

# Spirit of revival felt in City Heights Residents fight crime, drugs, general decay

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It is the best and worst of times in City Heights.

Cops, residents and community activists say crime is the issue in the dense, ethnically mixed community of more than 36,000.

During the first quarter of this year, two homicides, eight rapes, 31 strong-arm robberies, 126 assaults, 235 residential burglaries, 32 commercial burglaries, 240 grand thefts and 199 auto thefts occurred in City Heights.

"Lawless," "war zone," "drug-infested" and "Beirut" are just a few of the terms elected representatives of the area have come to use when describing City Heights, where the crime rate is significantly higher than the city average.

No less of an albatross around City Heights' neck, however, is the planned extension of Interstate 15 through the community, which is bordered by El Cajon Boulevard to the north, Home Avenue to the south, I-805 to the west and Euclid Avenue to the east.

"Planned" is the operative word here, considering that the extension project has been on the drawing board of the state Department of Transportation since 1959. Dilapidated homes along 40th Street, scheduled to be razed for the freeway extension, have become thorns in the side of the community, not only because of their unsightliness but also because they have become "shooting galleries" for drug abusers, squatter camps for transients and kindling for arsonists.

Equally pressing issues include the neighborhood's deteriorating and badly overcrowded schools, its abundance of substandard housing, and the slow but steady decline of the business districts along University Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard.

Still, a spirit of revival has gripped many residents of City Heights.

In fact, now may be the best of times for City Heights because people here are fed up and they're not going to take the crime, the drugs, the gangs and the general decay anymore.

They are successfully pressuring the City Council for more police protection and more recreational services for their children.

They are staging rallies, demanding that CalTrans stop dragging its feet on the I-15 extension -- a 2.2-mile stretch that would run parallel to 40th Street between I-805 and I-

8.

After a series of meetings and rallies organized by residents earlier this summer, CalTrans got busy razing 18 homes it had acquired and condemned for the interstate extension; work on the freeway is scheduled to begin in the fall of 1993.

Trees are being planted in City Heights, hundreds of them.

And people are patrolling their own mean streets at night with a take-back-the-neighborhood attitude. Additionally, a dedicated brigade of residents paint over graffiti wherever it appears.

City Councilman John Hartley, who represents the area, says City Heights and its people are engaged in a "battle for the soul of the neighborhood."

What's needed, he said, is an infusion of more public and private support and service to the community, and more involvement from those most affected by the urban ills facing City Heights.

Hartley says a renaissance is possible there, especially if the I-15 project includes construction of a "cover," which is basically a concrete overpass built above the below-grade section of the freeway.

With the freeway beneath, such a cover could be used for commercial or residential development or the construction of educational or cultural facilities -- similar to Copley Square in downtown Boston.

Hartley envisions that the covered freeway would become a centerpiece for the community, in the same way that Horton Plaza became the centerpiece for downtown.

It is approaching midday and housing specialist Jim Ridley is sliding into the front seat of his '71 Volkswagen van, preparing to take a visitor on a tour of City Heights.

Ridley is driving in the 3500 block of Highland Avenue. He points out a vacant and run-down house prime for conversion to a livable and affordable residence, especially for a low-income family.

"It's just tired, nothing really wrong," said Ridley, who is executive director of San Diego Neighborhood Housing Services Inc., a non-profit housing rehabilitation lender that works to revitalize the housing in City Heights.

"Most of us who have been here for years see the orchid in City Heights and not the onion," he said.

As Ridley cruises the 44-block community, a clear picture of City Heights emerges, and it is not flattering. Most striking is an odd and pervasive mix of large apartment buildings

and single-family homes.

It is common to see matchbox-size houses wedged between towering apartment buildings. Indeed, residential blocks in City Heights that have not fallen victim to the intrusion of apartments are rare.

What's more, a closer look at the existing housing reveals that many homes and apartments currently occupied have serious roofing problems plus electrical, plumbing and other code violations.

"Fifty homes could be eliminated right away through code enforcement," Ridley declares.

Left unsaid is that if the city's building inspectors did condemn homes, the displaced residents would need to find new housing -- one of many secondary problems facing those trying to restore the neighborhood.

City Heights is a place where you are likely to see cracked windows covered with duct tape rather than replaced. It is a place where stray dogs lounge on couches tossed out on front yards.

