

Positively Sixth Street: Hardscrabble S.F. neighborhood gradually undergoing a gentle, atypical revitalization

Amelia Glynn, Special to The Chronicle
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If you haven't taken an afternoon stroll down Sixth Street in a while (or possibly ever), perhaps it's time you did.

San Francisco's infamously gritty neighborhood, between Market and Howard streets, is in the midst of a revitalization -- albeit an atypical one. Call it un-gentrification. Traditionally, artists, musicians and other trendsetters move to blighted urban areas for their affordability. Once they leave their indelible mark, the yuppies aren't far behind.

Sixth Street has managed to buck this trend because of its high number of single-room occupancy hotels, some of which were built at the turn of the century.

Mike Grisso, San Francisco Redevelopment Agency project manager for the South of Market neighborhood, says building and planning codes do not specifically restrict the conversion of such hotels, but they do prevent the demolition of any residential units. This means the hotels are likely to stay, preventing the usual cycle of gentrification and subsequent displacement of locals.

As other neighborhoods in San Francisco have received complete (and often extreme) makeovers, Sixth Street has seemingly defied change. A longtime aesthetic and social Achilles' heel for the city, the corridor has been fingered by politicians and social organizations as an example of stagnation and the local government's perceived failed handling of the homeless epidemic in San Francisco.

Today, the scene on Sixth tells a story of change and evolution. It's still plenty gritty and the characters are still out in force, but there is less trash and graffiti and lots of fresh paint in every direction.

Many old storefronts that had been boarded up for as many as 40 years are being renovated and leased. The sidewalks, recently widened by a foot and a half, display palms and flowering pear trees.

It has all the trappings of a real neighborhood -- complete with new "old-fashioned" street lamps. The thing is, Sixth Street has been and continues to be a real neighborhood for many people. It is just now coming into focus for others because its newly scrubbed potential is staring us squarely in the face.

The Redevelopment Agency and the Department of Public Works funded the street improvements, spending \$6 million to \$7 million on the sidewalk expansion alone. The agency also pays the salaries of street sweepers and graffiti cleanup crews.

Part of the change that's happening on Sixth requires a constant upkeep. It's the "broken windows" theory in action, which holds that immediate and consistent handling of the little problems -- graffiti, trash, shattered glass -- can prevent greater neighborhood decline. In other words, if you can change the way a neighborhood is perceived, you can change the neighborhood.



Chronicle / Liz Hatalla

Sixth Street in San Francisco is in the midst of a revitalization.

The Redevelopment Agency in partnership with Urban Solutions, a nonprofit economic development organization, is combatting public perception by offering a rosier lens through which to view the street.

Mark Ellinger, a former recording engineer, came to Sixth Street in 2000 after spending nearly six months in the hospital recovering from a heroin addiction. "It was one of the only places in the city where I could afford housing," he said. Now clean, living in the Shree Ganeshai Hotel (named after the Indian God of auspicious beginnings), and working on a book of single-room occupancy hotel photography, he and other residents express concern about maintaining the character of the neighborhood.

He wants assurance that many of the original buildings won't be carelessly knocked down and replaced with generic lofts. It's these buildings that make San Francisco feel like San Francisco, he says.

Fortunately, the agency's redevelopment plan for South of Market aims to "preserve and improve the existing neighborhood for the benefit of its residents" -- including those who live in the hotels, as well as homeowners and apartment renters. It's a rare practice of urban renewal without displacement.

"One of our challenges is overcoming the legacy of heavy-handed redevelopment," Grisso said. This is one reason the agency frequently uses the words "revitalization" and "beautification" to describe the project.

Grisso says vacant retail spaces are the most damaging to the health of a neighborhood, and because declining neighborhoods naturally create vacant storefronts, the cycle is often a tough one to break. "In the beginning, getting enough business owners to change their mind about Sixth Street was a tough sell," Grisso said.

