



Gray Area Foundation for the Arts, left, anchor tenant on Newsom's Tenderloin Arts Corridor, moved to the Warfield Building after being evicted from Taylor Street. The old Gaiety Theater, right, planned for renovation to be a player in the corridor's cachet, still sits all boarded up on Turk Street.



Arts District in shambles in just 2 years

Newsom's vision sours as new phase takes shape

BY JONATHAN NEWMAN

WITH typical flourish, Mayor Gavin Newsom staged a midday press conference at Showdogs, then a new hot dog diner, at the triangle of Market, Taylor and Golden Gate on the Tenderloin's southern edge.

Surrounded by young aides from his Office of Economic and Workforce Development, dark-suited bodyguards, SFPD functionaries and media reps, Newsom announced the Central Market Partnership that was to push the area's revival.

It was January 2010 and the spearhead of this renewal was dubbed the Taylor Street Arts District, a plan to refashion Taylor from Market Street to O'Farrell into a Tenderloin gateway of galleries, public art exhibits, artists' studios and general bonhomie in hopes of attracting crowds and shoppers.

The Department of Public Works would redesign pedestrian crosswalks on Taylor and upgrade street landscaping, Newsom noted. An experimental ban on cars east-bound on Market from Eighth to Fifth streets would increase pedestrian traffic, he hoped, and CityPlace, a proposed five-story glass retail mall poised to begin major demolition and construction on Market a half-block east of Taylor, would bring new life to the area.

THINGS WERE LOOKING UP

Newsom also cited the opening of Gray Area Foundation for the Arts at 55 Taylor St., the endlessly rumored reopening of the fire-damaged Original Joe's at 144 Taylor and the Art In Storefronts program on Market Street as signs that things were already looking up. Six months later, San Francisco playwright Sean Owens and his production partner, Cameron Eng, announced plans to restore the old porn-lite Gaiety Theater at 80 Turk St. doors down from Taylor.

David Addington, Showdogs co-owner and owner of the Warfield Theater, was seated at a table in the back of the wedge-shaped diner, beaming at the mayor's pronouncements. If he felt any strain at the defeat two months earlier of Proposition D — the ballot measure designed to allow billboard and electronic signage on Market Street that his company financed to the tune of \$455,000 — it didn't show.

Now, two years later, the Taylor Street DPW planter box trees, unable to gain a foothold against daily deposits of litter and rough use as crack dealers' stash holes, have been removed. Jack Sumski, owner of the building that housed Gray Area, told The Extra that he "had to evict" Gray Area from its 3,000-square-foot Taylor Street site. It's since decamped to an iron-gated storefront in the Warfield Building on Market, where it conducts night classes for aspiring gallery entrepreneurs.

Original Joe's has reopened in North

Beach, a more suitable venue, perhaps, for its now-\$44 porterhouse steaks. Its 70-year Tenderloin site remains an empty plywood-clad hulk; and Art In Storefronts has come and gone.

The 21 Club at Taylor and Turk, with its monthly Ground Zero Poetry Readings, is the only arts venue in the Taylor Street Arts Corridor that is more than a newbie on the blocks.

Addington has filed a Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceeding for the old Hollywood Billiards building in the same block as Showdogs. CityPlace is in limbo while its major funder, Commonfund, navigates its own bankruptcy whirlpool. Not surprisingly, 65% of Market Street merchants recently polled by Observesf.com found the Market Street car ban harmful to their business. The Gaiety Theater has been leased to a clothing manufacturer, its past theatrical roots remaining behind shuttered doors.

Mayor Ed Lee has refashioned the Central Market Partnership of the Newsom era — itself a recrafting of the 1995 Central Market Redevelopment Plan — into the Central Market Economic Strategy, designed to "revitalize Central Market and the adjacent neighborhoods." Lee's plan is for the city to partner with private and nonprofit developers, exempt from payroll taxes for up to six years any Tenderloin businesses that create new jobs and revamp the look of Market Street before the boulevard's scheduled repaving in 2015.

To date, one loan has been granted from the Central Market Cultural District Loan Fund — \$250,000 to Pearl's Burgers, which opened its fourth location at Sixth and Market — two applications are pending and 11 applications denied or dormant. Part of the difficulty in securing this money for the revival of central Market is that applicants must hire one new full-time employee for each \$50,000 loaned, a tough hurdle for most arts groups.

Still, new players have entered the stage. Zendsk, the software innovator, has leased two floors at 989 Market St. for its 160 employees and Burning Man's Black Rock Arts Foundation has settled in at 995 Market St., leasing space for 30 workers.

Sumski, the octogenarian owner of the 112-unit building at Turk and Taylor streets that initially housed Gray Area, moved out a porn studio, bar and Grand Liquors from his site and is building a 5,000-square-foot grocery store, which, according to a recent poll, may become the most popular place in the neighborhood. He's leased 55 Taylor St., Gray Area's old space, to S3X, an erotic art gallery that opened Feb. 10. But the Sumski family is not happy and may start legal proceedings in the belief the tenant is using the commercial space as a residence.

Sumski's watched 30 years of neighborhood struggle and now has new concerns: "The empty buildings, including the

Warfield Building and the Shorestein-owned Golden Gate Theater building, reflect badly and the recent loss of Redevelopment Agency funds doesn't help either," he said. "It's a worry: Where is the money for new development going to come from?"

PianoFight, a theatrical production company, has signed a 10-year lease for space at old Original Joe's with plans to open a restaurant with a 60-foot-long bar and cabaret stage. PianoFight, which operated the Off Market Theater at 965 Mission St. for four years, hopes to secure Cultural District funds. "We're courting private investors, too," Artistic Director Rob Ready said. "The Tenderloin's a tough sell, but I know in five years it will improve. In 10 years, it'll be even better."

CERAMICS STUDIO OPENS

A ceramics studio, the Clay Underground, has leased part of old Joe's as well. It opened in February, offering classes and shared studio space for ceramists at 187 Eddy St. off Taylor.

Tenderloin Economic Development Project is partnering with American Conservatory Theater to build a \$100 million mid-Market Center for the Performing Arts at 950 Market St., the intersection of Mason, Turk and Market streets. Meantime, ACT has opened a small-box performance space — The Costume Shop — at 1117 Market near Seventh Street and recently purchased the nearby Strand Theater with plans to make it a 300-seat live performance theater.

Elvin Padilla, project director of TEDP's North of Market Neighborhood Improvement Corp., agrees with Sumski about vacancies.

"If the Golden Gate Theater would start running performances again, it would bring people and energy back to the street," Padilla said. But he still sees youth and talent heading for the Tenderloin, citing PianoFight's lease and the refurbishing of the 240-44 Taylor St. storefront into gallery/art studio by Hella More Funner, an art collective of Sam Fuchs and Adam Gray, as positive signs.

In devising the mayor's economic strategy for Central Market, OEWD polled 124 Tenderloin residents and found what they consider the gravest problems in the neighborhood — homelessness, lack of cleanliness and crime — and its biggest needs — additional housing, jobs for residents, and a full-service neighborhood grocery store.

The Taylor Street Arts Corridor is in shambles, at least as it was originally conceived. It is becoming something different — but good, maybe better.

And for the 21 Club — the landmark dive bar that Esquire noted — to be the senior arts venue on Taylor Street is just another real-life example of the Tenderloin mantra: Expect the unexpected. ■