Reinventing Downtown San Diego: A Spatial and Cultural Analysis of the Gaslamp Quarter

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In 1985, more than fifty transients held a candlelight vigil calling attention to their plight in downtown San Diego. Citizens from all walks of life marched through downtown as they sang, chanted, and prayed together.1 The marchers voiced their concerns over their displacement from newly developed areas of downtown, along with issues such as safety, affordable housing, and their systematic exclusion from public space. This event transpired against the backdrop of the newly developed Gaslamp Quarter, symbolizing how certain groups of individuals and their social problems seemed to disappear amid the transformed downtown. While these citizens became visible at this particular moment, they represented a marginalized group trying to establish their presence in a new downtown. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 in recognition of its late nineteenth century Victorian architecture, the sixteen and a half block Gaslamp Quarter lies within the heart of downtown San Diego. It has since become one of Southern California’s trendiest urban districts featuring dining, shopping, and entertainment. Nearby, the Horton Plaza mall, opening in 1985, adjoins the Gaslamp Quarter. Attached to the northern end of this shopping center stands Horton Plaza Park, a traditional urban plaza that has provided space for public gathering since the late nineteenth century.

This urban environment has not always existed in downtown San Diego. During its first decade of existence, the Gaslamp Quarter struggled to become successful, due in part to its sordid past. This section began in the 1890s as the city’s red-light district. This trend continued through the 1970s as the area featured various elements of urban blight. Old buildings stood frozen in time, decaying as they hosted cheap restaurants, bars, and liquor stores. These buildings also housed low rent apartments as well as residential hotels. The wide assortment of adult bookstores, however, remained one of the district’s most prominent features. A substantial number of marginalized inhabitants also lived within this neglected section of the city, ranging from the elderly, to prostitutes, alcoholics, and transients. This milieu existed outside the purview of citizens who lived in the more prosperous areas of San Diego. Furthermore, some city leaders and residents failed to distinguish between the different types of people and social problems within the area. As a result, many of the region’s inhabitants became “invisible” as city leaders and middle-class citizens disapprovingly turned their backs on the area.2

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The Gaslamp Quarter project was a by-product of a national historic preservation movement, mirroring projects in cities spanning from San Francisco to Boston. As redeveloped, the Gaslamp Quarter offered locals and tourists a legible way to conceptualize the previously neglected urban core by offering a semi-public space in the medium of themed architecture. Urban planner Kevin Lynch defined a city’s legibility as, “the ease with which its parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern.” Additionally, historian John Findlay described this concept as the intense supervision of urban forms through careful design and simplified land use patterns. Such legibility satisfies middle-class desires for experience while overcoming their reluctance to take risks, particularly within an urban setting.

As a result, the legibility of downtown San Diego, made possible through the development of the Gaslamp Quarter, transformed the previously gritty urban environment into an orderly and coherent space for middle and upper class citizens. Over time, the reinvented downtown became a place to explore and spend money—an urban Disneyland. In order to understand this transformation, it is crucial to trace the Gaslamp project from 1968, during an era of nation-wide urban crisis, through its development in the 1970s, and into the transition years of the 1980s. Horton Plaza’s successful opening in 1985 bolstered the struggling historic district so that by the 1990s substantial changes in the Gaslamp Quarter, and downtown as a whole, fully began to materialize.

This transformation, however, is only one portion of the larger narrative.
As historian Phoebe Kropp asserts, “To read the history of a place through its buildings requires more than tracing the skyline; one must read broadly into the stories and people behind the buildings.” By studying the transformation of the built environment, this reveals a “container of experiences” ripe with people, events, and conflict. Public historian Dolores Hayden further emphasizes how memory, myth, space, and place are all intertwined in “place memory.” All of these components become entangled in a battleground over urban imagery and the symbolic meaning of place, a conflict that illustrates that the spatial landscape cannot be divorced from the social and cultural one. This study applies the insights of Kropp and Hayden in order to explore the reactions to the spatial and cultural transformations of urban life in post 1960s San Diego. It is crucial that the historian pulls back the analytical lens far enough to evaluate equally not only the principals involved in reshaping the new environment, but also those who contested these changes. As a result, this method will provide a clearer understanding of the consequences associated with urban redevelopment.

Throughout the process of creating the Gaslamp Quarter, developers wished to cleanse undesirable social and physical elements within the project area. As a result, urban space and culture turned inward as the built environment became militarized and scripted. This byproduct occurred as city leaders and developers employed elements of defense, security, and surveillance to police social and physical boundaries within the project area. The transformation of culture also became a powerful means of controlling the urban environment as the types of businesses and services offered symbolized who belonged in the space and who did not. Those with the least influence either became surrounded by, or thrust outside of, the transformed urban space. As the city unveiled plans to reinvent its downtown, marginalized, and previously “invisible,” inhabitants suddenly became a painfully visible problem that stood in the way of revitalization. Developers were forced to confront the distinct cultures, communities, and lifestyles that had existed prior to redevelopment.

As the Gaslamp Quarter emerged, different groups of people experienced and understood the urban space in various ways. On the one hand, preservation and redevelopment represented a laudatory sign of progress that cleansed the sordid, neglected tenderloin of the city’s urban core. On the other hand, the project threatened a particular culture and lifestyle for a diverse population already living in the area. As San Diego’s newly reinvented downtown became economically successful, however, these marginalized citizens and their social problems threatened to become “invisible” once more as they became displaced to other areas of the city.

While there are positive elements of scripted and reinvented space, there are other issues at stake, such as the destruction of communities, displacement of the poor, and conversion of entire downtown regions into exclusive enclaves for a limited segment of society. Reinvented urban spaces such as the Gaslamp Quarter not only insulate a particular segment of society from unpleasant social problems, but they further render other inhabitants, along with their struggles, invisible to city leaders and the mainstream population by creating pockets of urban affluence. As a result, such urban spaces create the false reality that the people, culture, and built environment prevalent in the revitalized area are representative of the general public.
Rethinking Downtown: Urban Crisis and a New Plan for San Diego

Downtown San Diego has always had a Janus-faced past. On the one hand, the city boasted a thriving urban center in the late nineteenth century. In this same era, however, downtown also featured a thriving red-light district, known as the Stingaree. Both of these elements would continue to exist throughout the twentieth century. Downtown San Diego, as with other urban centers across the country in the postwar era, endured cycles of development, decay, urban crisis, and renewal. Underlying this trend were new ideologies brought forth by a group of progressive minded scholars, which challenged how cities should be viewed and designed, in hopes of finding a solution to the ensuing national urban crisis. Local planners and city leaders in San Diego not only adopted many of these ideas, but sought to steer clear of federal involvement by strengthening the ties between local private and public sectors. As a result, San Diego had all of the right ingredients needed to reinvent its downtown.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, legitimate businesses, attempting to distance themselves from the Stingaree, began moving north to intersections such as Fifth Avenue and Broadway. Vice-oriented businesses filled the resulting spatial vacuum. The military industry boom of World War II helped transform San Diego by creating new industries related to heavy defense spending and sprawling suburbs. The increasing popularity of automobiles helped change the patterns of leisure and transportation, and the locations of commercial centers and business offices, by locating these elements away from the urban core to regions such as Mission Valley. Entertainment and cultural centers also shifted away from downtown to places like Mission Bay Aquatic Park. The greater downtown area lacked vitality and by the 1950s, no significant building had been completed for more than twenty years. Ten years later, Mayor Pete Wilson and city planners set out to revitalize particular business districts downtown, excluding the red-light district, which began with new high-rise construction projects.11

Following World War II, urban centers across the country faced decay and
the exodus of Anglo citizens. Downtown San Diego was no exception, as retail shops and entertainment venues also fled the city for the burgeoning suburbs. Automobiles, accompanied by expansive freeway systems, helped create decentralized commercial and industrial centers. Within the remaining urban cores, the Public Housing Acts of 1949, 1954, and 1965 encouraged urban renewal by bulldozing slums and replacing them with inadequate high-rise public housing projects. As a result, ethnic and racial minorities, elderly people, and the poor became trapped, physically and financially, within the decaying urban centers. These crumbling cities erupted in the 1960s with nation-wide race riots in reaction to the urban crisis.

