

EAST VILLAGE: A CONSCIOUS DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

BY PAULINA VELASCO

The conversation about innovation and inclusiveness that has been happening in places like the Bay Area is now underway in San Diego. Entrepreneurs, tech-savvy millennials, and educational institutions are investing in East Village. The changes in the cityscape bring as many challenges to the neighborhood as they do possibilities, both of which were discussed at C3's Breakfast Dialogue on January 28th, 2016.

Moderator Stacey Pennington, urban planner and founder of Makers Quarter, began the morning with great enthusiasm about the opportunities East Village offers as an innovation district. According to Stacey, millennials and the creative class are driving the development of this corner of downtown San Diego. Entrepreneurs are installing their startups in its large open spaces, and the proximity of schools and creative projects is making East Village an up-and-coming urban center. Stacey encouraged the thoughtful design emerging in this neighborhood as networks of streets and pedestrian walkways create an open space connectivity unlike other areas of San Diego.

The accompanying panelists agreed. In fact, local architect Rob Quigley called East Village the “last opportunity to get the balance downtown is missing” and “our only hope.” Describing the decades-long struggle to develop and design downtown San Diego, he expressed the hope that East Village would attract tech companies creating “high-end employment” and establishing themselves in the area's large office spaces. Sumner Lee, President of Fuse Integration, is one such entrepreneur; he mentioned his appreciation for the way technology and art comes together in East Village, supporting firms that are trying to be innovative.

Education is another key catalyst to East Village's evolution. The panel on Thursday included Ralph Roesling of RNT Architects, in charge of the expansion of City College. The new designs place great value on art and on creating outward-focused buildings and pedestrian-friendly layouts. City College is one of a long list of education facilities that, according to Ralph, “are becoming the spine for this part of the city.” These include the Urban Discovery Academy and the New School of Architecture. Katie Rast was on the panel representing Fab Lab San Diego, which also focuses on inspiring city youth through education. She underlined the important interdisciplinary aspect of East Village. According to the panel, the I.D.E.A district with its emphasis on innovation, design, education, and arts, is truly coming to life in East Village.

Of course, such development comes with its challenges. The first and most prevalent mentioned during the conversation was “the homeless problem.” Bahija Hamraz of Downtown San Diego Partnership's Clean & Safe Program shed light on the issue. Over 600 of San Diego's 887 homeless live in East Village. They will either migrate southward as the “community needs to take over space,” or the neighborhood will have to find a better solution for housing and assimilating the homeless population. While Rob Quigley deplored the “fifth-world” situation he finds in East Village, another attendee asked if the homeless could be an asset instead of a problem to the development of the area.

Conversation about the setbacks of homelessness led to a discussion about the working class in East Village and in neighboring Barrio Logan. Dialogue participant Rob Miriello asked if the concept of innovation was not just “candy coating for raising rents.” He reminded the gathering of the importance of making innovation inclusive, mentioning the “What's in it for us?” question he often receives while

working with Barrio Logan locals. Creativity is an important asset to East Village, and its “gritty” aspects are ultimately what inspire many entrepreneurs, artists, and innovators to move there. An attendee from Moniker Group described the community element that drew him and his co-workers to establish creative businesses in the low-amenity Warehouse. The dialogue continued to emphasize the necessity to make innovation and the Makers Quarter concepts – and therefore East Village in its present and future developments – inclusive concepts.

Panelists and group members brought up numerous other opportunities for East Village to “get it right,” as Rob Quigley hopes. According to Rob, one of these is the opportunity to connect parts of downtown and Balboa Park by “healing the gap” caused by the freeways. Another major challenge to the development of East Village as a 21st century open space is the possible construction of the new football stadium. A suggestion by a breakfaster that the city invest its millions of dollars on affordable office spaces in East Village rather than on a stadium received rousing applause.

There was much discussion about how exactly the city should be involved in East Village's development. The question of cost came up: how can the creativity and innovation spurring its growth be sustained? The panelists and attendees concluded that a collaboration must be set up soon between all the groups with vested interests in the neighborhood in order to prevent East Village from becoming financially prohibitive to young entrepreneurs.

The rich and varied Dialogue succeeded in making East Village part of an important conversation about innovation and development; a nationwide conversation that encompasses “tech equity” efforts in Oakland and bike lane controversies in Washington, DC. With foresight, cooperation, and continued discussion, maybe East Village *can* “get it right.”

A post-discussion will be held by C3 on Thursday, February 4th, at The Quartyard from 6pm to 8 pm.

LINKS:

<http://techcrunch.com/2015/09/24/oakland-tech/#.qjzsryp:CSP1>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/local/wp/2015/11/12/why-are-bike-lanes-such-heated-symbols-of-gentrification/>

<http://www.c3sandiego.org/event-2158098>