Today, the corridor is undergoing a retail renaissance. Urban Solutions encourages existing Sixth Street businesses to stay put and new businesses to open through a grant program that targets façade and tenant improvements. The thinking is, the more quality, resident-serving businesses that exist the better the quality of life for the residents.

"Businesses need solid reasons to open here," said Urban Solutions Executive Director Jenny McNulty, "And residents need businesses they can afford to patronize."

In January 2003, Urban Solutions started Six on Sixth, a program to increase commercial vitality. Six on Sixth offers matching grants, free architectural and broker services, and low-cost loans to property and business owners. Business owners can receive \$10,000 in matching grants for facade improvements (meaning that they also contribute \$10,000) and \$25,000 in two-to-one grants for interior improvements (where owners contribute at least \$50,000).

Urban Solutions' original goal was to bring six businesses to the area. To date, it has completed 35 facade and tenant improvement projects and has attracted a wide range of new services to the neighborhood -- including a hair salon, pizzeria, tattoo parlor, deli, bookstore, dry cleaners and credit union. A dozen new businesses have opened their doors in the last year.

Other facade and tenant improvement projects on Sixth include the Delta Hotel, Desmond Hotel, Bayanihan Community Center and the Alder Hotel. The Baldwin Hotel is expected to begin renovations in the fall. "The overall atmosphere of Sixth Street has radically changed," said the Alder's owner, Sam Devdhura, of the area's transformation.

Grisso is quick to point out that this isn't a place that should or necessarily could support tourism. In other words, don't expect the corridor to morph into Chestnut Street -- a fact for which he and residents are thankful.

Northeast Community Federal Credit Union CEO Lily Lo will open a Sixth Street branch in late fall. There are no banks or other financial institutions in the immediate area. In addition to serving the community with banking services, Lo also plans to offer financial workshops, for example, teaching residents to avoid using the high-fee check cashing centers. (Many of the residents are living on fixed incomes and don't have bank accounts.) "This helps to create sustainable change in the neighborhood," Lo said.

After standing vacant for more than five years, the Seneca Hotel's two ground-floor storefronts, at the corner of Sixth and Mission, were recently renovated and leased to Mythic Pizza and Hair Masters hair salon, which both opened in June. The owners of the Seneca have also applied for facade improvement.

Hair Masters owner Ralph Martin has been cutting hair since age 12 and previously managed 18 salons in the Philippines. For the last six years he worked as an instructor at the San Francisco Barber College.

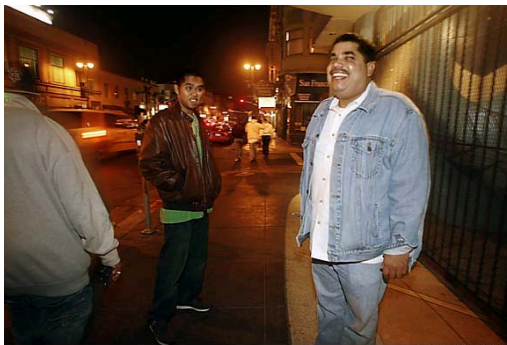


Sixth Street style: Ralph Martin (right) shares a laugh with Adrian Jones. Martin opened his six-station unisex salon, Hair Masters, in June.

Martin considers many of the residents on Sixth to be his family and believes he and his six-station unisex hair salon can provide services that cater to the neighborhood's needs and, "make people feel special."

A self-dubbed "miracle child" because of his not-so-hot credit score before opening his salon, he wants to start a trend that encourages others to upgrade their shops to attract more clients. "The way Urban Solutions helped me is just unbelievable," he says.

Angel Cruz, owner of Club 6, which he opened in 2001, expanded his business in January 2006 to include an art gallery and live performance space. Cruz hopes more businesses will move into the neighborhood. "Smart entrepreneurs should get in now because they won't have to wait – they'll immediately benefit from the changes that are happening."



Club 6 owner Angel Cruz has expanded his 5-year-old business to include an art gallery and performance space.