As a response, a group of progressive-minded scholars emphasized the connection between urban space, image, and individual and social well-being. Rather than accepting new postwar spatial forms such as sprawl and fragmentation, they presented alternative frameworks for understanding and creating urban space that favored economic, social, and ethnic diversity within a dense urban setting. Underlying these efforts was their collective belief in the importance and value of urban centers in the postwar era. One such scholar and activist, Jane Jacobs, argued that cities were an “unstudied, unrespected, sacrificial victim” filled with rejuvenation potential because they were appealing, vibrant, and organic. Planners, she continued, should utilize and create a network comprised of parks and other public spaces to create a “street fabric” between the built environment and diverse groups of people. To bolster this “fabric,” the author advocated the use of elements such as old buildings, mixed-use zoning, dense housing, and short blocks.12

One of the nation’s most influential urban planners, Kevin Lynch, echoed this sentiment by positing that cities, “Speak of the individuals and their complex society, of their aspirations and their historical tradition, of the natural setting, and of the complicated functions and movements of the city world.”13 Collectively, this body of scholarship encouraged city leaders and citizens to rethink attitudes about the city. Jane Jacobs concluded that, “Cities have the capacity of providing something for everyone, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”14 This premise thus reveals how planners such as Jacobs and Lynch...
encouraged leaders to create democratic urban space, not just for a limited segment of society, but for the entire populace of the city.

The influence of this new ideology became extremely evident in the city of San Diego. The city’s new mayor, Pete Wilson, presented an aggressive urban reform agenda in 1972. Wilson called for the slowing of suburban sprawl and the revitalization of downtown by mixing housing, cultural, educational, and recreational facilities among the existing and planned office buildings. The keystone of the plan called for bringing major retail enterprises back downtown. In 1972, the mayor and city council, along with various groups of the private sector, approved the Horton Plaza Redevelopment Plan."^{15}

In order to prepare for these plans, the San Diego City Council accepted a ten thousand dollar private donation from the Marston family to hire an independent consultant to prepare a study on the regional landscape of San Diego. In 1974 the council hired renowned urban planners Kevin Lynch and Donald Appleyard to prepare the report. In their study titled, “Temporary Paradise? A Look at the Special Landscape of the San Diego Region,” the planners reinstated their idea of legibility, explaining, “centers of a city are the places that people identify with, sharing reflected glory or shame, depending on their quality. People are proud of cities whose unique centers present a clear image to themselves and to visitors.” The planners concluded that the City of San Diego and developers should create a plan not only to beautify the city, but to promote the fundamental rights of every citizen in the region. The authors warned against the excessive use of private interests and profits at the expense of the urban and natural environment by stating, “It will be unfortunate if the renewal program banishes this liveliness [downtown] and substitutes for it an empty space ringed by bank fronts…thus the city becomes a collection of private islands, which ignore each other and ignore the general public.”^{16}

The following year, in 1975, the city adopted a proposal to create a public, nonprofit organization, Centre City Development Corporation (CCDC) to focus solely on downtown redevelopment. The mayor and city council appointed seven members to this organization as they worked as liaisons between the public and private sectors. A year later, CCDC presented its first plan, the “Centre City Plan of 1975,” which called for the revitalization of downtown through four redevelopment project areas. The Gaslamp Quarter project sought to rehabilitate turn-of-the-century architecture prevalent in the heart of downtown."^{17}

This 1975 plan was crucial because it not only acknowledged the centrality of downtown as the focal point for business, but also as the center of retail shops and cultural entertainment facilities. The plan aimed to unify downtown and “reinforce the role of the central area as the image of regional San Diego.”^{18} City leaders and the private sector sought to reinvent the urban core by dividing downtown into several distinctive sub-districts, each with their own name, character, identity, and land uses. The partnership between the public and private sectors, reinforced by new ideologies regarding the value of the urban core, and an ambitious city plan, made downtown San Diego ripe for reinvention. Prior to development, the principals reinventing downtown first had to grapple with the harsh reality that an existing physical and cultural landscape already existed within the urban core.
South of Broadway: An Alternative Urban Landscape

Broadway served as a de facto boundary between two distinct worlds as the area north of Broadway underwent extensive urban renewal in the early 1960s, creating a new central business core. During the daytime, the region bustled with activity as approximately 60,000 middle and upper class white collar suburban workers commuted downtown. A completely different milieu existed south of Broadway, where the future Gaslamp Quarter project would emerge. In fact, the buildings within remained reasonably intact for preservation because this alternative landscape, and its inhabitants, had been ignored by city leaders and investors for decades.19

The existing structures within the planned historic district had been built between 1880 and 1910, which resulted in a classic Victorian commercial streetscape. Other portions of the region contained industrial space, social service centers, and residential hotels, referred to as Single Room Occupancy hotels, or SROs. By 1974, much of the building stock in the district stood in poor condition, yet many of the structures’ ornate classical details still remained. Ranging from two to four stories, the buildings shared common characteristics such as brick façades, bay windows, arches, and deep-set openings. At all hours, people of varying ages and from disparate parts of San Diego crowded the streets.20

Land values in the red-light district were much lower than in other areas of the city, decreasing over fifty percent per square foot as one crossed south of Broadway. Rent prices remained three times lower than in other parts of downtown. With no new hotels built within the district for over a decade, the majority of existing hotels were SROs, which varied in price, size, condition, and services. Those who could not afford these establishments could migrate to places such as the City Rescue Mission on Fifth Avenue and Market. Historic Horton Plaza, along with an ornate fountain, sat adjacent to Fourth Avenue which served as a linkage to the Gaslamp Quarter. Serving as a central public space within downtown, citizens had for decades used the plaza for such activities as civic celebrations, political demonstrations, and rallies.21

As plans to develop the Gaslamp Quarter unfolded, city leaders such as Mayor Wilson began to stigmatize the region’s citizens as deviants. Nevertheless, it is clear that an alternative culture and community existed with a unique social hierarchy. An individual who embraces an alternative culture can be defined as “someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it.”22 The existing inhabitants and their built environment consisted of citizens who did not embrace the dominant culture’s values such as homeownership, social mobility, marriage, and family. Instead, this alternative community, composed of various groups, created and took advantage of the gritty, distinct culture and infrastructure south of Broadway. Collectively, this citizenry embraced the notions of freedom and privacy. Police officer Mark Vattimo described this human ecology south of Broadway in the 1970s as, “…a whole different world, the real world. It’s the world the people in the suburbs have run away from.”23

Census tract data from 1970 revealed that the space within the planned district was quite distinct for San Diego County. The area was predominantly male with San Diego County’s lowest “family status.” Additionally, the area had 3,618 citizens over the age of sixty five, or nearly fifty percent. A quarter of the district’s
residents fell below the poverty level, making the area the third lowest socio-economic tract in the entire county. In addition to elderly pensioners, the area was home to sailors, pimps, prostitutes, homosexuals, and employees and customers of skid row businesses. One adult business owner within the district revealed how many of his patrons consisted of business men and young suburban couples. He revealed, “I'm just providing what the public is buying.”

