Application for the
2001 Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence

Vermont Village Plaza
PROJECT DATA

Project Name: Vermont Village Plaza
Location: 81st Street & Vermont Avenue, South Central Los Angeles, California
Owner: Vermont Village Plaza, LLC
Project Uses: 36 For-Sale Townhouses, 4200 SF of Storefront Commercial
Project Size: 1.3 Acres
Date Initiated: September 1993
Percent Completed, December 1, 2000: 100%
Project Completion Date: September 1998

Application Submitted By:
Name: Daniel Solomon
Organization: Solomon E.T.C. Architecture and Urban Design
Address: 246 First Street, Suite 400 San Francisco CA 94105
Telephone: 415.227.4081
Fax: 415.777.5306
Email: dans@solomonarchitecture.com

Key Participants:

Public Agency:
Los Angeles Housing Development
Architect/Designer:
Solomon E.T.C.
Developer:
Vermont Village Plaza LLC
Professional Consultant:
King R. Woods & Associates
Other:
Competition Juror
Community Group:
Councilman's Office

Please indicate how you learned of the Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence. (Circle all that apply).

Direct Mailing Magazine Previous RBA entrant of RBA Announcement Selection Committee Member

Other (Please specify) Metropolis Magazine

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Signature:

Vermont Village Plaza
Project Name: Vermont Village Plaza
Location: 81st Street and Vermont Village, South Central Los Angeles, California

1. **Give a brief overview of the project, including major project goals.**

Vermont Village Plaza is a mixed-use development prototype for the commercial boulevards of South Central Los Angeles where there is over a billion square feet of commercially zoned land in a state of near total abandonment. Once South Central was not a place of emptiness and despair but a community to which hundreds of thousands of African-Americans came, mostly from the south during the 1940's, because there was opportunity and hope. There are still bastions of black middle class life in residential neighborhoods of South Central that are now completely deprived of the social services, retail and civic life that once made them part of an organic community. Given the changes in the ways that goods and services are distributed, there is no prospect that the vacant land of the boulevards will ever again support a coherent fabric of commercial buildings. Vermont Village Plaza began as a winning entry in a design/build competition initiated by First Interstate Bank to address this pervasive condition.

2. **Why does the project merit the Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence? (You may wish to consider such factors as: effect on the urban environment, innovative or unique approaches to any aspect of project development, new and creative approaches to urban issues, design quality.)**

Vermont Village Plaza addresses a physical and social disintegration that has produced an urban pathology that is as dangerous and dispiriting as that in any American city.

Vermont Village Plaza establishes an innovative pattern of development, the essential features of which can be replicated by others. It served as a valuable case study for the Los Angeles Department of City Planning as they considered the specifics of a new city-wide mixed-use ordinance.

Vermont Village Plaza is an architectural work of distinction, produced under difficult constraints of cost. It transforms a modest program into a powerful symbol of hope that stands up to the overwhelming scale of abandonment in South Central Los Angeles.
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. What issues did this project address? How has it affected the local community?

The commercial boulevards of South Central Los Angeles are streets several miles long that once provided community services, shopping and a locus of civic life for a vibrant community. The confluence of a series of public policies and economic events have turned these streets into an urban wasteland, leaving the remaining residential neighborhoods isolated behind a landscape of palpable despair.

It is too soon to assess the long term catalytic impact of the new mixed-use pattern of development the project seeks to establish, but the immediate effect of the completed work is clear. The housing units were all sold to enthusiastic buyers before the project was complete. A community-based non-profit has leased all of the commercial space. The physical impact of the project on the surroundings is dramatic; it is an icon of new life and new investment in what was the saddest urban circumstance.

2. Describe the design concept, materials used, and visual impact of the project. How was the design shaped and influenced by its intended use? Its urban context?