As businesses have opened, others have closed or been replaced, and, not surprisingly, some residents miss their old haunts. Ellinger laments the recent closing of some of the older neighborhood bars, such as Grady's, which functioned as an extension of many people's living rooms. The street remains in desperate need of coffee shops and cafes where residents can socialize.

"I don't see these changes as gentrification," says Cruz. "The new businesses are working with what's already here to help improve the neighborhood. I'd call it successful coexistence."

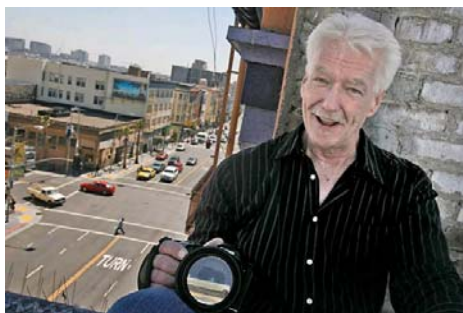
Despite a vibrant nightlife from hipster hangouts such as Club 6 and Anu, the daily economy of Sixth Street has rarely been described as anything better than dismal. There is little opposition to boosting its economic vitality, but some wonder about the long-term viability of the businesses.

Because government and nonprofit sources fund the majority of projects on Sixth, they tend to move at a notoriously slow clip. "I always remind people that redevelopment is intended to be a long process," says Grisso. "That's why redevelopment plans are designed to last for 30 years."

Collaborating with property owners, businesses, residents and community organizations takes time, especially if done right. In blighted areas such as Sixth Street, owners have very nearly given up on the area and are reluctant to invest in their properties, he says. "It takes time to convince them that investing in their properties is not only good for the community, but also for themselves."

Although Ellinger appreciates the aesthetic improvements, including those made to his own hotel, he doesn't believe that "face-lifting" alone will help new businesses succeed. "When you start a new business here, your doors are open to the public, he says. "This is a scary prospect for a lot of business owners."

According to Ellinger and other residents, crime on Sixth Street, mostly in the form of drug sales, is still common. "If it's allowed to continue, it won't matter how good a building looks," he says. "Watching drug deals go down will give potential new business owners something to think about before they decide to invest in the neighborhood."



Eye on Sixth: Mark Ellinger has been living on Sixth Street since 2000 and is working on a photography book. He says it's people who make the neighborhood, not buildings.

This could also have a negative impact on pedestrian traffic. Ellinger concludes. "I've been told by more than one cop that this is a containment zone. A lot of people want to condemn this area to continuous failure."

But McNulty asserts the corridor is getting more than a face-lift -- it's receiving an infusion of hope and economic vitality. This hope can be felt at the Sixth Street annual fair, which took place June 10. Unlike fairs in other San Francisco neighborhoods, Sixth's is very resident focused and includes representatives from more than 30 service providers, such as health care specialists and social workers. Free haircuts and bags of groceries are offered to every resident who collects stamps from any six providers.

"Everyone here is used to a pretty tough existence and for one day they get to be entertained and just relax," says Ellinger, who helps raise money and organize the annual event. "People need to feel they can be proud of their neighborhood, and the neighborhood isn't the buildings -- it's the people."

New this year
 AJD Dry Cleaning: July
 Mission Cleaners: July
 Hair Masters: June
 Mythic Pizza: June
 Louisiana Fried Chicken: May
 Mirch Masala (restaurant): May
 Play Bar: April
 Club 6 Lounge (expansion): January
 Coming soon
 Arkipelago Books: Opens this week
 Northeast Community Federal Credit Union: Fall
 Amin's Cafe: Fall
 Source: Urban Solutions

That's how much money has been committed to Sixth Street's revitalization since 2003. It breaks down like this:
 \$133,000: Design grants and architectural assistance from San Francisco redevelopment agency
 \$292,000: Construction grants from the redevelopment agency
 \$729,000: Investments from business and property owners
 \$578,000: Construction grants from redevelopment agency for projects now under way
 Source: Urban Solutions
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\$1.73 million