

San Pedro's shifting canvas; Artists wonder if they'll still be welcome as their sanctuary becomes increasingly gentrified.  
[HOME EDITION]

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Artist, art instructor and art gallery director, Ron Linden is talking about a sense of place. He is talking about the curious community of San Pedro at the far reach of Los Angeles and its appeal to the sensibilities of artists who have clustered there over the years.

What he doesn't have to talk about is what you can see for yourself: This is an off-center kind of community at land's end, bohemian, ethnic, inexpensive, historic and just a little shabby -- the mightiest industrial landscape in Los Angeles and, at the same time, among the most scenic.

In other words, it's an inspired place for artists.

Linden takes his time as he talks. On this weekday, there isn't a single customer in the atrium gallery. It's so quiet here that you cannot miss the distant sound of hammers.

The rat-a-tat echoing along 6th and 7th streets is the sound of change for central San Pedro, a low-rise pedestrian-scale business district shot through with random approaches to architecture -- some interesting, some boarded up, much of it beset with a tired feel of yesterday. The hammering tells of the coming of condos and perhaps the whole familiar package of redevelopment that has transformed so much of Southern California. For San Pedro, this is the sound of hope and of uncertainty.

"I don't know what's going to happen," Linden said with a frown. In five years, "the potential is huge" for the Warschaw Gallery, where he is director, as well as for other galleries that have struggled to take hold there.

But development tends to follow patterns too. Artists reliably foreshadow gentrification, but they don't often survive it.

"I just don't want to see it swallowed up in the suffocating sameness of development," Linden continued. "It's stifling."

He knows. A painter trained at the Art Institute of Chicago, Linden arrived in Southern California in 1972. He settled with other artists in Old Pasadena, then seedy and affordable. Then came redevelopment, which priced out artists. Linden moved into a loft in downtown Los Angeles in the 1980s. Again he lost his space as speculators began driving up property values in the city center. In 1991, he fled to San Pedro, leading a contemporary wave of artistic homesteaders.

Today, San Pedro's artists and civic leaders want to alter the outcome of this familiar cycle for the sake of the community's artsy, offbeat character. If only they can agree on how.

'I love this area!'

It's PEA-dro, not PAY-dro. The waterfront looks onto the busiest container port in the U.S., and that everyday description entirely fails to convey the colossal industrial scale and bustle of the harbor. In the other direction from downtown San Pedro, the Palos Verdes hills rise, and toward the ocean the Dover-like sea cliffs of Point Fermin Park.

Rich with the heritage of fishing, commerce and Euro-ethnic settlement, San Pedro was annexed by Los Angeles 97 years ago to ensure that the inland city 20 miles away also had control of a port. But for today's purposes, the relevant history of San Pedro is right now, as the future is being charted.

"In 20 years of redevelopment, I haven't encountered anything with such widespread support in a community," said Walter Beaumont, assistant project manager for the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles.

He is speaking about the consensus among politicians, business owners and artists to shape San Pedro's redevelopment around arts, culture and entertainment.

He recently took 28 redevelopment agency employees from other communities on a bus tour of San Pedro. "I ended up with 28 people who either wanted to work in this office or buy property or both," he said. "I love this area! In three years, it's going to be so hot and happening."

Los Angeles Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who represents San Pedro and has lived there for 15 years, counts 1,300 housing units under construction or approved, a total of \$140 million of investment. The first of these units, in the five-story Center Street Lofts between 6th and 7th streets, is to open in the coming weeks.

"We are on the cusp of a renaissance in our downtown San Pedro," Hahn enthused. She is among those championing a redevelopment strategy that preserves the waterfront character and artistic ambitions of the community.

"People don't want this to become Long Beach or San Diego," she said. "We've got to keep what is unique and interesting about San

Pedro."

For Andrew Silber, proprietor of the Whale & Ale pub and a civic activist, the boom is 11 years overdue. "In 1995," he recalled, "San Pedro was poised to explode. It was going to equal or eclipse Redondo Beach or Seal Beach. San Pedro was the last vestige of waterfront property in the region. Disappointingly, it didn't happen."

With the hammers thwacking away just down the block, Silber has his fingers crossed this time. "Hopefully, the waiting is about to pay off. But don't forget: I'm an optimist."

Seeking consensus

The problem is as plain as the opportunity. The citizens of downtown San Pedro want a new and vibrant arts district to anchor the future. "The only issue," Beaumont said, is "when I ask people, they don't know what it is."

Is an arts district really a place for art and artists, or is art just a come-on for the familiar arrival of chain restaurants and nightclubs?

His agency and other civic groups have scheduled community meetings and focus groups in the weeks and months ahead to try to arrive at a consensus of what an arts, culture and entertainment district would actually look like in San Pedro. That, he said, will determine the zoning restrictions and the laws that will attempt to shape development.

