I. City Heights: Background

History

The community now known as City Heights began first as a series of subdivisions, then became part of the City of East San Diego in 1912, and finally was annexed into San Diego in 1923 (Schimitschek, 2018). In 1980, the community formally became known as City Heights (Schimitschek, 2018). Through much of this time, the City of San Diego neglected City Heights and other adjacent mid-city communities, directing little public investment to the area. At one point, conditions became so dire that the City of San Diego declared City Heights to be in a state of emergency (Burks, 2014). To combat this disinvestment, City Heights residents organized to advocate for improvements. When several blocks of homes were demolished to construct the Interstate-15 freeway, leaving the neighborhood divided, decades of community-led advocacy for justice ensued. Ultimately, the efforts resulted in the development of “a Complete Corridor” featuring the expansive freeway cap Teralta Park, “two transit plazas, two bike/pedestrian bridges, two adjacent parks” and “the region’s first-ever in-line Bus Rapid Transit Stations” (City Heights CDC, 2018).

City Heights is also distinguished by its decades-long history of refugee resettlement. The area’s first major refugee group, the Vietnamese, was resettled in City Heights in the 1970s following the devastation of the Vietnam War (Luna, 2011). They were originally able to relocate in City Heights because of its relatively low cost of housing. “Over time, City Heights evolved to become a social services hub for immigrants” as organizations opened offices to “provide health care, resettlement assistance, job training, education, and other services” (Luna, 2011). The combination of low-cost housing and supportive infrastructure for new arrivals allowed City Heights to become a home for other refugee groups over the next several decades, including migrants from East Africa, Central America, and South Asia. As a result, today, there are over 40 languages spoken in City Heights and more than 40 percent of the community’s population is foreign-born (Munto, 2018).

Demographics of the Community

City Heights has roughly 100,000 people in its 5.8 square miles, making it one of the densest neighborhoods in San Diego and four times as dense as the average for the City as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The average household size of 6.9 is also significantly larger as well, whereas San Diego averages 2.8 people per household (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). And while household family size is much larger, the median household income is about $30,000 lower than the rest of the city at about $39,650 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The largest ethnicity in City Heights is Hispanic at 55.8 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The next largest groups are White at 14.8 percent and Asian at 14.5 percent, making this community also one of the most diverse in San Diego (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).
II. California Cultural District Designation

About the Designation

With the adoption of Assembly Bill 189 in 2015, the California Arts Council developed the California Cultural Arts program to highlight the rich diversity and thriving cultural assets of local communities across the state. This program targets well-defined geographic areas with high concentrations of cultural resources and activities. The 14 districts that received the designation in the first round, which acted as a pilot launch, were slated to receive certain benefits including but not limited to: official state certification, technical assistance, learning exchanges, branding materials, joint marketing support, a $5,000 annual stipend for two years, and political precedence to set an overlay zone. Additional communities may apply for the Cultural District designation this year by completing the state’s specified certification process. Although the process and its criteria may shift in this next cycle, we present an overview of the pilot launch as background.

In the first round of state-level designations, the California Arts Council had an array of communities to choose from that exemplified the vibrancy and commitment to cultural and artistic assets they were looking for in their cohort. The initial criteria included a comprehensive look on a district’s emphasis on cultural consumption, cultural production, and cultural heritage in a range of areas including urban, suburban, and rural. The chart below outlines the general categories described in the 2017 application process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>LIFE-CYCLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>urban</td>
<td>cultural production</td>
<td>emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suburban</td>
<td>cultural consumption</td>
<td>mid-point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rural</td>
<td>cultural heritage</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: California Arts Council

Application Process

The selection process for the California Cultural Districts consisted of a multistep process beginning with an open call for initial letters of intent for areas interested in pursuing the designation. The next step involved a peer panel review and for those applicants that advanced through the process, site visits and a finalist application were then completed. The timeline below chronicles the application process for the first cohort of the program.
1. Letter of Intent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 31, 2017 to March 29, 2017</td>
<td>Any community interested in participating in the pilot cohort for the program submitted an initial application for consideration in the Letter of Intent (LOI) phase. Applicants needed to provide letters of support from individual community members or artists located in their respective district area.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Semi-Finalist Selection and Site Visits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April/May 2017</td>
<td>Approximately 20 semi-finalists were selected for site visits based on a review of their LOIs and typology.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Finalist Selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June/July 2017</td>
<td>Finalist were invited to submit additional application materials for final review including a cultural asset inventory conducted within the last three years. The first cohort of Cultural Districts were announced in early July 2017.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### III. Cultural Districts in San Diego

**Balboa Park**

As one of the inaugural California Arts Council Cultural District, Balboa Park is lauded as the cultural center and “Jewel of San Diego” (Balboa Park Visitors Center, 2019). This 1,200 acre park, a valuable precedent in our research, has become a “rich cultural resource and central hub for art, science, and history within the region” (California Arts Council, 2018). Balboa Park was the center of several historic event; for example, hosting the 1915-1916 Panama-California Exposition, celebrating the opening of the Panama Canal and cementing San Diego's reputation as the first U.S. port of call for ships moving northwest through the canal (Amero, 1990). With close to four million visitors a year, Balboa Park is characterized by an abundance of community organizations, museums, performing arts venues, amenities, hiking trails, gardens, and its most notable attraction, the world-famous San Diego Zoo (California Arts Council, 2018). Balboa Park’s accessibility and family-friendly atmosphere accentuates its abundant supply of recreational opportunities, events, and entertainment.

**Barrio Logan**

At our initial site visit, the City Heights Economic Development Corporation (CHEDC) identified San Diego’s Barrio Logan as the best potential case study, and model, for City Heights’ application. Barrio Logan—one of the first 14 districts to be awarded the California Cultural District designation—is described by the California Arts Council as "a vibrant artists’ community
with a high concentration of creative energy rooted in Chicano history” (California Arts Council, 2018). It is clear in descriptions of Barrio Logan’s Cultural District that its distinguishing feature is its art, both on the street and inside galleries and local businesses. Barrio Logan is anchored by Chicano Park, which boasts “79 historic murals” and has been recognized as a National Historic Landmark (California Arts Council, 2018). The California Arts Council also highlights the Barrio Logan Art Crawl as a notable community event (California Arts Council, 2018). While the designation may have increased Barrio Logan’s exposure, it also has not removed fears about gentrification. At this time, it does not seem that Barrio Logan has pursued any additional protections for residents or businesses.