You might find a manicured lawn with a lush tree, but the house is falling down from neglect. Or you might notice a well-maintained house, but then hear chickens cackling inside.

There is no uniformity here. Nothing is typical or consistent.

With the exception of streets in the older and more established Lexington Park area of City Heights, not a single block is without major needs.

Ridley drives past a house with a vegetable garden for a front yard.

"A lot of Southeast Asians like to garden," he notes. "If they have a yard 6-feet by 12-feet, they'll garden."

A fleet of garbage trucks could roll through this community and find no shortage of trash to haul. Junked cars are everywhere, but mostly in front yards.

"If the neighborhood looks funky from the street, you can bet the view from the alleys is worse," Ridley says.

He is right.

Mattresses are heaped into back alleys -- along with sofas, chairs and full-size swing sets, to name just a few of the large and more visible items.

"Neighborhoods like these get ignored," Ridley said as he passed a boarded-up apartment complex in the 4100 block of 40th Street. "It's almost easier not to look at it because if you look at it, you're going to have to make some hard choices. There are no easy solutions."

City Heights is among the most densely populated areas in the city, particularly between El Cajon Boulevard and University Avenue, which is known as "the corridor."

This compactness is attributable to past unbridled development of apartments and condominiums. The housing situation has had a profound -- and in some ways destructive -- effect on City Heights.

Thirty years ago, City Heights was a stable, working-class neighborhood in which people owned their homes.

Today, however, the homeowners have been largely replaced by low- to moderate-income renters, many of whom view City Heights as a pit stop on the way to a better neighborhood.

In fact, renters far outnumber homeowners in City Heights; 64 percent of the dwellings are leased.

And while hardly a ghetto, City Heights has suffered as a result of the rapid growth and demographic shifts. Increased crime tops the list of problems.

Leanne Brown, 37, has lived on the same property on the same street in City Heights since birth.

"It was a middle-class, single-family home neighborhood when I was growing up," said Brown, who is area coordinator of the Neighborhood Watch program for the San Diego Police Department. "We knew everybody on the street."

She described a "step-by-step" decline of the community: "As everyone started getting older and their kids grew up, they started selling or renting the houses out. The apartments started going up, and more people moved into the area. Traffic started getting worse. The schools became overcrowded.

"With prices going up on houses, both parents had to go to work. The kids became latch-key kids, and they started hanging around together to substitute for the family.

"Then came the gangs, and we started having graffiti. The gangs had to prove themselves, so they started doing burglaries and vandalism."

Brown said "it was gradual thing. But it has escalated in the last 10 years to the point now where we have at least three or four very active gangs in the area."

Police officers John Slough and Steve R. Williard, who work out of a storefront office in City Heights, said the increased gang activity can be attributed in part to stepped-up enforcement in Southeast San Diego, causing gangs to move north to City Heights.

But that is not the only reason for the presence of the Hell's Angels and black, Latino and Indochinese gangs, they said.

The officers say the area's highly dense and transient population have also contributed to the overall crime problem.

City Heights is an interesting mix.

The ethnic breakdown is 62 percent white, 15.3 percent Hispanic, 17.3 percent black and 5.4 percent Asian, according to data provided by the City Heights Community Development Corp. Senior citizens make up 20 percent of the neighborhood's population. The median family income in City Heights was \$14,967 a year as of 1985, the most recent year for which figures are available. And one-third of the residents are poor, according to federal standards. The unemployment rate hovers at 17 percent.

Barry J. Schultz, president of the City Heights Community Development Corp. and a 10-year neighborhood resident, recognizes the difficulty of trying to revitalize a community lacking a strong income base.

Still, Schultz said he "feels a new sense of community involvement."

For its part, the community development corporation has succeeded in recruiting residents to take part in its Community Pride Day trash removals, its Adopt-A-Tree Program, its graffiti paint-outs, and its code enforcement task force.

The Community Development Corp. also has been a strong and successful lobbyist for extra public services and facilities in City Heights.

It has received a \$170,000 city grant to hire consultants to design a freeway cover for the I-15 extension.

The study, which may be complete as soon as next May, will detail how many blocks the cover should encompass and how to finance the project, Shultz said.

Schultz's rough estimate of the cost of an eight-block freeway cover is \$60 million.

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