When streetcars were removed from Vermont Ave in 1958, the street was altered into a wide boulevard with frontage roads. The frontage roads provided insufficient parking to keep the commercial street alive without the streetcars and the Vermont frontage fell into a state of abandonment. Vermont Village Plaza gives new life to the existing frontage road by providing just the amount of new commercial space that can be served by the frontage road parking, interspersed with new townhouses. The frontage road becomes a pedestrian oriented, mixed-use adjunct to the boulevard.

The project consists of three new building types and the rehabilitation of an historic Art-Deco building. The new buildings are completed and the rehab portion is in progress. Along the Vermont frontage the new buildings each consist of four townhouses over a 1000 sq ft commercial space with eight secure residential parking spaces (in South Central LA , 1 mortgage = 2 incomes =2 cars). The routes from cars to units are behind security gates. The inner two townhouses have private gardens at grade and the outer two have private decks on bridges which link to adjacent buildings, providing continuity to the streetwall and serving as portals to residential lanes in the mid-block. Mid-block houses have entries from the lanes, private gardens and two-car tandem parking making use of a single garage with garage doors front and back. Around the central courtyard are live-work units in which a downstairs room can function either as a home office or bedroom.

Stylistically the work evolves from two intentions: First - through the bridges, a giant order of engaged columns and bold ornament to embellish a modest program so that it makes a significant impact on the abandoned streetscape; Second - to relate to the historic Art-Deco building which symbolizes to locals the time when South Central was a whole and vital community.

3. Describe the underlying values of the project. What, if any, significant tradeoffs were required to implement the project?

The design and the program that underlies it grow from the recognition that abandoned commercial boulevards of South Central Los Angeles and other similar places will never be revitalized in their original form as commercial corridors. The means of distribution of goods and services have changed too much in the last decades for that to occur. The strategy here is to reinhabit the vacant boulevard with modest amounts of community serving commercial space and an extension of the healthy residential fabric that exists in pockets a block away from the boulevards.

Vermont Village Plaza
A principal challenge was to design houses that had the security and level of amenity to be marketable in a very difficult setting. This had to be accomplished in a way that was simple and inexpensive enough to permit the public face of the project to be of sufficient quality and boldness to have real impact on the surroundings.

4. Describe the key elements of the development process, including community participation, where appropriate.

The project is the result of a 1994 design-build competition sponsored by First Interstate Bank. The competition teamed architects with local developers and builders and charged them with creating a mixed-use development proposal that would act as a catalyst for further economic development in the area.

A strong faction of neighbors wanted a retail-only project of substantial size, which was deemed completely unrealistic by the development team. The two community meetings the team held during the competition design period resulted in an ownership project that was in scale with adjacent neighborhoods and which included neighborhood-serving commercial space.

The six-person jury included local City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, local residents, and local design professionals. The jury applauded the fact that the winning proposal was “conceived as part of the fabric of the neighborhood,” and was “a model that could be replicated.” The jury observed that “this proposal doesn’t put all hopes in the architecture of the project, but focuses on how to make a community, how to make a street, how to create ownership of the neighborhood.”

5. Describe the financing of the project. Please include all funding sources, and square foot costs where applicable.

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6. Describe what is unique about the project. Is the model adaptable to other urban settings?

Vermont Village Plaza creates a pedestrian environment on and along Vermont Ave while accommodating a mixed-use program, security needs and the huge parking requirements generated in auto-dependent Los Angeles (Residential parking @ 2 off-street/DU; Commercial parking @ 3/1000 sq ft.). This was accomplished without the use of aggregated parking solutions that would have made the project economically unfeasible.

We believe that we have made a pattern that is easily replaceable and is encouraged by Los Angeles’ new Mixed-Use Ordinance which benefited from this case-study. In cities with similar abandoned commercial corridors, but lower parking requirements (Chicago, for example) the pattern is more easily achieved.

The stylistic qualities of the project are less easily replicable, but we hope that we have provided a model for uncovering the architectural roots of a place and creating both new development patterns and continuity with local history.

Vermont Village Plaza
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1. What role did you or your organization play in the development of this project?