**Oceanside**

The California Cultural District describes Oceanside as “an emerging cultural coastal town rife with theaters, museums, galleries, and practicing artists” (California Arts Council, 2018). Its location between Los Angeles and San Diego—as well as its placement next to Camp Pendleton, the largest Marine Corps base on the West Coast—gives it an interesting twist to its prestige as “Southern California’s most authentic beach town” (California Arts Council, 2018). Important sites in this designation include the California Surf Museum, the historic pier and iconic amphitheater, and Artist Alley with painters, muralists, and tattoo artists (California Arts Council, 2018). Oceanside uses its community character as a quirky and quaint beach town to leverage the cultural designation to increase tourism—especially from those travelling between the two largest cities in Southern California.

**IV. Cultural Districts in California and Beyond**

Looking at other cultural districts in California and the rest of the United States, there were many similarities that can be identified across the spectrum. This report specifically looked at the Cultural Districts in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, San Pedro Waterfront Arts District, Los Angeles, Chinatown, Chicago, and SOMA Pilipinas Filipino Cultural Heritage District, San Francisco. Of all these districts, they all hold three key characteristics that guided the recommendations for the University and Fairmount site. The three characteristics are:

1. **Walkability** — Each district is located in a central area within a broader neighborhood context, and they follow multiple blocks down one street or surround a main landmark or open space where the majority of activity occurs. These areas are designed so that visitors and residents can easily traverse on foot to see the neighborhood, run errands, or meet with others.

2. **Transit-oriented** — Most of the districts are also located near major transit opportunities such as the L or BART stations. This also contributes a factor in accessibility as a whole, and makes the area attractive for tourists from other parts of the city.
3. **Monocultural** — The districts all contain one major people group that is highlighted in the area whether or not it is ethnicity like Chinese or occupation/interests like artists. This characteristic is able to unite the area and bring people together.

Of all of these case studies, the group determined that the SOMA Pilipinas Filipino Cultural Heritage District in San Francisco was the best comparison for City Heights. This is because its Cultural District Designation was formed more around the presence of Filipino business and the history of the Filipino community in the area, rather than around a vibrant art scene or tourism opportunities. SOMA Pilipinas was selected by the California Arts Council as a Cultural District because of its position as “a cultural, social, arts, and service hub for Filipinos throughout Northern California” (California Arts Council, 2018). One unique aspect of the designation is that it recognizes the neighborhood’s role as a “critical employment hub for Filipinos”—highlighting a community asset that is not easily shown on a map or advertised to tourists, and demonstrating that the California Arts Council is willing to consider more nontraditional cultural assets (California Arts Council, 2018). SOMA Pilipinas is also recognized for its annual festivals, and events including "UNDSCVRDSF, a monthly Creative Night Market” (California Arts Council, 2018). In the fight against gentrification, SOMA Pilipinas is actually hoping to attract more Filipino residents and businesses to move back to the district in order to facilitate long-term preservation. In this way, the monthly Creative Night Market acts as a sort of a “platform for emerging businesses” that could grow large enough to rent a storefront and move into the neighborhood (Kane, 2018). In a similar way, City Heights has a strong tradition of businesses owned and operated by immigrants and refugees, which will be detailed later.

**V. Scope of Work**

The client—a coalition of nonprofit organizations that refer to themselves as the City Heights Economic Development Collaborative (CHEDC)—has requested our help in identifying a walkable district within the neighborhood that could become the focus of an application for a California Cultural District designation. In order to do so, we were asked to produce the following for the district that we selected: a map of the proposed boundaries, an inventory of cultural assets and artifacts within the district, and a thorough explanation of why we believe that the site should be the recipient of the designation. Specifically, they also asked that we pinpoint benefits of selecting that site for the neighborhood at large.

Furthermore, the client has asked that we consider the dynamics of gentrification in the development of our proposal. According to the CHEDC, the ultimate goal of the designation is to “boost commercial activity in the lower-income area while preserving the immigrant neighborhood’s multicultural identity” by constructing a brand that “officially [acknowledges] the area’s unique blend of Asian, African and Latino cultures” (Mento, 2018). However, there is also concern that becoming a Cultural District invites gentrification by boosting the neighborhood’s profile. For this reason, we also looked at mechanisms for protecting the community against potentially harmful forms of investment that could invite the displacement of residents and businesses, especially those that may have been used in similar districts. These safeguards
could include—but are not limited to—special zoning overlays, other historical/cultural designations, or economic instruments.

VI. Value Added by Cultural District Designation

According to the California Arts Council (CAC), the purpose of the California Cultural District designation is to “help grow and sustain authentic arts and culture opportunities, increase the visibility of local artists, and promote socio-economic and ethnic diversity through culture and creative expression” (CAC, 2017). Places that have achieved this designation can leverage certain aspects to not only highlight the cultural legacy of their community, but also increase local revenues and stimulate a more vibrant arts scene. The following describes four key benefits from the designation for City Heights.

*Increased Ability to Compete for Federal, State, and Local Funding*

Receiving a Cultural District designation can be leveraged for additional funding through local, state, and federal programs and even private grant sources. For example, federal Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) often target funds towards arts programming in low-income areas that have demonstrated an environment conducive for a strong arts culture; therefore, achieving this designation may make City Heights more competitive for CDBG awards (Americans for the Arts, 2006). The designation could also be an asset in seeking other public and private funding opportunities. If City Heights were to receive the designation, tracking increased grant funding in the census tract areas that encompass City Heights would be one significant method for identifying the fiscal impact of the designation.

*Bolstered Community Identity and Draw for Tourists*

Recent research on the symbiotic connection between arts and the urban environment affirms that there is a positive impact on economic development in areas that host at least one professional arts organization (Florida, 2015). A cultural designation could attract tourism into City Heights, thus bringing in more revenue from consumers who spend their dollars in local restaurants and retail shops. As part of the expected $5,000 in awards granted for branding from this designation, City Heights would be able to strengthen their identity as a community and highlight the cultural assets that make this area a desirable place to visit. Information captured by San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation and supplemental reports from business associations in the area would help to determine the scope of the increase in local revenues due to the tourism draw from the designation. Additionally, appraisal reports from the San Diego County Recorder and demographic data from the Census Bureau can help to determine the potential economic changes over time.
**Precedence for Cultural District Overlay Zone**

Emphasizing a distinctive place through the Cultural District designation will set a precedence that there are notable cultural assets that must be protected. Residents and community organizers, including members of the CHEDC, have shared concerns that gentrification is heading from North Park toward City Heights. With gentrification also comes fears of displacement, as rising housing prices threaten low-income residents that already experience high rent burdens and more housing instability. Small business owners and artists, who are often thought of as the leaders of cultural production in a community, can fall into that category. Thus, having the designation will provide City Heights with a political mechanism to advocate for a Cultural District Overlay Zone, a zoning tool that incentivizes arts development and protect artist spaces from displacement as well as providing protections for small business owners (Americans for the Arts, 2018).

