Urban effervescence south of downtown

Welcome to SoDá – the South of Downtown Area – an eclectic stretch of First Street, a.k.a. Monterey Highway, from Interstate 280 to Keyes Street.

“We’re gathering the troops, trying to make it an official district,” said Jim Salata, who moved his Garden City Construction office to 1010 S. First. “We have high hopes for SoDá.”

Salata credited architect Steve McMillan for coining the name.

“I’ve heard SoDá used before,” said Erik Annonson, manager at Camino Brewery at 718 S. First St. “I think they should call it the Brewery District instead – the trail that starts at Uproar, then Camino and Clandestine on South First, Hermitage on Seventh and Strike on 10th Street.”

A mélange of hole-in-the-wall cafes, used car sales lots, tire shops, auto supply, flooring, appliance and furniture stores, barber shops and salons and other small businesses, SoDá’s buzz began two years ago with Camino and Clandestine’s openings within days of each other. People started thinking about the district in another way: downtown’s expansion is not just probable but inevitable.

“There’s a lot more traffic now and people on the street,” said Armando Gray, manager of Rick’s Furniture, which has been on south First Street for 20 years. “People coming to the breweries, residents of The Pieros, Second Street Studios and Neo (across the street). We expect more when Span opens.”

With more residents moving into SoDá as well as the established SoFA district just on the other side of I-280, there are more customers in the neighborhood.

“There’s more retail now, which doubles the value of being here,” Annonson adds. “The people stopping to drop off or pick up their pets at Downtown Dogs may want to lay over and have a beer or get something to eat.”

The district has charm. SoDá’s landmark, Faber’s Cyclery, is being restored by Garden City. The Faber’s property includes an adjacent open lot where an active outdoor gathering space is planned. Salata also owns and holds fund-raisers at Studio 724 along the main stretch.

Next to Rick’s Furniture is one of the most unique businesses in the city. Break Stuff, a “stress therapy demolition center” at 860 S. First St. Other landmark businesses in the district include Lamas Western Wear, Idol Karaoke, Bruce Barton Pump Services, Chivas Grill in the old S Sport Drive-in, Burger Bar (5 for $7.99) and Der Wiener schnitzel.

For every self-serve car wash and Wash ’N Dry Laundromat, newer retail such as Agapiellas, Hardware and Garden Supply, Insta Spe Solar Services and Glass House Smoke Shop are also making a go of it in SoDá.

Freshly painted murals have sprung up the neighborhood, but properties with razor wire, steel bars and fencing are also part of a district in transition, along with the occasional drug dealer.

SoDá is making progress. Salata said, especially in eradicating graffiti and cleaning up the area. He has commissioned a mural for the north side of his SoDá office that will show what the Monterey Highway looked like in 1876.

“I never heard of SoDá,” said Juan Martinez, owner of a party decorations business in the former Pastelería Martinez space at 860 S. First. “I’ve knew this neighborhood to be Washington.”

South First Street is the traditional boundary between the Washington Guadalupe neighborhood to the east and Spartan Keyes to the west, with SoFA and the downtown core to the north. Districts overlap here. The city’s Biblioteca Latinoamericana branch library at 921 S. First St. also houses the Washington United Youth Center.

Martinez has noticed some growing pains during his two years on the street.

“There’s not enough parking,” he said. “More crosswalks are needed across First Street. And the city has no parking-street sweeping signs up everywhere, but they never sweep the streets.”

The area falls under the city’s Downtown Frame Area. South First and Second streets are zoned for ground-floor commercial uses that can rise five stories and outlying streets are zoned for multiple residences that can be built three stories high.

Since 2017, 14 parcels along South First have changed owners. “There’s a lot of land off South First and it’s cheaper than downtown,” Salata added.

“We talk about this all the time,” Annonson said. “The Pierce, the Keyes apartments (Second Street Studios), Foundry Commons (on Fifth Street), the new hotel in SoFA – all are or will benefit us. And more is on the way.”

Good building design includes local know-how

One of my first assignments as the new president of the SJDA Board of Directors was to answer several questions by the Silicon Valley Business Journal about the future of downtown.

As I said in the article, downtown is headed in the right direction. We have many iron in the fire, and now is the time to execute all those projects and plans.