The Los Angeles Housing Department identified the site for the project, provided an acquisition loan, subsidized the construction loan for the residential portion of the development, and provided mortgage assistance through soft seconds, mortgage bonds, and mortgage credit certificates.

2. Describe what requirements were made of this project by your agency.

The Housing Department required the project to reserve half of the units for low-income households. The City Council further required that the project be a mixed residential/commercial project.

3. How was the project intended to benefit the urban environment? How did the intentions change? What compromises were required?

The initial purpose of the project, as proposed by First Interstate Bank, was to serve as a design model for affordable rental housing in South Central Los Angeles. I urged that such a project be located at a focal point of Los Angeles reinvestment efforts. Given the location of the site, the project also became a model for development on commercial strips in South Central Los Angeles. Such sites are the most available development sites in South Central Los Angeles. First Interstate Bank was encouraged to expand the range of possible projects from solely low-income rental. The area's city councilman, Mark Ridley-Thomas also encouraged the alternative of homeownership and the inclusion of commercial use.

Thus, the project’s purpose expanded from that of serving as a design model for affordable rental housing to serving as a model for inner city reinvestment. In evolving in such a way the project’s cost, and the required city subsidies, increased substantially. Going from low-income rental to home ownership meant losing the leverage of Low Income Tax Credits and adding the subsidies required to make units affordable to the thin homeownership market in South Central Los Angeles. (The project attempts to expand that market.)

4. Data on the project’s impact on surroundings.

The Vermont/Manchester Area is a focal point of other development efforts. Currently a commercial development is in the planning stage on the east side of Manchester.
5. What about this project would be instructive to agencies like yours in other cities?

For inner city areas such as South Central Los Angeles, the most important project criterion is impact on community development. This is a more important criterion than such internal project criteria as cost per unit or site plan. The Vermont Village project was opposed by the local congresswoman as well as many local homeowners who wanted to see only a commercial development on the site. The project was supported by the local councilman and many area homeowners who saw the homeownership/small retail as a positive investment in the community. However, for both sides, community development impact was the prime concern.

6. If the project was judged successfully five years from now, what would be its characteristics?

The project would be judged successful if the values of the townhomes increased, income generated by the project approached that of retail space in other parts of the city, and most importantly, new commercial and middle-income residential development took place on the surrounding blocks in the Vermont-Manchester Corridor.
1. Describe the design of the project including design concept, choice of materials, scale, etc.

When streetcars were removed from Vermont Ave in 1958, the street was altered into a wide boulevard with frontage roads. The frontage roads provided insufficient parking to keep the commercial street alive without the streetcars and the Vermont frontage fell into a state of abandonment. Vermont Village Plaza gives new life to the existing frontage road by providing just the amount of new commercial space that can be served by the frontage road parking, interspersed with new townhouses. The frontage road becomes a pedestrian oriented, mixed-use adjunct to the boulevard.

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2. Describe the most important social and programmatic functions of the design.

The first objective of the work was to create a new development pattern for a pervasive condition of abandonment along commercial boulevards in South Central Los Angeles. The means by which that intention is fulfilled are described elsewhere in this submission.

It should be noted that Vermont Village Plaza is not intended to be a new large scale retail typology, but rather a means of interspersing modest amounts of office space and neighborhood services amidst new housing and thereby bringing the boulevard back to life.
3. Describe the major challenges of designing this project and any design tradeoffs or compromises required to complete the project.

The major challenges of the project consisted of mediating among the following contradictory demands:

- Creating a pedestrian realm along the street and within the site while accommodating huge parking requirements without building expensive and potentially unsafe concrete parking garages.
- Creating a sense of community within the project, an openness to the larger community and providing security for residents in a very harsh and sometimes dangerous setting.
- Giving a modest program sufficient presence to have real impact on the vast scale of abandonment along an enormously wide street.
- Doing all of the above for $75/sq ft.

4. Describe the strengths of the project's design and architecture, and the way in which it relates to its urban context.

