



## Bittersweet Revitalization: Oakland's Reincarnation

Tuesday 28 December 2010

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<http://www.truth-out.org/bittersweet-revitalization-oaklands-reincarnation66198>

In spite of an ongoing, grim economic downturn felt nationally, the city of Oakland continues to enjoy a beatification, resurrection and transformation which has turned a rather neglected, desolate place into a spectacularly cleaved jewel in the Pacific Northwest.

Architecture and public art are definitely playing a significant role in the emerging identity of Oakland. Take, for instance, a modernist-revival building and plaza a stone's throw from Lake Merritt and just a few blocks from Oakland's downtown Whole Foods and Trader Joe's. The sublimely designed Cathedral Christ of the Light, built by world-renowned firm SOM Architects, is but one of many fine examples in the city's newly refined, designer-built architectural environment. There's also a number of noteworthy restoration projects that have taken place, including the preservation of two historic theatres, the Fox and the Paramount, both of which were erected during the heyday of grand Hollywood musical productions.



*A fully restored Paramount theater welcomes guest for an evening out on Broadway Street. (Photo: Max Eternity)*

"An opulent and exotic mix of terra cotta tiles, dizzyingly detailed paintings and golden deities, reminiscent of a Brahmin Temple" is how the Fox is described on its website, though it must be stated that the Paramount is equally as captivating. Both theatres have their original, spectacularly lit marquees, and both have all the expected Art Deco design accoutrements, paying homage to one of the most pronounced commercial architectural styles during that era - 1928 for the Fox and 1931 for the Paramount.

Beautiful lofts, condominiums and luxury apartment buildings are in no shortage, either. **The Uptown**, located a couple of blocks away from the Paramount, is one of the many newly developed properties, being especially of note as it is Oakland's first LEED certified residential building. **The Pacific Cannery Lofts** on Frontage Street in West Oakland is another touted residential project.

That property is "a community of 163 live-work lofts, flats, & townhomes," with easy access to Emeryville, a small, vibrant city just North of Oakland that has also seen a number of big renewal projects in recent years.

Additionally, for the past decade, Oaklanders have looked forward to the Oakland Art & Soul festival. Once a year, the showcases the city's homegrown musical talent, but on a daily basis, good eats, art and entertainment are always close at hand. VO's, located at 59 Grand Avenue, is a hip Vietnamese restaurant with a robust clientele. Not far away from VO's is Luka's, a restaurant and bar with 16 beers on tap and a nice listing of specialty drinks, plus a menu inspired by the brasseries of France and Belgium. The restaurant also features rotating art exhibitions.

Opportunities for an enjoyable urban experience are virtually everywhere, and the [Meet Downtown Oakland](#) website - providing an abundant listing of restaurants and other venues, all within a one-mile radius of Oakland's beautifully preserved City Hall - is a smart place to start gathering information about some of the varied options.

All this change and progress is a cumulative effect to be taken in and savored. It also demonstrates that by any measure, whether in terms of residential options, public transportation choices or venues for the arts and entertainment, Oakland is a city on the rise, rightfully tooting its own horn of inner city success.



*A fabulously designed, arts and crafts styled, custom-built home stands foreclosed on West Grand Avenue. (Photo: Max Eternity)*

This is due in large part, some say, to Jerry Brown - a former and current governor-elect of California, and a recent mayor of Oakland - who aggressively pursued civic revitalization efforts, the cornerstone of a renewal theme that pivoted on Brown's sometimes controversial and much-debated **10K Project**, a plan to attract 10,000 new residents to Oakland's downtown. With the culling and refinement of elegant, civic gems comes deep mining that can translate into an unequal distribution of wealth, an unfair exploitation of resources and a neglect of the downtrodden in favor of coddling the well-heeled, who - for one reason or another - tend to be white.

Since electing Brown and, thereafter, Ron Dellum, as mayors of Oakland, obvious effects of urban revitalization - and its lesser discussed Siamese twin, gentrification - have placed an indelible stamp on the area. In addition to the physical aspect of recent transformations, there are also cultural, educational and criminal justice dynamics in play. A lot of change takes place behind the scenes, long before end-users see the net effect. Complexities abound: Oakland's reincarnation is not simply a run-of-the-mill black and white issue. Yet in times of prosperity and growth, must inner-city urban renewal equal displacement of the poor, disenfranchised and/or black?

"We had a lot of pressure during the housing boom to transform our industrial land to housing. I didn't think that was a good idea," says **Nancy Nadel**, City Council member for District 3, which serves West Oakland, part of the Oakland Port, Lake Merritt and Downtown. "West Oakland had been a place where the city put everything they didn't want to put anywhere else."