One of the most notable groups existing within the future project area was the sizable transient population. This group of urban dwellers could further be categorized into two major groups: transients and permanent residents. Transients often relied upon some form of government assistance while living in the street or temporarily in SRO hotels. Many had problems linked to alcoholism, drugs, and other illicit activities. One transient reported, “Trouble is, you kin always git some wine...Food's different. Food cost money, man...When I ain't got a Mickey I eat shit.” Permanent residents, attracted by low rent costs, also depended on some form of public assistance. They were mainly elderly, single, white, male, and poor. On average, members of this segment had held a steady job for an extended period of time during their lifetime. In 1977, over half of the inhabitants living in downtown hotels were permanent residents who had lived in places such as the Golden West Hotel for over a decade.

An actual community existed within this specific territory, with a sense of social organization on the streets, and within SRO hotels. Many permanent residents congregated at places such as Horton Plaza Park to bask in the sunshine. Others socialized or played chess while some inhabitants simply watched the world pass by. Seventy-year-old landlady Hazel San Nicoles recognized the community that existed within SRO hotels by declaring,

People do help each other around here, that’s one thing...If something happens to one of these people, everybody’s there to help or do something if they can...If I don’t see these people around, the older people, I check on ‘em. I know what time they usually come out. I find some dead people here once in a while, and that’s not even funny...The way these people live, they got nobody.

Within the hotel, however, spatial and cultural tensions existed between the different generations. Permanent residents, who felt that they had worked hard for their small pensions, oftentimes viewed the transients as trouble-making “welfare bums.” Common areas such as the lobby and television rooms often became contentious spaces within the micro-society.

This society utilized and created a micro infrastructure within the future project area. Numerous restaurants served low cost meals and bakeries sold discounted stale goods. Many Chinese restaurants offered complete meals for less than two dollars, while some even provided delivery service, a feature especially attractive to elderly citizens with limited mobility. Pawnshops, secondhand book stores, thrift shops, and missions addressed various material needs, while social needs could be met from taverns or tattoo parlors. Furthermore, the district’s barber college offered free haircuts and a chance for men to interact with women. Entertainment could be obtained from the penny arcades, card rooms, and movie houses. For another segment of society, burlesque shows, adult nightclubs, and
massage parlors offered services not readily available in the nearby suburbs. This region also served as an inexpensive central transportation hub. Seniors could obtain bus passes for less than a quarter. The bus benches themselves enabled many elderly to view the bustling street activity from these vantage points. For other residents, these same objects served as beds after sunset. One observer commented on the area’s infrastructure by stating, “If they [the region’s inhabitants] want to act out or go a little crazy, they do it. The people around them don’t mind. Their environment allows them to be a little different, a little strange.”

Horton Plaza Park offered crucial support to this group. Since the nineteenth century, the plaza had been used as a traditional public space for a variety of activities. One property owner described the plaza space in the 1960s and 1970s as “a cauldron of hippy freaks, perverts, drug addicts, and a conglomeration of bedraggled, seedy individuals.” From the early morning through the late afternoon, however, elderly people took advantage of the plaza. These inhabitants enjoyed waking up early from their residential hotels, getting coffee, and sitting on benches in the plaza. One elderly man stated, “I come because just about everyone comes by here and there’s a lot to see. What else would I do?” The plaza provided the only grassy area within walking distance for such elderly citizens living downtown.

Plaza life in the 1970s also included other sets of individuals. Passionate evangelical speakers shouted their messages of salvation through bullhorns. Additional religious groups such as Hare Krishna members clanged cymbals and chanted. On any given day, one could witness alcoholics, pigeon feeders, thieves, sailors flirting with young girls, and people talking to themselves. Others used the plaza as a place to conduct business, from pimps and prostitutes to drug dealers and panhandlers, and people passing out leaflets. Sounds of blaring boom boxes and ringing payphones mixed with other street noises, creating a discordant urban symphony all while middle class workers scurried around the space.

This alternative landscape was important for a specific segment of society as this group migrated downtown because of its central location and accessible open spaces such as Horton Plaza. The warm climate and proximity to an assortment of services made the environment enticing while the numerous SRO hotels provided places of residence. One retired hotel resident summarized the fabric of the alternative community by asserting,

If they tore down my hotel, I don’t know what I’d do...You just can’t put elderly people on the street. There’s a lot of good people in these here hotels...I like downtown. I have been a bachelor all my life...I’d be setting up there all by myself [if relocated to the suburbs]. I can find all kinds of people to talk with and different people I can have fellowship with...all those different kinds of people [even the winos] can be very amusing, very interesting, well-to-do people as well as poor people. You can have a lot of relationships with a lot of people here and fellowship with a lot of people here and you won’t ever be lonely.

For the region’s inhabitants who did not embrace the majority culture’s values, a
viable community existed in this urban space. The built environment and cultures existent in San Diego’s downtown region south of Broadway in the 1960s and 1970s proved that downtown remained, just as it had been in the past, a place with various overlapping subcultures.

The Gaslamp Quarter and the Development of a Legible Space

City leaders and preservationists conceived of the Gaslamp Quarter within this alternative landscape and culture. During the 1960s the national preservation movement emerged after influential scholars such as Jane Jacobs and members of the public expressed concern about the destruction of old buildings caused by urban renewal, the interstate highway system, and other large public works projects during the era. The most important piece of historic preservation legislation materialized with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. This federal legislation, coupled with the urban renewal efforts already in progress, served as a catalyst for the creation and redevelopment of entire historic districts, such as the Gaslamp Quarter.

One of the key provisions within the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 was the establishment of the National Register of Historic Places, which operated under the Secretary of the Interior to recognize and record historically significant sites. In addition, the National Register presented a variety of criteria for establishing historical significance based on two main factors: historical or cultural importance, and architectural importance. More specifically, criteria centered upon significant people, events, and distinctive architectural characteristics. The registry expressed that preservation not only honored memory and people, but reflected community pride by creating a link to the past while enriching the present. More importantly, historic preservation provided cities a “competitive edge” of place differentiation and community livability. In turn, this differentiation had the capability of turning a city into an attractive and economically profitable tourist destination.

To assist in the preservation process, the Secretary of the Interior published Standards for Rehabilitation, Standards for Restoration, and Standards for Preservation, which set guidelines for successful preservation efforts. The crux of the preservation movement, however, fell to the state and local level since the National Register program had little to no regulatory power. At the local level, the city government, along with private organizations and property owners, created ordinances pertaining to sites nominated and placed on the National Register. While utilizing the Secretary of the Interior’s framework, municipal ordinances gave local preservation authorities the power to review design changes pertaining to the historical structures.

