

UNIVERSITY & EUCLID

Final Report

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Executive Summary

Our site, University and Euclid, is located in the community of City Heights. City Heights is part of the greater City of San Diego Mid-City planned community. City Heights is comprised of 16 sub-neighborhoods. University and Euclid is the point of convergence of the Terralta East, Fairmount Village, Fox Village, and Colina Park sub-neighborhoods. Our site falls within Chollas Park and the previously mentioned sub-neighborhoods.

The population within our specific site is very diverse and reflective of the larger City Heights community socio-demographics. The total population in the site's area is approximately 20,708 residents and the racial composition is made up of: 63.6 percent Hispanic, 24.2 percent White, 21 percent Asian, 14 percent Black, 1 percent American Indian and Alaskan native, and 1 percent White non-Hispanic.

Since its inception in 2015, the California Cultural District Designation, has designated and granted 14 sites, 3 of which are in San Diego. The California Cultural District looks for walkable areas that cultivate and attract artists, cultural entrepreneurs, and creative industries and preserve significant cultural and historical assets. With this in mind, the main drivers in selecting our site were focused around the area's historical buildings, rich diversity in cuisine, and proximity to community assets and other significant community nodes.

In our report, we analyzed our site through the lens of walkability, topography, and an in-depth inventory of the site conditions. We identified poor conditions of the current infrastructure and limited walkability due to the topography. The University and Euclid site is rich in culture, historical and architectural significant buildings, and is well situated within an abundance of community assets. We identified areas opportunities centered around collaboration with nonprofits and adaptation of small pockets of underutilized spaces. Despite the strong cultural assets and historical architectural buildings within the site, the lack of walkability, poor infrastructure, and significant vulnerable population are major challenges that impact the viability of a cultural designation district in our site.

Our recommendations include streetscape and infrastructure improvements through the Vision Zero project for University Avenue. Particularly, we propose that traffic calming elements such as roundabouts, raised medians and crosswalks, and protected bike lanes be expanded to the area east of Menlo Street. University and Euclid has the potential for long-term revitalization that could lead to a cultural district designation in the future.

City Heights background

History

At the end of the 19th Century, two business partners purchased over 200 unincorporated acres of land to the East of San Diego. They hoped to develop the area and named it City Heights. By 1912, City Heights was incorporated as a city known as East San Diego. Following the incorporation, City Heights' population rapidly increased from 400 in 1910 to 4,000 people. However, by 1923, the City of East San Diego was annexed into the City of San Diego and City Heights regained its original name¹.

Today, City Heights is home to over 100,000 residents² and is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse neighborhoods in the City of San Diego. The diversity in City Heights can be grandly attributed to the thousands of residents who were displaced from their home countries and resettled in City Heights. In addition, City Heights is very densely populated when compared to the greater City of San Diego. City Heights has 17,586 people per square mile versus San Diego which has 4,337 people per square mile³. This variation in density, can be traced back to the Mid-City Plan, adopted by the San Diego City Council in 1965. The plan envisioned that increasing the neighborhood's density, amongst other mid-city communities, would consequently help to increase commerce and business in the area⁴.

City Heights is comprised of many sub-neighborhoods, physically divided into two pieces by Fairmount Avenue. The neighborhood is bound by Interstate 805 to the west, El Cajon Boulevard to the north, 54th Street to the east, and Home Avenue/Euclid Avenue/Chollas Parkway to the southeast. City Heights is an extremely diverse community. This diversity has led to the formation of numerous, varied community assets in City Heights including: nonprofit organizations, philanthropies, and a high community participation from residents engaged in their community. Our project will aim to highlight these assets and the piece they can play in applying for the community's Cultural Designation.

Demographics

Unless otherwise noted, the following demographic data is derived from City Data City Heights Neighborhood Profile.⁵

¹ <http://cityheightstowncouncil.org/history-of-city-heights/>

² <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/City-Heights-San-Diego-CA.html>

³ <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/City-Heights-San-Diego-CA.html>

⁴ https://sandiegofreepress.org/2013/08/welcome-to-city-heights/#.XJgH_y2ZMql

⁵ <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/City-Heights-San-Diego-CA.html>

Population

City Heights community boundaries encompass approximately 5.834 square miles and a total population of about 102,593, 39.8 percent of which are foreign born. City Heights has historically been a beacon of hope for migrant and refugee communities, reflected in the racial makeup of the community. City Heights is made up by a racial and ethnic makeup as follows: 54 percent Latino, 19 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 13 percent African-American, 12 percent White, and 2 percent Other.

Comparative Demographics

City Heights is one of the densest locations in San Diego. City Heights houses 17,586 people per square mile compared to the San Diego average of 4,337 people per square mile. The average household size in City Heights is 6.9 people, while in San Diego it is about 2.8 people. City Heights is considered a low-income neighborhood, with a median household income of \$39,647, compared to a median household income of \$71,481 for the greater San Diego. The percentage of people who live below the poverty level is 29.9 percent, while in San Diego it is 13.1 percent.

What do these Demographics tell us?

The demographic data of a city helps identify the community's future infrastructure needs, potential resource allocation, and municipal services.⁶ The demographic data of City Heights reveal a vulnerable population. The large renter community coupled with large household sizes allude to a rent-burdened community that manages to afford rents by increasing the number of members in their households. The low-income status, high number of people living below the poverty level, and the racial composition – a majority of minority populations – are all indicators of a population that is highly vulnerable to changes in City Heights.