**Opportunities for Future Collaboration Among Businesses, Organizations, and Residents**

Given the breadth of diversity in City Heights, coordinated efforts to benefit the community as a whole are faced with the challenge of balancing multiple interests, stakeholders, and resources. While some leadership is provided by the City Heights Business Association and the City Heights Economic Development Collaborative, there are opportunities to better integrate arts and culture with the business community, which will spur economic benefits (Short, 2018). The designation would serve as a catalyst for City Heights and its leaders to develop a more cohesive framework in synergizing the diversity of arts, culture, and businesses in the area.

**VII. Site Selection and Research Methodology**

**Site Selection**

After some preliminary research, our group decided to examine the University and Fairmount area, also known as the Urban Village, as our primary research site. Noted as the city center of City Heights, the existing land uses along this intersection offered significant potential for growth. Our site was chosen due to its central location, connectivity to transit and other surrounding areas, hub of local organizations and services, dense concentration of civic spaces, regular events such as the weekly farmers’ market, and its potential for artistic cultivation.

**Research Methodology**

To begin our investigation into the University and Fairmount area, we conducted online research into the neighborhood and its central features. We also reviewed data from the City of San Diego, the City Heights Business Association, and the United States Census Bureau.

To deepen our understanding of the neighborhood, we also structured our time in San Diego to include touchpoints with residents, business owners, and other key stakeholders. We conducted
semi-structured interviews, evaluated the pedestrian experience via walk audits, and surveyed local businesses to supplement our research. These conversations and experiences offered insight on local perspectives and allowed us to assess key issues, navigate power structures, and identify areas for improvement amongst local business owners, residents, and city stakeholders. In particular, the interviews—summarized below—contributed significantly to our site analyses and final recommendations.

**Interview #1: David Tran and Sterling Tran, City Heights Coffee House Owners**  
*Friday, February 8, 2019*

In the first round of interviews, we spoke with David and Sterling Tran who are the co-founders of the City Heights Coffee House, a social enterprise designed as a multicultural hub for the neighborhood. During our conversation, they highlighted what they saw as the blemished relationship within the business community and nonprofits. Sterling specifically pointed out that community members felt that basic infrastructure such as street lighting must be addressed first before City Heights should pursue the cultural district designation. Both David and Sterling pointed out that developing genuine relationships with key influencers around the neighborhood is a major component to ensuring the success of any designation. There are also important political dynamics that our team was made aware of to navigate how we approach residents and community leaders. Overall, this conversation was helpful in identifying challenges businesses are facing businesses—especially along the main corridor of our site which is University Avenue—and how our team might integrate a proposal to synergize the designation with a more coordinated effort among businesses.

**Interview #2: Esther, Tan Nguyen Phong Chinese Herbs, Ginseng, & Acupuncture Owner**  
*Friday, February 8, 2019*

Our team stopped by next door to the City Heights Coffee House to visit Esther who is the owner of Tan Nguyen Phong, a Chinese herb and acupuncture shop. She is a Chinese-Vietnamese refugee who relocated to City Heights after the Vietnam War and opened up her business in 1984 with her late husband. Esther spoke about her experience living and running a business in City Heights while watching the neighborhood change over the decades from what was once notorious for crime and is now slowly gentrifying. She emphasized the resilience of local refugee store owners and the cohesive social fabric of her community. Our conversation, and the story Esther shared, sparked our team’s interest in conducting a business inventory to identify which businesses in the area are refugee-owned and how that might be a key facet to spotlight in our cultural district designation proposal.
We conducted a thorough site visit of the area surrounding University and Fairmount, including the Urban Village and Azalea Park, led by Nigel Brookes. Nigel contributed his expertise as a local artist and representative of the theater community, with a long history of working in City Heights and partnering with other community organizations. Through this site visit, the team was able to learn about several significant art pieces in the community, including the mosaic statue outside of Rosa Parks Elementary, the sculpture by Jim Bliesner in front of La Maestra, and the public art displayed throughout the canyons in the Azalea Park neighborhood. Brookes was also helpful in communicating the value of the Cultural District Designation to the local art community, and in explaining how it might augment his current efforts to expand the audience of the City Heights Performance Annex.
Interview #4: Mirle Rabinowitz-Bussell, Professor of Urban Studies and Planning at UCSD
Friday, March 8, 2019

Our group traveled to the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) to speak with Professor Mirle Rabinowitz-Bussell and learn more about the economic landscape of City Heights. Professor Rabinowitz-Bussell shared some of the research she had conducted in the community on the informal economy. She highlighted the importance of capturing the leakage of money currently flowing out of City Heights and both attracting new businesses and capturing the current informal businesses that exist in the neighborhood. In regard to building out a plan for the California Cultural Designation, Professor Rabinowitz-Bussell advised that we look at how to combine celebration of the neighborhood’s existing arts and culture with infrastructure improvements; for example, asking residents to design the lights, the benches, or the streetscape as a mechanism for bottom-up placemaking. She also shared some potential funding sources for implementing such improvements.

Interview #5: Jim Bliesner, San Diego Artist and Activist
Saturday, March 9, 2019

At the recommendations of both Nigel Brookes and Professor Mirle Rabinowitz-Bussell, the group sat down to speak with local artist and activist Jim Bliesner. Jim has two art pieces featured in the greater University and Fairmount site, one in front of the La Maestra Community Health Center and another at a canyon trail in Azalea Park. As a long-time activist in City Heights, and one of the founders of the City Heights Community Development Corporation, Bliesner was able to share important historical context about the development of the site area, including its strengths and challenges. He talked with us about the potential to use the California Cultural District Designation to bring formality to an informal culture, and to support existing local businesses. Such a transformation, Jim suggested, could be accomplished through the overlay of a live/work zone in the area or through the legalization of street vending. He also spoke with us about how a designation could serve as an anti-gentrification strategy to recognize and preserve what already makes the community unique.

Interview #6: Carlos McCray, Owner of DOJO Cafe
Tuesday, March 19, 2019

The team held a phone interview with Carlos McCray, the owner and founder of Dojo Cafe, which is a social enterprise selling coffee while also serving as hub of community events and activities. Given his background in social work, Carlos is interested in developing a business model that can be both profitable and impactful to the surrounding community. Specifically in City Heights, he feels that the media’s perception of the neighborhood has warped the minds of residents, which perpetuates a negative stigma despite crime levels over time decreasing. This in turn affects safety and walkability because people are afraid of their own neighbors and they become accustomed to leaving City Heights for other amenities. In terms of the abundance of local nonprofits, Carlos commented collaboration is challenging because nonprofits focus their
energies on sustaining their operations by competing for limited grant funding, so incentives to cooperate are slim. From a social work perspective, Carlos suggested that City Heights should leverage the strengths of the neighborhood, namely its diversity, food, and art. He recommended replicating street fair programs such as South Park’s Walkabouts, which brings live bands, artists, vendors, and other performances out in the open to liven up the community and highlight the unique assets that are not always visible. His hope is that the cultural designation will be a catalyst in developing amenities in City Heights for youth specifically to spend time in, encouraging a more vibrant community.

