

Sol Price, at 86, helps make City Heights a pioneer

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Back from time off, down from the mountains, a reporter catches up on the city he cherishes:

It's time to recognize City Heights, once a mid-San Diego slough of immigrants and violence, for what it is becoming with the help of Sol Price, the irascible man who changed the world with his discount warehouses. Price is leveraging his own millions there with public funds to challenge the way American cities work.

Nothing quite like this roseate, utopian bravado has been changed since Jane Addams went into the Chicago slums in 1899 to convert an industrialist's mansion into Hull House, America's first settlement house. It was intended to bridge the gap between immigrants and old-stock Americans with an unsegregated, interracial community. Later a crusader for women's suffrage and legal protection of immigrants, Addams became the first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Her social experiment is bedrock in textbooks about urban renewal.

Price, 86, has never mentioned the name of Jane Addams to me and I will require protection from him for linking his work with hers. He is the son of a reasonably radical labor organizer for New York's Ladies' Garment Workers Union in violent Depression years.

He comes to work each day at his La Jolla office flanked by power planners like his son Robert, Murray Galinson, Jack McGrory and Jim Cahill. Under Price, they are an uncommonly branded band. Price's foundation is a major interest of each, its grants lists are earthy. Price equally loves making money and doing good. He and his people are neither sleazy Wall Street nor white-stockings philanthropists.

Price has given tens of millions to San Diego causes he considers constructive, but he is legend for abruptly ending interviews with some of this region's most elite fundraisers.

"You're on an ego trip," he told one recently, and walked her to his door.

My rare strolls with him among the blighted blocks he has filled with classrooms, libraries, small homes and playgrounds are never frequent enough to stay up with his restless mind and checkbook. On my last visit, he was frowning:

"If you succeed, you know, you fail. I got a letter from a City Heights minister. We asked him to come in. He worries that since City Heights is a better place to live, land prices

are going up and poor people can't afford to live here anymore."

Now he addresses that issue. In a \$43.5 million project next to a six-story office building rising at University and Fairmount, he's building 116 townhomes (1,280 square feet), intended for City Heights residents and public and nonprofit employees working in City Heights.

Price shrewdly delivers nonprofit housing locked inside an enticing free-enterprise game:

For their service on community projects, tenants will receive rental credit up to 100 percent on their \$950 monthly payment for a \$140,000 town house. Their loans will be on a 50-year mortgage at 5 percent.

To control land cost inflation, which Price calls the major factor in rising housing costs, Price's foundation will own the ground and rent it back to tenants. The wait list is already swelling.

Such private-public leverage is at the core of the rebuilt City Heights. At the start, Price persuaded City Hall to build a new police station as though it were an open community center. Neighbors still stand patiently there to relate their woes to desk sergeants.

The city demanded a master plan that would require a two-year delay. Price wouldn't wait. "I'll pay for it and you pay me back," he said, and it was finished in six months.

Such fervor permeates the Price domain: His son Robert oversees education enhancement; San Diego State manages three City Heights schools (including Monroe Clark Middle School and Hoover High) for the city board of education as pilot projects.

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