Background on CA Cultural District Designation

The California Cultural District is a state designation, denoting a defined and walkable geographic area with a high concentration of significant cultural resources and activities. The designation was created in 2015 with the adoption of Assembly Bill 189, authored by Assemblyman Richard Bloom. There are currently fourteen adopted Cultural Districts in California, including a few close to City Heights, such as Barrio Logan and Balboa Park. The California Arts Council is the government body that oversees the application process, approves applications, provides technical and promotional support for cultural districts, and cooperates with public and private entities to maximize the benefits of the cultural district. With a Cultural District Designation, a chosen area is subject to numerous benefits from the Arts Council, including technical assistance, peer-to-peer exchanges, an annual

⁶ https://extension.unh.edu/resources/files/Resource004765_Rep6784.pdf

convening session, branding materials and promotional strategies, and a stipend of \$5,000 per year for two years.

There are several criteria that an applicant needs to fulfill in order to be accepted as a cultural district. Most critically, the defined area must be “walkable”, or easily traversable on foot in 15-20 minutes. It has to be an area that cultivates and attracts artists, cultural entrepreneurs, and creative industries and preserves significant cultural and historical assets. Its creative activities and industries should be actively contributing to the area’s economic development and support entrepreneurship. Opportunities for growth and development need also to be balanced with policies and measures to prevent displacement and gentrification. But ultimately, an area will be chosen as a Cultural District Designation if it has strong cross-sectoral and creative capital networks that celebrate, uphold, and shape its unique cultural identity.

For our scope of work, we will be assessing our designated area and recommending whether or not applying for a Cultural District Designation is feasible. To determine this, our team has developed several key resources that will inform the strength of our case. First, we conducted historical, demographic, and economic data for our area to determine its basic population conditions. Second, we drew up a cultural asset inventory for the areas, including all relevant historic buildings, popular restaurants, religious centers, public art exhibits, community centers, and important businesses and nonprofits. Third, we completed a site conditions analysis, noting the state of the physical infrastructure of our chosen area, including sidewalk, lighting, streetscaping, and building facade conditions. Finally, we conducted interviews and surveys with key area stakeholders, including community ambassadors, city officials, business owners, and nonprofit affiliates. All of this research informed our understanding of the culture and activities of City Heights and shaped our conclusions and recommendations.

Other kinds of districts similar to the California Cultural Districts include the California Special Districts. These districts are local service agencies that provide vital services like street lighting and road maintenance, street lighting water and energy, fire protection and public safety, treatment of wastewater, and much more. It is a hyper local form of government that is directly accountable to residents and must meet state mandated requirements for quality and accountability. There are different types of Special Districts, depending on the needs of a given community. There are Community Services Districts that focus on infrastructure service like street lighting, Water Districts that focus on conserving the water supply and developing innovative water infrastructure solutions, and even Utility Districts that supply power, transportation, and communication services.⁷

San Diego also currently has several Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), including one that encompasses University Ave from 33rd St. to Euclid. These BIDs are geographic-based areas designated by the city where businesses owners are “assessed annually to fund activities and improvements to promote their individual business districts.”⁸ The City uses BIDs to strengthen communities with strong entrepreneurial activity by

⁷ <https://www.csda.net/dmtd/district-types>

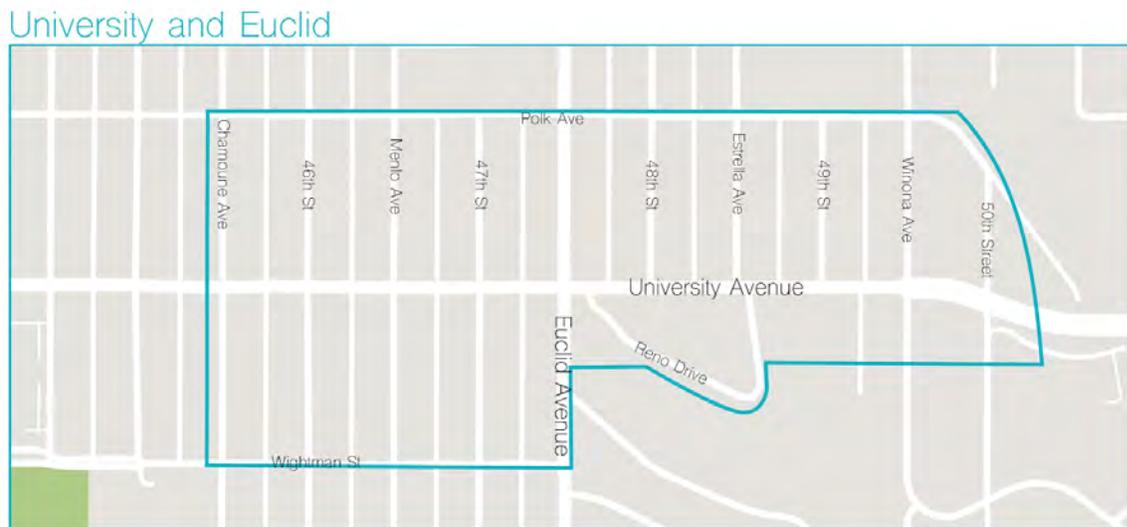
⁸ <https://www.sandiego.gov/economic-development/about/bids>

creating new jobs, attracting new businesses, and revitalizing commercial corridors. Extending the BID to incorporate the entirety of our geographic area will require the City to partner with the City Height Business Association.

