



NEMIZ History: A Snapshot of the Mission's Industrial District

for the Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition

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AsianNeighborhoodDesign

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Early industrial activity. The first industrial activity in the Mission began in the mid-19th Century around the Center Street wharf on Mission Creek, on what is now the corner of 16th and Treat, and down the newly paved Folsom Street along the west bank of the Creek. A new railroad built in 1860, linking San Francisco and San Jose along the Bernal Gap (now known as San Jose Avenue) and up along Harrison Street on the eastern bank of Mission Creek, brought a proliferation of new industries: tanneries, textile mills, foundries, breweries, and warehouses. The disruption of imports due to the Civil War was the engine for the development of San Francisco's industrial base. The Creek was filled in the 1870s to make more land for development.

Land use patterns. By 1890 the streets and land-use patterns that exist today had basically been built up. This area is currently designated by city planners as the Northeast Mission Industrial Zone ("NEMIZ"), and was zoned in the 1950s with the designations M-1 (Industrial) and C-M (Heavy-Commercial). The NEMIZ consists of a broad industrial area, roughly north of 20th Street, east of South Van Ness and west of Potrero. It also extends into a "tail," extending south along Harrison and then turning to the west at 23rd Street, following the industrial uses that lined the path of the railroad; it is along this "tail" that many of the live-work projects and upscale condo projects are located. The NEMIZ also extends west to the North Mission, following the auto-oriented uses and sausage factories along the onramps to the Central Freeway, where several other significant new upscale projects are located.

Ties to Latin America. The Gold Rush had created the first strong ties with Central and South America, with Pacific Steamer ships making regular voyages to the overland connections to the Atlantic in Nicaragua and Panama, and with the arrival of Chilean miners. When coffee became a cash crop in Central America in the late 1800s, San Francisco became the chief processing center, with Folgers, Hills Brothers, and MJB. By 1890 San Francisco was the third most important sailing port in the world. However, it was the construction of the Panama Canal in the early 20th Century that brought the first mass immigration from Central America. Latin American men in San Francisco in the 30s worked as laborers near the waterfront, at coffee companies, canneries, agricultural refineries and industrial plants, as well as the infamous United Fruit Company, which operated a dock on China Basin. Women worked at cigarette packing plants in South of Market, or in garment shops such as Levi's at Valencia and 14th.

An immigrant working-class neighborhood. In 1906 the Mission became a receiving ground for the homeless displaced by the great earthquake and fire, living in tents and shacks in Dolores Park. Fancy Victorian houses were subdivided into flats, and apartment buildings and "single-room occupancy" hotels, typically on corner lots, were built in the North Mission to house the refugees from ravaged areas. Italians arrived from North Beach, and Irish, immigrants and children of those who came fleeing the Potato Famine, as well as Germans and Scandinavians, arrived from South of Market. These new arrivals firmly established the Mission as a working class immigrant neighborhood. The neighborhood is typical of many United States working class neighborhoods that developed adjacent to the burgeoning industrial districts. By 1910 the Mission District's population was 50,000, a little less than what it is today; one in three residents was foreign-born. A network of streetcars throughout the commercial corridors and industrial areas took people to and from work. The first wave of Latinos began arriving in the Mission around the time of World War II, "recapturing" their old turf. Many came from the Rincon Hill area, pushed out by the Bay Bridge construction, and from old Latino neighborhood around our Lady of Guadalupe Church in North Beach, pushed out of by rising rents, as many are being pushed out of the Mission today.

Industrial growth. World War II created another wave of industrial growth, with U.S. Steel employing hundreds at its sheet metal and wire rope plant at 16th and Harrison in what is now the enormous "Muni Barn." The NEMIZ continued to grow as an important industrial center into the 50s, with warehousing,

metalworks, woodworking, food processing, breweries, textiles, construction contractors and building supplies as major industries. In the 60s, food processing, apparel, auto repair, and printing gained in prominence.