Interview #7: Lara Gates, Deputy Chief of Staff and Chief of Policy at Council District 9
After Lara Gates’ presentation during our initial site visit, our group reconnected with her through a phone interview to explore policy and planning solutions for City Heights. Lara’s experience as the Deputy Chief of Staff and Chief of Policy for Council President Georgette Gómez’s office of District 9 offered valuable insight in the assessment of our site as a potential candidate for the designation. Lara emphasized the use of the “Urban Village” as a descriptor for University and Fairmount and the role Price Charities played in its growth. She reminded us to hone existing assets of the site, such as the farmers’ market, and explore food as a means to shape the theme and branding for the area. Lara suggested that we revisit the idea of a “Spice Alley” to anchor the neighborhood and offer a space for people to sell their food products since the area is considered a food desert. In terms of local transit, Lara encouraged us to think about gaps that can be filled through public-private partnerships to achieve First/Last Mile goals and shared the example of Circuit (formerly The Free Ride), a free transportation service that allows riders to hop onto gas-free electric shuttles anywhere in Downtown San Diego. She finally added that the grassroots efforts and advocacy of other San Diego neighborhoods, such as Barrio Logan and Little Italy, are what led to their economic success, albeit not without risk of gentrification.

VIII. Individual Site Analysis — University & Fairmount

Introduction

Bounded by Orange Avenue to the north, 46th Street to the east, Landis Street to the south, and the I-15 to the west, the University and Fairmount site is centrally located and accessible to a variety of civic spaces, community organizations, ethnic restaurants, and places of worship. According to the Official Zoning Map of the City of San Diego, the intersection is an established commercial corridor (City of San Diego Development Services Department, 2015). University Avenue and Fairmount Avenue are both within the Central Urbanized Planned District (CUPD); University is primarily zoned Community Commercial (CC-5-4) and CUPD-CT-5-4, while Fairmount Avenue is mainly zoned CUPD-CU-2-5 (City of San Diego Development Services Department, 2015). Residential zoning surrounds the intersection with multiple unit (RM-1-3 and RM-1-1) housing throughout and single unit (RS-1-7) housing designations on the southwest end of the site (City of San Diego Development Services Department, 2015). An analysis of the
historical, geographic, demographic, and infrastructural characteristics of the site is conducted to assess its feasibility for the California Cultural District Designation application.

Project site bounded by Orange Avenue, 46th Street, Landis Street, and the I-15 (Source: Base map from Google Maps)

**History of the Site**

At the peak of redevelopment in City Heights, the University and Fairmount area became known as the Urban Village. The City Heights Urban Village is an award-winning redevelopment project where multiple public and private uses coexist within a communal village setting. The restoration of its core and establishment of a pedestrian-friendly town square, allowed the multi-phased Urban Village to fundamentally change the social and physical environment of University and Fairmount. This eight-block span includes the Rosa Parks Elementary School, Weingart City Heights Library, Mid-City Community Services Center, City Heights Recreation Center, City Heights Retail Center, and Village Townhomes and Office Center. This effort was carried out through the City Heights Initiative, a partnership between Price Philanthropies Foundation/Price Charities and multiple public and nonprofit agencies to provide opportunities for local youth and families to prosper (Price Philanthropies, 2019).
Geography and Boundaries

The rough boundaries of our site are Orange Avenue to the north, 46th Street to the east, Landis Street to the south, and the 15 Freeway to the west. However, there are also key sites located outside of these boundaries with strong connections to the University and Fairmount center including Fair@44, Azalea Park, Thien Hua Temple, and Teralta Park. While it is important to acknowledge their significance, unfortunately, these sites fall outside of the limited scale allowed within the California Cultural District designation rules. For this reason, if a designation was pursued adjacent the University and Fairmount intersection, careful thought must be given to how these other sites might be leveraged to enhance visitor experience.

Site Demographics

Census tracts within site boundaries (Source: ArcGIS, San Diego Census Tracts, n.d.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Tract</th>
<th>23.02</th>
<th>24.02</th>
<th>22.02</th>
<th>26.01</th>
<th>Overall site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>7,826</td>
<td>5,391</td>
<td>5,775</td>
<td>5,554</td>
<td>24,546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>28.9 years</td>
<td>27.8 years</td>
<td>29.7 years</td>
<td>31.9 years</td>
<td>29.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average household size</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent bachelor’s or higher</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income per capita</td>
<td>$11,332</td>
<td>$13,093</td>
<td>$11,544</td>
<td>$13,405</td>
<td>$12,238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$30,231</td>
<td>$32,742</td>
<td>$25,625</td>
<td>$28,422</td>
<td>$29,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent under federal poverty line</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of units renter-occupied</td>
<td>91% renter</td>
<td>92% renter</td>
<td>93% renter</td>
<td>76% renter</td>
<td>88% renter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race / Ethnicity</td>
<td>59% Hispanic 22% Asian 8% White 6% Black 5% 2 or more</td>
<td>71% Hispanic 14% Asian 12% Black 3% White</td>
<td>72% Hispanic 15% Asian 7% White 6% Black 1% 2 or more</td>
<td>66% Hispanic 19% Asian 8% White 5% 2 or more 2% Black 6% Black 3% 2 or more</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent foreign born</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average travel time to work</td>
<td>28.2 minutes</td>
<td>25.1 minutes</td>
<td>25.5 minutes</td>
<td>26.4 minutes</td>
<td>26.5 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Streetscape and Walkability**

Left to right: Bicyclist on sidewalk along University Ave; Streetscape of University Ave  
(Source: Myca Tran, 2019)

As part of our methodology, we conducted a walk audit along University Avenue from Chamoune Avenue to 42nd Street to survey the quality and safety of the street for pedestrians, cyclists, and others. Through this process, aligned with criteria established by Metro Los Angeles for their walk audits around transit stations, we found many challenges facing pedestrians and bicyclists. These challenges include, but are not limited to: disconnected bike infrastructure, little signage and wayfinding, lack of streetlights, minimal landscaping and trees, significant amounts of air/noise pollution from cars and auto shops, and poor quality sidewalks. All of these elements create an unsafe environment for pedestrians and bikers, and contribute to a diminished sense of place. Importantly, given the emphasis that the California Arts Council places on walkability in its Cultural District designation process, these factors would likely diminish the strength of the University and Fairmount area’s application.