Individual site analysis

Site Boundaries

Figure 1



Source: B. Frei

Site Selection

Our Site is located within the larger context of the ethnically and culturally diverse City heights neighborhood. The site is centered at the intersection of University Avenue and Euclid Avenue and bound by Chamoune Avenue to the East and 50th Street to the West, further depicted in Figure 1 in the next section. Our site selection was based off of the historical buildings, rich diversity in cuisine, the sites close proximity to numerous community assets and to other significant community nodes, as well as the potential for long-term revitalization in the area.

The first criteria were based off of the invaluable historical buildings that are located at the central node of our site. The Silverado Ballroom, an art deco building on the northeast corner of University and Euclid Avenue, has

served as a site for community gatherings, dances and musical performances since it opened its doors in the 1930's. The Ballroom was restored through a \$1.38 million city redevelopment loan, \$81,000 from the city's Small Business Revolving Loan fund and a \$160,000 contribution from the owner's family⁹. The historic ballroom reopened its doors in 2016. This project shows the communities support and commitment to preserving the rich history of the area.



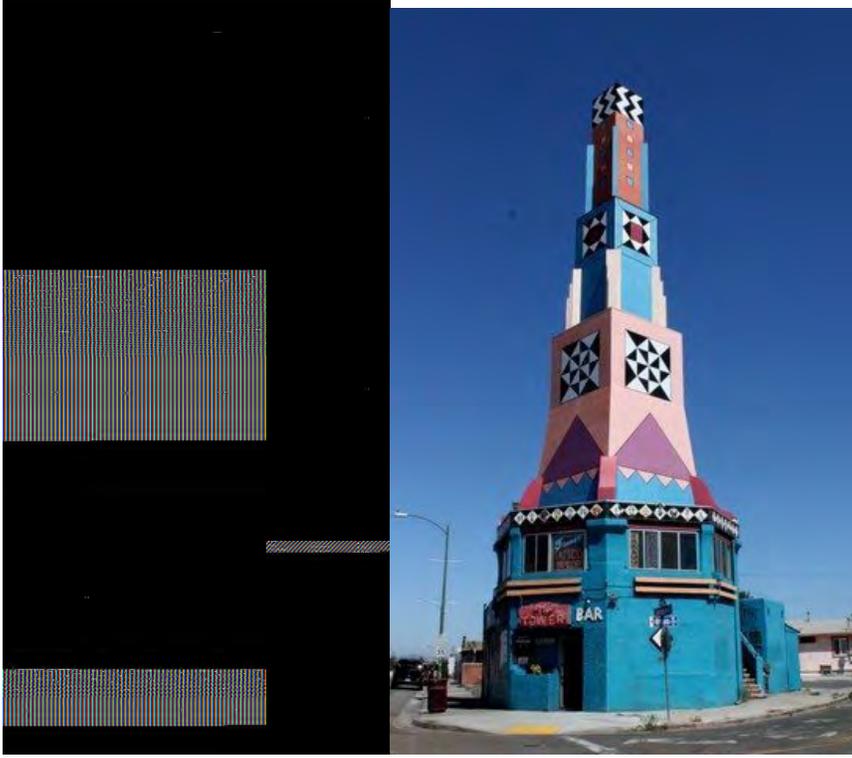
1948

2016

The Tower Bar, another historic art deco building, sits across the street from the Silverado Ballroom, on the southside of University Avenue. The Tower Bar was originally opened in 1932 as a drive-in sandwich shop with an observation deck on the second floor that overlooked the city's boundaries to the east. The Tower Bar has undergone multiple owners and uses, but in 2009 it was rebuilt with a grant from the City of San Diego Redevelopment Agency and today it is a well-known neighborhood bar with a tattoo parlor on the second floor¹⁰.

⁹ <https://www.kpbs.org/news/2016/feb/17/silverado-ballroom-in-city-heights-reopens/>

¹⁰ <https://www.thetowerbar.com/history/>



1932

2013

The third historical building of importance centrally located in our site is the Egyptian Garage. The Egyptian Garage is located on the southeast corner of University and Euclid Avenue, next to the Tower Bar. It originally opened in 1923 as a substation and terminus for the, then, City of East San Diego trolley streetcar line. The streetcar line ran over three miles along University Avenue until it reached the end of the line on Euclid Avenue. However, following the annexation of East San Diego, improving technologies and the growing popularity of motor buses and personal automobiles, the electrical substation was closed just two years after it was built. The station was sold to a paving contractor and painter who remodeled it into the Egyptian Garage in 1925, an auto garage penned to serve people who were traveling out east in their personal automobiles¹¹. Today, the Egyptian Garage has a liquor store, barbershop and beauty shop and large vacant commercial space, which could serve as a potential for future commercial development.

The second criteria for choosing our specific site was based off of the wide range of community assets and cuisine available within the area. The diversity in City Heights is accurately represented by the options available for food and dining in our site. The dining establishments within our site boundaries cover many different regions and countries including: a Vietnamese bakery, Hispanic supermarket, as well as restaurants ranging from Somali, Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese, East African, Halal, Mexican, Ethiopian, Italian and American. Apart from the food and dining available, the sites close proximity to numerous community assets in the greater City Heights neighborhood influenced our decision to choose the specific site. Some of the most notable

