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A new take on Thai Town - Capitalizing on the area's unique ethnic mix, community leaders draw plans to revitalize the diverse neighborhood.

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The western entrance to Thai Town in East Hollywood is guarded by two golden Apsonsi angel statues – half-woman, half-lion figures of Thai folklore symbolically charged with guarding the ethnic enclave.

Eight years after the stretch of Hollywood Boulevard from Western to Normandie avenues was officially designated Thai Town, the neighborhood offers a colorful streetscape that matches the lively flavors found in the area's crowded Thai restaurants and markets as well as its Armenian bakeries.

The rapid gentrification of Hollywood to the west is spreading Thai Town's way.

But that tells only half the story.

The working-class neighborhood – home to Armenian, Latino and Thai immigrants – is one of the poorest sections of Los Angeles County, with many residents cramming into low-income apartments and working at minimum-wage jobs.

Now Thai community leaders are capitalizing on the neighborhood's unique ethnic mix to attract more visitors, bolster the local economy and revitalize the area.

With more than \$500,000 in federal and state grants, the Thai Community Development Center is looking for a site to open a farmers market and an indoor bazaar next year. In addition to creating business opportunities for fledgling immigrant Thai, Armenian and Latino entrepreneurs, the market is designed to promote social interaction among the ethnic communities.

"We appreciate the diversity that exists in this area," said Chancee Martorell, executive director of the center. "We definitely want to see how this kind of project can be a vehicle to bring everyone together"

Retired teacher's assistant Prapasi Kheourai, 65, hopes to start her own business at the Thai Town Bazaar and Food Court – perhaps selling kites, gardening hats and jewelry from her native Thailand. She is saving money and taking business classes through the community center, learning how to write a business plan and do the accounting.



Kheourai said she was convinced that the project would be successful – not just for her and other entrepreneurs but for the entire East Hollywood area.

“Even though we have Food for Less, they don’t sell interesting things from other countries,” she said. “The public market will be unique.”

Los Angeles and Bangkok both mean “City of Angels,” and many Thais jokingly call the region Thailand’s 77th province because roughly 32,000 Thais live in L.A. County. Though many Thais now live elsewhere in the county, they began clustering in the Thai Town area as early as the 1960s and later opened markets and restaurants.

Armenian, Central American and Mexican immigrants have also moved into the neighborhood, and some have started their own grocery stores and restaurants. In fact, another nearby part of East Hollywood is known as “Little Armenia.”

Yet statistics show the neighborhood has a long way to go.

Data for the area show that 27% of households live below the poverty line – a rate 12 percentage points higher than the county average.

In addition, the median annual income for households hovers around \$20,000 – less than half the county average. Most residents rent, with only 4% of the neighborhood consisting of homeowners. The county average for homeownership is 48%.

Fueling the persistent poverty has been the arrival of thousands of working-class Thai immigrants in the last two decades who have flooded sweatshops, restaurant kitchens and, most recently, massage parlors, said Martorell, whose organization has conducted several studies on the plight of Thai Town.

Despite the higher cost of living in the United States, many of the new arrivals still regard minimum wages here as an improvement compared with their pay in Thailand and have fallen easy prey to business owners seeking cheap labor. The most notorious example of this was the 1995 discovery of a sewing sweatshop in El Monte where 72 Thai nationals worked in slave-like conditions.

Martorell said many of the freed workers did not know their rights were being violated and had been resigned to the fact that they could not seek help. It’s an attitude that reflects the cultural barriers that have contributed to Thai Town’s meager gains, she said.

“Thais are very fatalistic,” said Martorell, who was born in Bangkok and moved with her family to the United States in 1972. “It’s a Buddhist culture. They don’t realize they don’t have to accept poverty or someone violating your rights. They think it’s their lot in life.”

Jet Tila, a restaurant consultant and radio and television chef, visited Thai Town regularly as a child in the 1980s to go to his father’s grocery store. He said despite the neighborhood’s grungy surroundings, immigrants saw Thai Town as a place of opportunity.

“I remember the neighborhood was a dump with pimps, hookers and drug dealers,” Tila said. “But it put Thai people on the map in L.A. And poor people could come from Thailand and make something of their lives when they probably couldn’t back home because they were lower class. That’s the thing about my dad: In America, he was somebody.”

Community leaders hope the market project will help other immigrants make something of their lives. One of the potential entrepreneurs, Ana Figueroa, wants a space to sell tamales and other Honduran food.

“I have the desire and the energy,” Figueroa said. “What I am lacking is the money.”

The bazaar and food court will offer spaces for 18 start-up businesses and create 38 permanent jobs, including sales clerks, cooks, cashiers and security staff. The entrepreneurs will participate in small-business training to boost their chances of running successful food and handicraft stalls. They will also be able to take part in a federal matching program to help them accumulate enough capital.

Gina Voskanian, 52, who manages two apartment buildings at Western Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard, said she thinks the bazaar and the farmers market will draw immigrants seeking food reminiscent of their homelands. It will also allow people of various nationalities to try other cuisine and share recipes and conversation.

“They will go there not only to buy something, but so they can meet people,” said Voskanian, who is Armenian. “They will have a connection with other people.”

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