We would describe the project's strengths in the following ways:

- It creates a pattern of renewal that is easily replicable.
- Through its manipulation of scale it stands up to its challenging setting and is a symbol of new investment and new life in a long abandoned place.
- It connects with a meaningful local history rather than repeating Los Angeles' pattern of perpetual eradication.
- It accommodates large numbers of automobiles in innovative and inexpensive ways without allowing them to dominate the streetscape or the site.
- It provides security, private open space, daylight and amenity for residents without compromising any of the project's urbanistic goals.
DEVELOPER PERSPECTIVE

Name: Rodney S. Shepard  
Organization: Vermont Village Plaza, LLC  
Address: 8039 South Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90044  
Fax: 323.789.1839

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1. What role did your organization play in the development of this project? Describe the scope of the involvement?

The role our organization played in this project was that Vermont Village Plaza, LLC (VVP, LLC), the legal ownership entity, was incorporated in 1995 for the express purpose of developing the 81st and Vermont Avenue Project. We teamed with the architectural firm of Daniel Solomon, Inc. to win a design competition from among 66 other architectural and development teams. The VVP, LLC and Solomon, Inc. won because our design and vision provided solutions for the restoration of retail stores on the Vermont Corridor, while also addressing the need for new affordable housing in the community. VVP, LLC organized a development team that effectively complemented the design team, bringing together 100 years of collective real estate experience. The project under our direction included development phases from land acquisition through planning and entitlements, design, construction, advertising, marketing, leasing of commercial space and sales of townhouse units.

Our scope of involvement included implementing a process for each task of the project’s critical path from pre-development through construction. The processes incorporated value engineering sessions to review each line item of the budget; meetings with the architect, engineers, and planning consultants; negotiations of contracts; review of plans, details and methods of construction to ensure compliance with budget and overall objectives.

2. What, if any, modifications were made to the original proposal as the project was developed? What tradeoffs or compromises were required during the development of the project?

Relative to the program initially envisioned by First Interstate, the final proposal enlarged units, reduced their number, and added a commercial component. These compromises were necessary as a direct result of the development team meeting with the community and addressing their concerns. The decision to decrease the total density of the housing component and add the commercial component reflects the adjoining neighborhood’s wishes.

3. What, if any, innovative means of financing the project were used?

This project was a model of innovative and effective public/private partnership. Based on its successful implementation, the project provided an excellent prototype for future developments in the inner city of Los Angeles. Additionally, special financing options for qualified home buyers were provided by the City of Los Angeles Housing Department which included down payment assistance, mortgage credit certificates, and mortgage revenue bonds for first-time homebuyers.
4. How did the financial benefits and economic impacts of this project differ from other projects? How does the project's quality relate to the financial goals?

The financial benefits and economic impact of this project differed from other projects in that the $11 million budget represented the largest single investment in the Vermont Corridor, in terms of dollars, in the last quarter-century. The long-neglected site was formerly a major Pacific Electric streetcar route, and one of the City's leading commercial strips. It recorded the coming of age of the automobile, the civil unrest of the 1960's, the advent of mini-malls, and the ultimate flight of many businesses from this once vibrant area of the City. The area not only suffered from long-term neglect, but also experienced a $15 million loss when 22 properties were burnt out during the 1992 disturbance.

The project's quality is related to the financial goals by bringing renewed vitality to the Vermont Corridor and keeping an architectural blend of the old and new. It was envisioned that the project would link the area's vibrant history of commerce and community with its vital future as a neighborhood oriented commercial venue. The mixed-use development offered a financially sound alternative for balancing the housing and retail needs of the community.

5. What was the most difficult task in the development of this project? What was the least successful aspect? With hindsight, would you do anything differently?