¹¹ <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/1992/april/revival/>

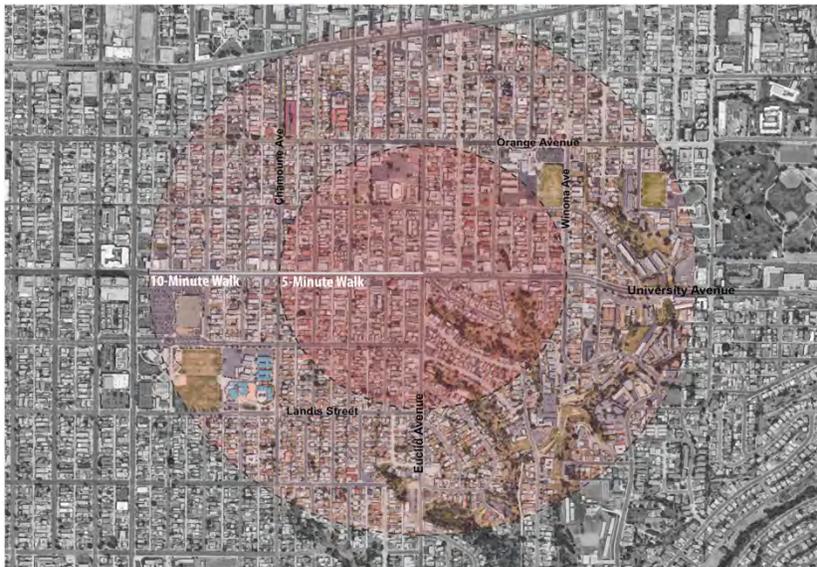
community assets near our site include: number of religious institutions, International Rescue Committee, New Roots Farm, City Heights Nursery, Colina del Sol Park, the Karen Organizations of San Diego and the Vien Dong supermarket. Our site is also easily connected to other significant community nodes such as Little Saigon and the intersection of University and Fairmount Avenue.

Walkability/Topography

Walkability

The 5-minute walk, also known as the “pedestrian shed” is considered to be the distance people are willing to walk before opting to drive. The visual below, in Figure 2, shows the 5-minute and 10-minute walking distance from our primary node at University and Euclid Avenue.

Figure 2



Topography

The topography of City Heights varies greatly by area. The streets for the greater neighborhood area are primarily laid out in a grid pattern, except where canyonland topography and subsequent slope prevents the grid pattern. As can be seen in the topographic mapping below in Figure 3, the business corridor along University Avenue is mostly flat west of Euclid Avenue. However, there is a

unique topography to the east of Euclid Avenue. Urban development can be seen extending into steeply sloping canyons. These topographic changes influenced our decision on selecting a site that was bounded by 50th street on the east side. Extending too far east of 50th street could pose mobility and walkability problems for families with small children, the elderly or any user with a mobility disability.

Figure 3



Site Conditions

<p>Streets</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Street shows cracks, but relatively well maintained➤ Bike lane inconsistency	A photograph of a street scene. In the foreground, there is a paved road with a white dashed line. In the background, there is a building with a large sign that says "MONEY? Jaxx". The sky is blue with some clouds.
<p>Sidewalks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Fairly well maintained along University, but quality drops on side streets➤ Narrow and full of obstacles such as bus stops, wells around trees lined with brick	A photograph of a sidewalk. The sidewalk is made of concrete slabs. There are colorful murals painted on the sidewalk, including blue and green designs. A tree is visible in the background, and its shadow is cast on the sidewalk.

<p>Crosswalks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Crosswalks are degraded: washed out paint and poorly maintained asphalt ➤ Areas with low visibility due to topography ➤ Fast moving traffic ➤ Not enough crosswalks 	
<p>Walkability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Little to no shade or foliage ➤ Narrow sidewalks and auto-oriented shops reduce pedestrian street activity ➤ Topography changes sharply on east side of site ➤ Potential for accidents is high ➤ Not enough shade 	
<p>Lighting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Poor lighting conditions along alleyways ➤ Poor store frontage lighting 	

Alleyways	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Poor pavement conditions➤ Sidewalks are nonexistent➤ No visible lighting infrastructure➤ Seem to be a part of the informal pedestrian network, however, safety concerns were very apparent	
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Demographics and Trends

Data

The demographic data specific to our site does not differ greatly from the information gathered for the greater community of City Heights. The demographic data for the site analysis was gathered from the US Census Bureau 2017 and 2018 American Community Survey¹². The geographic level of the data was extracted at the block level group in order to gather specific socio-demographics.

The University and Euclid site boundaries encompass five block level groups. To understand the socio-economic dynamics in the community we gathered: total population, housing status, median household income, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, poverty, and age distribution.

Trends

University and Euclid has a total population of 20,708. The population density varies from 1092 to 2854 total count of people in the respective block groups within University and Euclid. The southern portion of the site houses a higher density of the population ranging at 2502 to 2854 count of people, as is reflected in Figure 4. The lowest population density at University and Euclid is located in the north eastern-most area of the site; the density ranges from 1092 and 1444 count of people.

¹² <https://factfinder.census.gov>

Figure 4

Population Density



Of the total population, approximately 20 percent of the community at University and Euclid have poverty status. The US Census Bureau calculates poverty by using a set of money – before taxes, not including capital gains or non-cash benefits – income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who

is in poverty.¹³ Figure 5 is a map of the poverty distribution in our site. The southwest corner of the site ranging from 994 to 1148 count of people per block group. The areas with higher amount of people living in poverty also corresponds to the areas of a higher population density.

