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*Downtown: Why There's No
There, There
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The History of Santa Clara's Downtown



Groundbreaking on the Barcells office complex in the Franklin Mall during the mid-1960s. (left to right) Frank Barcells, unknown, Dan Taxera, Peter Talia, Miss Santa Clara of that year, and the president of the Chamber of Commerce.

Photo courtesy Frank Barcells.

By Carolyn Schuk

With the success of historic areas like Campbell's downtown strip and the "faux" downtown of Santana Row, many regret that Santa Clara has no similar draw.

But before we race to fix today's perceived problem, history offers a cautionary tale for contemporary engineers of public space.

It's the old story of good intentions gone awry. Santa Clara's downtown fell victim to something intended to save it: the post-war urban renewal movement.

Urban Renewal: Post War Sign of the Times

The modern urban renewal movement began in 19th century Paris. Slum areas and twisting narrow medieval streets were demolished and replaced with new neighborhoods, plazas, traffic circles, and broad, tree-lined boulevards that are still a Paris hallmark.

Fast forward to the U.S. in the 1930s.

Influenced by Robert Moses, who drove development of highways, parks and low-income housing in New York City, the federal government passed the 1937 Housing Act, designed to develop housing in low-income areas.

The law provided money to municipal governments to build new housing but required that slum housing be demolished prior to new construction.

After WWII, wholesale demolition picked up steam with the 1949 Housing Act, which provided generous grants for slum clearance. Entire neighborhoods were torn down in anticipation of new, tax-generating developments.

It was against this backdrop, and the "newer is better" postwar mindset, that the idea of redeveloping Santa Clara's downtown took root.

A "Bright New Future"

Redevelopment was first proposed in 1958 by then City Manager Lloyd Brady, according to former Mayor and Council Member Frank Barcells. "He was the instigator," Barcells recalls.

The proposal was headlined as "Franklin Facelifting Plan Filed" in the Jan. 2, 1958 Santa Clara Journal. A perfect example of the thinking of the period, the article reflected no doubts about the soundness of the idea.

"Action to obtain federal assistance in a plan to remedy blight conditions of the Franklin street business section...was taken last week when City Manager Lloyd Brady and City Planner William Loretta filed the city's application for government funds under the Urban Housing Act of 1954," the Journal reported. "The proposal is to rehabilitate a section of the blighted area and reverse its 'creeping' effect from spreading to other areas."

Planners anticipated \$1.3 million in federal matching funds for demolition and reconstruction of what one contemporary promotional piece described as "the threshold of a bright new future."

Redevelopment director Karl Pearman, in a 1960 interview with the San Jose Evening News, described the future as "old Mission atmosphere with a modern touch...flowered walkways about modern arcade-style shops."

"A farmer's market with gay umbrella-covered tables...perhaps even muted music coming through dozens of hidden microphones...public benches along the streets...upholstered with waterproof plastic for colorful d'Écor."

The consulting firm Wilsey & Ham went further, predicting that the area "will be rebuilt someday to be the place of history, pageantry,