The most difficult task in the development of this project was in managing the private and public funding aspect. This also turned out to be the least successful aspect of the project. The original financial institution sponsored a design competition to fulfill a Community Reinvestment Act requirement. They committed to investing $15 million into the project over and above public financing. During the building phase the original financial institution merged with another institution that refused to honor the original agreement of investing $15 million. As a result, a new financial agreement was drawn which only committed $3.8 million to the project. The focal point turned from investing into an economically challenged community to ensuring that the new financial institution would minimize its losses, should the project not succeed. In hindsight, I would reconsider accepting the new financial agreement and perhaps insist that the new financial institution honor the original agreement on which the whole project was based.

6. What about the project would be instructive to other developers?

It is important to evaluate whether or not a design competition is the most effective means of bringing affordable housing to the inner city. The word "competition" in and of itself suggests that those who submit a proposal will pull out all the stops to make the best presentation (to win). However, in reality the best design may not always be the most affordable in terms of the costs to build each housing component and what the current housing market will dictate in the inner city at the point of sale.

7. If, five years from now, you were to judge that this project was still successful, what characteristics would convince you of that fact.

Five years from now I would judge this project to be successful if: a) none of the original homeowners have lost their homes in foreclosure, b) all the retail spaces were leased and making a profit, and c) this bold initiative had an economic ripple effect that would encourage other private/public agencies to partner with developers and businesses to continue the revitalization of the Vermont Corridor.
PROFESSIONAL CONSULTANT PERSPECTIVE

Name: King Woods            Title: President
Organization: King R. Woods & Associates Telephone: 213.489.4224
Address: 911 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 2180, Los Angeles, California 90017
Fax: 213.489.3937 Email:

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1. **What role did you or your organization play in the development of this project?**

   King R. Woods & Associates provided Land Use Consulting services for the project to include all required entitlements.

2. **From your perspective, how was the project intended to benefit the urban environment?**

   The project was built in an area that suffered considerable damage during the 1992 civil disturbance. It has benefited the urban environment in this area by being the catalyst for other new development in this community.

3. **Describe the project's impact on its surroundings and on the people in the area. Do you have data that document these effects? Attach supplementary material as appropriate.**

   The subject is one of the most attractive mix use projects in the City of Los Angeles. It provides home ownership for people who otherwise would not own property. It is a welcome addition to this community.

4. **What trade-offs and compromises were required during the development of the project? How did your organization participate in making them?**

   Our staff conducted numerous community meetings in order to respond to community concerns. The most important issue in the community was that the project included for sale housing and some commercial use. Those compromises were required before the project could move forward.

5. **What was the least successful aspect of the project? With hindsight, what would you do differently?**

   The total project was substantially time consuming. With hindsight I would suggest that a much closer relationship be developed with the community, to ease, improve, and speed up the public process.

**Vermont Village Plaza**
6. How might this project be instructive to others in your profession?

The project was the result of a design/build competition sponsored by Wells Fargo Bank/First Interstate. Others in the land use consultancy industry could profit from understating this process, because ultimately better projects result from its use.

7. If, five years from now, you were to judge that this project was still successful, what characteristics would convince you of that fact?

In five years, the success of this project would be confirmed by the emergence of new housing and commercial development in this neighborhood.
OTHER PERSPECTIVE

Name: Robert S. Harris, FAIA
Title: Professor of Architecture
Organization: University of Southern California
Address: University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, 90089
Fax: 213.626.2050

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1. What role did you play in the development of this project?

I consulted with the sponsor about the purpose and structure of a design competition for the project and subsequently was a member of the competition jury.

2. From your perspective, how was this project intended to benefit the urban environment?

The project had three significant public purposes:

First, the bank that sponsored the competition wanted to understand the difference between excellent, satisfactory and mediocre design. Bank leaders stated that they knew about all the other economic and political parameters of market and subsidized housing, but not enough about housing quality.

Second, the bank and the council member of the district in which the selected site was located wanted to have a positive and catalytic impact within the site neighborhood.

Third, one of the competition intentions was to generate a replicable demonstration project that might encourage other neighborhoods to welcome moderate density subsidized housing.

3. Describe the impact that this project has actually had on its surroundings and on the people in the project area. Include any data or supplementary materials that support your conclusions.