Disinvestment. At the same time that the Mission began developing its own vibrant culture from this new wave of immigration of Latinos, it also began to feel the effects of economic restructuring in the inner cities. In a process repeated throughout U.S. cities in the 1940s and 50s, this attack on working class neighborhoods was carried out both by large-scale government interventions, and the more subtle interventions of finance and “the market.” The Bay Area Council in the 1940s mapped out its strategy to remake San Francisco as a world financial capital, moving its industries to the East Bay and establishing a high-tech center in the South Bay, to be connected by the future BART system. Levels of city investment between the neighborhoods of people of color and those of whites were markedly different. In the 1940s, banks and Federal policy helped returning WWII vets to buy homes in the Western neighborhoods and in suburbs, while a policy of “redlining,” marking out neighborhoods they would not lend to, kept Latinos and other people of color from building up wealth or being able to keep their homes in good conditions. Capital’s flight to the suburbs throughout the 50s and 60s created areas of poverty that would eventually become ripe for new investment and new cycles of growth for the banks. Capital began creeping back into the neighborhood in the 70s with first white “urban pioneers,” and returned with a vengeance in the 90s.



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“Urban Renewal.” Redevelopment was the most visible tool of this assault on the City’s working class. In this process, cities would declare certain areas “blighted,” and would target them for destruction, buying up properties by eminent domain, and “redeveloping” them into new neighborhoods. In San Francisco, this meant targeting working class strongholds: the South of Market bastion of unionized longshoremen (the veterans of the ’34 Strike) as well as elderly Filipinos, the Black neighborhood of the Fillmore, and the Latino neighborhood of the Mission. In the Mission, a successful organizing campaign repelled Redevelopment.

Industry in the 90s. With the global restructuring of capital markets, the 1970s to the early 90s saw the gradual closure of many of the larger industrial plants in the NEMIZ, with the Koret clothing company, which once employed 700 people, closing in 1990, Best Foods mayonnaise factory, which by 1990 still employed 145 people, moving to Guatemala, and the Lilli Ann clothing company, which had employed 360 people, closing in 1995. But these plant closures did not mean a loss of manufacturing jobs: from 1970 to 1990 the citywide proportion of manufacturing remained constant at 9% of total jobs. Many new industries were moving in, including printers, photography studios, small garment makers, catering services, auto repair shops, building contractors, arts production, scene shops, bakeries and confectioners, such as Joseph Schmidt, which brought 100 jobs to the NEMIZ, and “niche manufacturers,” such as custom messenger bag makers Timbuk 2. Service businesses, like auto-repair shops, increased from 13 in 1970 to 98 in 1988. In the 80s the Mission became known as the “transmission,” due to the many body shops, brake shops, and other auto services in areas such as the 14th Street and South Van Ness node. A 1991 study showed that 70% of the jobs in the NEMIZ were held by San Francisco residents. These industrial businesses were attracted to the NEMIZ for its proximity to downtown markets, access to freeways, and relative affordability. In the early 90s, local activists fought off a downtown plan to rezone the area for a UCSF biotech campus (now located in Mission Bay) and related “biotech” industries, and created a relatively weak “Industrial Protection Overlay Zone” to promote local businesses in the area.

Dot-com boom. The economic boom of the late 90s shook the Mission like an earthquake. California's high-tech boom, centered in the Silicon Valley, attracted not only venture capital, but a wave of upscale young workers associated with the dot-coms. Real estate agents hungry for new markets sold the neighborhood's relative affordability, proximity to downtown, hip nightlife, and its "culture" as a selling point. Rents and the rate of "owner move-in" evictions skyrocketed, and, mysteriously, so did the fires in residential hotels. High-end restaurants and clubs began to price out the local businesses, artist spaces and non-profits. The entire feel of the Mission at night changed with the arrival of hipsters, nightclubs, and valet parking. Dot-com offices began moving into the NEMIZ and displacing industrial businesses, calling themselves "business-service industry" to get around the ban on office buildings in industrial areas. One of the most visible of these projects was Bryant Square, which evicted a number of small industries, including a furniture manufacturer, a sweater factory employing 30 mostly Asian and Latino men from the Mission, and some 50 artists, photographers and videographers in an artists' warehouse. Even where dot-coms did not directly displace businesses, the rising rents effectively did the same, as traditional industries, like garment shops, had to find new space, or move out of the city. Many eventually went out of business. The Mission's people and culture was slowly being eroded and in some cases, literally erased, as with the famous Chuy Campusano mural that once graced the Lilly Ann factory building, whitewashed to make way for a dot-com advertisement. In 1999-2000 the Mission had the highest eviction rate in the city, with over 600 recorded Ellis Act evictions in one year – this was not counting the many other kinds of evictions that go unrecorded.