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Central City Extra

End of Skid Row?

New businesses, better housing signs that 6th St. is turning corner

By John Goins



Wing and wife Mui recently relocated their Mission Cleaners to 144 Sixth Street.

The revitalization of the Sixth Street area from a corridor of crime adled with liquor stores, prostitutes and pawnshops into a healthy community of small businesses, safe, well-lit streets and, perhaps, one day, the laughter of children, is a slow work-in-progress.

Since 1992 the Redevelopment Agency has pumped more than \$70 million into the area, \$55 million of which was spent on 1,4000 units of affordable housing after the '89 earthquake, said Mike Grisso, the Redevelopment Agency's South of Market project manager.

The rest- \$15 million – has been spent on nonhousing improvements to bolster the area's infrastructure, including widened and heightened sidewalks and façade improvements. Developers have chunked in an additional \$130 million, for a total of \$200 million over 14 years, a Redevelopment document shows.

And still it's the city's skid row.

But perhaps that's changing as the housing and improvements near critical mass, the population becomes infused with younger, working professionals, and the Federal Building a block away on Seventh Street takes shape.

“There are two economies on Sixth Street – the nighttime and the daytime,” said Angel Cruz, the owner of Club Six, a popular venue for clubbers, at 60 Sixth St. “Nighttime is doing great; the daytime is picking up.”

Cruz, a board member of the nonprofit Urban Solutions, working to improve the area, said: “The SRO hotels will always attract lower-income folks. It’s not about gentrification – it’s about coexistence, how to coexist with the SRO residents in the neighborhood.”

Cruz said it was “good to see much needed funds for infrastructure” such as new “sewer lines and palm trees” on Sixth Street.

A large fan whirs above the inside door of Midtown Loan, a pawnshop at 39 Sixth St., where four men and a woman stand in line waiting to conduct business. Ralph Kazanjian, who has run the shop since 1964, says, “This was a pretty desolate place before. Things have changed dramatically in the past 25 years. I think they’ve done as good a job as they can, but it’s moving at a snail’s pace.”

The effort to improve and beautify the neighborhood has continued through the help of Urban Solutions, which created the Six on Sixth project in 2003. Thirty-five façade projects have been completed since then and Executive Director Jenny McNulty feels optimistic about the future and the new businesses the project has nurtured into being.

“We’re aiming to create commercial vitality on the street,” she said. “We do a range of things: working to attract new businesses, to retain businesses that are there,” and “to provide assistance in getting loans.”

McNulty has been at Urban Solution for almost five years. “At the moment, there is a very high vacancy rate on Sixth Street and we’re trying to change that,” she said. “If someone is willing to open a business in this neighborhood, we’re fairly flexible with them.” Not more bars or porn shops, she added.

“We certainly have desired businesses,” she said, “but we’re not really at the point to say, for example, ‘Well, what we really want is a shoe store.’ It’s really, really tough to fill the vacancies.” One space that was recently leased had been vacant for 40 years, she said.

This reporter counted four vacant storefronts on Mission from Fifth to Sixth Street, seven closed locations between Sixth and Seventh streets on Mission, and six spaces along Sixth Street from Market to Folsom –including the side streets and alleys.

McNulty said June had been her busiest month so far.

“Seneca Hotel had two retail spaces vacant for over five years that had previously been occupied by a pawnshop and a bar. Now there’s a very bright, cheerful hair salon in one space and a pizzeria about to open in the other space. We think that’s a great improvement and we’re really delighted,” she said.

Dotti Bell, the owner of Ms. Marty's, a school specializing in hair dressing and skin care at 1087 Mission St, said, "Anything they try could only be an improvement. I have 100 students and they try to avoid that area (Sixth Street) like the plague. People urinate in my doorway. The urine runs into my building."

Bell said when Bloomingdale's opens at Fifth and Market, business should perk up, and she conceded that the neighborhood does look better. "We've been in this building five or six years and there's definitely been an improvement."

Signs of improvement could be seen along Sixth Street as McNulty led a tour of the area where widened sidewalks, tall banners and new palm trees could be seen. Many storefronts had "for lease" signs by Urban Solutions on their windows. But beneath the bright banners were the same drug addicts, alcoholics and prostitutes one had seen on Sixth Street for years, just killing time or hustling on the new sidewalks and in front of businesses with improved facades.

"When they approved my loan - believe me - I was so happy," said Ralph Martin, the owner of Hair Masters by Ralph at 40 Sixth St., one of the newly leased Seneca storefronts.



