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# Another Face of San Jose

Montira Horayangura

On a sunny Saturday afternoon a walk around downtown San Jose hints at the broader effects of the city's recent redevelopment efforts. Along First Street near the transit mall, spruced-up historic storefronts are mostly occupied by trendy cafes, tech firms, music clubs, and theaters. Handsome signs point the way to nearby civic buildings and cultural institutions, and posters advertise the weekly farmer's market at San Pedro Square. Nevertheless, a number of stores are up for lease, and few pedestrians are about.

Meanwhile, half a mile away in the local commercial area south of San Jose State University, the Tung Kee Noodle House at William and Sixth is doing brisk business. Chinese and Hispanic families spill out of cars and wait in line for pearl ice tea and *chow fun*. Nearby, the signs in grocery stores and small businesses are written in English, Vietnamese, Chinese and Spanish, and handmade fliers on telephone poles speak of five local garage sales. Nevertheless, cracked sidewalks, scraggly street trees, and numerous "for rent" signs testify to economic decline and neglect.

Clearly, even the best efforts of the San Jose Redevelopment Agency have had a hard time recapturing the city's pre-World War II urban energy. In part, it has been successful at building a new base of activity downtown. But today these efforts also highlight the shabby gentility of surrounding areas, whose vitality, ironically, seems more genuine than that of the high-wattage downtown.

To address this contrast, the city launched its Strong Neighborhoods Initiative in July 2000. Over the next five years, SNI will target \$120 million toward the needs of twenty older, largely residential neighborhoods which generally surround the downtown. Together, these neighborhoods account for nearly one-third of the city's population.

To date, SNI has been praised by some as a long overdue effort to share the city's redevelopment wealth and boost the fortunes of areas that embody real home-grown potential. But others have criticized it for treating the symptoms rather than the deep-seated causes of physical and economic decline.

## New Neighborhoods from Old

The inner-ring residential neighborhoods of San Jose have a rich history. In places, the city's beginnings as a farming and agricultural processing center are still visible in the form of farmhouses or barns from the mid-1800s. But most of the built fabric dates to California's boom years at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, in areas such as the Hemsley District and Naglee Park, the city's early prosperity gave rise to elaborate Victorian dwellings

along tree-lined streets. Elsewhere, the city's working-class lived in more modest bungalows with deep porches.

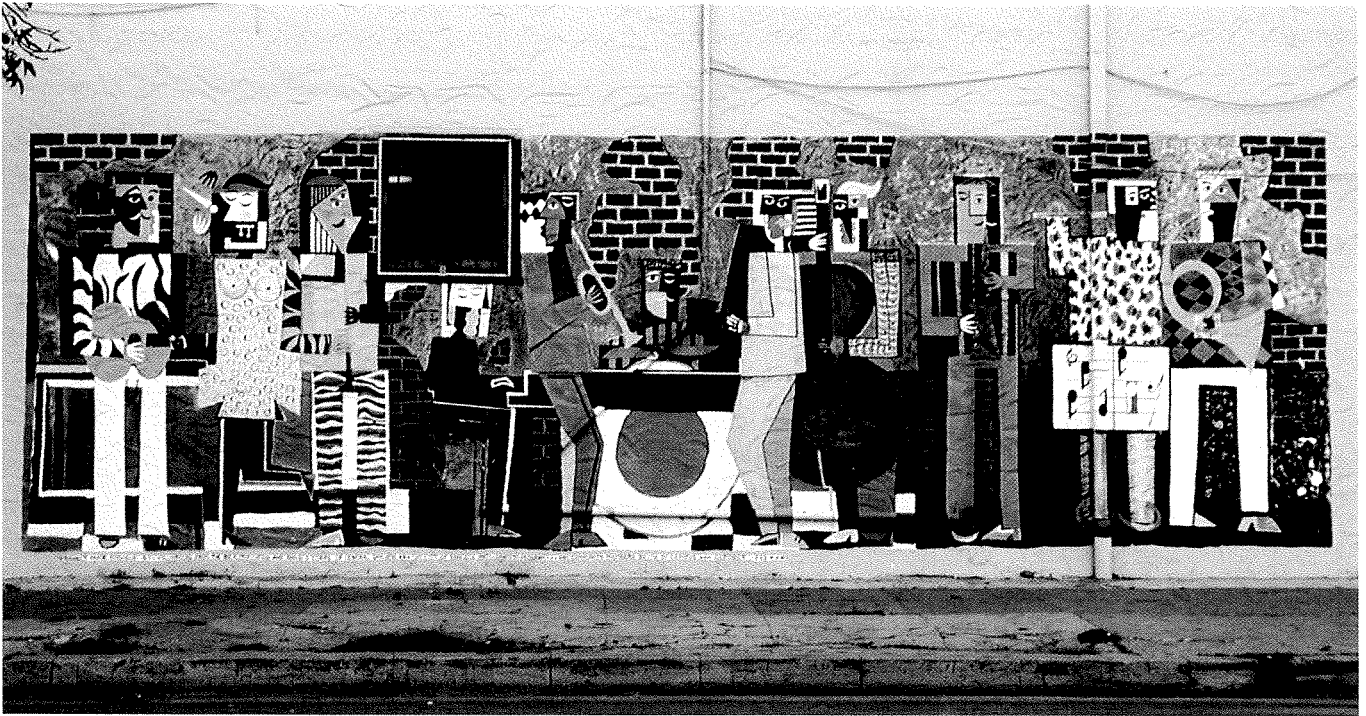
More recently, these older structures have been joined by boxy moderate-income apartments. But along neighborhood commercial corridors, such as Thirteenth Street, small-scale retail buildings still orient themselves to the street. And, in general, these neighborhoods retain a low-density character that gives the city much of its small-town charm.