She adds, "We had toxic industry dispersed with low income housing - a bad mix." However, Nadel says, after spending many years "trying to separate those out," West Oakland now has "a separate industrial area with gradation," which is "closer to the port." And that, she says, "was a big thing to get established."

Once upon a time - a decade ago - many inhabitants across the bay in San Francisco would hardly set foot in Oakland, **perhaps because of the city's notoriety for crime**. And though, statistically, safety in Oakland is improving, what still persists are complaints of racial profiling and police brutality - think **Oscar Grant**. There are also serious concerns for those increasingly dispossessed - many of whom have lived in Oakland for 20-plus years, or for their entire lives.

Change has arrived, and in recent years Oakland has seen a dramatic rise in its white demographics – as newcomers arrive from San Francisco and elsewhere – even as its once-prosperous black population remains in decline. Consequently, Oakland's current reality is business as usual for those, such as Whole Foods, Trader Joe's and Starbucks, who cater to the middle and upper classes. These retail outlets have popped up all over, shining brightly around Lake Merritt, Rockridge and other choice spots, while a visibly black populace gets sometimes pushed aside - left behind.

*The modernist-revival SOM architects built, Cathedral Christ of the Light, is a major focal point of Oakland's Downtown modernization and beautification. (Photo: Max Eternity)*

"I've lived in Oakland since October 1, 1986," says resident Mark Mathews - a professional advocate for health and wellness who works for The Black Coalition on AIDS (**BCA**) in San Francisco, a nonprofit primarily serving the African-American community and seeking to reduce disparities.

"I visited on a vacation in the spring of 1986 and fell in love with it," says Mathews. "I decided then that I would return and make it my place of residence."

However, "Oakland has changed significantly since I moved here," says Mathews, who is African-American and came to Oakland from the East Coast. "There were a lot more small businesses. Broadway had many small businesses, and there [were] major department stores."

"Oakland was really thriving, diverse, with lots of energy," Mathews remembers. "And the thing that I loved was that there was a significant African American population in Oakland as well as San Francisco." Now, 24 years later, he says, since "we had the real estate bubble burst, economic downturns, people losing their homes, jobs leaving, it's a very different place. Folks are struggling with day to day living, the expenses that go along with that." Mathews also says that for him the mood of Oakland has changed, too. "I don't feel the same enthusiasm that the city had when I first moved here."

Mathews notes that while he is supportive of progress, he is still very much "concerned that a lot of African-Americans might not be included in where the city is going," because, he says, the new "face of downtown Oakland is young, white, educated." And though he feels "there's nothing wrong with that," his most troubling concern is that "as Oakland moves forward, it's not going to be a place where African-Americans, who have historically been in this community, will be able to stay."

Mathews is now considering moving to Atlanta, a city that has been dubbed "the Black Mecca." With a sigh of disappointment, he reflects, "It's not the same city that it was when I first moved here."

**Donna Wood**, a shabby-chic white urbanite who's relatively new to Oakland, shares her view. "I moved to Oakland two years ago from San Francisco, because a very talented group of people decided to start a communal house [in Oakland], working together for the arts." "I knew of how hard Oakland used to be," Wood adds, "but after seeing and coming here more," she says she decided to move. "I was coming and visiting, but I haven't been able to watch the change," she says. "I got here after the change started."

Wood is an underemployed clown who sometimes rides a unicycle and says that in Oakland, "everybody is welcome to talk to a unicyclist" even though "there is still trouble." She recalls that one of her roommates had a backpack stolen. "It can be dangerous," she admits. "There have been about four incidents of gunshots in the area of my house."

Wood says that, while she likes her housing arrangement in Oakland, "on the opposite spectrum, there's some people you don't want to get too close to on the street, because there are crack deals." When asked what she thought was at the root of these crimes, Wood said, "It underlies like how you're brought up, what kind of situation you're in – parents' interaction. It goes back to the roots of how kids are being taught. I don't understand that kind of thinking." Nevertheless, "I've enjoyed living here and I'm not leaving." Wood says she wants to help "to try to straighten up the neighborhood."

"Oakland," she says, "hasn't scared me off."

**Tia Ballantine**, another white resident who's friends with Wood and is also Mathews's next-door neighbor, has a different view of the crime element. "It's the built-in economic inequity that goes from generation to generation to generation." Expanding on this point, she says emphatically, "It's obvious - there's such inequity!"

According to Ballantine, "we are not supposed to talk about racism," when it comes to connecting the dots between inner-city crime, education and gentrification. "This is something that has gone on generation after generation, and when people see educated white people move into their neighborhood, they feel like they are losing that neighborhood," she says.