The capstone piece of the preservation movement was the federal Tax Reform Act of 1976. This act cited that expenses from rehabilitating blighted buildings could be recoverable on income-producing structures certified to be important to a greater historic district. As a result, the process of historic preservation had many types of economic benefits associated with it. For example, preservation stabilized and increased property values, which in turn encouraged public reinvestment and private investment. Furthermore, historic preservation enhanced tax revenue collection. All of these elements helped discourage the process of suburban sprawl.
In order to secure these federal tax benefits, a building or district had to be nominated and successfully listed on the National Register. In addition, historic residential buildings within the district that housed rental units could receive benefits. This proved beneficial to property owners and city leaders as many of these rental units in urban centers were slums. This tax act represented a significant shift from public sector involvement to private sector initiatives, then heavily linked to federal incentives. Investors now became crucial players in the preservation movement due to economic incentives as older buildings in the decaying urban centers became financial opportunities. The re-conceptualization of downtown by progressive-minded scholars, along with new economic opportunities created by the federal government, made the old Stingaree in San Diego a prime candidate to enter into the “business of preservation.”

Prior to the federal Tax Reform Act of 1976, San Diego city leaders acknowledged the opportunities available in downtown with their multi-year development planning effort, the Centre City Plan of 1975. One portion of this wide-ranging project centered on the old Stingaree in a plan entitled “The Gaslamp Quarter Planned District Ordinance and Urban Design and Development Manual.” The name Gaslamp Quarter drew upon the images of a downtown “Golden-Era” with brightly lit gaslamps at the end of the nineteenth century. Initially, property owners and businesses staunchly opposed being included in a larger redevelopment project area, equating this with other bulldozing renewal efforts of the era. An updated 1984 Gaslamp Quarter Redevelopment Plan gave the city and its redevelopment agency the right to acquire and re-sell property for redevelopment purposes that fit the guidelines of the plan.

Through the use of zoning ordinances, the city quickly adopted the official boundary of the Gaslamp Quarter. The district stretched from Broadway to Market Street between Fourth and Sixth Avenues. The ordinance also offered specific development guidelines, set by the City of San Diego Historic Site Board. This fifteen-member organization, appointed by the city council, were responsible for insuring that the existing structures were maintained and restored to their “original” character. Developers utilized adaptive-use preservation to capture the flavor of the late nineteenth century by converting old buildings from their original use to a new economically profitable one.
The local government in San Diego created multiple organizations to serve as liaisons between the city, private investors, and architects. The city council instated a planning director to ensure compliance of the preservation process and to approve or modify permit applications for the local historical site board. Nine officials of the Gaslamp Quarter Planned District Advisory Board, most of whom were property owners within the district, were appointed by the mayor and city council to serve under the planning director. Another group, the Gaslamp Quarter Association, handled promotional affairs related to the district while the Project Area Committee, the Planning Department, and the Economic Development Division Property Department handled affairs ranging from funding applications, design reviews, land use, and supervision of loans, tax programs, and grant applications. By 1975, Fifth Avenue had twelve buildings designated as historic structures by the City of San Diego Historical Site Board. By 1980, the federal government placed the Gaslamp Quarter on the National Register of Historic Places.

Developers of the Gaslamp Quarter would be influenced by Boston’s Faneuil Hall which re-opened after 1976. This adaptive-use preservation venture utilized private and public funds to create the most successful downtown retail experiment of the era. The Gaslamp Quarter mirrored Boston’s model as developers took full advantage of the Tax Reform Act of 1976. For public elements of the project, such as sidewalks, the city developed a program working with local and state lending institutions to leverage public funds for below market rate loans. By 1980, the city had invested almost eight million dollars in public improvements, which the city hoped to recapture in property taxes and other benefits. Furthermore, the private sector invested approximately twenty-two million dollars in over forty preservation projects. Enticed by new economic incentives, over eighty percent of the property owners within the district were new since 1970. While federal legislation created new opportunities to development the Gaslamp Quarter, it is crucial to understand that other key elements within the existing built environment buttressed the process of preservation. For example, a seemingly “invisible” and disposable citizenry existed, making preservation efforts in San Diego attractive.

In 1968, the editor of San Diego Magazine asked Los Angeles artist Robert Hostick to provide an imaginative artistic proposal for the area encompassing the future Gaslamp project. Inspired by Victorian buildings, Hostick produced colorful sketches of a Victorian themed landscape that portrayed a sanitized mixed-use, middle-class space. Brick sidewalks guided visitors along a street lined with news stands, flower stalls, cafes, and specialty shops. Details such as European styled steps, ironwork, ornate facades, signs and lettering illuminated the environment. The themes of cleanliness, uniformity, detail, and legibility demonstrated what the urban space should be, while also expressing what it should not be and who should not be there. This publication encouraged locals, city leaders, and private investors to imagine a themed environment within the greater city. Planners envisioned the Gaslamp Quarter as one particular strategic point, or node, within the greater downtown. Kevin Lynch argued that these nodes offered security and intense human experience by satisfying citizens’ needs to recognize and pattern their surroundings. The district would be both dependent on and supportive of the Horton Plaza Redevelopment Plan, another node in its own right.
The Gaslamp Quarter would provide specialty shops and entertainment against the backdrop of a historic environment, while linking Fifth Avenue, the district’s spine, to the southern waterfront and the northern business core.47

City leaders envisioned the Gaslamp Quarter as serving multiple purposes. First, developers hoped that the region would unite and enrich an amalgam of people, while broadening the experience for locals and tourists alike. Media outlets echoed this sentiment by emphasizing the value of old buildings in relation to character, history, identity, and a “return to the rightful glory of America’s Finest City.”48 One advertisement after the debut of the revitalized district stated:

Come step into San Diego’s historical downtown. Enjoy the unique experience of a walk through Gaslamp—San Diego’s 16 block historic district. This area is teeming with the excitement of architecture which is the strength of its cultural history. Beyond that, this is a neighborhood with varied ethnic heritages hiding behind many a restaurant or shop door. Come explore49

Secondly, following a national trend in the mid 1980s, the project enabled Mayor Wilson to declare a “war on smut.” Wilson and other leaders accomplished this by decentralizing the existing population and transforming the cultural flavor of the area by limiting the types of businesses permitted in the region. City documents revealed lists of permitted store uses within the new district. Absent from these lists were arcades, card rooms, adult entertainment venues, and charitable organizations that provided free food and lodging. Furthermore, in 1979 city ordinances prohibited any new adult venue from opening within one thousand feet of an existing adult business, church, school, residential area, or park. One ordinance specifically targeted the Gaslamp Quarter by prohibiting theaters from hosting both general audience and adult films. These factors, coupled with rising rent prices, exterior building code restrictions, and harassment to “clean-up” the window displays of adult businesses, helped increase the pressure upon the remaining questionable businesses.50

Most importantly, Mayor Wilson bluntly emphasized the economic incentives driving the revitalization efforts. He expressed how the project sought to “accomplish historical preservation by making the periodic flavor of the Gaslamp Era an economic asset, both for the District and the city.” Wilson imagined, “One could have dinner in one restaurant, then go to a night club and end up on an intimate after hours spot for a nightcap—all within the Gaslamp Quarter.” City planners concurred, stating “everything is meant to help make browsing, shopping or strolling an interesting and rewarding experience.”51 These visions, in turn, had to be marketed into a safe downtown experience. One property owner compared the situation to the war in Vietnam by declaring that owners and city leaders were fighting the mean streets south of Broadway, against the enemy of neglect and abuse. He continued to state that, “We’re building ‘safe-zones’ the same way they did in Vietnam…we have to secure areas so it is safe for the people to walk in them and shop in them.”52

In order for the Gaslamp Quarter to become a reality, private investors first had to be lured back downtown. One way to accomplish this was through the creation of the Gaslamp Quarter Association. This organization had membership
Reinventing Downtown San Diego

fees, hosted expensive fundraising events, and distributed informative newsletters such as the *Gaslamp Gazette*. One invitation beckoned citizens “to join a very select group of pioneers…”\(^5^3\) This revealed the exclusive nature of the project and how a specific segment of society wielded power over the area’s development.