**Roadways and Infrastructure**

There is an abundance of parking for cars, whether in the lots of retailers and strip malls or along the street, and the streets are generally well kept with wide alleyways between homes. The local streets are also wide enough for cars to park on either side of the street and a lane of traffic going both ways. However, once leaving University and Fairmount, the street conditions themselves become significantly worse, and the roads are often times bumpy and cracked. Even if there is technically enough space for two cars to travel down the road, the road conditions make it difficult for it to actually happen and impede circulation in the neighborhood.

For other modes of transportation, there are many amenities along University, but less so along Fairmount and other local streets. University has some shaded bus stops, bike lanes, and wide sidewalks that are well-lit at night. Some of the street lamps also have hanging planters, but those are not well kept and are often overlooked. The City Heights Business Association has
also sponsored trash cans and for decorated utility boxes along University. These improvements have certainly improved foot traffic along University and enlivened the streetscape in some areas, but also show the disparity between the major thoroughfare and its local streets.

**Community Assets**

The assets map highlights the array of community organizations (purple), religious institutions (dark blue), restaurants and grocery stores (turquoise), civic institutions (teal), open spaces (green), annual events (gray), and artistic spaces (burgundy) across the site. For an in depth look into our preliminary assessment, the Google Map we’ve created can be accessed here: [https://drive.google.com/open?id=1u18mk_A98mJ9IrRQQx6-tPOZnB7Je0c&usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1u18mk_A98mJ9IrRQQx6-tPOZnB7Je0c&usp=sharing).

Some notable community assets featured on the map include:

- **City Heights Square Mini Park:** The City Heights Square Mini Park opened in 2013, in order to address a lack of green space and public gathering places in the City Heights neighborhood. The mini park features picnic and game tables, a fence dedicated to the wildlife of the canyons designed by local sculpture artist Wendell Kling, and a mural of photos taken by the youth of AjA project (Brown, 2014).

- **La Maestra Community Health Center:** La Maestra Community Health Centers is a nonprofit health clinic located in City Heights that has provided care to the neighborhood for the past 24 years (La Maestra Community Health Center, 2018).

- **City Heights/Weingart Library and Performance Annex:** The Weingart Library and adjacent public park opened in November 1998 as a part of the Price Charities City Heights Initiative. The library is connected to the Performance Annex, the only city-owned and operated theatre in San Diego, “that offers a variety of dance and music performances, along with lessons for adults and children” (City of San Diego, 2019).

- **Azalea Park Arts District and Canyon Trail Network:** A short distance from University and Fairmount, further down Fairmount Avenue and within the canyon networks, is the Azalea Park neighborhood. The Azalea Park neighborhood is distinct from the rest of City Heights, with history as an enclave for artists and the LGBT community (Morlan, 2014). The district has unique, beautiful wayfinding signage depicting the streets named for flowers and trees and a network of canyon trails sprinkled with unique art pieces (Morlan, 2014).
• **Saturday Morning City Heights Farmers Market:** Each Saturday from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM, a segment of Wightman Street adjacent to the Weingart Library opens to a street market featuring fresh produce, goods from around the world, and prepared food from a variety of cultures. The farmers market, which was originally started by the International Rescue Committee, a local refugee resettlement nonprofit is a mainstay in the neighborhood.

• **“The Storyteller” at Rosa Parks Elementary School:** “The Storyteller”—a large bronze and mosaic statue of a woman sitting with her arms outstretched—was installed in front of Rosa Parks Elementary School in 2006 as a symbol of the diversity, people, history, and community of City Heights (Gao, 2006). It centers around storytelling in acknowledgment of the important role it plays across cultures (Gao, 2006).

• **City Heights Coffee House:** Located on University Avenue east of Fairmount Avenue, City Heights Coffee House is non-profit specialty coffee and tea house that creates culturally authentic drinks and provides job training to local youth facing barriers to employment. The operators “believe in radical inclusiveness, second chances, and the sacred wroth of each human being” (City Heights Coffee House, 2019).
Other notable features include at least two community gardens, several places of worship, a skate park, culturally authentic retail stores and small businesses, and historic buildings from the original town of City Heights including the old City Hall and Fire Station.
Site Connection to Entire Neighborhood

As the center of City Heights and the City Heights Initiative, University and Fairmount offers easy access to other neighborhoods. University and Fairmount is both the geographic and social heart of City Heights due to its central location and the strong presence of local organizations and nonprofits. University Avenue is both a corridor and destination, offering several bus stops for residents and visitors. The area can also be accessed via the I-15 freeway. Improved bicycle infrastructure could allow seamless connectivity along Fairmount from Little Saigon down to Azalea Park. Importantly, the University and Fairmount site is also culturally diverse, with representation from most of the ethnic communities within City Heights. The area is inviting to people from all backgrounds because of its many different cultural organizations, services, restaurants, and markets—for example, the farmers’ market serves as a resource for all City Heights residents to obtain healthy, fresh, local, and culturally-relevant produce.

Commercial

The major thoroughfares are University Avenue running East/West and Fairmount Avenue running North/South. At the University and Fairmount intersection, buildings are as high as five stories, but they slowly cascade down to one or two spreading outwards. Most commercial spaces along the major thoroughfares are generally single story commercial retailers, strip malls, and parking lots. Outside of the major intersection, most of the retailers along University and Fairmount are small businesses owned by locals of City Heights or of nearby neighborhoods. The presence of auto shops increases the further one travels from the intersection University and Fairmount, and these are generally gated off from the sidewalk with entrances along side streets but are along the major thoroughfares nonetheless.

These business owners also have storefronts of varying conditions, though most are well kept with windows and doors opening to the sidewalk and catering to the high foot traffic along
University Avenue. However, there are also quite a number of strip malls which are separated from the street and pedestrians by parking lots in front. Most of the storefronts are outfitted with security gates over the doors and steel bars over the windows, signaling a need for a sense of protection. There are also some vacant storefronts, the most obvious one being in the major intersection next to Donut Star.

Business Inventory

In order to collect data on some of these local businesses, the team gathered a brief inventory of most storefronts along University Avenue through interviews. Given the ethnic diversity of City Heights and its history of immigration, our goal was to collect data on refugee and immigrant-owned businesses. Almost 60 businesses were surveyed. The results from our analysis indicate that the vast majority, approximately 75 percent, of businesses in the vicinity of our project node are owned or operated by a refugee or immigrant. During our business inventory, our team also noted that many of these businesses serve niche demographics and offer a variety of services that is not always clear from standing outside. After some brief conversations with businesses owners, our team concluded that the touted diversity of City Heights is indeed reflected in its business ownership.