It’s exciting that Jay Paul Co. jumped at the opportunity to secure a large office building at 200 Park Ave. and that Adobe is connecting their office towers via a bridge over San Fernando Street. These are the types of actions that will move us closer to realizing our vision of more people downtown.

Another point that I made in the article is that we need to challenge downtown developers to use design and architecture talent to add nuance and quality to their buildings – and utilize the advantages of hiring local talent. Why do we reach outside the Bay Area and even California for architects to design our buildings?

When you experience the city every day, you know where people hang out, how pedestrians use a paseo, and which restaurant is the most welcoming to downtown.

This first-hand experience offers a unique perspective to inform how a building is designed, the materials used, and the experience that a ground floor space should provide.

For instance, the designers from my firm, Steinberg Hart, paid particular attention to the connection that Miro Towers has with City Hall at the ground level and views of the city from the floors above.

Similarly, for 200 Park Ave. and City View Plaza, designers must understand how Park Avenue connects to Paseo de San Antonio, which runs all the way to San Jose State University, and how that path connects to the rest of the city.

And, projects like the reimagined St. James Park require input from people who have experienced the diversity of this community firsthand and understand the need for public spaces where families, young adults and seniors can gather, enjoy nature, and express their cultures.

My favorite walk downtown is along the Paseo de San Antonio because we embraced materials and colors for paving and crosswalks and art that you can touch and feel. I am confident that this experience will only get better when new retail and key projects like the renovated Camera 12 re-engage with the paseo.

My mother was a teacher, and in her mind, every moment was an experience will only get better when new retail and key projects like the renovated Camera 12 re-engage with the paseo.

I hope I can help elevate the design of new buildings downtown. I am not referring to a specific style or a massing design solution, rather, how buildings can catalyze businesses and ultimately, improve the quality of life downtown.
Business News

Morton’s on the move: Landry’s will play a round of “musical restaurants” in the coming months, moving Morton’s from 125 S. Market St. to 50 W. San Fernando St., fourth floor. The new owner hopes to start transitioning the inside of the building this spring into 65,000 square feet of office space over ground floor retail. The building has sat vacant since the theater ran its last show in 1979.

Antonio at Second Street, will revitalize the space with more than 20 concerts Feb. 14-29 at Hammer Theatre Center, 18663 Santa Clara Pkwy. Visit DowntownDimension.com for tickets information.

Urban Catalyst wants to add windows in Camera 12 building.

Volunteers fill the gaps

Hilton San Jose changes ownership; GEM Realty Capital, a Chicago-based real estate investment company, has purchased the Hilton San Jose, paying $117.55 million for the 18-story, 353-room hotel adjacent to the San Jose Convention Center. Seller Haris Holding Group of China has owned the property since 2017, when it paid $87.3 million for it. The owners had begun a renovation in 2019. JLL Hotels and Hospitality handled the sale, which averages to $333,000 per key.

The Hilton includes 18,375 square feet of meeting and event space, an outdoor pool over the front entrance on Almaden Boulevard, spa tub, fitness center, business lounge and Affinity restaurant.

AT&T sells parking lot: AT&T sold the parking lot at Post Street and Almaden Boulevard to local developer J.P. Dinapoli Companies for $35.65 million. The site is nearly an acre.

The site went up for sale in April 2019. It has served as surface parking for employees of the adjacent windowless AT&T/PacBell building that holds telecommunications equipment for the company’s massive network.

Catch up on BID fees and businesses taxes: Downtown businesses can register or pay their July Business Local Service Taxes (BLT) and Business Improvement District (BID) fees and the city will waive the penalties and interest. The city’s amnesty program continues through March 27 and covers October 2016-March 2020. Payments can be made at Window 1 or 2 on the First Floor at City Hall, or call (408) 535-7055. More information at sanjoseca.gov/businesses and sjdowntown.com/yuja.

Downtown Events

Downtown Demension is published monthly by the San Jose Downtown Association, a nonprofit organization established in 1998 to serve the Downtown business community. It is printed on recycled paper.

Editor-in-Chief: Scott Knies
Editor: Rick Jensen
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Volunteers fill the gaps

Our City Forest, SJDA and more than 20 volunteers spent a recent rainy Saturday morning planting 12 trees along downtown streets where the previous tree had died or been removed. Species planted included London plane, pear, plum, emerald sunshine elm, Chinese pistache and jazmines.

Downtown News

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