Today, the residents of these areas are more diverse, poorer, and less well-educated than those of the adjacent downtown or more outlying areas. Nevertheless, they closely mirror the changing face of California. In particular, Asians and Hispanics — many fairly recent immigrants — constitute a significant majority of neighborhood residents.<sup>1</sup>

The new ethnic and economic diversity often results in complex physical and social juxtapositions. On the same street, one old Victorian may be occupied by descendants of its original owners, while next door another may have been converted to single-room occupancy. Likewise, immigrants working in low-skill jobs may live on the same block as tech-industry engineers. And well-heeled young professionals on their way downtown for dinner and a show may pass the garage sales of large Hispanic families.

Like downtown, these inner-ring neighborhoods were hard hit by disinvestment following World War II. As jobs, retail, and middle-class residents left for the suburbs, they slipped into physical and social decline, becoming sites of crime, drug trafficking, and blight. Nevertheless, they held on through the lean years. And in 1989, the city launched Project Crackdown, a \$1.3 million program that employed a combination of aggressive police activity and community mobilization.<sup>2</sup> Today, with serious crime largely controlled, the city believes these communities are poised for a comeback. Toward this goal, SNI is billed as "a partnership of the City of San Jose, San Jose Redevelopment Agency, and the community to build clean, safe, and attractive neighborhoods with independent and capable neighborhood organizations."

Most of the funding for SNI will come from redevelopment tax-increment monies, while the rest will come from parks and library bond issues, grant programs, and the city's general fund. But funding for the program is not large: indeed, when averaged over the twenty neighborhoods, the city's total financial commitment translates to only \$1.29 million per neighborhood per year — roughly enough to complete two very nice intersection improvements. Instead, the expectation is that the neighborhoods will be able to leverage city funds, and the



institutional support of city agencies, to obtain matching grants from other sources.

Proponents for such decentralized strategies have in the past argued that neighborhood mobilization is necessary to build local support and a sense of personal investment in municipal improvements.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, SNI is structured around a bottom-up process for prioritizing neighborhood needs. And central to this process is the formation of Neighborhood Advisory Committees (NACs) to focus resident participation in decision-making.

So far, most of the SNI neighborhoods have proposed improvement plans based on input from residents. Prominent in these plans are basic improvements to the public realm, including sidewalk repair, street clean-up, tree planting, street lighting, traffic calming, more parks, better access to community facilities, improved housing and business conditions, and pedestrian/bicycle corridors. In many cases, “top-ten” community priorities include long-neglected needs familiar to residents, which might have languished in the city’s bureaucratic backlog.

### Critics Emerge

Despite its good intentions, neighborhood response to SNI has so far been mixed. Among other things, skeptics argue that the SNI process does not adequately represent the concerns of residents. They say NAC representatives have either been co-opted by the city, or have focused too narrowly on their own interests. Meanwhile, they point out that the cost of San Jose’s new city hall alone is \$380 million — casting doubt on the city’s stated commitment to the residents of the greater downtown area.

Some critics have gone further, claiming the city is deliberately using an unworkable participatory framework to obscure its real redevelopment agenda. Ideally, they say, planning for the future of the SNI neighborhoods should balance gentrification pressures against other scenarios.