To market these safe-zones for locals and tourists, developers and promoters recognized the need to create an identifiable, sanitized entity. District leaders carefully crafted the name, “Gaslamp,” and its accompanying logo to market the area’s history. Developers believed “The name will establish this as a very special and delightful area of San Diego…the logo will become a symbol.”\(^5^4\) Later, in 1989 the logo appeared on a decorative wrought iron sign over the intersection of Fifth Avenue and Harbor Drive proclaiming the area the “Historic Heart of San Diego.”

In order to create a legible space, the city and local historical site board utilized the framework established by the Secretary of the Interior’s *Standards for Rehabilitation*. These leaders placed strict building codes for all renovation or new construction projects within the district. Furthermore, they emphasized the need to respect the old architecture through similarity in scale, building form, proportion, and detail. In order to create a stepping-down effect from the adjacent downtown area, the city limited building heights to four stories or sixty feet. Leaders also placed strict regulations on ground floor heights, window placement and size, architectural details, and...
building materials. Regulations even stipulated colors, favoring earth tones and stating that no adjacent buildings were to be painted the identical color. Perhaps the strictest codes related to the variety of restrictions placed upon signs by purpose, size, color, placement, shape, material, font, and type of lighting.  

By creating a space that was both public and private, the city recognized the need for street furniture. The city treated these as special objects designed to fit within the Victorian themed environment. For example, the city initially placed numerous Victorian styled benches throughout the district. Lighting was one of the most crucial elements needed to attract pedestrians by creating a safe and vibrant nighttime scene. Developers opted for “historic five globe” light stands to meet these needs. Planners additionally agreed to hide utility wires and other services.
underground. While recognizing the importance of pedestrians, city leaders adopted plans to widen the sidewalks into eight foot wide brick pathways. This created more private space for outdoor cafes, while reducing street clutter and removing on-street parking, thus shifting the parking burden to nearby streets. To assist in the functionality of the urban space, the city created special loading and unloading zones, which could be accessed during specific time periods during non-peak hours.56 Developers encouraged public and private employees within the district to dress in costumes appropriate to downtown’s Golden Era. Additionally, Gaslamp Quarter organizations developed walking tours, a typical tactic found in national historic districts. One tour advertisement in the 1980s stated:

Experience San Diego’s rich Victorian heritage...walk where some of San Diego’s most colorful history took place--back in the days of Wyatt Earp and the Stingaree Raids...
experience some of the city’s finest examples of commercial Victorian architecture...share the excitement of the restoration process as Gaslamp’s streets and buildings are returned to their turn of the century glory.57

Promotional pieces evoked romantic images of the Golden Era focusing on rustling taffeta, clanging trolley bells, horse drawn carriages, fancy hats, and piano halls.58 Ironically, while such efforts attempted to create a scripted space by capitalizing on certain aspects of the risqué aura of the era, others worked feverishly to eliminate any traces of gritty elements in the contemporary one.

Suburban women became specific promotional targets for the revitalized Gaslamp Quarter. One promotional newsletter featured an article entitled, “Welcome (Back) to Gaslamp” as the author exclaimed, “Tired of suburban shopping, crowded stores, impersonal service, and the confusing maze of department store merchandise?? COME TO GASLAMP.”59 This type of promotion encouraged women shoppers to explore the new area, especially the establishments that hosted such specialty products as antiques, clothing and kitchenware. Even mothers became promotional targets: “Mothers at home can give themselves a pampering present by hiring a sitter and spending the day in Gaslamp on an adventuresome spree... rather than traveling all over the city you can also sightsee while you shop.” Other promotional pieces targeted wider audiences by focusing on “exciting” ethnic eateries with “polite and shy Mexicans,” music venues, and Gatsby-like dinner parties.60 The experience of the Gaslamp Quarter thus became the commodity.

The restaurant chain, Old Spaghetti Factory, located on the southern end of the Gaslamp Quarter on Fifth Avenue, epitomized this trend by combining elements of familiarity and themed space. The eatery, housed in a structure built in 1898, was one of the most popular restaurants during the Gaslamp Quarter’s first decade of existence. Opening on February 20, 1974, and later expanding, the restaurant’s success proved crucial because it revealed how national chains began investing in the district. Private owners transformed the building into a 1890s trolley-themed restaurant. Besides the actual historic building, antiques and other artifacts served to buttress this theme; there was even a life sized trolley within the restaurant.
Waiting in line became a pleasant experience as customers sat on plush Victorian chairs or enjoyed a drink at the mahogany bar. These individuals could also examine the ornate stained glass windows or the original works of art lit by antique lamps. The restaurant represented a microcosm of the themed experience and familiarity created within the greater district. In 1985, once Horton Plaza opened and construction began on the convention center, other national restaurant chains began to take interest in the Gaslamp Quarter, which in turn helped spark private investment throughout the district. This ignited a trend, which began to rapidly flourish over the next decades, as it pitted chains against the supposed unique character of the historic district.

While the concept of the Gaslamp Quarter was not nationally unique, it proved unique for the city of San Diego as it offered locals and visitors a welcoming historical node within downtown. As a result, the district and businesses such as the Old Spaghetti Factory revealed a synergy and synthesis within the themed environment, which emerged in the form of what sociologist John Hannigan has referred to as “shoppertainment and “eatertainment.” The district helped citizens gain their initial bearings of downtown, and the city as a whole, making downtown, its citizens, and history easier to understand by offering a “quick, shorthand method of characterizing a place.”

Worlds Collide: Contentions over Urban Space

The population within the Gaslamp Quarter project area did not share the same idealistic vision of urban space that business investors, city leaders, and mainstream society promoted. As the area’s physical, social, and cultural landscape began to transform, the environment became militarized. Polemicist Mike Davis referred to this process as the defense, surveillance, and policing of social and physical boundaries. In order to comprehend the spatial and cultural conflicts that ensued in the Gaslamp Quarter, one must analyze everyday forms of resistance, which can be read in the daily lives of citizens. Historian Robin Kelley argues that rather than simply being dismissed as criminal acts, these “hidden transcripts” characterize the complexity of scripted urban space. Adding to this framework, historian Eric Avila asserts that there are “counternarratives, counterstrategies, and counterexpressions” that assert and maintain humanity in transforming spaces, such as the Gaslamp Quarter.

