Landmark tower to rise again: Rickety structure demolished in 1999

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City Heights is getting its landmark back.

Plans are in motion to erect an 80-foot replica of the "Euclid tower," a spire that loomed as a local icon for nearly seven decades until 1999, when the city of San Diego ordered it torn down because it was leaning precariously.

With $225,000 in city redevelopment funds, a South Bay firm has been contracted to build an aluminum-alloy replacement of the original wooden tower, designed in 1930s art-deco style to resemble New York’s Empire State Building.

By mid-September, the replica is expected to be trucked in sections from Chula Vista and hoisted by crane to its rightful perch atop the namesake Tower Bar on University Avenue just east of Euclid Avenue.

Bar owner Mick Rossler, who bought the business in 2001, said hardly a week goes by that someone doesn't wander in and ask about the missing tower, pictured in photos inside the distinctive, octagon-shaped building.

"They want to know what happened to it," Rossler said. "A lot of people say when they were drunk, they could find where the tower was to find their way home."

The tower’s history is almost as colorful as the spire eventually became. Erected in 1932, it rose 100 feet above what was then a hamburger drive-in at the end of the former trolley line from downtown San Diego. Over the years, a succession of businesses -- mostly restaurants and bars -- occupied the two-story base building, which now has a tattoo parlor on the upper floor.

In 1964, a car crashed through the front wall, killing a bar patron. Through all that and more, the tall, ornamental tower remained City Heights’ most recognized landmark. The town council still depicts it on its letterhead.

In 1995, the tower became a public art project. With $65,000 in city arts and redevelopment funds, its peeling white facade was replaced with bright, eye-popping colors and geometric designs intended to reflect City Heights’ ethnic diversity, which includes immigrants from every continent of the globe.

Despite the face-lift, the tower was deteriorating structurally. Gnawed by termites and time, its once-slight tilt kept worsening to the point where city inspectors declared it a hazard and ordered it demolished in May 1999.
"It was such a landmark -- it was just devastating to us to have it taken down," said Linda Pennington, a City Heights artist who helped lead the push for the 1995 makeover.

Bob Kennedy, City Heights project manager for San Diego's redevelopment agency, said replacing the tower was one of the most requested and least costly projects identified by community groups in a five-year plan adopted in 2003. Some $20 million to $30 million worth of improvements are planned for the area over the next three to five five years with local property-tax revenue that, as redevelopment funds, must be reinvested back into City Heights.

Correcting a rumor that's making the rounds, Kennedy said the new tower will not be tilted. "No, no, no, it's going to be straight up and down," he said.

Kennedy said the owner of the University Avenue parcel, Jackie Thai of Escondido, won't have to help pay for the project because the tower will have no functional use and won't significantly raise the property value.

What it will raise is community morale, said Enrique Gandarilla, executive director of the City Heights Business Association.

"It's a symbol of the revitalization that's taking place in City Heights," he said. "Every community has special landmarks. For us, this is once again going to be one of those."

Caption: 1 PIC
Painters Glen Bild (right) and Michael Wehking touched up the facade of the Tower Bar, under its namesake spire, at University Avenue and Reno Drive in City Heights. 1995 file photo / U-T
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