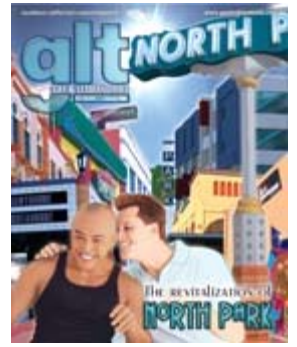


# A community comes full circle

The revitalization of North Park

BY MARGIE M. PALMER



In 1880, the city of San Diego had a population of 2,700. Yet after the transcontinental railway reached Southern California, within seven years that number grew to roughly 40,000.

A vast segment of neighborhoods developed as the city grew, with each individual community developing its own unique flair. Some of these communities, such as Coronado and La Jolla, seceded, while others remained incorporated.

In 1893, 40 acres of land located just northeast of Balboa Park was sold to James Monroe Hartley. This land, originally named “Hartley’s North Park,” then transitioned into the area of town we now know as North Park.

After its “birth,” North Park grew into a place with a set of matchless charms. In 1913, as developers and contractors started pouring the concrete sidewalks and curbs, many people left their marks on them; if you pay close attention as you walk down the street, you’ll notice that many of these people often put the date, their names and other information in the form of permanent stamps. A cornerstone on Ohio Street reads “Gabrielson 8-13,” suggesting that it had been built by someone of that name in August of that year. Similar markings can be found on Polk, Lincoln and Kansas streets.

Although the community continued to develop on par with the overall growth of San Diego, it wasn’t until after World War II that economic expansion really hit the area. Many large retailers such as JC Penny, Woolworths and Rexall Drugs opened up shop on Main Street (now known as the section of University Avenue running through the area’s business district) almost overnight. In the 1940s, the annual North Park Toyland Parade began, boasting crowds of more than 100,000. Spectators of all ages lined the streets to watch marching bands, floats and various celebrities kick off the holiday season. The area was booming, and its continued success seemed secure.

Yet less than a decade later, after the Mission Valley and Fashion Valley malls opened, the larger stores moved away. Many San Diegans were lured by the shiny newness of these types of retail mega-centers and thus followed suit. Main Street was no longer the “place to shop,” and smaller, local merchants began to suffer when foot traffic waned, many going out of business due to the loss of revenue.

Ultimately, this trend turned what had once been a thriving shopping mecca to little more than a mass of empty storefronts, vacant buildings and the memory of what it had once been. The North Park Theatre closed its doors and was boarded shut. The Toyland Parade stopped running. The North Park street sign (which had been put up in the 1920s by the Women’s Auxiliary for the North Park Businessman’s Club) was taken down for repairs and for some reason was never put back up.

As the community deteriorated, residents blamed local businesses for the demise of the area, while the business owners pointed fingers back, saying that a lack of customer loyalty caused them to

go out of business. Check-cashing places, 99-cent stores and other high-discount retailers started taking up residence in abandoned retail space. In 1978, Pacific Southwest Airlines flight 182 crashed in North Park after colliding with a private Cessna 172 while in descent to Lindbergh Field. All 135 people on board were killed, along with the two passengers aboard the Cessna and seven people on ground. Nine others were wounded, and 22 homes were either damaged or destroyed.

The community seemed to be cursed.

But in the mid 1980s, things started to take a positive turn. In 1985, the Business Improvement District was founded by area business owners. The association began as a small project that was overseen by a group of volunteers. These visionaries realized the magnitude of what had been lost and wanted to work together to bring the community back to what it had once been. They implemented small changes initially, such as the restarting of the Toyland Parade in 1986.

In 1994, the Business Improvement District sought to replace the North Park sign, and a new one was affixed over University Avenue in early 1995.

“The sign which hangs today is a replica of the original because the original sign had been lost,” said Jude Thomas, interim executive director of North Park Main Street. “There are many ideas and rumors as to what happened to it, although the last I’d heard it was sitting in a ditch beside University Avenue somewhere between Florida and Alabama Street. No one really knows where it is. It could be buried; it could be sitting in a dump somewhere. Many of the original smaller signs have been recovered and now hang in some of the local banks, yet the whereabouts of the original street sign is unknown.

“Although some positive changes had been initiated in the ’80s, it was really more in the ’90s that things were kicked back up the next level,” Thomas continued. “More people became involved in the revitalization project and had more of a clear idea as to what they thought about the neighborhood and things that they wanted for it. There are three organizations which are working together to make this happen. North Park Main Street primarily focuses on the business district. We are a business advocate and we review development projects which are proposed for the area. The second entity is the North Park Community Association. Formed in 1984, they provide a forum for issues and concerns within the community and focus on issues such as land use, community image, cultural activities and public safety. The third is the Greater North Park Planning Committee. This is an official planning committee which was created by the city of San Diego to review planning issues. Their focus is urban design and project review, parks and public art, and community relations.”

In 1998, the area publicly declared itself an “arts, culture and entertainment district” and continued with its mission to cultivate this idea. Storefronts were given a makeover. In 2004, a revitalization project for the North Park Theatre broke ground. The 1928 building’s restoration proved to be a major boost for the business corridor. When it reopened in 2005, the newly remodeled, fully renovated, state-of-the-art theater was re-branded with a new name: the Stephen and Mary Birch North Park Theatre. It’s currently home to Lyric Opera San Diego and hosts a number of performances throughout the year.