This would allow existing qualities to be retained while accommodating changes beneficial to today’s residents. Instead, they worry the city’s real goal is to extend the densification of the downtown to SNI areas. And by declaring the neighborhoods redevelopment areas, the city has opened the door to the use of eminent-domain powers.<sup>4</sup>

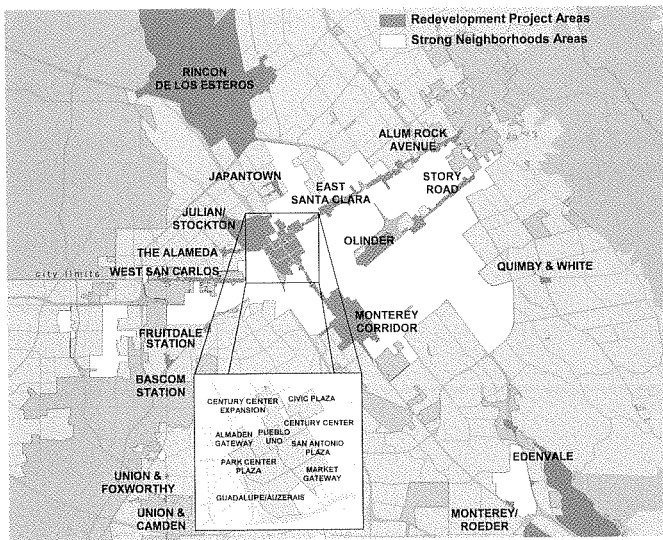
Critics also point out that most of the recommendations emerging from the SNI process involve largely mundane one-time capital improvements. Meanwhile, more socially oriented programs, such as homework centers at local schools and commercial revitalization, which could make a long-term difference in the lives of residents, have not been included. Critics claim these have been left out because they would require an ongoing funding commitment the city is unwilling to make.

Finally, critics argue that SNI shifts the onus of decision-making to local residents. They say city agencies should determine programs of basic neighborhood services and improvements that are conceptualized, maintained, and funded as part of a coherent long-term effort. Such programs should not be the responsibility of neighborhood representatives, whose technical knowledge and familiarity with citywide issues may not be on par with their enthusiasm.

### The Task Ahead

Some of the problems the SNI program faces were revealed in work by a Fall 2002 community-development class in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley. Specifically, the class set out to investigate the feasibility of implementing pedestrian corridors in two SNI neighborhoods. As part of this research, discussions with residents and neighborhood

Above: A mural in one of the SNI neighborhoods indicates how San Jose has become ever more diverse in the last decade. Photo by Vu Bang Nguyen.



groups soon revealed a multiplicity of voices. And while door-to-door surveys reflected the areas' ethnic diversity, it soon became apparent that their sizable Hispanic and Asian populations were underrepresented at public meetings.

Among other things, the class discovered that many residents walk to conduct daily errands and get to and from work — with 15 percent of respondents walking upwards of 40 minutes each trip. This seemed to call into question the city's overall vision for the pedestrian corridors — that they should serve primarily as cross-town connectors between recreational trails along Guadalupe River and Coyote Creek.

Other major ongoing projects in the city also demonstrate the difficulty of balancing public and private voices. For example, in an unprecedented partnership, the new eight-story Martin Luther King, Jr., library at Fourth and San Fernando Streets will soon make the resources of San Jose State University accessible to the general public. But at the southeast corner of the SJSU campus, a new dormitory complex, stepping up from seven to fifteen stories, will soon bring 5,600 new faces to the surrounding area, increase competition for already-scarce parking spaces, and physically dwarf the adjacent low-rise neighborhood.

Similarly, the new BART extension to San Jose, scheduled to start construction in 2005, will eventually create a transit hub that will benefit the entire downtown. But the project will cause years of disruption, as East Santa Clara Street, a historic neighborhood commercial corridor, is dug up for underground tracks.

Residents of inner-ring neighborhoods are also fighting to save the San Jose Medical Center, the only hospital downtown.<sup>5</sup> In the context of increasing downtown land values, they are lobbying the city council to prevent the hospital's new owners from redeveloping the site as high-end housing.

In theory, SNI is meant to empower neighborhoods and spread the wealth of the city's successful high-tech-driven downtown redevelopment. But with regard to downtown, a central public powerhouse was able to direct the revisioning process based on a clearly understood message about

the future of the city. By contrast, the community-led SNI approach may result only in a diffuse raft of small-scale projects driven by disconnected, parochial interests. Thus, while the former effort may be faulted for inadequately considering the social aspects of redevelopment, the latter may be impeded by the very diversity which enlivens the neighborhoods it intends to serve.

The challenge for the city today is to provide a high level of institutional support for the SNI program to ensure the broadest array of input from local residents. It must then frame these interests strategically in the context of ongoing municipal, transportation, and development planning. Otherwise, the SNI initiative may fail to create neighborhoods that are stronger after all, and instead create new barriers to communication, and accentuate fundamental differences in priorities.

