Andrew Carnegie used his steel millions to build libraries across America. Sol Price built warehouse stores and, at 85, he's obsessed with the revival of San Diego's rawest melting pot. In City Heights, he's catalyst for this city's largest redevelopment since Horton Plaza.

To Price, the tens of millions that his and related charities have invested in its central Urban Village are not the point; that's come-on money. Son of a CIO garment union organizer in New York, he's driven by a crabby social conscience and a lifetime of street savvy.

"And City Heights is working," says Councilwoman Christine Kehoe, "because it's built up from grass roots, not by some urban designer. Sol sat in focus groups in City Heights living rooms. He has as much brains as money, and he's determined to make a difference."

Price's leverage in any deal is immense, and in this one he's leveraging public funds through smart charity. His model could serve to link public and private rehabilitation of America's blighted cities. City Heights has no close parallel in other cities.

For four years I'd asked him to walk the tour with me.

"Let's wait and see if it works," he'd said. He's as demanding of himself as he was when he bargained for a million toasters.

We met at the sunny new City Heights library, with his colleagues in Price Entities, Murray Galinson and Jack McGrory.

"Let them tell you," Price said, and slipped away to sit at a computer among a rainbow of kids.

Across Fairmount Avenue was the community colleges' new education center, next door to an airy and open police substation built on the site of an abandoned Vons, the central symbol of decay. On past the new theater, community center and playground, the tennis courts and community pool, was the new Rosa Parks Elementary School.

Price rejoined us, frowning.

"If you succeed, you know, you fail. I got a letter from a City Heights minister. We asked him to come in and talk about it. He says now that City Heights is a better place to live, land prices are going up so much that poor people can't afford to live here anymore."
It’s a problem often attacked with government subsidies. Price and William Jones, the idealistic former councilman and developer who introduced Price to City Heights, had anticipated that. Through charitable funds, Price will offer rent credits to tenants for specific volunteer work in City Heights.

Early on, Price convinced City Hall to build the police station like a community center. The city demanded a master plan that would take two years. "I'll pay for it and you pay me back," Price said, and it was done in six months. He pledged millions to enhance two new schools. He studied federal subsidies for City Heights redevelopment and decided red tape would add 20 percent and years of delay.

"Sol has no patience," Kehoe says. "He's always in a hurry."

An Albertson's supermarket is coming, and in February work begins on a block of offices and 116 low- and mid-income apartments. Priority will go to present or displaced City Heights residents, aided through rent rebates. Price uses his leverage to recruit more jobs in City Heights, and better public and private health services. His son Robert oversees education enhancement; San Diego State manages three City Heights schools (including Monroe Clark Middle School and Hoover High) for the city board of education as pilot projects.

"Sure," Price says. "I tilt at windmills."

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