The displacement of the area’s original dwellers became a harsh reality. Spearheaded by Mayor Wilson, with the goal of creating an economically profitable downtown with minimal federal involvement, initial city documents reveal very little detail addressing human elements related to the project. One 1976 document expressed more concern for the “elegant types of people that Gaslampers hope to attract” than the “rougher elements of society.” Planners assumed that, “As the Gaslamp Quarter develops, the economic growth of the area will most likely disrupt the existing residential community as well as other users that would not find the area suitable for their needs.”

As developers sought to rid the district of certain people and low-income housing, San Diego still had approximately 1,500 homeless people living downtown in 1985. This same year, the district’s City Rescue Mission closed due to a resolution banning such services in the project area. Transients adapted to the
rapidly changing policies by sleeping in vacant lots or in old buildings. Others sought refuge in produce trucks or parked Greyhound buses at the nearby station. Those with meager funds could sleep in all-night theaters, as long as they still remained. Some transients simply slept on benches or on the sidewalk. One San Diego Union-Tribune article presented a picture of a store front under renovation with a homeless man sleeping lifelessly on a bench as the caption read, “Although rebuilding operations are moving along at Gaslamp Quarter, some objects are still stationary.” Gaslamp organizations distributed tips for property owners and visitors on how to cope with these stationary objects such as “Don’t give food to transients. It doesn’t really help them—and it does hurt the neighborhood.”  

Development of the Gaslamp Quarter also affected the elderly population. In 1975, the district encompassed the highest percentage of elderly citizens in the city and county. As development began in the late 1970s, the region witnessed a great population influx of younger people, which suggested an out migration or dying off of the elderly. Five years later, the median age was approximately thirty seven years of age, while by 1990 the median age became even lower. The lack of inexpensive rooms partially caused this change. The approximately 4,600 inexpensive rooms that had been available in 1976 decreased to fewer than 3,500 by 1985.

As the area developed, SRO hotels began to disappear, thus raising rent and living expenses higher than social security and disability checks. For example, the average rent for a SRO hotel room increased over one hundred dollars between 1980 and 1985. As new high-end establishments emerged, the elderly, disabled, and others with fixed incomes began losing out to a new generation of better paid downtown workers in specialty shops and fancy restaurants. As a result, one of the key components of reinventing downtown San Diego was the influx of younger citizens.

The face of public security within the planned district also changed to create a sense of safety for its targeted consumers. In the early 1980s, the city assigned walking beat cops to patrol the area on horse and by foot. They monitored activity from inside of buildings, rooftops, or by mingling with shoppers. Ironically, one police sergeant declared that, “The one thing we didn’t want was an image of heavy-handedness.” In 1986, the city council approved a storefront police station within the district on Fifth Avenue, thus increasing the area’s image of safety for middle and upper class consumers.

Private security, hired by merchants within the district, also became increasingly prominent. Venues such as the Old Spaghetti Factory and Cabo Cabo Grill teamed up to hire security guards. Some private security officers even gained public notoriety, becoming characters within the themed environment. In 1979 Ben Harroll, known as Clancy the Beat Cop, and his twelve-man team began patrolling the Gaslamp Quarter in turn-of-the-century police uniforms. They frequented questionable businesses multiple times a day and interrogated customers, workers, and owners. While multiple Gaslamp Quarter Merchants contracted this team, they later faced public scrutiny for their vigilante style of shocking transients with cattle prods and dumping buckets of water on them. Such security groups also used mace and clubs on transients. While official Gaslamp Quarter organizations distanced themselves from these “unofficial” groups, they did offer a variety of free crime prevention seminar series to the public. The first installment taught
how to prevent panhandling, while the second program addressed how to become street wise and defend oneself.69 Earlier inhabitants of the area did not understand the space as becoming more consumer friendly, but rather as a new fortified urban area. One homeless man in the later 1980s, and former SRO resident, lamented:

We can’t go anywhere near Horton Plaza. I can’t even walk over to that store across the street without being harassed by the police… They’ve started treating people like dogs… We don’t bother nobody, we don’t steal, we’re not on dope. We don’t even go down into the Gaslamp Quarter anymore. We have a right to be here.70

With heightened security, street people not only faced arrests, but harsh interrogations, fines, and pressure to reveal identification or other documentation.71 As the built environment changed and rent prices rose, the gritty cultural flavor of the original urban space began to disappear. Responding to the transforming district, one disgruntled business owner declared,

If people want cute and sanity, let them go to the carefully planned communities in the suburbs where everything is made to look alike, and where nothing out of the ordinary is ever allowed to happen. A great many people like me come downtown specifically to escape that kind of spiritual blight.72

The remaining red-light venues all suffered declines in business, some as much as 60 percent. Clamp-downs on massage parlors and prostitution also stymied these types of businesses. In addition, police vice squads raided such venues, and harassed or fined customers, owners, and employees. One bar owner revealed that a vice squad leader told him, “The next fucking time you tip anybody off that we’re vice squad, I’m gonna run your ass to jail.”73

Liquor stores also faced scrutiny as the Gaslamp Quarter Association persuaded these venues in the district to discontinue selling individually sold cigarettes and bottles of fortified wine in 1983, favorites among many transients. Even more crippling were the cutbacks in public bus transportation services beginning in August 1978, which stopped transit between suburb communities and downtown by eight in the evening. While this may appear to run counter to the goal of attracting suburbanites, these actions helped keep transients and elderly residents out of suburban communities while simultaneously curtailing suburbanites without automobiles from partaking in the more risqué elements of downtown.74

Fifth Avenue had been home to the highest density of X-rated businesses in San Diego, but development of the Gaslamp Quarter changed this. External pressures ranging from rising rent prices to restrictive ordinances on exterior building codes, along with harassment from vice squads, all helped change these urban spaces. Bob Clark, owner of Lyric Bookstore, asserted that his business suffered a 40 percent decline due to the busing cutbacks and increases in police forces. Clark cited twelve raids within a year and a half, which resulted in two clerks quitting. Furthermore, such businesses had to submit an annual $300 payment for monthly health inspections. Even mainstream theaters and bookstores suffered a
substantial decrease in business. As a result, adult businesses elsewhere, such as National City’s Pussycat Theater, witnessed an increase in patronage. From 1969 to 1981, the number of adult establishments in the district declined 50 percent without any new adult businesses opening and by 1992 only two adult businesses remained.75

Even seemingly unimportant street fixtures within the Gaslamp Quarter symbolized the various contentions over the changing space. The city bought approximately two hundred new garbage cans for the themed district. A portion of these were specially designed “transient-proof” cement cans. Some inhabitants, however, did not view these pieces as themed street furniture. One large transient, who was an epileptic Vietnam veteran, known as “Tank,” left his social mark on the themed environment by pushing over many of these new fixtures along with smashing old aluminum ones. Despite the fact that the city spent over fifty thousand dollars to buy new fortified cans, people in the Gaslamp Quarter became accustomed to seeing tipped, destroyed cans, a social reminder that people such as “Tank” still remained embedded within the urban environment. Once business owners complained to the city, “Tank” disappeared.76

Similar conflicts emerged over themed benches, creating a type of “bench-warfare.” Developers placed multiple expensive Victorian styled benches throughout the district. The themed benches came to have three separate meanings for three different groups of people. To the homeless, the objects provided a comfortable place to sit or sleep. For developers, these benches offered themed pieces of history throughout the district. Lastly, business owners viewed these fixtures as a menace. Soon after the city distributed these new benches, merchants quickly condemned them and demanded their removal as they became gathering places for alcoholics, drug users, and people who harassed customers. Merchants also complained that people littered, panhandled, and urinated on or nearby the benches. When one business owner took the liberty of removing what he referred to as a “Victorian-styled wino’s throne” outside of his store, business rose. Other Gaslamp business owners blamed the new benches for break-ins and other acts of vandalism. A separate private owner expressed, “They [the police] tell me I ought to do like one of the other businesses did—the benches just disappeared…”77 Eventually, the city removed all of the district’s benches.