Ballantine is a retired college professor, artist and poet. Earlier on the day she was interviewed for this article, her house was broken into, robbed of a few inexpensive items, including food and vandalized by individuals who have since purportedly been identified as two young, black teens.

"I'm not some naive white person from the suburb coming into West Oakland," says Ballantine. "That's not me."

"I brought my kids up in some of the roughest neighborhoods in New York, but I believe in having a neighborhood that's a mixed neighborhood. We do not need to continue racism by creating black ghettos. We need people to be able to live all over." And while some newcomers are being accused of real estate speculation, Ballantine says, "I didn't come here to buy this house to turn it over and make money off of it. This house was falling down, so I turned this property from a property that would have been a liability to a house that can be lived in."

Ballantine seems to have struck a balance, retaining resilience and patience in spite of the difficulties urban decay and revitalization can sometimes present. Other cities are wrestling with those difficulties as well.

"Downtown revitalization and beautification projects are going on in just about every major international city," says Brooklyn, New York-based urban planner and transportation engineer **Naomi Doerner**, who observes that the projects "seemingly competing with one another." In her years of experience working for various government agencies and in the private sector, Doerner identifies a reoccurring theme from city to city seeking to remake itself. "Large urban public space projects are being undertaken to beautify, but also to provide landmark-like features that essentially become part of a city's 'brand.'"

As an example, Doerner notes a recent revitalization project in New York City. "In June of 2009, the first section of the High Line Park on Manhattan's west side was opened to the public. Originally built in the 1930s as an elevated track to lift dangerous freight trains off of Manhattan's streets, it has been transformed into a park, which, when it is completed, will be one-and-a-half miles long." Doerner says the park, known as the High Line, is "quite a sight," "gorgeously landscaped," "a pleasure to stroll along," "one of the 'must sees' for any tourist or visitor." However, in tandem with the new park, Doerner says, "it should certainly be noted that NYC has a number of neighborhoods that are severely lacking with regards to open space and are underserved by public parks."

Doerner certainly has an appreciation for the development of the space, but she, like Mathews, is concerned about who is being served and not served in urban renewal projects. "The question becomes, as beautiful as the High Line is, was it needed, especially considering that Central Park is less than a half mile away? And does its existence, and thus the utilization of any public resources, make sense, when they could be allocated towards supporting true public parks, which are in much greater need, particularly where residents would reap benefits far beyond aesthetics?"

"While public outreach is required for every planning proposal, it is all too often treated as just a component of a project, rather than the impetus for it," she adds.

So again, who is being served and how does that manifest are questions that seem to underlie the entire urban renewal discussion. And in many instances, as in the view of Commissioner Nadel, a key goal should be having a positive impact on youth in the area who will in time inherit leadership roles.

"Another thing [needed] is the transformation of the juvenile justice system to a restorative justice system," Nadel says, because "the problem on the juvenile justice system side is that we have youth being incarcerated and coming out worse. So we're looking for ways to get their behavior transformed, instead of just exposing them to other people, to bad behavior."

In real life situations, how does this play out? For Nadel, "What that means is that when a youth breaks the law, instead of incarcerating, they bring the parties together, to see if they can work out an agreement to make the harmed person to feel healed. Currently [the juvenile justice system is] a sort of paternalistic approach that doesn't seem to change anyone's behavior. "

Like Ballantine, Nadel sees a direct connection between urban decay, crime and restoration. In her view the situation is far from hopeless. She notes that the restorative justice approach has support, but that it does require a lot of work and a lot of skill. She is an adviser to Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth. In one school in particular, she says, "We found that by teaching values in the classroom - to do peacemaking circles where everyone takes turns to speak, discussing integrity and honesty in a way that's age-appropriate and sometimes fun - builds up family values in the classroom."

"It creates," she says, "circles of support and accountability, so if a conflict arises, that circle tries to resolve that conflict." Nadel says this approach to juvenile justice has been a success in other cities and countries, citing New Zealand's extraordinary success in employing the collective techniques of restorative justice. Concluding, Nadel informs us, "in the school that we tried this in, we had no expulsions, no teacher turnover and no fights all year." The model was an apparent success. "Since that time, the school district has adopted restorative juvenile justice," said Nadel.

Citizens don't always have to wait for the courts, town hall meetings or government municipalities to come around before tackling civic improvement action on their own. That is the forward-thinking approach of Dwayne Aikens Jr., a PhD candidate who co-founded a South Oakland nonprofit with two colleagues, Lamont Robinson and Trestin George. All three are African-American men, and their organization is called [We Lead Ours](#).