Figure 5

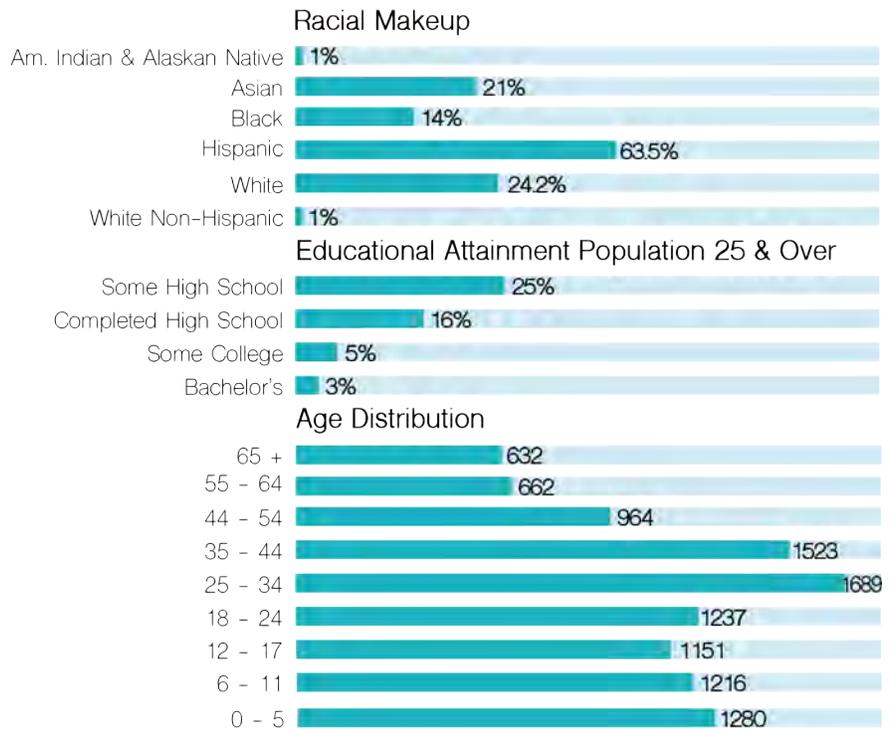
Population in Poverty



Below: Figure 6 depicts an infographic of the socio-demographic data specific to the University and Euclid site.

¹³ <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty/guidance/poverty-measures.html>

Figure 6



Community Assets

Figure 7



District Highlights

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Tower Bar
4757 University Ave 2 Silverado Ballroom
4756 University Ave 3 Red Sea Ethiopian Restaurant
4717 University Ave 4 Fatuma Restaurant
4869 University Ave 5 Dalat Cafe
4738 University Ave # H 6 Tu Thanh
4804 University Ave 7 Chinatown Bar and Grill
4727 University Ave 8 Huy Ky Bakery
4568 University Ave 9 African Grill Somalian Food
4647 University Ave 10 Somali Bantu Association
4979 University Ave | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11 Minnehaha Food Market
4990 University Ave 12 Minh Huong Supermarket
4029 Euclid Ave 13 Supermercado Murphy
4580 University Ave 14 Chinese Friendship Association
3876 50th St 15 Masjid Al-Ansar
4014 Winona Ave 16 Thien Hau Temple
4538 University Ave 17 Bhikkuni Buddhist Congregation
3776 46th St 18 Somali Mural
University Ave and 50th St. 19 Mural: Windmill Thrift Shop
4611 University Ave 20 Parklette on 50th
University Ave and 50th St. |
|--|---|

Site Connectivity to Greater Community

Our site is located within a walkable neighborhood with many restaurants, businesses and shops near the main residential pockets. It is centrally located within San Diego and can be easily accessed via the Interstate 15 or

through the major thoroughfares: University Avenue, El Cajon Boulevard and Fairmount Avenue. Additionally, the area has daily bus service connecting it to and from Downtown, as well as to the Mission Valley Trolley stops¹⁴.

Figure 8



University and Euclid is easily accessible by several nearby major thoroughfares, including El Cajon Blvd, 54th St, and Fairmount Ave. University Ave itself is a major corridor that is only a five-minute connection from the I-15. Surrounding the University and Euclid node are several other crucial community assets that as depicted in Figure 8, while not part of the node’s walkable network, have cultural and communal influence upon it. The intersection of University and 54th is home to many of the city’s most important nonprofits, including the International Refugee Council, the Karen Organization, the Karen Organization of San Diego, and Somali Family Service of San Diego, all of whom provide social services to the varied refugee

population of City Heights. Major natural assets like Colina del Sol Park and Chollas Creek provide open space, public sporting activities, and serve as major social infrastructure anchors of the city. New Roots Community Farm and City Farmers Nursery ease food insecurity by providing important pathways for residents to maintain a relationship to land and educating the public about sustainability. Public gathering spaces like Fair @ 44 and the City Heights Farmers Market are visited by people from all over City Heights, and therefore are seen as important connectors to all of the main nodes of the neighborhood. Finally, University and Euclid is within walking distance of Little Saigon, probably the most well-known and defining districts of City Heights.

¹⁴ <http://blog.steelesandiegohomes.com/neighborhood-spotlight-city-heights>

SWOT Analysis

Figure 9

SWOT

- | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Abundance and proximity of cultural and community assets.2. Potential for long-term revitalization efforts.3. Cultural and historical resilience.4. Rich fabric of diverse cultures - potential for innovation and community vibrancy. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Poor perception of safety.2. Uncertainty of the long-term economic viability.3. Proliferation of informal economy.4. High susceptibility to displacement from gentrification.5. Old and low quality infrastructure.6. Weakness in cross-sector community relationships. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Collaborate with nonprofits to aid entrepreneurs to enter the formal economy.2. Redevelop key site as a food hall with affordable retail space for local businesses.3. Adapt small pockets of underutilized space as gathering areas.4. Apply for grants to help augment businesses and improve frontages. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. High renter to owner ratio indicates high risk of displacement.2. Lack of strong policies that clearly establish and enforce equity and sustainability principles for capital investments.3. Lack of trust between community members and outside nonprofits operating in City Heights. |
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Strengths

The University and Euclid node is a place with rich cultural history and architecture, with the Tower Bar and the Silverado Ballroom anchoring other key restaurants and community assets. Surrounding the intersection are several popular restaurants that serve as key community gathering spaces such as Fatuma, Red Sea Ethiopian Restaurant, and Taste of Africa Cuisine. Several nonprofits around the node also provide crucial social services for the community; the International Rescue Committee is one such nonprofit that provides education and employment services, relocation and settlement assistance, and other social programs for City Heights' notable refugee and migrant community. The node's abundance of and proximity to other major City Heights assets and connections, including the New Roots Community Farm and Chollas Creek, also strengthen the node's centrality to the community.