But the rebirth of the area is more than the shiny new buildings and rebirth of the North Park Theatre – the arts have started to make their way back. In 2001, Gustaf Rooth, owner of Planet Rooth Studios, and Ken Callaway of North Park Studios founded an arts and cultural event known now as Ray at Night. Since its inception, it's become the second largest monthly art event in San Diego, drawing crowds of more than 1,500. Roughly 40 galleries, cafés, coffee shops and retailers participate, with approximately two dozen of them hosting myriad art from local artists.

When Rooth was searching for the location to open Planet Rooth, he quickly found himself drawn to the eclectic allure of North Park. Shortly thereafter, he began speaking with Callaway about his participation in art walks in Sweden. Realizing that this could be a great source of exposure for various businesses in the area, the two decided to move forward in replicating this type of event on Ray Street.



“The heart of what really started Ray at Night was the desire of the local business owners to be successful. And to do that, we recognized the need to bring people to our places of business,” Rooth said. “Ray Street itself is a little, obscure one-way street. Although there was a lot of foot traffic walking past it, there wasn’t necessarily a lot of traffic going down it. A lot of us decided to get together and make that happen. If they weren’t art-based, they realized that they could build that into their business. We all decided we wanted to do an art night out, which would allow local artists to showcase their work [and] would at the same time increase our visibility to the public.”

The first Ray at Night took place within days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. “We really weren’t sure if anyone was going to attend considering the magnitude of what had just happened,” Callaway said. “But people came. Lots of people came. Some came to look at the art, some came just to get out and be able to have social interaction with there not being any of the pressures of what was going on in the world around them.”

Since then, Ray at Night has become a social mecca for artists. “If you’re involved in that community, it’s difficult to attend this event and not see a local artist you know or whose work you’re familiar with,” Rooth said. “It’s just a wonderful array of colorful people with huge talent. If you look at what the event has prompted throughout the area, it’s kind of amazing. North Park has pretty much forever been an artsy and eclectic part of town, but within the past several years, you can pretty much walk a mile in any direction of Ray Street and see art happening everywhere. It’s not just in galleries but in coffee shops, cafés, theater, etc.”

In addition to creating a greater art presence in the area, Ray at Night is a key selling point for other business owners to choose North Park as the community in which they want to open up shop. The Rubber Rose, which opened July 25 last year, is one of the newest residents of Ray Street. A

sexuality boutique of sorts, owners Carly Delso-Saavedra and Lea Caughlan thought the area would be the perfect place for their store.

“North Park always seemed to be a good fit for us,” Delso-Saavedra said. “It’s San Diego’s last really close-knit community, it’s very ‘neighborhood-y,’ it has a strong artist community and many of its residents have lived there for a really long time. They’ve been there through all [North Park’s] changes. The people who live here are a really good cross-section, where people seem to be a little more open-minded with regard to sex, gender issues and sexuality as a whole. Our store wasn’t built for any one specific community or cross section; we really wanted to have something for everyone: gay, straight, female, male, young, old, whatever. All things considered, in terms of deciding on where we were going to open The Rubber Rose, North Park was the most logical choice.”

Caughlan added that Ray at Night has been a big help in drawing business to their store. “It’s pretty amazing,” she said. “Once a month, we have 500 to 700 people showing up on our doorstep. It’s exciting, but not just because of the retail exposure. Half of our space is community space, a place where musicians and visionaries regularly come to perform. It’s a gallery for artists to show their work. Our hopes for the gallery was to draw the work of people who don’t usually make it into other galleries.... We wanted to provide an adequate space for many of these highly talented, amazing artists who aren’t able to get shows elsewhere.”

In terms of North Park’s future, there are still a lot of things in the works, and many more positive changes are expected.

“North Park Main Street’s new executive director, Elizabeth Studebaker, will be taking office at the end of January, and she has a lot of things she’d like to see accomplished,” Thomas said. “There’s the advocacy of more clean and safe streets. Downtown San Diego has a property-based improvement district which provides funds for cleaner streets, security – the types of things that really make a neighborhood safer and more walkable. We’re trying to secure that same type of funding for North Park. This funding will also help us repair infrastructure and promote the arts, culture and other entertainment.

“At the same time, we’re making a point to really fight the gentrification of the neighborhood,” he added. “During an economic downturn, lots of artists will move into an area, yet as that area gains exposure and becomes more trendy, other businesses move in and take control of the properties. We’re fortunate enough to have a lot of property owners who are sympathetic to the arts and keeping them there. The artists are a huge part of our community and we want to do everything we can to keep them here.”

Yet current revitalization projects span beyond the cultivation and preservation of the arts community. The La Boheme Condominiums touts itself as the “largest development to be built in North Park in generations.” This complex will include more than 200 residential units and 15,000 square feet of retail space, according to North Park Main Street. At 32nd Street and University Avenue, a two-story Walgreens Pharmacy is being built on the land that was once home to a 99-cent store, which burned down several years ago. The North Park Library has received funding that will allow for the building of a new 25,000-square-foot facility.

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North Park Main Street is also petitioning the city of San Diego to reinstate a historic streetcar transportation system that would operate along Park Boulevard and University as a form of “transit-oriented development.” This is something, they propose, that would increase property values, area image and business development.

“The streetcar line would compliment the existing bus system in that it would attract passengers who don’t really like buses,” North Park Main Street argues. “It’s also something which will serve as a tourist attraction, much as the streetcar systems in New Orleans and San Francisco do ... [B]usinesses recognize the need to work with the residential community in order to have a sustainable downtown area.”

North Park has seen its fair share of ups and downs, spanning from one end of the spectrum to the other, and doing so in the most extreme of ways – there are few places in the country that have been able to bounce back from economic downturn and other highly unfortunate sets of circumstances with such marked success. If city officials continue to work with local government, North Park will soon be all that is used to be, if not more.