The project is just now completed and being occupied. It may be early to evaluate the deep impact of the project. Meanwhile, as one of first substantial projects in this neighborhood in more than a decade, the project has been received as a welcome addition by many neighbors, while it was opposed initially by some. Given the quality of the design, this early opposition has now been replaced by pride.

4. What tradeoffs and compromises were required during the development of the project? Did you participate in making them?

Several tradeoffs were necessary to gain public approval. These included a modest increase in retail space and an equally modest decrease in the number of residential units. The tight budget required the elimination of a very important street improvement that included planting in a median between the local service street and the larger avenue. Some arts and crafts elements were deleted for budget purposes.
5. What was the least successful aspect of the project? With hindsight, what would you now do differently?

The only aspect of the project that is disappointing to me personally is the aforementioned elimination of street-side open space improvement.

6. What can others learn from this project?

This mixed-use project demonstrates the importance of individual unit entrances and the identity that is thus achieved. Adjacent parking is a safety and convenience achievement that also makes these units compare favorably with access arrangements in conventional single-family residences. The presence of community courts, and of live/work opportunities creates a generous set of everyday life options.

7. If, in five years from now, you were to judge that this project was still successful, what characteristics would convince you of that fact?

Success could be measured by fullness of use of the ground level spaces, both the courts and the work/commercial spaces. Great success might be measured by the degree to which this housing type begins to be replicated in other similar areas. I am confident that the units will become "hot properties" and will remain fully occupied.
COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Name: John Muhammad  Title: Sr. Deputy, Economic Development & Planning
Organization: Office of Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas  Telephone: 213.485.3331
Address: 200 North Main Street, room 501
Fax: 213.485.7683

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1. How did you, or the organization you represent, become involved in this project? What role did you play? For example, was there a public review process in which you took part?

The Office of Councilman Mark-Ridley-Thomas became involved with the Vermont Village Plaza Project at the invitation of First Interstate Bank. The bank suggested doing a public/private venture with the City of Los Angeles and the council office.

The Office of Councilman Mark-Ridley-Thomas helped mobilize the community to get feedback concerning the highest and best use of approximately 78,000 square feet of vacant land. A panel of building industry professionals were organized to review proposals submitted by developers in response to a design build competition. A selection was made based upon criteria developed by the community and panelists.

There was a public review process in conjunction with financial assistance provided by the Los Angeles Housing Department and the entitlement process. The council office participated in the public review process for both items.

2. From the community's point of view, what were the major issues concerning this project?

The major issues from the community's perspective were (1) quality construction, (2) the massing and scale of the proposed development, and (3) compatibility of the new development with the existing built environment.

3. What tradeoffs and compromise were required during the development of the project? How did your organization participate in making them? With hindsight, what, if anything would you do differently?

The overall density of the proposed project was reduced. Yes, our organization and the community participated in the process. With hindsight, we might reconsider the design build process.
4. Describe the key elements of the development process, including community participation, where appropriate.

Please see my responses in the developer's perspective.

5. Describe the financing of the project (please see my responses). Please include all funding sources (see information provided below), and square foot costs where applicable (please refer to your information).

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There’s pride in my voice when I tell people, “This is a good area to live.”

LAWRENCE KOONCE, 33-year resident of the Vermont Knolls area

Revitalizing Vermont Avenue

COMMUNITIES: A once-vibrant district near Manchester Avenue has hopes for an economic revival centered on a $50-million shopping center.

GEORGE RAMOS

L.A. TIMES  NOV. 8, 2000

LAWRENCE KOONCE, like a lot of his neighbors near Vermont and Manchester avenues in South Los Angeles, stands up for his part of L.A. But sometimes what he hears really hurts—as when relatives in New Jersey recently told him they wouldn’t come for a family reunion.

“They tell me, ‘Go down there. You’re going to be carjacked,’” the 33-year resident of the Vermont Knolls area recalled.