Residential

Leaving the major thoroughfares, the neighborhood rapidly becomes medium density housing with mainly fourplexes or small compounds with four homes gated with a shared driveway/parking. Larger apartment complexes are spotted throughout the neighborhood, standing at around four stories. Further north along Orange Avenue, buildings seem to be better kept with well-kept facades and new fences, however most homes have chain-linked fences or old gates. Alleys between homes are wide and serve as not only a pathway for cars, but as open space for people to play soccer or football outside their homes. Other than the nearby schools, there are not many parks or other open spaces for residents to use. Besides Teralta Park, the only large open space is the Officer Jeremy Henwood Memorial Park; the other spaces are small spaces tucked between buildings such as the City Heights Square Mini Park.

Economic Analysis

Given the concentration of low-income households and immigrants in City Heights, much of the local economy is comprised of entrepreneurial, informal activities. The term “informal economy” generally refers to economic transactions that occur outside of traditional businesses procedures, including operating without a formal license, and are primarily handled with cash. Food, clothing, and basic services are the top commodities exchanged in the informal economy in City Heights (Bliesner and Bussell, 2013). Due to conditions including “linguistic isolation, high unemployment, low levels of education, and high cost of housing, large family size and geographical concentrations of immigrant populations,” the informal economy of City Heights is necessary for many residents to overcome the financial challenges they face in attaining a
certain standard of living (Bliesner and Bussell, 2013). Consequently, nonprofits and public officials must understand the significance of the informal economy in City Heights and consider policy levers and other technical mechanisms to bolster entrepreneurship, training, financing, and the safe distribution of services and goods in the area.

**Leading Industries & Occupations**

As often reflected in low-income and immigrant communities, a large portion of City Heights residents are employed in the service industry. Service industry employment prevails because barriers to entry in service jobs are minimal compared to other occupations that may require more education or technical training. The workforce in City Heights is mostly employed in occupations related to food preparation, building and grounds maintenance, and personal care—while the City of San Diego’s overall workforce characterized mostly by white collar jobs in management, business, and finance (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). A deeper analysis into the industry clusters that are prominent in City Heights could support strategies that leverage the existing strengths of the community and build new economic activity into the area.

**Economic Revitalization**

The emerging arts scene and vast array of ethnic cuisine in City Heights makes the community an increasingly popular destination for cultural excursions and possible relocation for transplants. With this, there is a risk of both gentrification and displacement. Just as in much of Southern California, surging housing prices and land values also threaten the stability of the neighborhood. New developments continue to fuel the changes that are occurring; for instance, mixed-use developments, housing projects, and street improvements have sprouted up across City Heights. While some may argue this is bringing a beneficial resurgence of investment to the neighborhood, the largely renter-owned community is faced with financial pressures to keep up with rising rent prices. Thus, managing growth is one of the most pressing considerations, and it must be a priority to develop a framework that ensures existing residents can access the new economic opportunities associated with City Heights’ revitalization.

**Environmental Analysis**

The environmental landscape of City Heights “mirrors [the] geographic patterns of racial and income disparities” seen throughout San Diego (Pastor, Sanchez-Lopez, and Ito, 2015). Given the area’s history plagued by environmental racism due to zoning and highway expansions—as City Heights source of pollution is mainly drawn from its proximity to freeways and poorly maintained housing—the city has become a pollution “hot spot” reflecting some of the highest CalEnviroscreen scores (Pastor, Sanchez-Lopez, and Ito, 2015; Health Equity by Design, 2011; OEHHA, 2019). With only “1.52 acres of park per 1,000 residents,” residents are burdened with the socio-environmental effects of living within an urban heat island amidst threats of gentrification and displacement (California Endowment, 2018).
However, local community organizations such as the Environmental Health Coalition have been working to address the cumulative impacts of these vulnerabilities through education, advocacy, and policy implementation. The bittersweet community victory of Teralta Park—the Interstate-15 freeway cap park granted in the mid 90’s after many years of community engagement and negotiations with Caltrans over amenities to offset its expansion—has informed future feasibility studies and paved the way for future community development. Community plans prioritizing tree plantings, riparian revitalization, biological preservation, brownfield elimination, and landfill cleanup are aiming to safely connect existing open space areas to promote wildlife habitat restoration and address dire air and water quality concerns (City of San Diego Planning Department, 1998).

### SWOT Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HELPFUL</th>
<th>HARMFUL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengths</strong></td>
<td><strong>Weaknesses</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ High concentration of nonprofit organizations and community groups</td>
<td>○ Unmaintained street infrastructure: street lights, sidewalks, alleyways, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Center of civic institutions</td>
<td>○ Little wayfinding signage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Open spaces</td>
<td>○ Limited community branding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Major religious institutions in the area</td>
<td>○ Lack of commitment from the Business Improvement District to engage local store owners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Several restaurants, coffee shops, and bars</td>
<td>○ In need of anchoring events and key destinations to draw visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Annual Dia De Los Muertos and National Night Out events</td>
<td>○ Minimal tree canopy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Weekly Farmers’ Market</td>
<td>○ Walkability and bikeability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Several art pieces throughout site</td>
<td>○ High renter tenancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Strong artist community</td>
<td>○ Lower income area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Resilience of local refugee store owners</td>
<td>○ Cohesive social fabric</td>
</tr>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Opportunities</strong></th>
<th><strong>Threats</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>○ Federal, state, and local funding</td>
<td>○ Regional competition for the California Cultural District Designation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Potential partnerships for existing open spaces, such as the City Heights Performance Annex, to host annual community events and festivals (e.g. Outdoor Movie Nights)</td>
<td>○ Uncertain allocation of funding for infrastructural improvements to supplement the designation application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Opportunity for more youth engagement</td>
<td>○ Potential political constraints and contention amongst organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Draws for artists, performers, and musicians</td>
<td>○ Residential concern for safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Gentrification and displacement of</td>
</tr>
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IX. Site Recommendations

As a result of the group’s analysis of the Urban Village, three key recommendations to prepare the site for a California Cultural District Designation. These are:

1. Improve street infrastructure to increase safety and cultivate the site’s sense of place.

2. Increase community participation in the Business Improvement District in order to hold the entity accountable and allow the site to become a viable candidate for city funding.

3. Utilize food as a unifying strategy for community development.

If the University and Fairmount area is chosen to be the center of the City Heights application for the California Cultural District Designation, pursuing these three recommendations will help to ensure that the site is adequately prepared.

Improving Street Infrastructure and Placemaking

Although both University and Fairmount are major corridors in City Heights and the intersection itself is always busy, there is not a strong sense of place to encourage residents to spend their own money, time, and effort here. In order for other people to come and enjoy City Heights, it is necessary for the residents themselves to enjoy it first. Therefore, placemaking should be the primary goal of the City Heights Business Association and the City Heights Economic Development Corporation.

