Asian center is dream come true; Mixed-use business hub making mark in City Heights
San Diego Union-Tribune - Tuesday, January 30, 2001
Author: Dong-Phuong Nguyen

Two years ago, Norman and Yan Lei Timineri looked at a pile of rock and dirt on a City Heights lot and saw their dream.

They envisioned a three-story, pagoda-style structure looming over one of the most diverse neighborhoods in San Diego County, a building that could become a symbol for a new City Heights.

Today, after more than 18 months of construction, the Asian Business Center is open, its paint still fresh and newly laid asphalt still gleaming.

The center, an impressive mixed-use structure that juts from a lot on El Cajon Boulevard near Menlo Avenue, is making its mark.

"I'm so proud of it," Norman Timineri said. He and his wife hope their project will become a landmark in the Asian business district in City Heights, much like the Asian Garden Mall is in Orange County's Little Saigon. "It's perfect, everything we wanted it to be."

The building, which was completed a few months ago, has 10 retail and office tenants and occupants in all six apartment units on the top floor.

There is room for about 20 more businesses, but Timineri is being selective.

In keeping with self-imposed rules to prevent loitering, Timineri has turned down requests from people wanting to open up such businesses as a pool hall and a coffeehouse.

"They didn't want to serve anything else in the coffeehouse, not even doughnuts or pastries," Timineri said. "I just couldn't do it."

The center is one of a number of revitalization projects in the City Heights /Mid-City area, which runs along a four-mile stretch of El Cajon Boulevard and University Avenue.

"The place is absolutely beautiful," said Jay Levine, secretary of the El Cajon Boulevard Business Improvement Association. "It’s a showcase for the whole area."

The City Heights area has residents representing as many as 20 ethnicities and cultures, including Vietnamese, Chinese, Chaldean and Latino.
But the hope is, with such buildings as the modern Asian Business Center, people from other cities will explore City Heights and what the community has to offer, Levine said.

"There's just a tremendous amount of exciting things going on," he said. "I don't think the (center) is enough to change the whole area, but it shows that the community is standing behind these kinds of projects."

Timineri is adored by his commercial and residential tenants.

"He is a great man," said John Chan, who moved from San Francisco to open the Fortune City Bargain Center inside the Asian Business Center. "I liked what I saw in Norman and I liked what I saw in the building. This man has helped me out so much. I cannot thank him enough."

The dream came five years ago when the Timineris were driving to San Diego from Los Angeles. Yan Lei Timineri asked her husband, "Why can't we have our own Little Saigon or Chinatown?"

The couple, owners of the Tea Garden Motel at the time, decided to tear down the motel and build the center in its place. Two years ago, a groundbreaking ceremony drew politicians and dignitaries, all supporters of the revitalization efforts in the Mid-City area.

Although it would have been more profitable to build apartment units, the couple wanted a mixed-used structure such as those that are common in East Asian cities.

Everything from the color of the stucco -- jasmine rose -- to the electrical outlets was carefully chosen. The 31,724-square-foot center also has an electric-car charging station.

There also are a hair salon, a gift shop, a money transfer service, a restaurant and a Vietnamese video and music rental business.

"Norman had a dream and I liked it," Chan said. "So I moved my family here to start a new life and live my dream."

Caption: 3 PICS
1. Tuan and Tammy Tran shopped recently at Fortune City Bargain Center inside the Asian Business Center. 2. Anna Chan watered bamboo plants at Fortune City Bargain Center, which she and her husband own. Among other ABC tenants are a hair salon, a gift shop, a money transfer service, a restaurant and a Vietnamese video and music rental store. (B-4) 3. John Chan, who moved from San Francisco to become a tenant of the Asian Business Center, is lavish in praising ABC creator Norman Timineri. "He is a great man," Chan said. (B-4) 1,2,3. Fred Greaves photos
Asian Business Center