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VALLEY EDITION

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Photographs by FRANCINE ORR Los Angeles Times

**PEDESTRIANS:** Shoppers walk past a plastic dinosaur at Plaza del Valle, a new outdoor mall that resembles a Mexican market, featuring murals, fountains and decorative tile. The plaza is attracting discount businesses to the downtrodden area.

## Reviving Promise of Panorama City

Planners want to restore the Valley's model suburb of the '40s with a discount shopping area.

By WENDY THERMOS  
Times Staff Writer

When Panorama City sprang up in the late 1940s atop farmland in the center of the San Fernando Valley, developers breathlessly hailed it as "The New City" — an entire mass-produced town the likes of which Los Angeles had never seen.

Today, Panorama City's business district is downtrodden and faded. The four department stores that made up the heart of the area — Orbach's, Robinsons, the Broadway and Montgomery Ward — are long gone, along with many of the smaller shops that grew with



**CLOSED:** Maria Gonzalez passes a vacant building in Panorama City, where a new retail center is envisioned.

them. Vacant storefronts abound. A six-story bank building that was once the centerpiece of the commercial district sits empty.

"It's distressing," said long-

time resident Paul Powers, 68, who remembers when shoppers from around the Valley and beyond would flock to Panorama City. "I don't expect to see a return to those times."

The town, just north of Van Nuys, has been battered by competing shopping malls, the loss of factory jobs that fueled the local economy and the 1994 Northridge earthquake.

Once white and largely middle class, the area's population of 66,000 is now a mix of working-class Latinos and Filipinos.

But in this demographic shift, Los Angeles city officials and urban planners see an opportunity to remake Panorama City.

They envision creating a new retail center that caters to ethnic populations. Instead of old-line department stores, they see mom-and-pop discount shops.

Instead of playing to the suburban car culture, they want to make the strip along Van Nuys Boulevard more inviting to pedestrians who could spend hours strolling and shopping.

"I would not be surprised if it [See Revival, Page B7]

# Planners Hope to Revive Promise of Panorama City of the Past

[Revival, from Page B1]

became a center of discount shopping," said planning consultant Bob Scott, who lived in Panorama City for 19 years.

He is part of a volunteer group of planners and architects trying to get the town back on its feet. "There's a difference between 'economy' and 'blight.' There are economy discount centers where people go to spend the whole day and shop."

In some ways, the transformation is already occurring. Latino-owned businesses like Del Sol Furniture in the new Plaza del Valle on the north end of Panorama City have in recent years filled the void left by departing chain stores.

"The neighborhood has changed a lot, and for the better, I think," said Sylvia Torres, the store's co-owner. "Ten years ago, we would not have put our business here."

Customers come to such sale-price businesses with a purpose in mind beyond picking out a new sofa.

"A lot of people who come here are trying to build up their credit because they're thinking ahead and they want to buy a house," Torres said.

A Valley businesswoman for 22 years, Torres moved her shop from Van Nuys in May, partly because she believed foot traffic would be a plus.

While clients are not flush with money — the area's median family income in the 2000 census was about \$33,000 compared with \$42,000 in Los Angeles County as a whole — they "seem like they're comfortable and can afford to buy good furniture," she said.

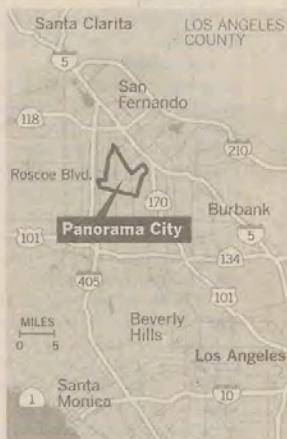
Shops in the block-long Plaza del Valle face an outdoor courtyard that resembles a market square in Mexico.

Murals, fountains and decorative tile soften the harshness of utilitarian stalls where merchants on short-term leases can start businesses with little investment.

Panorama City was the creation of industrialist Henry J. Kaiser and developer Fritz B. Burns, who teamed up after World War II to build 2,000 starter homes.



**NEW CHANCE:** Merchant Leslie Garcia sits before a mural in Plaza del Valle, a new pedestrian mall where merchants on short-term leases can start businesses with little investment.



The houses — all about 1,100 square feet and offering similar floor plans but different exteriors — rose from the Valley floor near Van Nuys and Roscoe boulevards, placed along curving streets that broke with the Valley's crisscross grid.

Panorama City was seen not as a bedroom community for downtown Los Angeles but as a self-contained development with jobs at the nearby General

Motors factory and Schlitz brewery. Instead of going downtown to shop, residents had their own sprawling shopping complex along Van Nuys Boulevard.

"East Coast scholars would look at Levittown [on Long Island, N.Y.] to define post-war suburbanization," said Ken Bernstein, a preservation expert with the Los Angeles Conservancy. "But here on the West Coast, Panorama City is one of the best examples. Back then, it was innovative."

The town was in the vanguard of the post-war subdivision boom that swept Southern California. Mass-produced housing, following the Panorama City model, led to the region's legacy of modest but respectable tract housing in suburbs such as West Covina and Lakewood.

And for decades, Panorama City seemed to work.

"The big deal was to get a job at the GM plant and get a car, and life would be good," said Los Angeles City Councilman Tony Cardenas, who grew up in the area and represents part of Panorama City.

In addition to the car factory and brewery offering thousands of jobs, the town boasted a Carnation research laboratory (where Coffee-Mate was invented) and plenty of aerospace jobs nearby.

All are now only a memory. The backbone of Panorama City — good paying manufacturing jobs — began to buckle in the 1980s. And with it came change.

The biggest blow was the closure of the GM plant, which produced more than 6 million automobiles and provided up to 6,000 jobs.

"What happened is that we saw the economic degeneration of more and more people living on less and less," Powers said.

By that time, the shopping area was sliding downhill.

"Gradually, Robinsons stopped selling men's suits and better shoes, and eventually it just closed," along with every other department store, Powers said. Wal-Mart eventually took over the space vacated by the Broadway.

Today, the original homes are aging but neat; the yards are clean, if not lush. The storefronts may have a gritty look, but the town is not saddled with trash or graffiti.

"It's filled with a lot of hard-

*'What happened is that we saw the economic degeneration of more and more people living on less and less.'*

Paul Powers, longtime resident, on the decline of Panorama City



Photographs by FRANCINE ORR Los Angeles Times

**EMPTY:** A pedestrian's reflection is caught in the window as he passes a vacant building at Van Nuys and Roscoe boulevards in Panorama City, where some officials want to revive the shopping district that went downhill after large employers left the area.

working, humble people," Cardenas said. "They appreciate what they have and they would like to see their area improved."

Organized efforts to regenerate the area are ambitious but doable, Cardenas and others say.

A retail corridor design plan, approved last year by the Los Angeles Planning Commission, seeks to rid Van Nuys Boulevard of jumbled building styles and garish signs meant to attract motorists.

Under the plan, many stores would be remodeled or rebuilt. Regulations call for less-boxy structures featuring lots of window space geared to foot traffic.

Scott's volunteer group has drafted a revitalization proposal that aims for a suburban-village theme with green belts, benches, shade trees, fountains and kiosks to encourage pedestrians.

"We are ready for this," said Orlando Villalon, 52, an out-of-work wastewater technician who has been a resident since 1986. "I plan to stay here. More people downtown means a better economic shot in the arm for all of us."

To backers, 50-odd years after Panorama City began, another "New City" is rising from the old.

"Demographics change over time," said Los Angeles City Council President Alex Padilla, who was born there. "Panorama City is at that point of redefining itself for the next generation."

*Times researcher Penny Love contributed to this report.*