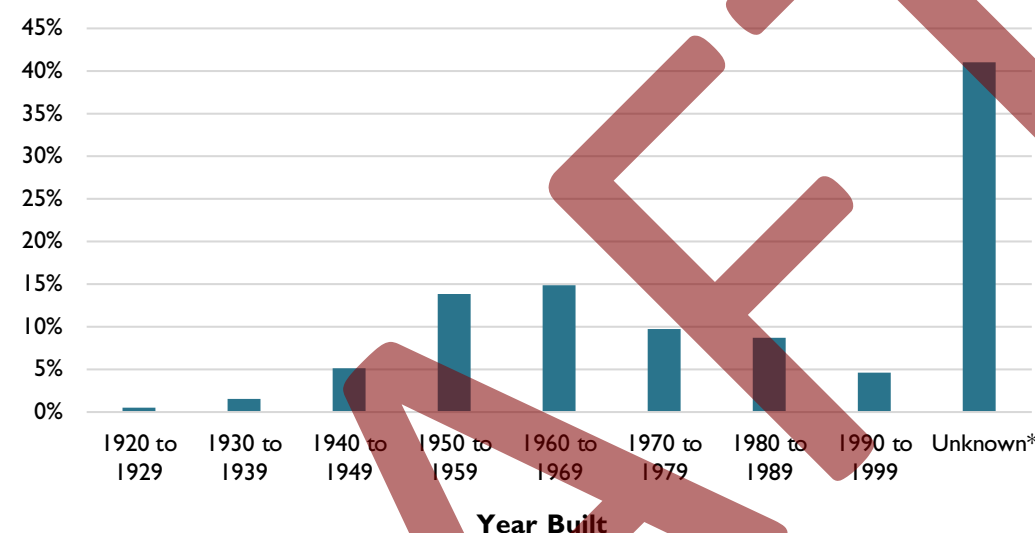
4.5 Non-Residential Buildings

Non-residential buildings are primarily located along El Cajon Boulevard and near the University, while the Alvarado Hospital Medical Center and other medical offices surround the Alvarado trolley station. As shown in **Figure 4-5** and summarized in **Chart 4-3**, the ages of non-residential buildings vary and were built relatively evenly over time, starting in the 1950s. It is important to note that when a property goes through significant reconstruction or rehab, then the construction date is updated which is why individual properties may have newer year built dates. Like residential buildings, commercial buildings within the plan area are made up of many styles and layouts, depending on construction date. There are three main types of commercial buildings located within the College Area community: strip commercial centers, small-scale standalones, and mixed use buildings. The majority (54%) of non-residential buildings within the planning area have been built prior to the 1990s when strip retail was prevalent.

Strip commercial centers are characterized by string of smaller businesses set back behind surface parking lots that front the street. The shopping center at Aragon Drive, and Ralphs supermarket at the corner of Montezuma Road and El Cajon Boulevard, are examples of strip commercial centers. Small-scale standalone buildings include a variety of restaurants, autobody shops, motels, and a myriad of other commercial uses. These buildings are characterized by having a storefront directly along the street with its own parking lot either behind or adjacent to the commercial building. The stretch of El Cajon Boulevard between 67th Street and 73rd Street is an example of small-scale standalone commercial buildings. The third commercial type—mixed use—is characterized by retail on the ground floor and residential units above. Mixed use buildings within the community include the South Campus Plaza North and South Towers located on the SDSU campus, the “Iconic at Alvarado” apartment complex located near the Alvarado Trolley Station, and the Mesa Commons development along El Cajon Boulevard, adjacent to Montezuma Park.

There are three main types of commercial buildings located within the College Area community: strip commercial centers, small-scale standalone, and mixed use buildings. The majority of the commercial buildings (54%) within the planning area have been built prior to the 1990s when strip retail was prevalent.

Chart 4-3: Non-Residential Building Age



Source: City of San Diego; SANDAG/SANGIS Regional GIS DataWarehouse (www.sangis.org)

*Data contains a two digit year and it is not clear for structures built post-2000 and those built early 1900s.



Small-scale standalone on El Cajon Boulevard.

