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From the Los Angeles Times

City West Catches Up With the Vision

The long-dormant area across the 110 Freeway from downtown L.A. is gaining appeal with studios, builders and urban professionals.

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Drive past the Los Angeles Center Studios' black stone gates, walk through the spare but modern lobby, with its George Nelson lanterns and low-slung couches, and you'll enter a complex that is a surprising oasis of urban hipness.

In the shadow of downtown Los Angeles' skyscrapers, the studios were once the home of Unocal's corporate headquarters, until the company left during the district's post-riots dark period in the mid-1990s.

These days, the 20-acre campus has been reinvented as a center for all things cinematic. It boasts six sound stages (including one with an indoor pool), sleek production offices, a commissary and even a 400-seat theater. On a recent day, the CBS drama "Numb3rs" and the Eddie Murphy movie "Dreamgirls" were filming there.

How the studios went from an abandoned corporate headquarters to a flourishing center of industry is a dramatic example of a transformation unfolding on the west side of Harbor Freeway.

The wave of gentrification that started in the rest of downtown in the late 1990s has finally reached the area known as City West.

While it is half a mile and across a freeway from the historic lofts and trendy restaurants and galleries that have been the focus of downtown's revitalization, developers have seen City West as fertile ground for new projects and conversions of former office buildings.

In a way, the booming area's changing fortune fulfills the city's decades-old vision for the district along Beaudry Avenue.

City planners envisioned skyscrapers lining the Harbor Freeway, and in the late 1980s planned to build more than 2 million square feet of commercial space in City West. Conceptual drawings of downtown at the time show the freeway as a narrow canyon with towers rising from both sides.

While such large-scale development occurred east of the freeway in the 1970s and '80s, the west side languished. Not a single square foot of office space was built in City West in more than a decade. One of the few towers west of the freeway, 1100 Wilshire, sat vacant for more than a decade.

Unocal's downtown pullout — along with a series of problems that left the Belmont Learning Complex an unfinished shell — haunted the area. By the 1990s, the area had become a den of drug dealers and a

patchwork of parking lots.

These days the area is alive with the nearly constant hum of construction-related machinery. More than half a dozen residential developments are sprouting up around the Los Angeles Center Studios. They are joining the 632-unit Italianate Medici luxury complex that is already open.

Razor-wired parking lots are next to shiny new condominium units. Banners advertising loft units for rent and sale boast expansive views of the city.

Two new schools — including the former Belmont Learning Complex, now renamed Vista Hermosa — are under construction and could open as early as fall 2008.

At the south end, 1100 Wilshire Boulevard, a 37-story geometric building that never quite succeeded as an office building, is being reinvented as 230 high-end, open and airy lofts.

The renewal in City West is also generating some of the same criticism that has come with the larger downtown revitalization: That it is pushing out poor and needy people.

One casualty may be the state's Parole Outpatient Clinic, which has been operating downtown for more than 50 years. Employees at the full-service psychiatric facility that treats men and women on parole have been told that the clinic will soon close.

The department's lease on the building at St. Paul Avenue and 6th Street runs out July 30, said Elaine Jennings, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, which runs the facility. The department has decided not to try to negotiate a new lease, she said.

According to several sources, rising rents in the area and the risk of having mentally ill patients in the midst of a gentrifying downtown were at least partially to blame.

Jennings said that the decision to close the clinic and move patient services to other, decentralized locations, "was made for reasons of economics and feasibility." She said that the clinic's employees would be moved to other parole offices, and the patients would be referred to other sites for treatment.

But in a letter sent to several dozen elected and other government officials, a group called the Committee to Continue a Centralized Parole Outpatient Clinic questioned that analysis. They said that while patients currently treated at the clinic would be sent to outlying facilities, they would lack the cohesive care of the social workers, psychiatrists and psychologists who currently work together in the facility.

City West is still finding its way as a neighborhood.

New residents have the same complaints that have dogged the rest of the downtown area — that it lacks the restaurants, shops and other amenities to support a burgeoning residential population.

"We are dealing with the same issues that central downtown is dealing with: the fact that the infrastructure to supply people who live down here hasn't caught up with the development," said Stephen Shapleigh, on-site manager for the Flats, a former Holiday Inn that has been converted into 205 loft units that lease for \$1,200 a month.

Still, those who have chosen to call City West home cite an undercurrent of energy — in part because of the people who are choosing to live in the area — as compelling argument for living there.

The Flats has attracted "a really nice demographic: people who are high energy and have a lot going on in their lives ... some in law school or graduate school, corporate people who like to be downtown, up to attorneys, bankers," Shapleigh said.

Dan Parker said he bought a unit in 1100 Wilshire because the building's views of the rest of downtown appealed to him. He saw its location, across the freeway from downtown, as a plus. He said he plans to take the Red Line subway to work at Universal Studios' music division in the San Fernando Valley.

"And you avoid a lot of traffic, like after a Lakers game, with cars out on the street. You won't face that problem," he said.

Los Angeles Center Studios advertises itself as "unincorporate," "independent" — an antidote for people tired of suits and rigidity.

Its 14-story office tower — designed to jut out toward the freeway like the bow of a giant oil tanker — won design awards when it was built in 1958. But by the time Unocal left, it had become a dull, creaky building in desperate need of a total makeover.

A Pittsburgh-based developer had plans to raze it and build an office and hotel complex on the site but was unable to secure a loan. Later, the building was mentioned as the possible site for a basketball and hockey arena. But that, too, failed.

Eventually, two Hollywood location scouts started luring people to the site.

Peering over the entire facility, the office tower has found its glory again. It hosts a smattering of entertainment-related companies.

The former board room regularly stands in for such sites as FBI headquarters and was the star of a shoot-em-up scene in the recent film "Mr. And Mrs. Smith."

At the elevator bay on each floor, flat screen TVs play endless loops promoting the building, the studios and the many projects filmed there.

Sam Nicassio, president of the studios, said he believes their presence in downtown has contributed to City West's reemergence.

"I think our genuine involvement in the 20 acres here has helped spur the growth of the surrounding area," he said. "And I think the residential has helped us in our leasing efforts."

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