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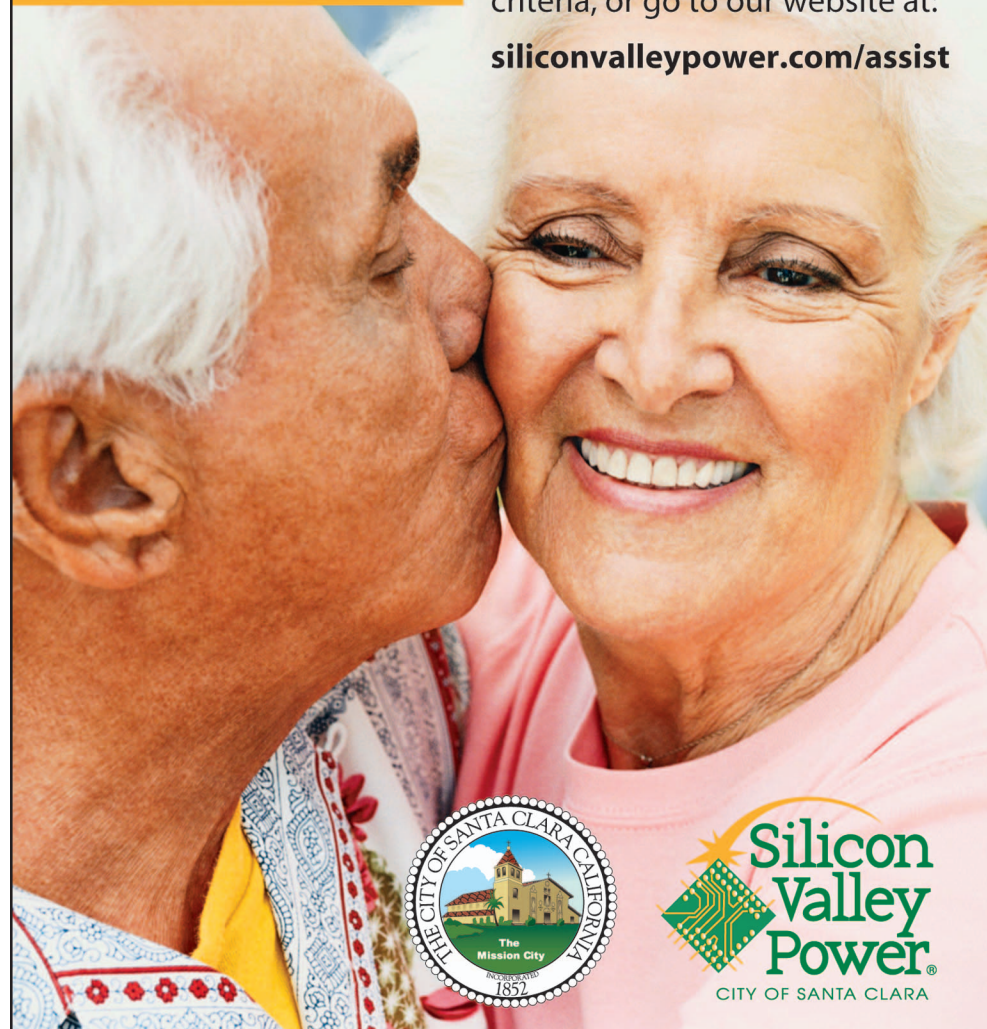
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Good Intentions Gone Awry

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art galleries, libraries, coffee houses, museums and concert halls."

The original plan encompassed 64 blocks from the Carmelite Monastery on Lincoln St. to the train tracks behind SCU, and from Bellomy Ave. to El Camino. The plan included a pedestrian shopping mall as well as high-density housing.

When the federal government objected to the plan being too ambitious, it was scaled back into three phases.

A 6-1 Vote for the Wrecking Ball

Despite fierce public debate, on Sept. 29, 1960 the City Council voted 6-1 to approve the downtown Urban Renewal Plan "after a stormy session that came close to bedlam," Dick Cox wrote in Sept. 30, 1960 Mercury News report.

"The motion for approval was made by Councilman James Viso," Cox wrote. "He stated... 'I know from the bottom of my heart that Urban Renewal is the salvation of this community.'" Viso was later to change his mind.

Climaxing the Sept. 29th meeting was the near-arrest of Bill Wilson Jr., of Wilson's Bakery on

Franklin St., an outspoken redevelopment opponent.

Notified that his allotted three minutes was up, Wilson replied, "I'll speak three minutes for someone who doesn't want to talk," Cox reported. "When two police detectives took him by the arm he started to take hold of the microphone, then shrugged and stepped aside." Half the audience walked out with Wilson.

In the vote, Austen Warburton was the sole dissenter. Favoring the plan were Mayor Al Levin, and Council Members Jim Viso, Robert Simons, Maurice Dullea, Joseph Rebeiro, and Matt Talia.

And in February 1965, fixtures of Santa Clara like the Franck Building (ca. 1900) and Pereira's Men's Store Building (ca. 1920) and Wade's Mission Pharmacy fell victim to the wrecking ball. Later that year William Wilson Sr. and Austen Warburton were the first purchasers of parcels in what was to become the Franklin Mall.

Original business owners, with the exception of Wilson's Bakery, didn't come back.

