Street Smarts: Storefront improvement program offers benefits for architects, business owners, and the city
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Joe Banuelos used to work in a hospital inspecting and calibrating medical equipment. In the Navy before that, he learned avionics.

Now 37, Banuelos systematically manages Tortilleria Lily, a small factory in City Heights his aunt and uncle started 17 years ago but considered selling before he pitched in to help. Tia Delia and Tio Francisco Amezquita trained him, as they have the rest of the small staff, to run the business "like a personal kitchen," Banuelos said.

He monitors everything from fluctuating moisture levels in the air to the intensity of the gas oven's "lazy flame," family secrets that are key to producing 330 tasty tortillas per minute while most people are sleeping or just starting their day.

The daily challenge is to make enough -- but not too many -- preservative-free tortillas, the right amount to supply standing orders from local restaurants and markets, and serve walk-in customers from the neighborhood. Gardeners, shopkeepers and mothers begin arriving when Tortilleria Lily's new corner store on University Avenue opens at 6 a.m. They keep coming until closing time: "until we run out, around 1 p.m.," states a hand-written sign in the window.

Despite steady demand and a lovely name (after one of the Amezquitas' daughters), this factory with a small retail outlet didn't always look so friendly.

In fact, until a recently completed architectural makeover, Tortilleria Lily resembled a nasty fortress. The Amezquitas had slapped a steel fence across the building's aged doors and blocked its windows for extra security. After that, pedestrians were barred from entering from the sidewalk, as they would other shops on the street. Instead, customers and delivery vehicles went around to the back to pick up bags of a dozen fresh tortillas or bulk orders.

All that changed after Banuelos learned from the City Heights Business Association about the city of San Diego's Storefront Improvement Program for small businesses in older neighborhoods. Encouraged by City Heights Redevelopment Project Area staff, Banuelos applied for up to 10 hours of city-funded design services to reopen and restore the factory's University Avenue facade as the building's true front.

The city's Office of Small Business, which administers the program, arranged for Banuelos to meet with Zagrodnik + Thomas Architects, a North Park firm that renovated a prominent building for Whole Foods Market in Hillcrest and has worked on at least 20 city-supported storefront upgrades since 1999, with about half implemented.
"To me, it's neat to have a factory in the middle of stores and residences," architect Jean Zagrodnik said. She and her partner and husband, Scott Thomas, live and work in Normal Heights and North Park, where they've watched storefront improvements mushroom during the past decade and revitalize street life and neighborhood pride.

Zagrodnik + Thomas is one of five San Diego architecture firms preapproved by the city to meet with either owners of small businesses or their landlords who qualify for the program. Ergo Architecture, Fields Devereaux Architects & Engineers, Perisic Design Studio and Roesling Nakamura Terada Architects are the other four firms. The work centers on suggesting affordable improvements recorded in a color sketch that the client can complete, pledging to honor the essence of design concept, or not.

"If we can understand (the owners') goals and know their budget, we can propose reasonable changes, perhaps limited to color and tile. We try to make some order out of the architectural elements already there," Zagrodnik said. If the owner has more money to spend, "we might suggest adding awnings or changing the facade's structure, which would require the added expense of hiring a structural engineer."

The city pays the architects $100 per hour for 10 hours maximum. The owner is expected to pay for excess hours worked. In Zagrodnik's experience, the work required nearly always goes over that limit, and many owners are not able to pay the architects.

Her firm finds compensation in other ways. They treat the storefront projects as plum assignments, meted out to deserving or understimulated architects or tackled in a fun, team-building design charrette by the whole staff.

"When we bill the city, we charge for 10 hours, but we also note the actual hours worked," to raise awareness of what's really involved, she added.

The consultations and design sketches do indeed amount to a form of community service, said Alicia Martinez-Higgs of the Office of Small Business. "It's a great program for architects with the potential for them to get more work and bigger jobs from the business owner or new clients in the neighborhood.

Two of Zagrodnik + Thomas' notable finished storefront projects -- a renovated Art Deco-style office building in Hillcrest for KTU+A Landscape Architecture and Planning, and Stone Paper Scissors, a storefront gallery and artists collaborative in North Park -- involved extensive interior renovations done outside the city's program.

Zagrodnik and architect Ruth Farjarit-Davis hit it off with Banuelos, but that didn't mean the manager didn't have some trepidation.

"When we started, I was nervous," he recalled. "There wasn't a lot of money in the budget, and the building needed a lot of attention."
What began as a facade-improvement project turned out to be part of Banuelos' larger vision to improve the venture his aunt and uncle launched after moving here from Mexico.

"This business put their two daughters through med school," Banuelos said proudly.

He hired the architects to do a feasibility study for reorganizing and upgrading the free-standing, one-story building. That study led to the remodeling of the entire building, including the addition of large, operable windows on the street that allow pedestrians to watch -- and smell -- tortillas being made. The architects moved the retail outlet that was previously located in the rear to a corner of the building facing University Avenue and added a custom sign, lighting and landscaping.

The city's storefront improvement program contributed a $5,000 rebate for the facade improvements, and its Redevelopment Agency contributed $41,000 toward this $800,000 construction project, Banuelos said.

Tortilleria Lily turned into a model of how relatively modest storefront improvements can be a catalyst for economic development and neighborhood revitalization. Banuelos doesn't have concrete data, but he is sure retail business has improved with the new storefront.

Martinez-Higgs said she and other city staff hear that from a lot of owners who participate in the storefront improvement program. Her department has attempted to devise a survey to document the economic impact of these physical improvements but hasn't had the resources to follow through.

Among the success stories with citywide appeal, she points to the gourmet Grant's Marketplace, which replaced a corner convenience store in South Park, and Claire de Lune coffeehouse, which hosts arts events and poetry readings in a restored Spanish Revival building from 1929 in North Park.

San Diego's Storefront Improvement Program, which is approaching its 20th fiscal year, is one of many in cities throughout the county, the state and the nation. A similar program for old buildings in downtown San Diego is run by the Centre City Development Corp., the city's downtown redevelopment arm.

At San Diego's Office of Small Business alone, about 560 businesses or building owners had applied for the rebate and design services program since its founding in 1986. Of those, more than half -- 335 throughout the city -- have been implemented. More than 50 are now in the works, although Martinez-Higgs said some of these are stymied by today's high construction costs and a shortage of contractors.

The projects may be small, but they make a big impact on the image and visibility of storefront businesses and sidewalk cafes. They contribute to street life, a sense of community and safety.
"You can definitely see the impact over time," Zagrodnik said. "These redesigned storefronts uplift entire neighborhoods."

Caption: 5 PICS
1,2. Mark Olarsch (left) loaded fresh tortillas with the help of Dena Palacio at the recently remodeled Tortilleria Lily factory and store in City Heights. With redevelopment funds covering part of the cost and assistance from Zagrodnik + Thomas Architects, this small business shed its former fortresslike image (above). 3. The city’s Storefront Improvement Program helped create a friendlier facade with wide windows at Bahia Don Bravo’s (above) in Ocean Beach. 4. The program also supported facade design for a bakery-cafe, Bread on Market (above right), in what had been a historic hotel. 5. Hands-on manager Joe Banuelos works around the clock at Tortilleria Lily’s small factory, store and office. He also recently guided an $800,000 remodeling project that reorganized and upgraded the factory. 1. John Gibbins / Union-Tribune 3. Scott Linnett / Union-Tribune 4. Nelvin Cepeda / Union-Tribune 5. Nadia Borowski Scott / Union-Tribune Edition: 1,2,3
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