City Heights face lift is more than skin-deep; Cleaner streets, buildings counteract image as a declining, sometimes dangerous area

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Polly Gillette's motorcycle dealership in City Heights wore evidence of the ravages of time. The paint was faded, windows were chipped and the building leaked.

"It was looking a little tired," Gillette recalled.

Then this summer she took advantage of a city-backed program to defray the costs of facade improvements, giving the building a major face lift.

"It helps to keep things looking new and energized," Gillette said recently.

Building improvements like this example on El Cajon Boulevard are gaining steam throughout the struggling City Heights area. In addition to the popular city-sponsored program for businesses, some residential areas and major thoroughfares are seeing cleanup efforts to shore up some deteriorating pockets of San Diego's urban core.

The various projects are "a response to the physical decline that people have seen for the past several years," said Lew Pond of the Mid-City Development Corp., which oversees redevelopment projects.

City Heights residents said that improving the area’s appearance carries deeper significance than mere cosmetic enhancements. For a neighborhood trying to buck a reputation as declining and sometimes dangerous, cleaner streets and buildings are steps toward a more favorable image, they said.

"Perception is reality," said Valerie Hoffman, who has lived in City Heights for 17 years. "We'll never have a revitalization effort like downtown," she said, referring to the work done there in the 1980s, "but we can help turn the neighborhood around."

Some residents said one area experiencing a turnaround lies north of University Avenue near Fairmount Avenue. About 1,000 people live in apartments along three blocks that as recently as one year ago were beset with litter and graffiti, some residents said.

"Now it's just like a different city," said Juanita Green, who lives in one of two apartment buildings she owns in the area.

Trash and graffiti are gone largely because of a so-called "quality neighborhood project," run by a nonprofit organization in City Heights for the past year. Workers supplied by the county bag trash and paint over graffiti.
Before the program, "you'd get up in the morning and your shrubbery was filled with whiskey bottles," Green said. "People brought couches and beds to dump in the alley. Now, we don't have that anymore."

There is only a loose connection, if any, between the various improvement programs in the area, meaning that efforts might be focused in one area while other sections receive scant attention.

Despite the scattershot execution, cleanup programs received a boost following an April meeting with residents, community leaders and local officials. The ad hoc group devised strategies to combat crime and business problems in the neighborhood, a teeming community of 70,000 people stretching from Interstate 805 to 54th Street and from El Cajon Boulevard to Home Avenue.

Residents oversee many of the efforts to improve the neighborhood's appearance.

A "community enhancement" group roams the neighborhood on a weekly basis, looking for code violations along streets or residential properties. The group, which has grown to about 30 members, reports transgressions to the city or property owners and follows up to see that repairs are carried out.

Longtime resident and artist Linda Pennington has painted out graffiti in the neighborhood since the late 1980s. Covering the scrawl of graffiti is one way to fight for the area, she said.

"You can't get people to buy into an area when it's covered with graffiti and litter," said Pennington, whose anti-graffiti efforts in City Heights have been joined in recent years by two other groups, San Diegans United for Safe Neighborhoods and the Urban Corps.

Repeated resident complaints prompted police this summer to conduct the largest sweep for abandoned cars in recent City Heights history. Beginning in July, officers ticketed or towed more than 150 cars, said police Sgt. Alex Groza.

"It's just one way to clean up the area so it's not a dumpy neighborhood," Groza said of the sweep.

Along University Avenue, a public art project involving a local landmark appears to be moving ahead after previous false starts. The Tower, a bar that rises like a spike near Euclid Avenue, will be spruced up with a new coat of paint and multicolored ceramic tiles in January, said Michele Fergoda, a senior project manager at the Mid-City Development Corp.

Some businesses are trying to improve their surroundings.
Several small businesses along El Cajon Boulevard have paid to plant jacaranda trees along the street's median.

"We have to work on the image to encourage the businesses to come here," said merchant Jacquelyn O'Connor, head of the boulevard's business improvement district. "The image is far worse than it really is," she insisted.

Perhaps the most troubling element of "the image" is that City Heights is San Diego's crime capital. Residents said that falsehood is repeatedly given new life through press accounts, as well as through a controversial proposal last year by a City Heights business group to erect billboards touting the neighborhood's crime woes.

Whether or not they believe City Heights has a crime problem, not everyone in the neighborhood says things are looking up.

"From what I see, I don't see where anything has been done," said Betty Atkins, who has lived in her City Heights home for more than 30 years.

"I used to love San Diego, I used to love living here. . . . It's had its ups and downs. I'd just like to see the neighborhood come back."

Jim Hill, the head of a University Avenue business improvement association, applauds the aggressive grass-roots efforts in the area.

"There is probably more citizen activity than in most areas of town," said the longtime antique and coin merchant. But "how effective they are is hard to say because the problems are so deep."

Some others take a sunnier view.

"Unless we make changes now, it's not going to get any better," said San Diego Councilwoman Christine Kehoe, whose district includes most of City Heights.

Kehoe blames the city and several other public institutions for ignoring or failing the neighborhood in the past.

Kehoe intends to present an ordinance to the City Council next year that would require buildings to meet appearance standards. Peeling paint, dilapidated fences, porches propped up with cinder blocks or high weeds would have to be repaired.

"The streets of the neighborhood are the face of the neighborhood," Kehoe said, "and if it looks good then the whole place benefits."
Caption: 1 PIC
Cleanup: Linda Pennington, with help from Eric Vega, paints out graffiti on a mural in City Heights. The city also is defraying the cost of some facade improvements.
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