University and Euclid is a node with enormous potential for long-term revitalization efforts. Its proximity to other key community nodes, such as El Cajon and Little Saigon, and status as a key commercial corridor mean that it would be a wise location to invest in infrastructure and frontage improvements for buildings. With targeted investments to improving the pedestrian experience, such as improved lighting, sidewalks, and crosswalk safety, University Ave could thrive as a major driver for City Heights' economic development. Major investments could greatly contribute to the area's revitalization, but of equal importance are micro-development projects that invest in the community's social infrastructure; the parklet on 50th street shows the potential for success of these kinds of spaces. Because of the density of the city, large scale developments will be expensive and difficult, but small projects like this provide quality assets that serve as key community spaces.

City Heights' history of community resistance to disrupting development projects, such as I-15, reveals the strong social capital and resiliency within it. History and precedent has shown that the community's internal sense of strength and cohesion has grown over time; the resistance to I-15 serves as a powerful example to how community cooperation and organization has emerged and grown to meet significant challenges. The question will be how to maintain these networks of resilience and use them to spring City Heights forward.

The variety of cultures, experiences, and perspectives from City Heights' many cultural communities is a source of strength and innovative potential. Residents interviewed consistently cited the community's diversity as a source of pride and central to its identity. Neighborhood vibrancy, progress, and change come about from interactions of communities of different incomes, ethnicities, religions, cultures, and nationalities. The number and size of the many different communities in our node could be a well for creative cultural placemaking and placekeeping activities.

Weaknesses

The low quality and age of the area's building stock, presence of barred windows in the commercial corridor, and building frontage designs reflect an earlier era of City Heights when there were more significant issues with crime and safety. But while crime has dropped in recent decades, many residents and business owners still hold

a strong perception that the community is not safe, and the physical infrastructure implies to outside visitors that the area remains unsafe.

Several challenges to walkability exist. Highly varied topography, especially east of Euclid and south of University, combined with unsafe street crossing conditions and multiple points of car crossing along sidewalks make high volumes of pedestrian activity difficult to sustain, threatening long term economic development goals. The many auto shops east of Euclid also present walkability challenges because their use is not pedestrian friendly and their adjacency to residential properties pose environmental issues. Improving the walkability and vitality of the area will require businesses that draw pedestrians and a reduction in points where cars cross the sidewalk from the street onto the property. Alternatively, the auto industries are a major part the area's economy and history, and with some alterations in their frontage design they could improve pedestrian safety and reduce their negative impacts.

Long term economic viability of the area is currently weakened by the proliferation of the informal economy in the area. A 2013 report by the City Heights Community Development Corporation estimates that large percentages of residents use the informal economy to buy food (87%), clothing (87.8%) and basic services (71-77%), usually as a supplement for formal economic activity.¹⁵ A prominent informal economy takes away money from the community's tax base and leaves entrepreneurs unregulated and unprotected. While some business development programs by the International Refugee Council (IRC) exist to counter the informal economy, education and assistance to potential entrepreneurs needs to be institutionally expanded to meet the current needs.

Private, philanthropic, and nonprofits sectors do not have strong or well-established ties with one another. Interviewed stakeholders frequently expressed frustration that while there are numerous nonprofits in City Heights, coordination between them is scattered. There appeared to be low cooperation and a lack of strong ties between nonprofits and businesses, between businesses and philanthropy. Having the different economic sectors of the community acting more cooperatively and improving communication will make community wide projects faster and easier to implement and will improve the overall social infrastructure of City Heights.

Opportunities

City Heights Community Development Corporation (CDC) has many opportunities to collaborate with key nonprofits, businesses, and community organizations to strengthen the community's assets and build up its resilience. First, resources could be focused around collaborating with nonprofits such as the IRC to aid informal business entrepreneurs to enter the formal economy. Public events such as educational sessions on navigating the business permit process would be one form of potential outreach.

¹⁵ Bliesner, J., & Rabinowitz Bussell, M. (2013). *The Informal Economy in City Heights*(p. 6). San Diego, CA: City Height Community Development Corporation. Retrieved from http://www.cityheightscdc.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Informal-Economy-in-City-Heights_Final-Version_August-26-2013.pdf

Second, there are some vacant or abandoned properties that CDC has the opportunity to be renovate as part of street and neighborhood revitalization efforts. One 6,700+ building at 4604 University Ave, currently owned by Strategic Realty Trust, is currently unoccupied. Buildings of this size could be constructed in a “hall” style, where local businesses rent affordable, small retail spaces under the same roof, allowing customers to browse through different craft shops, restaurants, and boutiques.



