

OPINION

The future of downtown San Diego

By Nico Calavita
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The one truly great resource that lies embedded in the core areas of most American cities is their "sense of place," that unexpected amalgam of historic buildings, parks, civic squares, folklore, characters and events that shape and give meaning to the older parts of cities.

Here lies the magic that draws people to leave their cul de sac homes in the suburbs. More important today, here is where people are returning to live amidst the excitement of old buildings and new experiences.

Although its history does not span the centuries of some of America's earlier cities, San Diego does have an older business district surrounded by exciting communities — the Gaslamp Quarter, Little Italy, East Village, etc. — that inherently possess some of that magic: layers of buildings and streets constructed in different eras, blending together to create a unique and desirable place.

These surprising and wonderful niches in our urban landscape are *only* created in a kind of natural evolution of people and architecture — here lies their value. Such places cannot simply be manufactured under the rubric of "redevelopment."

As all American cities undergo revitalization, we must ask ourselves: what exactly do we mean by "redevelopment?" Some recent downtown redevelopment "success stories" have a disturbing subtext to them, one that causes architects and planners to shake their heads in frustration and write books with titles like "Variations on a Theme Park" or "The McDonaldization of Society."

The upshot of these books is that the urge to view profit and revenue generation as the main barometer of downtown redevelopment may, in the next generation, leave America with a bunch of simulated downtowns that are no different from theme parks.

San Diego is about to enter perhaps the most important moment of its downtown redevelopment era. Several of the city's oldest districts are facing change — the waterfront at North Embarcadero; Seaport Village and Convention Center expansion; the Santa Fe Rail station and the

proposed neighboring public library; the revitalization of East Village and possible construction of a new baseball stadium there.

Much of the dialogue about these projects has focused on whether or not they are financially feasible. The bottom line has been — if they can pay for themselves and bring consumers downtown, then let's call that "redevelopment."

We would suggest that the merits of downtown redevelopment ought not to solely rest upon the financial success or failure of projects, but rather on whether the projects make a contribution to downtown as a living and working space for all San Diegans. This brings us to the question of the baseball stadium proposed for East Village, and being promoted as a catalyst for redevelopment which would include new offices, shopping and hotels.

Why would a ballpark generate a demand for office or hotels? If there is demand for those uses, they could be accommodated in other parts of downtown

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without the huge subsidies that they will receive in the ballpark district.

But let's assume for the sake of argument that the ballpark will make those uses possible; a second question arises: Is "redevelopment" here to be measured only by the number of dollars generated per square foot of space?

This might be a sufficient measure for a suburban location, but we would argue that it is not for the historic downtown setting, which already has an invaluable resource — itself. By their nature — and whether you call them parks or stadiums — ballparks tend to be enclosed fortresses that wall off a game which people pay to see, from the surroundings, where those who have not paid or cannot pay will nonetheless experience the glaring floodlights and traffic congestion.

Further, a stadium houses a short-term event that lasts a few hours. What occurs

in them and around them on a daily and nightly basis? Drive around the new stadium districts in Baltimore or Phoenix where there is no game, and you will find the districts virtually deserted.

The East Village redevelopment project centered on the ballpark will wipe out almost all existing buildings, some of historical value, and interrupt 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th avenues in their march toward the bay. It will also halt the flow of energy emanating from the Gaslamp, leading to further congestion in that area. To the north, it will block city dwellers' views to the bay, and on the eastern side, behind the proposed office buildings, surface parking and parking garages will ruin the project, sealing off that area from the rest of downtown.

Jane Jacobs, in her book "Death and Life of Great American Cities," arguably the greatest book written in this country on urban planning and design, attacked the big urban renewal projects of her time, calling them, "hostile islands . . . that seldom aid the city areas around them, as in theory they are supposed to do." In her chapter on "The Need for Aged Buildings," she emphasized their importance, not so much from an aesthetic point of view, but from an economic one.

While new buildings can be afforded only by national chain stores or corporate offices, older buildings offer lower rents to those uses that bring vitality to a neighborhood or downtown, making possible the "intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially."

This was the basic principle behind the existing Center City Development Corporation plan for the East Village that proposed a mixture of what Jacobs called "primary uses," residential and commercial. Further, from a regional perspective, East Village was the place where a good portion of the residential growth of the city was going to be accommodated, reducing the pressure for suburban sprawl. Now much of it will be pre-empted by the project.

Redevelopment was occurring already perhaps in the best way possible — through the gradual expansion of business and residence from the Gaslamp Quarter eastward. A recent special advertisement supplement to *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, "Downtown," pointed out that in East Village, "Produce distribution warehouses are giving way to architecture studios, art galleries and software companies. Vacant lots are becoming

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dios, art galleries and software companies. Vacant lots are becoming live-and-work lots and row homes.

This market-based approach is not fast enough, we are told. What is fast enough? And to accelerate its pace will we destroy one of the few places left that can be infused with a sense of place? And spend \$275 millions of public money to boot? And use the power of eminent domain so that people who already live and work in this area, in Jacob's magistral words, can be "pushed about, expropriated and uprooted, much as if they were the subjects of a conquering power."?

We are not against redevelopment or the use of eminent domain when absolutely necessary. We are against it when used to actually destroy what makes downtown special. We are also concerned about using \$50 million of CCDC funds for a project such as this. That money could go a long way in aiding East Village to grow organically.

East Village does not need another isolated piece of large-scale infrastructure, but rather, like the Gaslamp Quarter, a pedestrian scale mix of residence and business that will allow it to be what it is meant to be: a downtown living and working space that opens onto the bay.