With the closing of places such as the Rescue Mission, “unwanted” elements migrated outside of the boundaries of the Gaslamp Quarter, creating new clashes between communities and the built environment. In 1989, places like Pantoja Park, near G and State streets, now faced large numbers of people in its urban park sleeping, and partaking in illicit activities. This milieu contrasted the pricey downtown condominiums across the street in Park Row/Marina Park...
that emerged following the development of the Gaslamp Quarter. Residents complained of verbal harassment and vandalism, while stumbling upon razor blades, plastic bags, and hypodermic needles. While yuppies envisioned the park in one manner, for others the park became a trading post for drugs and fortified wine, while shrubs became restrooms. As a result, Councilman Bob Filner proposed to the city council that the park be closed and locked up at night.

Horton Plaza Park also transformed as the Gaslamp Quarter continued to develop. The urban space served as a “theater” ripe with spatial and cultural conflicts in reaction to the newly reinvented urban landscape. Similar to the contentions that arose over the themed benches within the Gaslamp Quarter, the plaza came to have different meanings for different groups of people. Developers, city leaders, and merchants viewed the plaza as a space that represented the wrong people, the wrong image, and the wrong activities. Ron Oliver, president of San Diego’s Central City Association, stated that the plaza “should be a place where a family can go...where business people could have lunch...” For a different group, the space represented one to be historically preserved. Finally, the space represented a place to live in.

While all types of people moved though the plaza space, no genuine mixing existed between them. In their regional study of San Diego, urban planners Lynch and Appleyard warned that a renewal program that removed Horton Plaza of its brash and tawdry liveliness would result in an empty space. Nevertheless, San Diego city leaders and developers sought to transform the plaza and reform the environment and its inhabitants. Supporters of this plan followed the theory that if the plaza was made uncomfortable for everyone, it would become uncomfortable for undesirable people and their activities.

There were numerous attempts to clean up the plaza and its surroundings between the early 1970s and 1985. During this period, the city ordered palm trees and planted them in custom-made concrete urns. The city also installed new park benches with dividers on them to prevent sleepers. In order to keep people from sleeping on the grass at specific times, the city used timed sprinklers and
decorative cast-iron fencing. Special police patrols monitored the plaza, physically and with video cameras, and kept traffic flowing. With mounting pressures from Gaslamp Quarter merchants, the 1984 plaza reform effort sought to remove the bathrooms from the plaza as well as its benches and grass. By 1990 the City Council voted to remove the park’s eighteen benches and all of the grass, planting shrubs and geraniums in their place.81

In addition to these spatial changes within the plaza, in 1985 the city transit board voted in favor of moving the main downtown bus stop away from the plaza. At the time, the bus stop was the second busiest in the entire city, handling approximately five thousand riders per day. The new bus stop appeared one block west to the corner of Third Avenue and Broadway. By removing the bus stops and benches leaders physically and visually removed the citizens who relied upon public transportation, along with nuisances such as exhaust and noise. Cultural changes also helped transform the plaza environment. In the 1990s the city and developers added newsstands, kiosks, and live entertainment acts to the plaza. One promotional flyer advertised the lunch-time festivities during the work-week: “Bring your lunch to Horton Plaza Park and enjoy the noon-time festivities!!”82 The Central City Association and Commission for Arts and Culture presented this “Noon-Tunes” series in an effort to attract new people and activities to the environment.

While these physical and cultural reform efforts initially helped scatter some urban dwellers to other areas of downtown, for the most part undesirable people and elements remained. Possibly serving as symbols of frustration for these citizens within the transforming downtown, vandals ripped out irrigation lines, used graffiti, and set fire to palm trees. Furthermore, people continued to take baths, urinate, defecate, and vomit into the fountain. Since the removal of the plaza’s bathrooms, Gaslamp Quarter merchants now found that urban dwellers were increasingly using their doorways as public restrooms.83

The original inhabitants of the plaza became deeply affected by the various changes surrounding the plaza. For these people, the plaza had offered sleeping arrangements while serving as a place for handouts. For others, the environment appeared as a miniature market place where one could buy and sell cheap cigarettes from Tijuana, as well as other items. The public environment had been one of the few places in downtown with grass and bathrooms. When the city removed the benches and grass one homeless woman exclaimed, “They just tore up my bed…the sprinklers come on at 7…I’ve been homeless for six years, and this is the only place I felt safe. Now it’s gone too.” Another homeless man echoed, “What’s wrong with sittin’ on a bench? This was the only place left. Now, they’re throwing us out.” The elderly were also affected by the removal of the benches and grass. One SRO resident who used to enjoy the street activity by sitting on the benches said, “Bench seats may not matter to younger people, but seniors and those with disabilities need them.”84

As the Gaslamp Quarter developed, the social problems that plagued the project area merely shifted to other areas of the city. Developers did not wish to genuinely address these issues, but rather sought to change the image of downtown by removing their visibility from the project areas. As a result, visitors could ignore negative elements of reality as they experienced a new downtown that appeared to lack any problems. The new space sought to overcome fears
of downtown by creating a dense, multifunctional core. As a result, this concentrated people in particular scripted spaces, shortened the distances between destinations, and limited the activities offered. All of these factors helped determine the type of people using the environment. Nevertheless, the spatial and cultural conflicts that emerged served as a reminder of various problems downtown. Worlds collided among different cultures, citizens, and spaces.85

Conclusion: “And Everybody Forgets After Dinner”

The metamorphosis in downtown San Diego revealed attempts by city leaders and private developers to ensure that the public enjoying the new spaces represented a particular kind of public, one that was controlled and orderly. Those with the most influence helped shape who constituted this “public” and the activities within the new environment. The process of exclusion from these spaces represented a powerful means of reinforcing the concept of an “invisible” population. This development did not represent the “end” of public space, but rather a transformation of a public space with greater control over access.86 Today, these “invisible” individuals are not completely gone, as they still linger in the plaza and throughout the historic district. However, the space is no longer “theirs” as they are now infiltrators in this gentrified space. Nevertheless, through the process of “hidden transcripts” and counter-narratives, those excluded gained some type of visibility, voice, and representation within the rapidly transforming downtown. As a result, this process reveals how marginalized groups of people are indeed citizens with basic human needs and rights.