#### Notes

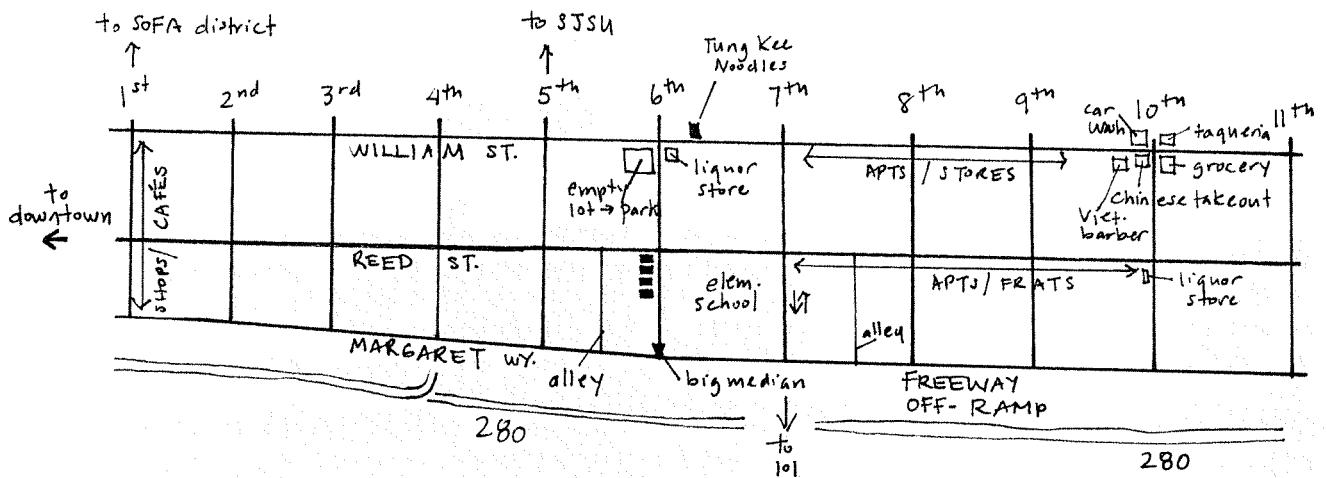
1. Citywide, people of Asian descent made up 26.9 percent of San Jose's population in 2000, up from 19.5 percent in 1990. The percentage of Hispanic residents similarly increased from 26 to 30 percent. In economic terms, during the 1990s, per-capita income in the Bay Area shot up from \$19,629 to \$30,769. However, in San Jose, the "Capital of Silicon Valley," incomes trailed the regional average (\$16,905 in 1990 to \$26,697 in 2000). Indeed, in some city census tracts, per-capita incomes dipped to as low as \$16,867. Such geographic averages may also obscure local socioeconomic contrasts. For example, per-capita income for whites in 2000 averaged \$33,367, compared to \$25,051 for Asians and \$14,799 for Hispanics. (All statistics taken from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census.)
2. According to the FBI Unitary Crime Report, May 2001, San Jose has the lowest crime rate of any city in the U.S. with a population of 250,000 or more.
3. For example, the community organization model created by activist Saul Alinsky in the 1960s advocated mobilizing communities as a mechanism for countering the disproportionate share of power wielded by government and corporate interest groups.
4. City residents concerned about the possible abuse of this power have contested the city's definition of blight. While state law calls for blight to be "so prevalent and so substantial" that it becomes "a serious physical and economic burden on the community," San Jose's blight survey primarily turned up cases of code infractions, including overgrown weeds, lack of landscaping, overflowing garbage, residential overcrowding, garage conversions, and crime levels higher than the rest of the city. See Mike Zapler, "Designation of Urban Decay Raises Redevelopment Plan Questions," *San Jose Mercury News*, August 11, 2002.
5. The hospital is located between 14th and 16th Streets, and E. Santa Clara and E. St. John Streets, in the Thirteenth Street neighborhood.

**Above:** Strong Neighborhoods Initiative areas surround San Jose's downtown, shown enlarged as inset. Over the years, San Jose's redevelopment effort has been fueled by high-tech investment in its outlying Rincon de los Esteros and Edenvale industrial areas. Map courtesy of SJRA.



Monina 9/21/02

- # 633 ↓
  - lush lawn
  - decorative fountain on lawn
  - porch with wicker sofa, plant stands, flag
  - paintwork in good shape
  - curtains are lined and match throughout house
  - elaborate roof joists - carved wood
- # 621 ↓ 9/21
  - rental property
  - open front door
  - different curtains/window covering in each window
  - longer grass on sidewalk, lawn
  - open fence
  - multiple mailboxes
  - back fire escape
- # 617 ↓
  - more modest house
  - some shingles in disrepair
  - blinds down but not drawn shut
  - foil on door
  - low wrought-iron fence
- # 601 ↓ 9/21/02
  - corner lot
  - good paintwork
  - excellent landscaping: grass, trees
  - blinds drawn
  - foil on front door
  - no fence
  - shingles in good shape



Above: A closer look at four historic residences (near the intersection of South Sixth and Reed Streets) reveals a range of tenure types, inhabitants, and maintenance levels that reflect the changing fortunes of San Jose. Drawings and field notes by author.