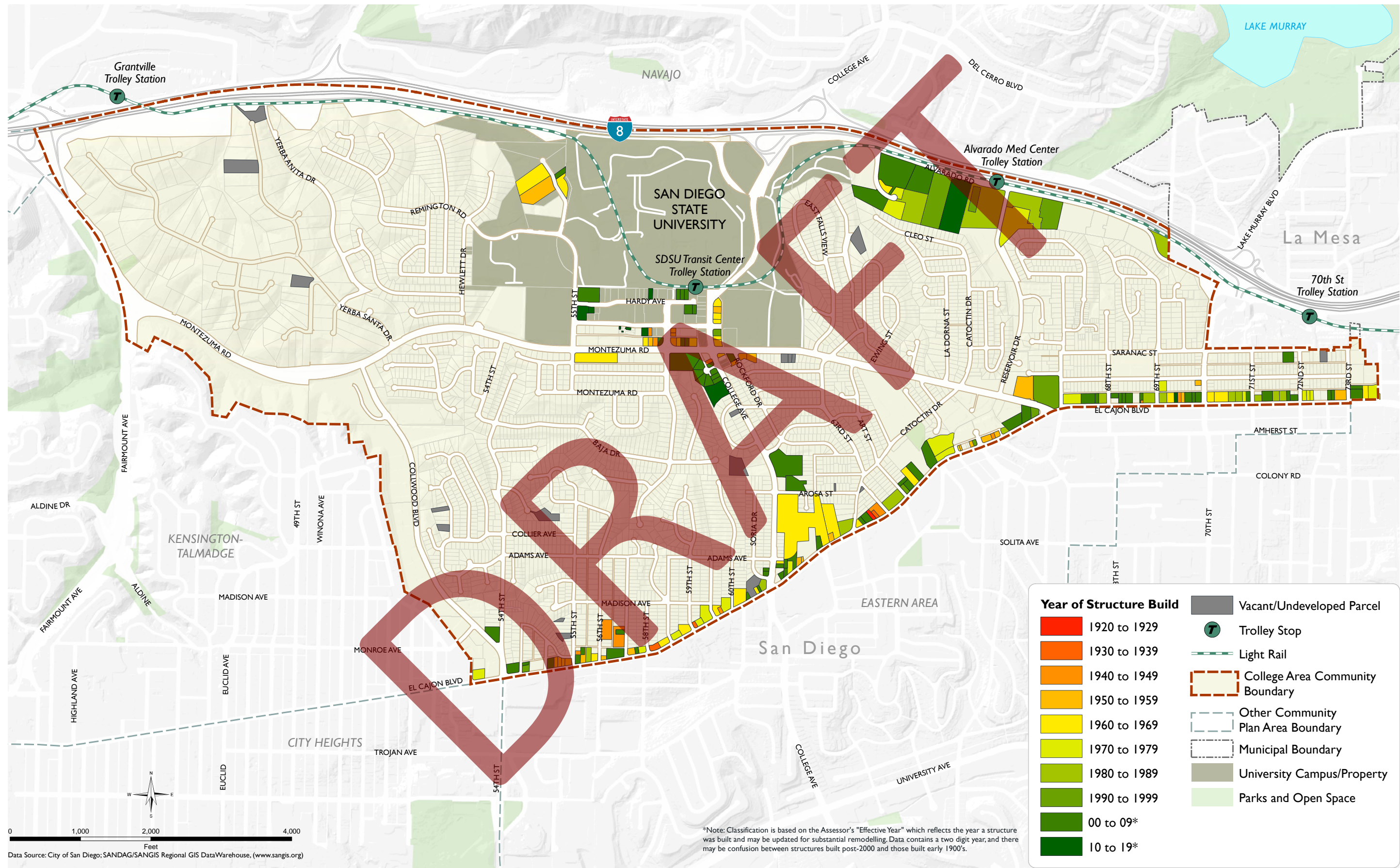


Strip commercial center on the corner of Montezuma Road.



Mixed use on the SDSU campus.