Figure 10

Pictured: Example of a rendering for the Midtown Green Alley program in Midtown, Detroit.¹⁶

Third, there exists an informal pedestrian network within the alleyways that surround the node. They are regularly used by pedestrians, cyclists and drivers, although residents have expressed that the lack of lighting features and poor landscaping means that alleys are not safe to walk down. Normally, alleys are neglected urban spaces, but in recent years there have been plenty of cities around the country investing in revitalizing them, such as in Midtown, Detroit shown in Figure 10. Another example, Chicago’s Green Alley Program aimed at restoring alleyways with permeable surfaces to allow better water drainage and dark sky compliant alley light fixtures that focus light downward.¹⁷ Making use of these underutilized spaces could build a richer urban pedestrian network in City Heights, and CDC would be in a position to cover the funding and planning of such a project.

Finally, CDC and the City Heights Business Association could concentrate efforts to help business owners in applying for grants to help augment their businesses and improve frontages. Although much of the building stock of the area is aged and in need of repair, many business owners choose not to remodel their buildings due to additional costs required for retrofitting and upgrading the building code. However, improving business frontages is needed in order to economically move the neighborhood towards a direction that could attract

¹⁶<https://www.locavesting.com/ecosystem/a-michigan-program-combines-crowdfunding-and-grants-to-fund-civic-projects/>

¹⁷ L. Attarian, J. (2019). *The Chicago Green Alley Handbook* [Ebook] (p. 13). Chicago, Ill: Chicago Department of Transportation. Retrieved from https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/cdot/Green_Alley_Handbook_2010.pdf

outside customers. The City of San Diego has economic development funding programs that provide grants to nonprofits that “launch, expand, attract or retain businesses in the City”¹⁸. The City’s Office of Small Business also runs the Storefront Improvement Program for Redevelopment Project Areas (example pictured below in Figure 11), which is open to property owners and business tenants with a San Diego Business Tax Certificate¹⁹. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is by far the largest player that funds business facade grants for for-profit businesses, and education to help businesses navigate HUD’s bureaucracy would help to improve and expand the neighborhood’s formal economy.

Figure 11



Cafe Madeleine North Park | Greater North Park Community Planning Area
2850 El Cajon Blvd., San Diego, CA 92104

Completed: Nov. 1, 2016 | **Total cost:** \$24,462 | **SIP incentive:** \$8,000

Key improvements: Fresh paint scheme, new doors, new windows, planter boxes, signage

Threats

University and Euclid, while rich in assets, is still highly vulnerable to threats to its economic development and civic sustainability. Displacement from gentrification is an issue throughout San Diego and urban centers around California and is especially concerning for low-income and high renter communities. City Heights is a neighborhood with a high renter to owner ratio, meaning that a significant portion of its population is put at risk of displacement by high speculation investment markets, economic development, and other planning policies that increase property and land values. Legally enforceable agreements like Community Benefits Agreements

¹⁸ Economic Development Funding Programs | Economic Development | City of San Diego Official Website. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.sandiego.gov/economic-development/about/funding>

¹⁹ Storefront Improvement Program for Redevelopment Project Areas | Economic Development | City of San Diego Official Website. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.sandiego.gov/economic-development/business/starting/storefrontredev>

should always be used in capital investment projects to protect nearby tenants and enforce equity and sustainability principles.

Another significant threat we have identified is the general distrust between community members and outside nonprofits operating in City Heights. Many community members are suspicious of philanthropic enterprises from outside San Diego and the kind of ventures they are interested in investing. On our visit to The Aja Project, a sign in the back of the room that explained community issues and grievances said: "Nonprofits are displacing people by evicting people and creating infrastructure for middle class needs." This lack of trust presents a serious challenge to the possibility of city-wide coalition consensus, collaboration, and cooperation. Nonprofits need to be careful to tailor their services to what the community really wants and needs, rather than to an outsider's vision of what the community should be.

Site Recommendations

Streetscape and infrastructure improvements

University Avenue has an extremely high number of pedestrian crashes, compared to other thoroughfares in the City of San Diego. In hopes of mitigating the dangers to pedestrians, the city's Mayor's office initiated the Vision Zero project for University Avenue, pictured below in Figure 12. The project currently includes the following:

1. New, protected bike lanes to maximize safety for people bicycling around by including physical barrier with bike lane.
2. Widening sidewalks by 5 feet on each side, making room for additional lighting and trees.
3. Wide Center Medians to replace center turn lanes, which can be planted with trees and provide a buffered bike lane. Gives people a safe space to bike, but puts them in conflict with parked cars.
4. Installing three roundabouts in the following intersections with University Avenue: at Highland Avenue (west of our site), at Chamoune Avenue (the western boundary of our site) and at Menlo Avenue (within our site). They City hopes that the roundabouts will slow vehicle speed while reducing congestion.²⁰

²⁰ <http://www.circulatesd.org/university>

Figure 12



What we recommend

We recommend additional long-term solutions for pedestrian and circulation improvements. University Avenue and Euclid Avenue, as well as the intersections to the east of Euclid will also need long-term improvements. One possible recommendation to consider would be to add a roundabout at the intersection of Estrella Avenue and University Avenue, which is about 1,200 feet to the east of the University and Euclid intersection. This would potentially help to slow down traffic within our site and follow the model that the Vision Zero plan is already working to design and implement in the three previously mentioned intersections.

Within our site there is a lack of pedestrian crosswalks, which leads to illegal crossing along University avenue. Cars driving rapidly on University Avenue are less likely to see pedestrians who are crossing at undesignated locations, leading to pedestrian fatalities. This danger is magnified because, as mentioned in section Part IV section C of our report, the topography within our site changes from a grid like pattern to a downward slope after the University and Euclid intersection. This topographic change reduces visibility for drivers driving westbound on University Avenue. In order to mitigate this issue, we recommend pedestrian improvement interventions.