A more haphazard approach has already let the community down once. A group of downtown artists and business leaders gathered at the Whale & Ale pub and pioneered a First Thursday art walk in November 1997. They wanted to expose people to art galleries that were sprinkled through downtown.

For a while, organizers were thrilled. Small galleries and artists studios prospered. Until about 2004, the arts were a growth business; more artists were coming to town and more galleries were filling in vacant storefronts.

What happened to the art walk will get you an argument almost anywhere downtown these days. Plainly, though, it is no longer what it started out to be. It has become a car show, a street festival, another fair for trinket sellers. The crowd changed accordingly: Art-minded visitors were displaced by those looking to whoop it up. Galleries began to close.

'A sense of freedom'

For some artists, the direction of downtown redevelopment is not as consequential as the fact that San Pedro is arts-friendly, artistically inspiring and home to a community of other artists. Fran Siegel and Marie Thibeault, for instance, maintain homes and studios in the community.

They teach art nearby, and you'll hear their names mentioned

whenever art is discussed there. But you have to travel elsewhere to see them showing. And you won't find their studios without an invitation.

Siegel came west from Lower Manhattan in the aftermath of 9/11. An installation artist, she evokes light and explores perception, drawing from the "conflicts" between the mighty industrialism of the port and the restless nature of the eroded oceanfront cliffs.

Her live-in studio on a main thoroughfare is unmarked, a former surf shop that became an outreach church and then a meeting club for alcoholics before being boarded up.

"There are a lot of serious artists here seeking anonymity and privacy," Siegel observed. For her, it is nearly perfect geography, within reach of Los Angeles International and Long Beach airports in a community known to be friendly to the artistically minded.

"I don't think of it as a backwater. I don't think of it as a cute little town. In a bigger way, I think of myself as being in Los Angeles," Siegel said.

Thibeault has been a contemporary painter in San Pedro for 17 years. Her backyard studio in a residential neighborhood is also unmarked, although it is on the circuit of those who are in the know in the community. Unlike Siegel's, Thibeault's San Pedro is not really part of Los Angeles but is a hide-out from it. She was attracted by the "visual dynamics: the harbor, hills, bridges, the weather and the fog."

"There is a sense of freedom here. Geography affects the mentality of a place."

For years, her expressionistic paintings of place and landscape portrayed this nearby world. But the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina reshaped her thinking just as surely as 9/11 did Siegel's. Her suspenseful paintings now evoke a city she has never been to, New Orleans.

When she brings her mind back home, the changes are unavoidable. Ten years ago, she would advise beginning artists to set up their first studios in San Pedro. But with redevelopment prospects driving up rents, she said, "they're going to Wilmington."

Large ambitions

San Pedro isn't hiding everything. At the far edge of the community, where the continent drops away, a hilltop park has been colonized for art and artists who enjoy an ethereal, almost floating panorama of the Pacific and the harbor below.

Once a military base and home to the largest defense guns ever deployed by the United States, Ft. MacArthur was closed in 1977, and the high ground was transformed into a tranquil Los Angeles city cultural park.

Today among the trees and tendrils of fog, 45 artists rent studios in whitewashed wartime buildings at sub-market rates. The sponsoring

agency, Angels Gate Cultural Center, is a nonprofit that leases the top of the park from the city. The center also provides the largest gallery exhibit space in San Pedro and is a center of community arts education.

Executive Director Nathan Birnbaum has bigger ambitions still for Angels Gate: to put San Pedro on the arts map as an events destination.

The center began an Art on the Waterfront festival at the port last spring, with a second one scheduled for May. Angels Gate is also in negotiations with the port and redevelopment officials for an even larger and higher-profile annual international arts festival.

"Right now, L.A. is perceived to be at the center of the arts scene," said Marshall Astor, Angels Gate's visual arts director, an artist and former local gallery owner.

"We're viewed as ascendant. To some extent, San Pedro has come along with it.

"It's a place where art is made and where artists live," he continued.

"Does San Pedro want to have an arts scene in five years or 10 years? It wouldn't surprise me if it happened. But there is no guarantee.

"It takes a lot of work and muscle."

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

San Pedro profile

Population: 76,026

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Racial/ethnic groups

Whites: 45%

Latinos: 41%

Blacks: 6%

Asians: 5%

Others: 4%

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Family structure

Family without children: 45%

Married couple with children: 33%

Single female with children: 16%

Single male with children: 5%

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Housing stock

Renter occupied: 53%

Owner occupied: 41%

Vacant: 6%

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Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% because of rounding.

Source: Los Angeles City Planning Department

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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