Although owners received market prices for their property, the

size of the new parcels put a return to downtown economically out of reach for most, according to Frank Barcells, who was among the purchasers of the phase one development. "I wanted to see the city subdivide each piece into small parcels. Those people couldn't afford to buy all that land. They just went out of business or they left."

Failed Expectations

By the end of the 60s, the tide turned against urban renewal. In 1969, led by Frank Barcells and Larry Fargher, Council voted 4-3 to shut down the redevelopment agency. Council Member William Kiely commented at the time that it represented a \$5 million vote for taxpayers.

But the city couldn't shut the door on problems spawned by the project.

Phase two plans stalled as financially-troubled Realtech, contracted in 1970 to develop the property over five years, failed to perform and fell behind on taxes and rent.

After the City Council fired Realtech and re-gained title to the land in 1977, no developers were interested.

"No one was prepared to do the work," former Planning Director Geoff Goodfellow said in a Jan. 9, 1987 Santa Clara American story. "No developer was willing to put the funds together." The area was zoned commercial and population didn't justify an exclusively commercial center. The only way to get developers interested was to rezone for residential building.

Plans circulated for high-rise luxury condos and office buildings, supermarkets and shopping centers. All of them came to nothing and dust continued to blow over the empty 7.6-acre lot, now a public eyesore.

In 1978, former Council Member Jim Viso offered about \$600,000 for a six-acre parcel with a plan that included office buildings,

commercial space and racquetball courts. At the time Viso described his investment as an attempt to make amends for a bad decision back in the 1950s.

"I feel I have a responsibility for this project," Viso said in a July 18, 1978 Santa Clara Sun story. "I don't consider myself just another developer. I grew up in Santa Clara and feel a deep commitment to it."

Viso was unable to interest any businesses in the development. In the early 1980s, Prometheus Development came forward with a proposal to build condominiums on the land. Initially rejected, the Council later voted 3-1 in 1985 to approve the developer's plan.

Viso sold the land to Prometheus in 1985 at a profit and some felt that he took unfair advantage of his position. "Why didn't somebody else buy it if it was such a great deal," Viso replied in a Jan. 9, 1987 Santa Clara American story. "It was a gamble."

Area homeowners opposed the development. They feared the neighborhood would suffer if a large number of renters moved in, Old Quad Homeowners Association vice president Shirley Odou, said at the time.

In 1987 Prometheus began construction of 193 condo units, after a quarter century of politicking.

As the Council considers new downtown plans, there's a thread of continuity with the past. Frank Barcells, a Council Member during the first redevelopment project, is now a member of the City Planning Commission. And he intends to look closely at new proposals.

"We should maintain what's there now and keep the historical homes," he says, adding, "I'd like to see a little more commercial, especially on Franklin St."

Mary Hanel of the Santa Clara City Library contributed to this story.

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Was Downtown Really "blighted"?

Blight, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder.

One contemporary observer was former City Manager Don Von Raesfeld, then director of Public Works and Utilities. Many downtown buildings were in bad shape, he told Ronald Campbell in a 1974 interview.

"When urban renewal was started...the buildings in the downtown area for the most part were badly deteriorated, lacking in public parking facilities. They were low expense type of business operations and the city would eventually have been confronted with forcing the owners to have them torn down and rebuilt.

"Some of those people would have been incapable of doing that," Raesfeld continued, "and if the city hadn't done that, the downtown would have continued to deteriorate to where it would have been nothing. Lots of people would have lost their life-long savings, or been unable to retire out of them."

Frank Barcells, a developer and owner of a real estate business, disagrees with Von Raesfeld's assessment.

"All the building owners had to do was clean up the buildings and bring them up to code," he says. "I thought it would be feasible for them to bring their own buildings up to code. That's what they did in Los Gatos and Campbell, and they're still there. That's what Santa Clara should have done."

Even before the first building fell, a National Real Estate Board group suggested "re-study" because the project was not geographically suited for a major regional business center. "Blight is at a minimum," said Edward Hustace in a Feb. 26, 1964 Santa Clara Journal story. "Bootstrap operations of self rehabilitations [could] cure most."

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