Placemaking is the collective process of shaping public spaces to facilitate more creative uses that incorporate the physical, cultural, and social identities currently there (PPS, 2018). Though these processes can be tied to expensive infrastructure improvements, many times they can also be small projects like adding pedestrian level signs to direct people towards places of interest. By putting smaller investments into making a place, the CHBA and CHEDC can build stronger ties to the existing community and encourage them to likewise invest in their own neighborhood. Examples of these placemaking projects recommended for University and Fairmount are:

1. Tree planting and green streetscape improvements — Increasing the tree canopy along University and Fairmount improves shading during the day for pedestrians and bikers,
and it acts as a natural buffer from the car traffic. This will allow pedestrians to feel safer while traversing University or Fairmount and increase the walkability of the area. Trees, although a bigger investment than planters, are more hardy and require less maintenance in the long term than planters with plants and flowers. However, not all of the sidewalks in the University and Fairmount area are wide enough to support tree installation. In the long term, sidewalk widening—as part of a complete streets vision—might be considered.

2. **Unique lighting** — Lighting is an important aspect to increase safety during the night. However, street lights are expensive and the process to obtain more from the City can be arduous. Implementing unique lighting such as LED lanterns is not only inexpensive and easy to maintain, but is already a familiar characteristic seen in many of the Buddhist temples in the neighborhood.

3. **Protected bike lanes** — As part of the walk assessment, many bikers were found using the sidewalk despite the presence of bike lanes. This is because the bike lanes are not protected from the car traffic and are often on cracked asphalt. The bike lanes are also disconnected and switch between sharrows and bike lane making it easier for bikers to just use the sidewalk. As of right now, bikers feel like the use of the sidewalk is allowed since there are not many pedestrians at certain times of the day, but as placemaking becomes a bigger focus in this area, upgraded bike lanes will be necessary.

4. **Wayfinding** — Unique signage not only ties a community together with a sense of place, but it also allows visitors to the community get a glimpse of all the places of interest. It is also a way for the community to express their culture and art, therefore making the area a stronger contender for the designation.
Top left, clockwise: Tree plantings and streetscape improvements inspired by Pike-Pine Renaissance Streetscape Design Vision (Source: GGN); Lighting for safety and placemaking inspired by Luminaries LED Lights in Brookfield Place, New York (Source: Inhabitat); Idea for street vendor legalization through the creation of “free zones” (Source: KPCC); Wayfinding throughout University and Fairmount inspired by London wayfinding (Source: Pentagram)

In terms of improving basic street infrastructure, there is opportunity on University Avenue to enhance the streetscape, lighting, sidewalks, and alleyways to improve pedestrian walkability. Additionally, in order to connect key destinations outside of the district, we also recommend that protected bike lanes with clear wayfinding be added from El Cajon Boulevard to Azalea Community Park. This would allow residents and visitors at the city center to explore the vast open space and trails of Manzanita Canyon as well as the many community events offered at Fair@44.

Enhancing the Business Improvement District

The City Heights Business Association (CHBA) was formed in July of 2003 to provide administrative oversight for the City Heights Business Improvement District (BID) and the City Heights Assessment District, both of which fall in the jurisdiction of the Fairmount and University Ave node. This 13-member board guides the strategic growth and partnerships among business and property owners to promote economic revitalization, capital improvements, and other initiatives enhancing the cultural fabric of City Heights as an international marketplace.

In sum, a BID is a defined area within which property or business owners pay an additional fee in order to fund certain projects within that district’s boundaries. This fee provides a steady and reliable source of funding for services that supplement those already provided by the municipality including street maintenance, public safety, business development, marketing, landscaping, and community services.

Despite their recent efforts in abating nuisances such as litter, graffitti, homelessness, and blight, CHBA’s current relationships with existing businesses can be strengthened to facilitate a more cohesive network of stakeholders, with clearly delineated goals and responsibilities. The
Interviews in our team’s research process indicated a modest engagement effort by the CHBA, which has the potential to be improved. Benefits for a strong BID are evident, in which local business owners have much to gain through their participation. Thus, the following are site-specific recommendations for University and Fairmount that discusses strategies to improve the potential of CHBA and the BID in making City Heights a much more viable candidate for the cultural district designation.

1. **Produce a more substantial district plan to guide CHBA’s directives** — Preparing and defining targeted goals for the CHBA can help guide decision-making in allocating appropriate resources to the BID. According to the CHBA’s website, there does not appear to be a current district plan that is available to the public which presumably means that one has not been created. The recommendation is to conduct a needs assessment with business owners in the BID’s jurisdiction to develop a framework that envisions the goals of the neighborhood through a series of tangible action plans.

2. **Rebrand CHBA’s online presence and marketing assets** — While the cultural district designation will provide funding for branding and marketing, CHBA can initiate plans to redesign their website and other marketing materials. Identifying a design theme can highlight the Urban Village’s unique characteristics as well as provide consistency in terms of how the Fairmount and University node is promoted. Modernizing the site may require enlisting a dedicated volunteer with technical skills in web development, but several online platforms such as Wordpress or Squarespace are have free service charges. A designated member of CHBA will need to update and maintain the website with upcoming events, projects, or services that are available to business and property owners.

3. **Establish and maintain a database of all business owners within the boundaries of the BID to centralize communication and outreach** — Consolidating information of all stakeholders, especially business and property owners who operate within the boundaries of the BID is critical in maintaining engagement with the community. Some information that should be included in the database and checked for accuracy include: tax block and lot numbers, assessed values of all properties, contact information of owners and commercial tenants, fields to track BID’s reputation to business owners, and scheduling options and logs from meetings. This centralized database will be an important tool in sustaining the efficacy of CHBA.

4. **Incentivize business owner participation in developing coordinated strategies for economic development** — Current dynamics among business and property owners suggests deeper engagement needs to develop in order to facilitate more collective approach in capital improvements for the commercial boulevard along University Ave. The CHBA can appoint block captains and assign them to specific areas to engage and target business owners those individuals have established relationships with. This will help to cultivate new interest in the BID and sustain an ongoing network of business
owners who participate and contribute to the goals of CHBA. Stakeholder engagement is reportedly an undertaking that CHBA can improve on, so plans to host more public meetings with incentives for participation can foster a more cohesive business community. In the context of this report, a strong BID is foundational for preparing a competitive application for the cultural district designation on top of additional city investments.

Pursuing Economic Development through Food

Our client, and several individuals that we interviewed, highlighted City Heights’ diverse array of food as one of the community’s foremost assets. Several also suggested that, for this reason, food serves as an important vehicle for connection between the different ethnic and cultural groups. Much of the existing City Heights’ Business Improvement District signage—featured on light post banners, utility boxes, and trash cans—showcase imagery of food, produce, and spices from around the world.

In order to strengthen its case for the California Cultural District, expand the current cultural event offerings of the Urban Village area, and promote economic development, the City Heights community should pursue the creation of a monthly food-oriented street fair event. This event would promote the goods of local farmers, chefs, and artisans and allow them to sell their goods. One interview recalled hearing about a previous plan for a similar event, branded “Spice Alley.”