Ralph Martin, who opened Hair Masters by Ralph on Sixth Street, and Jenny McNulty, executive director of Urban Solutions, talk at Martin's salon. He says, "Business is pretty good." McNulty says, "We're trying to create economic vitality on the street."

Martin, a flamboyant hair stylist with four gold and diamond earrings in each ear and a tattoo on the back of his right hand that reads, "Hair Master Ralph," began his business with just \$40,000, he said. Martin said he'd been styling hair for 34 years and opened his new business July 22.

"When I told Urban Solutions about my story they never said, 'We can't help you.' They said, 'We'll work with you' and that is what they did. Business is pretty good," he said. "I started out working by myself. I have four people now."

Martin said he didn't feel as if he was in direct competition with the other barbershops along Sixth Street, such as Tony Barbershop next door, because they serve only male customers, "I have a full-service salon," he said. "We do hair color, perms, braids... There's no other hair salon on Sixth Street that does only women's hair."

But Larry Summers, the owner of the San Francisco Barber College at 64 Sixth St., had a different opinion about redevelopment in the area. "I haven't seen it yet," he said. The burnished blues and jazz quartet on the radio punctuated the hubbub of barber students learning their craft. He glanced over his shoulder to the alley, Jessie Street, next to his school where the illicit traffic in drugs was as obvious as if the dealers had hung out a sign. "This is crack alley, right here."

Summers said he took over the longtime barber school four years ago and has 40 students. Asked what kind of business could make it on Sixth Street, he said, "Probably any business could if you could clean it up and get these derelicts off the street who run your customers away."

Hanin Hakim, the owner of Chico's Pizza at Sixth and Minna Street, added his own perspective. "It's improving. It's better than 10 years ago. I was at 980 Mission St. before, but I've been here for six years. Business is OK." His cousin, Amin Jamally, will soon open a café at 169 Sixth St. at the Alder Hotel, said Hakim, and Chico's Pizza now stays open later to accommodate the overflow of patrons streaming from Club Six at night.

The flourishing night life on Sixth Street – the Anu Bar at 43 Sixth St., continues to attract a large clientele – has also inspired the owner of the soon to open Mythic Pizza, across the street next to Club Six, to extend his hours also, said McNulty.

Mission Cleaners at 144 Sixth St. and AJD Garment and Cleaners at 1000A Howards St. "were considering locations in Daly City before signing leases" in the area, she said. Both businesses, besides their regular dry-cleaning and wash and fold businesses, also do "garment manufacturing" to supplement their incomes, she added.

McNulty said the owners of Mission Cleaners, which used to be across the street from the Federal Building, had to move after the building they were in was demolished. As far as the impact of the new Federal Building that was being constructed, "the rents on Seventh Street increased, but not on Sixth Street," she said.

Amy Li, the daughter of the owner of AJD Garment and Cleaners, said, "business is slow" and that her parents had moved from their previous location because "the owner wanted to turn the space into an office."

Competition for space was one reason Jackie Bell of Reruns Thrift Boutique at 1000 Howard St. moved from Jones Street into the larger store South of Market. Bell, who was assisted by Urban Solutions, now sells her used clothes in a 4,5000 square foot space. "Everything is just \$2," she said.

Bell said there needs to be more things for the children in the area and “more police on the beat – more concern for the people who pay taxes.”

Bell says that she runs the store with a partner and, sometimes, her brother.

Is she ever afraid when she works in the store alone?

“Absolutely not. You can’t be in fear all your life.”

John Elberling, executive director of non-profit housing developer TODCO, has worked South of Market since 1978. TODCO, according to Redevelopment Agency records, had received \$13.1 million in agency funds since 1975 to purchase, build and rehab 391 units of affordable SoMa housing, including the landmark Bayanihan House at Sixth and Mission, home to the Filipino community center of the same name.

“There have been some modest improvements,” Elberling said, “a little bit of progress, but no fundamental change. To get fundamental improvements we need more residents in the neighborhood and mixed-income housing.”

“The city’s master lease program has stabilized the housing. Better management in the hotels had taken them from slum hotels and improved the neighborhood. There are more master leases coming, and that will help.”

“There were no community assets before 1990,” Elberling said, such as the Bayanihan center and Bindlestiff theater, which are the sort of “long-term institutions that Sixth Street has always needed.”

“There’s definitely been progress. It’s happening, but it’ll take a while, five to ten years. The progress is modest, but it’s the long-lasting kind. And that’s important.”

Editor and publisher Geoff Link contributed to this report.