“There’s pride in my voice when I tell people, “This is a good area to live. I don’t see roving gangs; that’s what the media says about us. But that doesn’t exist on a day-to-day basis.”

Although the fortunes of the area around Vermont and Manchester have suffered in recent years as it has struggled with a variety of problems, including spates of gang violence and an economic downturn, Koonce and other residents say it doesn’t deserve to be seen as a dangerous part of town.

They see its good side—the mostly kept homes west of Vermont, a new residents’ organization and the area’s historic past—as well as its liabilities.

“It’s the best of times and the worst of times,” Koonce said.

The area around Vermont and Manchester’s once-vibrant shopping district, complete with movie houses and streetcars, collapsed in the 1950s and ’60s.

The closing of several heavy-industry factories sent unemployment soaring. Pepperdine University, once a small liberal arts college and a prominent fixture at Vermont and 79th Street, moved to pooh Malibu in 1970.

The area took a devastating hit during the 1992 riots. Destruction left many empty lots where businesses had been. Elsewhere, owners held on to aging storefronts, hoping they would be bought out if times got better.

And, indeed, that might be about to happen.

Planning is underway for a $50-million shopping center on Vermont, between 82nd Street and Manchester, that city officials hope will help revitalize the commercial district. They hope a new supermarket and some other major retail outlets will anchor it.

In addition, construction is expected to be completed by December on a new facility for a continuation high school at Vermont and Manchester. Though it may not bring in shoppers, the new campus, some say, is a sign that things are looking up.

Several new affordable-housing complexes for seniors have recently been built. A notorious crack
VERMONT: Residents See Hopes for a Turnaround

Continued from B1

During World War II, a vibrant shopping district flourished on Vermont, surrounded by large white neighborhoods of single-family homes. A streetcar line, with connections to downtown, brought in shoppers.

"We lived at 121st and Broadway," remembers community activist Brenda Shockley, "and we considered Vermont and Manchester considerably more upscale. We thought the tracks were really a thriving commercial area...the shops, the National Dollar Store."

"I didn't think there was a better area in Los Angeles," said Gerry Reeves, whose family lived near 91st Street and Hawthorne Avenue. "You could walk the streets at night. The Balboa Theater was a big, beautiful old building. The shopping there was very nice. The drugstore [at the corner] had the best chocolate noodles in the world."

After the war, the neighborhood began to change dramatically.

Blacks began moving in, housing discrimination was fought in the courts, and many whites left as a result.

A slow decline began, spurred by the closing of the General Motors assembly plant in South-Central and other nearby factories. The city government on Vermont disappered, grouping officials to replace the tracks on the wide thoroughfare with a grass median. Famed landmark businesses like the Balboa Theater went under or moved away.

Although the once cottage homes on 119th Street and Halldale Avenue—valued at $180,000 and more—remained as bright and inviting as ever, other sections, particularly those between Vermont and the Harbor Freeway, declined in value and appearance.

Spanish-Speaking Immigrants Arrive

By the 1980s, the second postwar influx of arrivals, this time from Mexico and Central America, brought more changes.

Hundreds of Spanish-speaking immigrants, eager to come to the U.S. to avoid war in El Salvador and Nicaragua, moved into areas east of Vermont, feeling a change in business. Taco stands, carnitas (meat markets) and other businesses catering to Latinos soon opened.

But the 1982 riots brought new problems. Twenty-two structures were destroyed and an estimated $1.9 million in damage was sustained.

Now, the area is finally showing signs of recovery.

Two resident-based organizations, Community Coalition and Community Build, were started. Community Coalition, which began as an anti-drug organization but has sponsored programs for youth leadership, helped to eliminate problems in poorer stores and motels, and in behalf of poor people.

Community Build offers job training programs for residents.

A residential group, the Vermont Coalition/Vermont-Manchester and Detroit Ann, was formed to oppose a plan to build more than 130 townhouses on Vermont. Residents said commercial development was more important.