On its website, We Lead Ours describes itself as, "a leadership organization provided to work with youth and adults in education, health, and civic leadership ... to introduce youth and adults to educational, volunteer opportunities, and service learning enrichment activities, which provides affirmative educational, health, and leadership principle." When asked about his thoughts on Oakland's recent evolution, Aikens responds, "We have a great chance of being a part of the revitalization that's going on in Oakland because Oakland is looking for those organizations that will support the school district, free of costs or with a third party." From Aikens's perspective, this type of partnership is of utmost importance for the ongoing success of Oakland, because, he believes, "It's all about what do these kids do, after school and weekends."

Aikens stresses that, "We have programs in place giving these kids something to do during these hours," and that matters, he says, because "we don't want to see a whole generation of kids falling into the wrong hands." Coupled with these programs, he says, "We have to start educating ourselves as a policy, like other people moving here" in order, he says, "to take advantage of every little opportunity."

Creating opportunity, in Aikens's view, is the best approach. Yet understanding and appreciating Oakland's historic past - its birth and subsequent population changes - is key to retaining the city's identity, so as not to lose its core values in the pursuit of cosmetic uplift and wealth.

Someone who is very familiar with Oakland's rich history is Rick Moss, Chief Curator at the [African-American Museum and Library at Oakland \(AAMLO\)](#). In a recent dialog, Moss spoke about AAMLO's "Vision" exhibition, an audiovisual display and automated presentation which provides a succinct narrative of Oakland's historic roots. Moss also spoke about changes he sees happening today, and about what lasting effect the present might have on the future integrity of the city.

Max Eternity: As chief curator of AAMLO, how do you see yourself and AAMLO serving the community?



Rick Moss: I see myself as an interpreter of African-American history and culture, but also a center for community dialogue. I often, since we opened ten years ago, thought to myself that this wasn't going to be a community center as such. There wasn't a place like AAMLO that existed in Oakland - a neutral place, where dialogues of all sorts could take place.

ME: Tell me about the "Visions" exhibition.

RM: I didn't want to focus on victimization, or react to the vicissitudes of history only. That's how African-Americans are portrayed: reacting to history. So if you notice, in "Visions," there's very little that has to do with reaction. It has to do with cooperation and engagement with others in this community. Historically, there was significant cooperation among the ethnic groups, and not conflicts.

There are two components to the show: the chronology aspect and the multimedia aspect, which focuses on how people see themselves. Oakland gets a very bad rap in the media, but when you listen to [the exhibition audio of] those people, you hear all kinds of voices here in the city, juxtaposed to the 100-year history of the African-American community that's displayed in the perimeter.

My interpretive point of view includes the businesses, the culture. A lot of people don't know that history; they only know the victimization, the reactions that happen. We're always overcoming something - that's a strangling point of view - as opposed to living our lives fully as everyone else does. We cannot deny the bad things that have happened, of course. We cannot deny slavery in history. I think that's important - for all people of Oakland to see, to hear, to listen to, on an emotional level, so that people do get it. And all these great things give a fuller picture.

ME: Is urban renewal changing the ethnic landscape of Oakland?

RM: Correct. Given the state of the economy, the prices for property and the cost of living in the Bay area - places that people might prefer to live. Many up-and-coming white professionals can't [afford to] live in San Francisco, so there's a turn to the East Bay.

Oakland offers wide-open opportunities. Although the prices are not radically different on the other side of the bridge, here they are more affordable.

Business in Oakland and city government were looking to attract that kind of environment. You've had an increase in development of high-rise condos. Those housing opportunities are not available to many African-Americans because they can't afford them. So blacks are squeezed into places. Many have been locked out [of previously black neighborhoods].

Not only that, if you look at areas like West Oakland, those opportunities are also available, [newcomers] buying Victorians there for a song.

Many families had their origins in West Oakland, where the city actually began. Folks from outside have been buying houses, one Victorian at a time, which is disconcerting to those who have lived here 40 years - multiple generations. I am aware of that.

A lot of young people are moving to the "West." As a result, we have people who have very little knowledge of West Oakland history. They are totally clueless, and it really doesn't matter one iota to them. They are just living here, taking advantage of every opportunity as they make their way.

The same thing happened in San Francisco as well, I know, because I was raised in that area. Places that were once black, are a different shade completely, are now completely different. So black folks are now confined to a two-block area in the projects. What used to be areas of Victorians and flats in the Western Addition and Fillmore now have completely different demographics. These areas were once the heart of San Francisco's African-American community before gentrification and urban renewal took hold.

There is a good feeling about Oakland, among Oakland residents, that I was unaware of before I moved here. There's a kind of an energy and optimism. There is, though, de facto segregation here, although Oaklanders get along together pretty well. Racial animosity has been tempered here, for a city that's had people coming from all over. So there remains a real feeling of hope and optimism - a can-do attitude.