An artful Tower of hope stands in City Heights
San Diego Union-Tribune - Saturday, May 1, 1993
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Rising like a spike out of the streets of City Heights, the Tower serves as a landmark for this eclectic, oft-troubled neighborhood.

So it really wasn’t much of a choice when last year a group of residents decided that the Tower -- an oddly endearing work of architecture that houses a friendly, neighborhood bar -- would be the spot for an unusual piece of public art.

Now, with the final details on the art project completed, residents hope that the Tower will become a beacon of sorts for a hoped-for rebirth of the University Avenue corridor.

"This will be a really strong way to visibly show redevelopment has come to City Heights," said Linda Pennington, an artist and community activist who has been involved with the project. And if all goes well, the project should be finished in the fall, she said.

The building, at University and Reno avenues, is now a rather drab-looking affair, faded tan-and-white stucco that is flaking in places.

When finished, it will be an unusual assemblage of bright colors and eye-catching geometric tiles: bright green, pink, sky-blue and orange.

Currently home to a cozy bar, the Tower opened in 1932 as a drive-through soda fountain.

It sits at the confluence of three streets, and is the centerpiece of four exceptional buildings. Across one street is the Egyptian Garage, formerly an electrical substation for the trolley. Across University is the old Silverado Ballroom and Silver Tower building. All were built around the same time, and each has its own special art-deco touch.

In an area plagued by a variety of problems -- crime, graffiti vandalism, crowded schools -- the Tower project is seen by many as a way of asserting community pride in one of its most recognizable buildings, Pennington said.

The artwork to be done on the Tower is one of 10 such community-based public arts projects sponsored by an award-winning city program. The city gives $7,000 to various communities -- from Carmel Valley to San Ysidro -- and then asks community members to pick a site, an artist and a project, said Gale Goldman of the San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture.

For example, in Golden Hill, they’re painting a mural of a recreation center. The
lifeguard tower in Pacific Beach will be covered in mosaic tiles and topped by a neon wave. And in Emerald Hills, eight steel sculptures will line the west side of Kelton Road.

The City Heights project is unique, because unlike the nine other projects, it is on a privately owned building, Goldman said. Also, "They've really taken the initiative to build community support in terms of enthusiasm and additional financial support," she said.

The area's fledgling redevelopment agency made a $15,000 contribution.

Keith Murray, who along with her husband, Jack, has owned the building for 11 years, has been supportive of the project from the start. "It's eye-catching, and I think the finished product will be something people can be very proud of," she said.

To do the project, the existing stucco on the tower had to be stripped -- an expensive project costing about twice as much as the city grant. In stepped the Mid-City Development Corp. with $15,000 for the prep work.

The grant marks the agency's first foray into redevelopment of the sprawling Mid-City area.

The art project also comes at a time when others in City Heights are looking to better the area's image, literally and figuratively.

On Saturday, proposals to refurbish a 2.2-mile stretch of University Avenue, from Interstate 805 to 54th Street, will be unveiled at a community meeting. One idea is to divide that section of University -- home to hundreds of small and medium-size businesses -- into seven individual districts, each with its own identity, but all with a uniform theme.

Caption: 1 PIC
A landmark: The City Heights Tower, with its new art adornments, is a symbol of neighborhood revival. Union-Tribune / John McCUTCHEN
Edition: 5
Section: LOCAL
Page: B-2
Index Terms: ALCOHOL ; ART ; BUILDING ; CITY ; FINANCE ; HISTORY ; MONUMENTS ; NEIGHBORHOODS ; STREETS AND ROADS
Record Number: UTS1059381
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