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Liberty Station's Arts District 10th anniversary: Celebrating thriving culture, art and civic duty

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10.28.17 - 09:27 am



Arts District of Liberty Station celebrated its 10th Anniversary, shouting, “Well done!” to San Diego’s arts, civic, business and philanthropic leaders instrumental in the historic transformation from military base to thriving cultural, civic and arts district. The event hosted over 200 people to acknowledge accomplishments 17 years in the making.

In 1997, after 75 years as a naval station, The Naval Training Center (NTC) padlocked its doors. In 2000, Corky McMillin Companies donated \$2 million to the NTC Foundation to

facilitate a founding board chaired by Murray Galinson. A dedicated team worked tirelessly and diligently to transform the venue into the signature community presently showcased as one of San Diego’s largest arts, culture and dining districts. Nearly 120 museums and galleries, art studios, dance companies, educational groups, creative and retail space along with fine dining and entertainment venues, grace 128-acres, spanning 38 historic buildings.

NTC’s executive director, Alan Ziter described the day as a “rewarding” honor to recognize the team devoted to the “development and history of the Arts District,” while noting the “founding board, the city leaders and Corky McMillin Companies for their leadership and vision.”

Ziter described the closure of the Naval Base as slicing into San Diego’s prestige. Faced with the daunting task of “competing interests” for the land and its buildings while “meeting Federal requirements for restoring 8, 000 civilian jobs,” founding board members were “handpicked for this volunteer endeavor.”

“Given 26 shuttered Navy buildings in varying conditions, we had the task of creating a new landmark civic, arts and cultural district – without city money,” he said. “The Corky McMillin Company shared the community’s vision. From our dreams and start-up funds, we invested over 85 million dollars into a closed military base to create a landmark destination that hosts over 700,000 people each year. And we’re still growing!”

According to Ziter, the excitement “is just beginning.” Ziter announced the prospective opening of a 300-capacity live theatre. Through the generosity of the Laub Family Fund, the NTC Foundation “engaged” a theatre consultant who determined “through extensive community outreach,” a need for a performing arts theatre, especially among the Arts District resident dance groups. A fund-raising capital campaign will soon be launched.

“Planning is underway for a new 300-seat theater for dance, music, theater and

film in the former Navy Base Exchange in the heart of Liberty Station,” said Ziter.

When asked to share his sentiments in the growth of Liberty Station Ziter stated, “I consider it a privilege to work with Liberty Station. Although years in the making, the Arts District will benefit San Diegans for generations to come. My ideal goal is to see the buildings through renovation completion.”

Ziter spoke of the challenges to secure community support.

“These beautiful and historic buildings reside on a Navy Base that most San Diegans have never visited,” he said. The vicinity of the base, Loma Portal, was not often frequented unless people were passing through to Cabrillo Point. We were challenged to invite people to share our vision of possibilities.”

In addition, the founding board “had much to learn,” including the buildings state of disrepair, renovation costs, the subject of each building, the selection of art and civic groups and the genesis of the financial backing. Ziter graciously thanks those who worked to tackle the issues and facilitate solutions.

“I salute the founding board and chair member Murray Galinson and Corky McMillin, who, along with the employees of the Corky McMillin Companies, were committed to seeing this project through in a way that honored the Navy’s history and while creating an arts and culture center that would become a community legacy,” he said. “Also included – Mayor Susan Golding and councilmembers, especially Byron Wear, who worked to ensure that we best serve the citizens of San Diego while serving as a model for other communities.”

Ziter is working to complete a Barracks Hotel by 2019 and the live-theatre performance venue by 2020.

“We encourage everyone to ‘Salute the Season’ at Liberty Station to ‘Skate, Create and Celebrate,’ he said. “The Rady Children’s Ice Rink opens November 19th plus a holiday light art installation and 90’ holiday tree lighting will illuminate on November 29th. Liberty Station is the place to visit for holiday gifts with a creative twist.”

Toni Robin of TR/PR, the public relations agency for the NTC Foundation described the celebration as an “opportunity to publicly thank founding board members for their vision and fundraising.”

According to Robin, the original concept for a civics and arts center was “broad.”

“The celebration thanked our founding board members for helping to establish our goals,” she said. “Along with civic leaders, the city council, the mayor, elected officials and the philanthropic community, we celebrated our achievements as a thriving district. We also questioned, What’s next? We’re not finished – the job’s not done. Our live performance venue – the theatre needs community support.”

For Robin, the day was “awesome.”

“People were in tears,” she said. “This was a family reunion of volunteers and elected officials who’ve been here from the beginning. These people saw an

empty palette and said, 'We're going to transform empty buildings in need of repair into a thriving arts district.' Over 220 of the event attendees worked to move the Liberty Station project forward."

Robin reminisced that Liberty Station's progress was nothing short of a miracle."

"Years ago, anyone could've walked around Liberty Station naked," she said. "No one was around to notice. We went from a place of messy dirt without and single road and wearing hazmat suits to walk into buildings to a beautiful, thriving district energized by the public market, movie nights, concerts, an ice skating rink, holiday activities and ballerinas walking around the dance building every morning. What a great achievement to be a part of this amazing venue!"

Robin invites everyone to visit and revisit as the Arts District shifts from renovation to programming.

"Become a part of the Art District's philanthropic outreach, have your name on the theatre and leave a legacy," she concluded.

Lead sponsors include The Corky McMillin Cos., Reuben H. Fleet Fund, The San Diego Foundation, Joye D. Blount and Jessie J. Knight Jr., Carol and Martin Dickinson, Manpower, Sandra Perlatti, Capital Growth Properties, Inc., AMO, CDC Small Business Finance, Judy McDonald, O'Connell Landscape Maintenance, Atlantis Group Land Use Consultants, Bank of Southern California, MeadsDurket, obrARCHITECTURE, Inc. and Swenson Advisors, LLP.

Committee members include Committee chairs, Jessie J. Knight, Jr. and Joye Blount, and committee members Hannah Abendschein, Melyn Acasio, Judith Andry, Marcela Escobar-Eck, Lori Fleet-Martin, Lisa Johnson, Victory Lareau, Laurie Madigan, Amanda Martin, Leslie Meads, Jackie Morgner, Sandra Perlatti, Kathi Riser, Toni Robin, Paul Scott, Silvera, Andrew Waltz and Alan Ziter.