Two possible interventions to consider are midblock crosswalks or raised crosswalks. Midblock crosswalks shown below, in Figure 13, help prevent jaywalking, provide a safe opportunity to cross a street between intersections and increase the visibility of pedestrians, while providing a median refuge which provides protected space for pedestrians during crossing. Alternatively, raised crosswalks, shown in Figure 14, create a speed bump that slows drivers, while the elevated crossing helps to increase the driver's visibility of the pedestrians.

Figure 13 -Midblock Crosswalks

Figure 14 - Raised Crosswalk



Renderings by Alta Planning + Design

Anti-Displacement and Gentrification Recommendations

Anti-displacement and anti-gentrification policies will be crucial to implement over the next few years as development creeps up from North Park and into City Heights. Many residents in City Heights have over 80% of their income going to rent, making them highly vulnerable to displacement from rising property values. Development will need to be targeted, equitable, and done in a “just enough” approach in order to prevent mass displacement. The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG, the equivalent to the San Diego Association of Governments, or SANDAG) has four general anti-displacement recommendations that the client could work to implement in City Heights: production policies, preservation policies, tenant protection and support policies, and asset building and local economic development policies.²¹

Production policies seek to increase the supply of affordable housing. While increased supply is needed, the major challenge to production policies is the low density of City Heights. Most buildings are zoned for only one or two stories, and vastly increasing the supply of affordable housing will require upzoning, which residents are likely to be resistant to. Preservation policies are generally not recommended at this time, since the building stock overall needs upgrades for health and safety reasons. Tenant protect policies, such as rent-to-own programs and right-of-first-refusal agreements for business and residential tenants, are incredibly important to protecting the population from displacement and should be immediately pursued. Asset building policies should start with renovating, revitalizing, or upgrading existing abandoned properties before existing active infrastructure is torn down and replaced.

Funding sources

Work with the City of San Diego and The Mayor’s office to secure additional funding using their existing grant funding sources: Caltrans Active Transportation Program (ATP) Statewide Grant Competition, Highway Safety Improvement Program, SANDAG Active Transportation Grants California, Office of Traffic and Safety Grants, U.S. Department of Transportation, and Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) Program.²²

²¹ <https://www.scag.ca.gov/Documents/ComprehensiveGuideToLocalAffordableHousingPolicy.pdf>

²² <https://www.sandiego.gov/vision-zero/strategic-plan>

Conclusion

Based on the current site conditions, walkability metrics, and the site's vulnerability to major development, our current recommendation is not to pursue a Cultural District designation at this time. While the area does show enormous potential, there are several drawbacks that make it unlikely win a bid for the designation if an application was pursued this year. We recommend pursuing improvements in the physical and social infrastructure first that will allow the cultural network and vibrancy of City Heights to grow and flourish.

The largest setback to the site area is its poor walkability east of Euclid Ave. The rolling topography, poor crosswalk conditions, lack of streetscaping and foliage, and prevalence of auto-related shops will make it difficult to make the case that our node is a walkable, pedestrian friendly zone. Current conditions have low pedestrian activity, which will only be able to be increased if the environment is improved such that it cultivates and improves the pedestrian experience. Improvements such as foliage and green streetscaping, clear and noticeable crosswalks, speed reducing features east of Euclid Ave such as bumps or ditches, and stricter building frontage design guidelines for auto shops are ways to improve the pedestrian experience for both residents and potential visitors and tourists. Without these critical pieces of pedestrian infrastructure, the node will not be reasonably seen as a walkable area. Alternatively, the boundaries for the site could be scaled back to Euclid, excluding its hilliest and least pedestrian friendly portions. While this might shorten the time-frame needed to make the site feasible enough to receive the Cultural District Designation in this application cycle, it would mean excluding key assets for the area.

In general, while the area could greatly benefit from additional exposure, outside visitors and consumers, and positive marketing, at the end of the day City Heights is still a working-class neighborhood with working-class needs. Public art and culture are crucial ways to unite community and create a sense of common identity, but improvements to the physical and social infrastructure of the area need to be practical and address the material concerns and conditions needed for the population to function and thrive. Focusing on improvements that are done for the benefit of potential tourists to the community, rather than the current needs of residents, would be premature at this time. There are several organizations operating in City Heights that cultivate youth arts and culture outreach and activity from the ground up. Defining features of City Heights as an arts and culture district should as much include these grassroots arts efforts as institutional backing.

Rather than aiming to apply for the designation this year, if the client still wishes to pursue a Cultural District designation, to apply in three to five-years-time. Focus resources now on making small placemaking and place-keeping improvements to the area, such as clear crosswalks, street lighting with a common color and design, improving streetscaping, and helping businesses obtain frontage improvement grants. Changes like these will encourage more pedestrian activity and increase consumer activity by simply designing public space to have a more positive pedestrian experience.

Alternatively, the client could also consider pursuing a California Special Districts designation instead. A Community Services or Utility District designation would be a good way for City Heights to secure locally controlled projects to improve its infrastructure needs. These kinds of locally controlled projects would be less disruptive than privately run development projects because they would be legally held more accountable to the public's needs. Both of these districts focus on sustainable development as well. Securing the material requirements City Heights needs to sustain pedestrian activity, expand businesses' capabilities and capacities, equitably grow its economy will go a long way to preparing the neighborhood to also sustaining tourists and outside consumers.

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