Figure 4-5 Non-Residential Building Age



4.6 Active Public Realm

The public realm encompasses all publicly visible and accessible areas within the planning area. This includes the space between buildings and streets, connections to transit, parks, and public spaces—all of which contribute to the community’s identity as a vibrant and welcoming place. Cities that have buildings with active ground floor uses in a walkable environment usually encourage foot traffic and provide a destination where people can take transit or park once and walk around to multiple stores and services. and/or use other transit modes to get around. This leads to an active and lively public realm in which people enjoy being outdoors and exploring their community, building connections with their neighbors and supporting local businesses. In short, this leads to more active, healthy, and socially-cohesive communities with greater commerce.

An active frontage, where the front façade of buildings orient and open towards the street, provides visual engagement between those on the street and those on the ground floors of buildings. Active ground floor uses include storefronts, residential and office spaces and amenities (e.g. gyms, conference rooms, community spaces, etc.), business types, and other uses that impact the streetscape. Businesses that have individual entrances fronting the sidewalk in which people are coming and going often, or that have storefront windows with merchandise available to look at from the sidewalk, or that feature a street-side outdoor dining area, are common commercial examples that contribute to an active ground floor. Commercial areas with parking lots in between the sidewalk and store entrances typically do not support an active ground floor and frequent curb cuts, street-front parking lots, narrow sidewalks without shade producing street trees, poor connectivity, and lack of pedestrian amenities contribute to an environment that is not conducive to walking. Overall, active street frontage within the College Area community could be improved, with the exception of the active frontages near SDSU. While much of the commercial areas along El Cajon Boulevard are designed to prioritize the automobile, there are stretches of commercial buildings that do face the street, such as the coffee shop and barber at El Cajon Boulevard and Aragon Drive, although this form is not consistent along the corridor.

Residential units can also have an active street frontage. Single family homes can be designed with porches, windows, and front doors that face the street instead of blank garage doors or tall opaque fences. The quality of active residential frontages within the plan area depends on the age built and architectural style, which typically reflects the time period when the structure was built. Many homes that were built in the 1950s and 60s typically had an “inward” focus, which meant few windows and a prominent

garage that takes up most of the façade facing the street, such as many of the homes along Baja Drive. Older houses, such as those along El Cerrito Drive, have entryways and windows facing the street and setback garages, all of which contribute to quality active residential frontage. For non-mixed use multifamily uses, buildings with active street frontage typically have ground floor units that open up towards the street with individual entrances, windows, stoops, greenery, and / or patios closer to the street. In general, most of the multifamily projects within the plan area have an “inward” focus with entrances facing surface parking lots or are limited in a few designated entrances, resulting in blank walls or poor lighting and landscaping facing the street.

Overall, active street frontage within the College Area community could be improved except for the active frontages near the University, which is very walkable. Portions of the commercial areas along El Cajon are designed for the automobile and are not as conducive to a walkable environment.



Street-side outdoor dining, greenery, and a storefront that opens onto the street contribute to an active ground floor at this restaurant near SDSU.

4.7 Community Form Summary

This section summarizes key information related to land use for the College Area presented in this chapter.

- The College Area community sits upon a network of steep hills, bluffs, and canyons which helps define the overall urban form.
- The College Area community was largely un-built until the early **1930s**. Higher density housing is clustered around SDSU, and single family residential neighborhoods surround the campus. Commercial activity is located on auto-oriented shopping centers, mostly around El Cajon Boulevard.
- Much of the College Area community consists of curvilinear streets that stem from the key corridors of Montezuma Road, El Cajon Boulevard, and College Avenue and dead-end in cul-de-sacs or loops. The three key corridors—**Montezuma Road, El Cajon Boulevard, and College Avenue**—act as the major community spines.
- The majority of the College Area consists of single family homes, with pockets of multifamily and shared housing spread throughout. Nearly **50%** of the existing residential buildings were built between **1950** and **1959**.
- There are three main types of commercial buildings located within the College Area community: strip commercial centers, small-scale standalones, and mixed use buildings. The majority of the commercial buildings (**54%**) within the planning area have been built prior to the **1990s** when strip retail was prevalent.
- Overall, active street frontage within the College Area community could be improved except for the active frontages near the University, which is very walkable. Portions of the commercial areas along El Cajon are designed for the automobile and are not as conducive to a walkable environment.