One may question if the Gaslamp Quarter represents the type of downtowns that scholars such as Jane Jacobs and Kevin Lynch initially envisioned? Furthermore, the national success of historic preservation did not necessarily preserve the industries, communities, and cultures that had occupied these environments in the past. As cities enter into the twenty-first century, emphasis appears to be more on trendiness and exclusiveness, rather than diverse democratic urban space. Downtown San Diego has been reclaimed and reinvented, but for whom and at what social and cultural cost? The blurring of lines between public and private space has created a complex environment, which continues to become more and more costly for citizens to enjoy. While the region was originally designed to attract a wide array of citizens, it has instead targeted a very specific crowd. The Gaslamp Quarter has become a commodity to be bought and sold just like any other consumer project. The paradox lies in the fact that while tourism offers the opportunity to see something different, reinvented cities such as San

A homeless man sits at Horton Plaza with his chair and other belongings, 2007. Author’s collection.
Diego seem more and more like other urban centers. As a result, this trend has not only changed how people understand cities, but it has created a new kind of urban core, one that is composed of separate themed environments.87

It is crucial for city leaders, citizens, and private developers to “see through” the pockets of affluence found in these reinvented downtowns and account for the social, cultural, and spatial costs of developing semi-public urban space. The city of San Diego will have to grapple with the extreme success of the “new downtown.” In 1979, longtime local preservationist Robert Miles Parker composed a poem that helped capture the essence of this complex transformation in downtown San Diego:

I like the bleary-eyed old men in flannel shirts. Ragged beards, tattered pants...the signature of the dispossessed. A derelict stands in the open door way of ‘The Home of God’s Extended Hand.’ Fat man snoozing in the drizzle, under a cross of new concrete blocks, cold and inhospitable, those unpainted blocks. Lost old man. Dead Dreams. Mexican talk on the sidewalks. Pilipino jargon, too. Glossy-haired beauties serve ponsit to countrymen hungry for a taste of home. Gangly Negro fellow in a droopy felt hat prancing on the wet cement, long wooly curls catching raindrops which glitter like diamonds. Vacuums running in an old Mission House, wooden windows frame scowls. Tawdry humanness...tired, lost people,
warmed by the pungent aromas from the Manila Café. Good to see the Café and know that it will continue to exist here, though the transients may drift away. The derelicts—I like them—like to look at them, but I don't think anybody really cares about them... and I wonder if they care about themselves? I read pompous articles deploring the downtrodden's plight, and I'll wager the writers go to their comfortable Mira Mesa homes. And everybody forgets after dinner. Some of the bums are younger than me. I used to worry, when I was a little boy, prowling downtown, that I'd be a bum one day. Here I am...still on their street, taking pleasure in their buildings, their colours, and their sounds. The rain falls. High-heeled staccato on wet cement.

Parker, writing in a lamenting tone, humanized the distinct culture and community that existed prior to the emergence of the Gaslamp Quarter, a milieu that many in the twenty first century do not know ever existed. This portrayal was not glamorous, trendy, or profitable, yet it offered a gritty and real sketch of a functional streetscape for a particular citizenry.

The development of the Gaslamp Quarter made it easier for “everyone to forget after dinner” as it became possible for visitors to traverse and conceptualize the urban core without coming into actual contact with the rest of downtown, its social problems, and its inhabitants that did not live in gentrified housing. This type of space became a node or entry point for the middle and upper classes to return downtown. As a result, the process of screening out certain groups of people and social problems became political in nature as certain individuals in the project area became invisible, without representation. As the popularity and success of downtowns such as San Diego only continue to flourish in the twenty-first century, the developers and city leaders reinventing these gentrified downtowns should revisit the advice of Jane Jacobs, “Cities have the capacity of providing something for everyone, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”

NOTES
2. To further expand on the concept of the “invisible population” within the context of the urban crisis era, see Michael Harrington, The Other America (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964). Besides transients, San Diego's red-light district hosted homosexuals and the mentally ill. See Kevin Eckert, The Unseen Elderly: A Study of Marginally Subsistent Hotel Dwellers (San Diego: The Campanile Press, 1980), 34-35. Eckert led a team of researchers and lived for approximately one year in the Gaslamp Quarter's SRO hotels. This anthropological study provides rich details about urban space in the early 1970s.


20. A variety of zoning types existed within the area with almost half of the land containing commercial space. Gaslamp Quarter Association and City of San Diego, “Gaslamp Quarter Planned District,” February 1975, SDHS Public Records Collection, City Plans R1.33, 2:33; City of San Diego Planning Department, “Gaslamp Quarter Preliminary Redevelopment,” March 1975, SDHS Public Records Collection, City Plans R1.33, 2:33; City of San Diego, “Memorandum Designation of the Gaslamp
Reinventing Downtown San Diego

Quarter Planned District as a Historical District,” July 9, 1976, SDHS Public Records Collection, City Plans R1.33, 3:15. City of San Diego, “Centre City San Diego Community Plan,” 1976, Microform at San Diego State University Library (CV Docs SD-C400-I71-C395/5); Eckert, The Unseen Elderly, 32.


29. Reed, “If You Lived Here You’d Be Home Now,” 1, 29.


31. Reed, “If You Lived Here You’d Be Home Now,” 1, 29; Eckert, The Unseen Elderly, 45, 139, 143.


33. Jeannete DeWyze, “Save It, Don’t Pave It” San Diego Reader, April 7-13 1977, 3.


35. Reed, “If You Lived Here You’d Be Home Now,” 1, 29.

36. Tyler, Historic Preservation, 44.


38. Tyler, Historic Preservation, 44-55, 146.


40. Tyler, Historic Preservation, 51.


42. Murtagh, Keeping Time, 113.


47. Lynch, The Image of the City, 3, 47-48; City of San Diego Planning Department, “Centre City Development Plan: Summary,” 1975, microform available at the San Diego State University Library, SDSU (CVL Docs SD-C400-I71-C397/4A); Gaslamp Quarter Association and the City of San Diego, “Gaslamp Quarter Planned District,” February 1975, San Diego Historical Society Public Records
Collection R1.33, 2:30; “Centre City San Diego Community Plan,” 1976, microform available at SDSU (CVL Docs SD-C400-P71-C397/5).


49. Advertisement, March 16, 1981, available in the Gaslamp Quarter Promotional Folder, SDHS.


53. Invitation for dinner party with Mayor Wilson; Gaslamp Quarter Promotional Folder, SDHS.


57. Walking Tour Advertisement Flyer, 1980, available in the Gaslamp Quarter Promotional File, SDHS.


59. Terri Schneider, “Welcome (Back) to Gaslamp,” Gaslamp Gazette 1 (October-November 1978), SDHS.


62. Hannigan, Fantasy City, 81; Findlay, Magic Lands, 296.


64. City of San Diego, “Centre City San Diego Community Plan,” 1976, microform available at the San Diego State University Library (CVL Docs SD-C400-P71-C397/5).


66. Eckert’s study classifies “inexpensive” SROs as ranging from $12-$14 per night or $120-$249 per month. Eckert, The Unseen Elderly, 36; “1980 and 1990 Census Comparisons: Major Statistical Areas, Sub regional Areas, Jurisdictions” (April 1991) by Source Point.


Reinventing Downtown San Diego


71. Arnold, “Now, Sweep Up the Citations,” 5. A sample from a three week period in 1985 revealed 702 citations and 352 arrests: 60 transients received tickets for panhandling, 181 for illegal drinking in restricted areas, 46 for possession of marijuana, and 227 for illegal lodging.


88. Robert Miles Parker, “Thoughts While Drawing on Fifth Avenue” Gaslamp Gazette 2 (February-March 1979), 5.

89. Findlay, Magic Lands, 267, 283, 297; Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, 238.