Commerce resurges in Mid-City sector
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Mid-City -- promoted by trolley builders in 1910 as San Diego's first suburb, and bludgeoned in the 1960s by shopping center developers -- is reawakening with new businesses born of the return-to-the-city movement.

Symbolic of the new attitude among developers and property owners is Campus Plaza, a $6 million, 84,000-square-foot shopping center at 62nd Street and El Cajon Boulevard. Where once stood the Campus Drive-In with its majorette-in-neon, is a spanking new but architecturally unique set of 25 shops, fully leased within weeks to willing retailers who have been doing their homework.

"Frankly, going out to the growth areas of San Diego, of which there are many, is a lot riskier business," said Steve Avoyer, the Coldwell Banker leasing agent for Campus Plaza, "just because there are not that many people in those areas. They all have master plans and I'm not saying that you won't have successful centers. But you have to wait for people to come to them. In the inner city, the people are already there, of course."

Mid-City, nine communities bounded by Interstate 8, Park Boulevard, State 94 and La Mesa, includes about 12,000 acres, nearly 200,000 residents and more than 3,000 businesses.

Avoyer added, "I think people have overlooked this area (of Mid-City) for some reason for five to 10 years and are starting to find that area has a tremendous number of people without adequate retail services. If the retailer comes in and makes a lot of money because people need those services, the developers who build those shopping facilities aren't going to be far behind."

Tom Hom, the former city councilman who has been active in the Gaslamp Quarter, also read his tea leaves carefully and is developing a 24,510-square-foot neighborhood shopping center, Mid-City Plaza, on University Avenue between 41st and 42nd streets in City Heights. Previously, the site was occupied by Guarantee Chevrolet.

"There is pent-up demand for retailers who have space for off-street parking in front," said Marc Brutton, the Business Properties Brokerage Co. leasing agent on the Hom project.

Joe Greeno grew up in Normal Heights in the 1940s and remembers Adams Avenue in its better days -- trolley service, Piggly Wiggly supermarket and endless strip of mom-and-pop shops.

Ten years ago he opened his Corner Liquor store in a former Bank of America building at Adams and Felton. Last year, he moved nearby to the onetime Piggly Wiggly location after a $40,000 renovation to the building, which he bought. This year, he is renovating a former karate school on the northeast corner of the same intersection and hopes to entice a restaurateur to open a business.

"I guess we were pioneers in the area," he said. "There was a massage parlor, some dirty bookstores, a couple of card rooms. But no more."
Yet, the challenge to revitalize is proving equally, if not more difficult, than the Centre City redevelopment program begun in the early 1970s. The Mid-City area is 10 times bigger than downtown and about 15 times more populated. State and federal law changes have made downtown-style redevelopment inappropriate, planners say, so that new approaches are being devised to modernize Mid-City.

"Fortunately, for Mid-City," said the area's city councilwoman, Gloria McColl, "we don't need drastic bulldozer action -- just good planning and good thinking. In the future, El Cajon Boulevard very well could be our Wilshire Boulevard."

Mid-City was born 70 years ago as a suburb to downtown and its environs. Trolley service along Adams and University avenues did to Normal Heights and Kensington what Interstate 15 did to Rancho Bernardo. The area was so confident about the prospects of major development that much of it incorporated as the City of East San Diego in 1912.

When the automobile became the rage, El Cajon Boulevard became Highway 80 and merchants knew they could capture business otherwise destined for downtown's retail core. (East San Diego annexed to San Diego in 1923, as did Normal Heights in 1925, because of sewer and water problems.)

But when post-World War II growth pushed development north to Clairemont and the College Grove and Mission Valley shopping centers opened in 1960-61, the regional retailers moved out of downtown. Mid-City merchants and businesses saw auto traffic -- and customers -- move north to Interstate 8.

Gradually, the properties along the three east-west thoroughfares deteriorated. Department stores became warehouses; shops became card rooms. Movie theaters, car dealerships and once popular eateries closed.

"It's like a cancer that comes into an area," said Sharon Rea, chairwoman of the 26-member Mid-City Revitalization Task Force.

"The Mid-City is vital to the economic strength of San Diego," concluded the authors of a 179-page economic analysis issued last October. "Efforts to renew downtown require that peripheral communities and neighborhoods such as Mid-City likewise be preserved and improved. This ensures the long-term economic potential and livability of the central city."

Beginning in 1981 with the work of McColl's predecessor, Susan Golding, the City Council turned its attention from Centre City to Mid-City. Unlike other areas of the city, there was no active community planning group. The 1965 community plan was outdated. And new census figures indicated that Mid-City was growing and exhibiting a changing economic, ethnic and social character.

Today, there are some 28 groups involved in charting Mid-City's course over the next 20 years. A new community plan will be ready for possible adoption by the City Council by this summer and business and merchant groups have garnered upward of $2 million in public funds to begin revitalizing the three main commercial corridors.

The groundwork has been laid to set Mid-City in the right direction, based on a survey of the 3,000-plus businesses in the area, the economic analysis urban design plans by students at California State Polytechnic University at Pomona and two target area design studies by HCH &
Associates and the Jerde Partnership (architect for downtown’s Horton Plaza retail center).

"This kind of revitalization program hasn't quite been done before by the city," said Gary Rose Weber, the city's paid community liaison and coordinating consultant on Mid-City. "Consequently, as we move along in various facets, we’re finding that we have to invent the wheels and reform government until we get things done. What we are doing now is attempting to really establish policy and procedure for revitalization."