The fight energized the group, especially after the number of townhouses eventually built was far fewer than had been proposed.

A mini-City Hall on Vermont, which would have been opened in 1989, was rebuilt after being burned during the riots. And the Nation of Islam has taken over the Balboa, where it plays videotaped speeches weekly of its leader, Farrakhan, as well as offering help to the needy.

A Call for the City to Invest in Corridor

Much of the new optimism is centered on a proposed $35-million shopping center east of Vermont, which would feature 200,000 square feet of commercial space.

But there is a difference of opinion about how best to make it a viable reality.

City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, who represents the area, is pursuing a redevelopment plan to make it happen and has offered a variety of economic incentives, including subsidies and the use of eminent domain, the authority to seize property for a municipal project.

He sees the project as a cooperative effort between the city's redevelopment arm and the developer.

That sounds all wrong to critics such as Shockley, director of Community Build, who contends that the city must aggressively infuse public money to spur revitalization. She said a redevelopment project won't be enough.

"Vermont is a major corridor. You have the makings of a vital renewal, but the public sector needs to take the lead," Shockley said.

"It takes time and resources and political will to make it work. I can point to Hollywood. Improving Hollywood is supposed to be good for Los Angeles. People have to understand and buy into the idea that developing South-Central is good for Los Angeles."

Another political leader who represents the area, Democratic Rep. Maxine Waters, argues that city officials, including Ridley-Thomas, haven't aggressively pursued the project.

"They need to get in there and make something happen," she said. Ridley-Thomas has heard similar criticism from Waters before.

The two politicians differ on the construction of the townhouses on Vermont. The councilman favors a mixed-use approach, including a commercial component, while Waters favors an exclusively commercial project in redeveloping Vermont's status as a shopping district.

Told of the criticism, Ridley-Thomas, who ticked off a list of improvements he has had a hand in bringing to the area, recounted the numerous meetings he has held with developers and supermarket executives, cautioning them to embrace the idea that the area is worthy of major investment.

Considerable effort, he added, has been spent trying to persuade hesitant property owners to go along with the idea.

"In less than 30 days, we'll name a developer for this project," he said.

With that, the councilman wrote the word "RESULTS" in capital letters on a yellow pad and circled it in ink. That's the bottom line, he said.
STREETCAR STREET / DENSE COMMERCIAL
Parts of Vermont Avenue were a thriving commercial street when businesses were served by the Pacific Electric Line.

FRONTAGE ROAD / DENSE COMMERCIAL
In 1958, after demolition of the Pacific Electric line, twenty-two blocks of Vermont Avenue were converted to their present configuration with frontage roads providing access to streets. On a densely developed block, the frontage and provided about fifty parking spaces for 50,000 square feet of commercial space: only one car per 1,000 square feet.

FRONTAGE ROAD / SCATTERED COMMERCIAL
Most of the twenty blocks of Vermont Avenue were not densely developed. 15,000 square feet of commercial space with parking lots between were more typical.

PREVAILING PATTERN / THE MINI MALL
By the mid-1970's neither the dense form of commercial development on Vermont Avenue nor the scattered form could compete with Los Angeles' new prevailing commercial building type, the Mini Mall. Mini Malls provide both ample, convenient parking (four cars per 1,000 square feet) and a mix of contiguous tenants that support one another.

FRONTAGE ROAD / MIXED USE
Our proposal is for development that makes the old infrastructure of Vermont's frontage roads into a new functional pattern that can extend for many blocks. If the frontage roads are to reused, Vermont can support only that amount of commercial space for which parking can be provided on the frontage roads and a limited number of parking lots served by them. Merchants require ample directly accessible parking, a continuous and lively pedestrian frontage and a high degree of visibility from Vermont. Our mixed use pattern which creates approximately the same amount of commercial space that existed formerly, now interspersed with residences, accomplishes all three goals.
Plan and Elevations, Central Courtyard
Hattem's Market, restoration now in progress
Vermont Elevation
Central Courtyard
Vermont Streetscape