To outsiders, this parcel of rock and sand along El Cajon Boulevard near Menlo Avenue doesn't look like much. But to residents of this ethnically diverse neighborhood, one step across the brown grainy surface and they feel hope.

Entrepreneurs, residents and political leaders got dirt and clay on their shoes yesterday as they trod a plot of City Heights land that will soon be the site of an edifice that will be the center of a revitalized ethnic business district.

The Asian Business Center, a tri-level, pagoda-style structure, is scheduled to open in about six months between an Asian market and a Vietnamese restaurant. The 31,724-square-foot center will provide a mix of retail, office and residential use and do much more than offer ethnic goods and services, its backers, say.

Also, its mere presence will change the face of this four-mile commercial stretch of El Cajon Boulevard from Park Boulevard to 54th Street.

The building is expected to be the heart of a district now frequented mainly by just nearby residents. Its owners hope the center will pump energy and hope into neighboring businesses, and prompt cohesion in building design that will add color and character.

They also want to draw residents from other parts of the county who normally would not venture onto this street that is already filled with businesses run out of nondescript buildings. The only thing identifying the cultures behind the tinted windows are the translations painted on the windows.

The area is inhabited by as many as 20 ethnicities and cultures, from Vietnamese and Chinese to Chaldean and Latino.

"We have such a vast diversity in this neighborhood," said Jay Levine, who has run Pip Printing on the strip since 1971. "People who live here and work here know that. We just want everyone else to discover us, too."

That was the thought behind the project, said the building's owners, Yan Lei and her husband, Norman Timineri.

Lei and Timineri owned the Tea Garden Motel, which once stood where the center will be built.

"Why can't we have our own Little Saigon or Chinatown?" Lei asked Timineri in November as they drove home from a trip to Los Angeles.
So they decided at that moment to close their business and build a dream. And a motel was demolished on Dec. 14.

"The motel brought lots of riffraff," Lei said. "And we wanted to make a difference."

The marketing plan so far has excited many residents, who watched the short groundbreaking ceremony from metal chairs under a white tent.

Members of the Hung Vuong Dragon Dance Troupe performed a traditional dragon dance intended to bring good luck to the area. Then four women -- an owner of the proposed building and three political figures -- took part in the ceremonial turning of dirt to launch construction of the $2.5 million center.

The design celebrates the past, present and future, said its architect, Peter Fung of InterPhase Inc.

Fung honored the past and designed the structure around a courtyard, which traditionally symbolizes protection and security. To celebrate the present, he incorporated lofts, a concept popular in big cities. Six apartment units on the top floor will be available for lease.

And in anticipation of the future, the center will offer stations where patrons can recharge their electric cars.

Also expected to aid in the revitalization effort is the road work along Interstate 15 that will direct motorists into City Heights.

Steve Russell, executive director of the El Cajon Boulevard Business Improvement Association, said he envisions a gateway to a bustling corridor made up of a mix of ethnic-run businesses offering exotic items.

"The winning formula for this project is the diverse partners," said Jose R. Lopez, president of the Fox Canyon Neighborhood Association. "It's a win-win situation."

Caption: 1 PIC 2 MAPS
1. Flying high: Hoang Nguyen went over three students in a demonstration of the kung fu jumpside kick yesterday at the groundbreaking for the Asian Business Center. 2,3. Asian Business Center 1. NELVIN CEPEDA / Union-Tribune 2,3. UNION-TRIBUNE Edition: 1,2,3
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Index Terms: ASIANS ; BUILDING ; BUSINESS ; NEIGHBORHOODS ; SAN DIEGO ; PROFILE.; Asian Business Center
Record Number: UTS1433936
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Full-text obtained via NewsBank