

Gentrification and Displacement : World Design Capital and UCSD's Design Lab

UC San Diego's Design Lab is causing gentrification, displacement, and homelessness through its participation in World Design Capital activities.

World Design Capital (WDC) is a designation bestowed by the World Design Organization, used to kick off a year of design-related showcases and festivities. San Diego – Tijuana was designated as World Design Capital for 2024 to great applause from civic and business leaders. However, behind the branding and the back-slapping, WDC is a capitalist economic development scheme that puts low-income and people of color San Diego-Tijuana residents at risk of eviction, displacement, and homelessness.

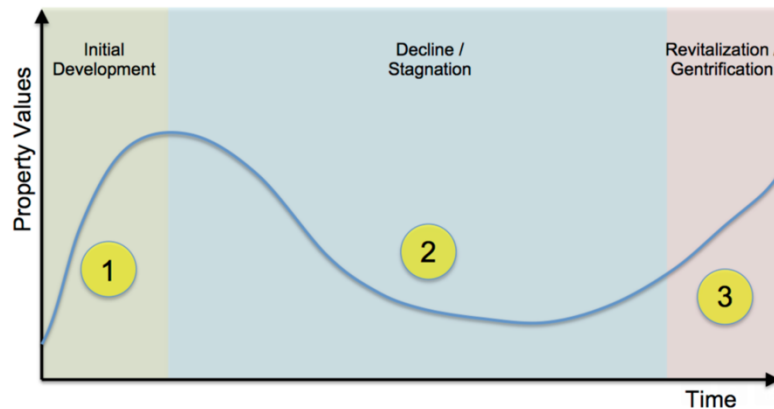
WDC seeks to create a brand out of arts, design, and innovation to attract new capital investment into the San Diego-Tijuana region -- especially capital linked to coveted industries like biotech, software, and medical research. This is part of a worldwide pattern. City governments around the world are attempting to co-locate affluent college graduates with financial institutions, high-end firms, and infrastructure improvements to create a tech boom in imitation of Silicon Valley. The arts and anything seen as "innovative" are often used as a brand to attract these new waves of investment and human capital. For their part, WDC leaders openly express that attracting capital to San Diego is one of their goals.

The WDC website highlights "bring[ing] new economic investment to the region" as a desired impact. In a May email newsletter, the CEO of WDC Carlos de la Mora writes excitedly that "World Design Capital will deliver significant economic benefits to both sides of the border from investments in projects, tourism to the region, and attracting talent in 2024 and for decades to come. We will be known as a global design and innovation hub attracting design firms, jobs, and businesses."

WDC activities include a Design Showcase in April 2024, a Design Festival in September 2024, yearlong Design Spotlight activities, and a Convocation Ceremony at the Salk Institute in November 2024. All of these activities are essentially arts and design-based branding exercises that serve an economic development goal: attracting the money and attention to make San Diego-Tijuana a "global design and innovation hub." UCSD's Design Lab is expected to participate in most if not all of the WDC activities.

One WDC project is the Bay to Park Paseo Project, which focuses on the 1.7 mile walk from Balboa Park to San Diego Bay. The Design Lab and 11 other teams of architects are responsible for installing new temporary pedestrian experiences on 12 sites along the 1.7 mile walk. A pitch deck sent out by the Director of the Design Lab sets the vision: replacing "police" and "tent cities" with "Instagrammable" and "whimsical" public art. In other words, the Park to Paseo Project seeks to sweep away the signs of decades of disinvestment and economic warfare

against the poor and replace it with the kind of urban arts projects used to attract college-educated professionals.



(From Daniel Herriges' "Who Benefits From Neighbourhood Improvements")

The classed character of this project cannot be missed or understated. According to a recent study by the UC Berkeley Urban Displacement Project and the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), the neighborhoods immediately east of the Paseo Project area are experiencing extremely high levels of displacement for low and very low-income households. "Extremely high" means that more than 200 households in an income group left a census tract in 2019 – even after subtracting households of that same income level who moved in. For context, each census tract has between 1,200 and 8,000 people. The UC Berkeley and SANDAG report also finds that families and Latino and Black households are disproportionately impacted by

displacement pressures and discloses that their model probably underestimates the current displacement risk.

The Bay to Park Paseo Project and CEO de la Mora's larger attempt to ignite a design bonanza "attracting design firms, jobs, and businesses" should be treated with extreme caution, considering the vulnerability of San Diego neighborhoods and the recent history of the Bay Area. In "Disparity in Departure," a report from UC Berkeley's Terner Center for Housing Innovation, researchers show the consequences of combining an economic boom with a housing system that is happy to displace poor residents for profit. The researchers report that from 2010 to 2016, six households making under \$100,000 left the Bay Area for every one household making \$200,000 or more that left. Low-income out-migrants were disproportionately likely to be Hispanic or Black. These out-migrants were replaced by disproportionately high numbers of households making more than \$100,000 per year. Alma Blackwell, a longtime resident of West Oakland, explained it well in a 2019 interview with Bay City News Foundation: "There's almost no one left," she said.

Many commentators argue that lack of affordable housing is the true problem, not attempts to boost economic growth. Whether or not this is true, the housing crisis has not been solved, so waves of new investment will put tenants at risk. Economic growth in disinvested areas still creates the crucial factor exploited by landlords, a rent gap: a gap between the potential value of a piece of property

and the value currently being realized. While they are under constant threat from their landlords, what reason do San Diego residents have to support tech and design-led economic development plans, when economic growth means rent increases that put them at risk of displacement, eviction, or homelessness?

Despite having a clear cautionary tale in the Bay Area, UCSD's Design Lab does not appear to be exercising any restraint as it boosts WDC activities. In fact, the Design Lab appears to see WDC as an opportunity to boost its standing. The Director of the Design Lab even made an appearance in front of the San Diego City Council in May, requesting \$3 million to support World Design Capital activities. The Director circulated de la Mora's newsletter to Design Lab members beforehand as a source of talking points for potential public commenters.

It is up to progressive and radical forces in San Diego, including union members at UCSD, to force the Design Lab to be accountable to the neighborhoods it affects through participation in World Design Capital 2024. Advocates can start to hold the WDC team accountable by asking some specific questions.

- Where will the new investment that WDC is attracting be located? Which neighborhoods?
- Will the new investment create a rent gap in those neighborhoods?
- How will the local landlords, both residential and commercial, respond to a rent gap?

- How can we use WDC money to directly support San Diego residents instead?

Asking specific, concrete questions is important because the WDC team and the Design Lab will attempt to sidestep the issue of a rent gap by representing racial diversity in WDC activities as a substitute. Representation is no substitute for power. The UCSD Design Lab has shown that when it holds the power, it will use it to advance economic development schemes that cause gentrification, displacement, and homelessness. This assault on San Diego residents will continue until our movement takes the power back.

Links

Urban Displacement Project |

UCSD Design Lab



Rough Waters: Gentrification |
and Cataclysmic Money

San Diego's Efforts to
Criminalize Unhoused People