Once a month, this event would close down a few blocks to traffic—potentially in the same location as the Farmers’ Market—and transform the streets into an open-air market or bazaar of dozens of vendors. Importantly, this event would be open not just to formal businesses, but also informal, independent makers and sellers. One 2013 study concluded that 90 percent of City Heights residents view the informal economy as “an important part of their community” and approximately 80 percent of residents by food, clothing, or other goods from informal vendors on a regular basis (Bliesner and Bussell, 2013). City Heights also has a strong culture of entrepreneurship; the same study found that just over three-quarters of residents indicated that they would be interested in owning their own business (Bliesner and Bussell, 2013). Through organizing an event that supports transitions from informal to formal economic activity, such as street vending, City Heights will both attract visitors to spend their money in the neighborhood and open up economic opportunity for residents.

If the monthly market is successful, the policy could perhaps be expanded to a permanent street vending “free zone.” Such a policy would need to also align with other city, county, and state health and safety regulations, and could be modeled after the recent ordinance passed in Los Angeles.
Additional Policy Recommendations to Prevent Displacement and Gentrification

Before the cultural designation can be applied for, policies should be put in place at the city or even neighborhood level that can prevent displacement and gentrification. As one of the most influential developers in the community, Price Philanthropies should embed strong community benefits agreement (CBA) provisions in their redevelopment efforts as they build new assets in the community. These provisions can include: local hiring, prevailing wage, right-to-return policies, apprenticeship and employment opportunities. In addition to Price Philanthropies, the entire Collaborative should consider policy measures to protect artists and existing residents from being priced out from impending rent increases that could result from a stronger arts and culture identity, as it tends to raise property values.

A second policy measure should also focus on enhancing economic opportunities and growth for lower income residents. The Collaborative should consider social programs that would complement the designation involving pathways to creative occupations and industries. Especially considering the high entrepreneurial capabilities found in the community, it is highly recommended that these social programs facilitate a means to formalize the informal economy instead of punishing it. Finally, the collaborative should consider how the designation can lay the foundation for arts incubation, and how low-income residents can participate in the new economic growth that will spur from a stronger arts culture.

Potential Funding Sources

There are multiple funding sources at the national level that can help accomplish many of the recommendations regarding infrastructure and placemaking. However, all of these grants need an overarching organization that will be designated to receive the money and manage it effectively. Furthermore, especially for those funding sources available from the City of San Diego, the Business Improvement District must be strengthened. With collaboration and organization, many of these grants can be readily attained.

Some of these funding sources are:

- **OUR TOWN - Place-Based Projects, National Endowment for the Arts** — The National Endowment for the Arts supports "projects that integrate arts, culture, and design activities into efforts that strengthen communities by advancing local economic, physical, and/or social outcomes" with the purpose of "[laying] the groundwork for systemic changes that sustain the integration of arts, culture, and design into strategies for strengthening communities" (National Endowment for the Arts, n.d.). The National Endowment requires these projects to be a partnership between a nonprofit organization and a public entity, and encourages partnerships in other areas.

- **Infrastructure and Capacity Building Challenge Grants, National Endowment for the Humanities** — The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is an independent
A federal agency that is “one of the largest funders of humanities programs in the United States” and serves to promote “excellence in the humanities” and covey the “lessons of history to all Americans” (National Endowment for the Humanities, n.d.). The grants are typically awarded to cultural institutions to “facilitate research and original scholarship” and “preserve and provide access to cultural and educational resources” amongst other key outcomes (National Endowment for the Humanities, n.d.). The Challenge Grants program aims to support institutions to “secure long-term support for their core activities” and cultivate access to humanities materials (National Endowment for the Humanities, n.d.).

- **Funding sources from the City of San Diego** — City Heights can also pursue funding at the municipal level, especially for basic street infrastructure improvements. Residents, community organizations, and other stakeholders can organize to advocate for this funding and also apply for opportunities as they become available. For example, there is opportunity at the City level to capture revenue via the creation of a parking district. Lara Gates, a representative of Council District 9, did indicate that the City’s propensity for allocating these funds is in part influenced by the strength of a local Business Improvement District (BID).

**Cost-Benefit Analysis of University and Fairmount Site**

As detailed, the University and Fairmount site has a multitude of strengths at present. The area has a strong art culture, centered on mosaics and sculptures, that is already evident from Azalea Park to “The Storyteller” and the City Heights Square Mini Park. There is also ample space for gatherings and events due to an abundance of civic spaces such as the City Heights Performance Annex. Furthermore, the area is home to an abundance of nonprofit organizations and services that represent the cultural diversity of the entire City Heights community, and some that have strong collaborative relationships. All of these strengths can certainly be leveraged in the pursuit of a Cultural District.

However, there are also weaknesses to the project area that must be acknowledged. Through our walk audit, we concluded that the site’s limited public infrastructure contributes to inadequate walkability. As this is a central requirement of a California Cultural District, this means that City Heights may be less competitive for the designation. Furthermore, while there are evidences of a strong art culture in the area, the promotion of local artists is not maximized. However, there are future plans for an Arts Corridor along Fairmount that would improve the visibility of local art and artists. We also discovered through our interviews that there are coordination challenges among and between businesses and nonprofits, which can inhibit the area’s pursuit of street improvements and placemaking. Lastly, the area is disconnected from the Azalea Parks neighborhood, which has more features that might resonate with the California Arts Commission’s requirements for the designation.
X. Conclusion

Should the Urban Village be a California Cultural District?

Given City Heights’ tumultuous history of disinvestment and being overlooked in the greater San Diego’s redevelopment efforts, other priorities must take precedence before pursuing a California Cultural District. While the district designation can augment and catalyze arts and economic development in the area, there is not enough of a foundation put in place yet for the community to truly benefit. Implementing a Cultural District at this time will only benefit developers, current owners, and outsiders while the residents and community organizations in City Heights will be at risk of being driven out. In order for the California Cultural District to be a beneficial tool for the City Heights community, several recommendations should be implemented first.

Street infrastructure and placemaking should become a priority for the City Heights Business Association (CHBA), and residents should share in in planning for these improvements and investing in the neighborhood. These improvements can be pursued with funding from private or public sources, and in particular in conjunction with the City of San Diego. Furthermore, the CHBA must play a larger role in improving their relationships with different businesses in the area and develop programs and mechanisms to enhance streetscapes, walkability, and economic development. Finally, policy against gentrification should also be put in place before a designation is obtained in order to preserve the cultural fabric of the neighborhood.

From Left to Right: La Maestra Garden of Life; Businesses on University Avenue (Source: Myca Tran, 2019)
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