

West Oakland Matters

OAKTOWN

P I C T U R E S

Once known as “The Harlem of the West”, the Oakland district bounded by X and Y between A and B saw 7th Street as its epicenter. Hotels, nightclubs, restaurants and more blended naturally into a typical urban zone of high energy attraction - greenlighting regular and frequent encounters of folks, all ages, from within and without the area, even as it had its redlight zone too - with business, entertainment and social engagement.

Today, the old bustling sidewalk of 7th Street is massively overwhelmed by a parallel overhead railway track, throwing deep shadow onto the windows and doors of its remaining vendors and proprietors on a borderline between failing and rebirth. A spirited-looking bike shop opens mainly as a depot for feeding the homeless and hungry. Alternating layers of glamour and decay post the location of a home of jazz. A ramshackle boat sits like a child’s private clubhouse in a vacant lot where an 800-seat theater used to host a regular audience. Nearby housing, some charred and some with mismatched outer and inner levels of repair, holds addresses on streets that are empty most of each day.

This kind of description has its faults and blind spots. For several reasons, it needs to stop being the way West Oakland is understood. Rather, both the mythic period that boasted night life including local celebrities and Las Vegas-level ne’er-do-wells, and the current period of ruins, are phases that challenge any idea of a uniform, persistent local culture spanning the 1930s to the 2020s. Likewise, the COVID pandemic had its period. Two earlier epidemics - drugs and, inevitably, guns - each had brusquely replaced what came before them.

Today there is a new threat: the wave of San Francisco Tech attempting to annex Oakland Real Estate, triggering an entirely different local economy. As with each of the other phases, the beginning is rough and the aftermath will be long-lingering.

In this economy, the rules are different depending on what side of the problem you find yourself. But they always were.

Black soldiers returning from Korea needed relief, jobs, and homes. Compared to benefits provided for veterans who were not Black, these resources were simply not much in supply. During (year x through y) City-funded projects undertaken in West Oakland would hire workers featuring no one from West Oakland. Police patrols in the years (x through Y) were not just territorial but more like paid security for private, not public, property. In the last year or two, one of the city's largest homeless encampments was displaced from its West Oakland locale by another of West Oakland's best sources of recent pride, a professional sports team.

The question rises, then, about how neighborhood residents hold on to what they have, and how what they have means more than what they don't have.

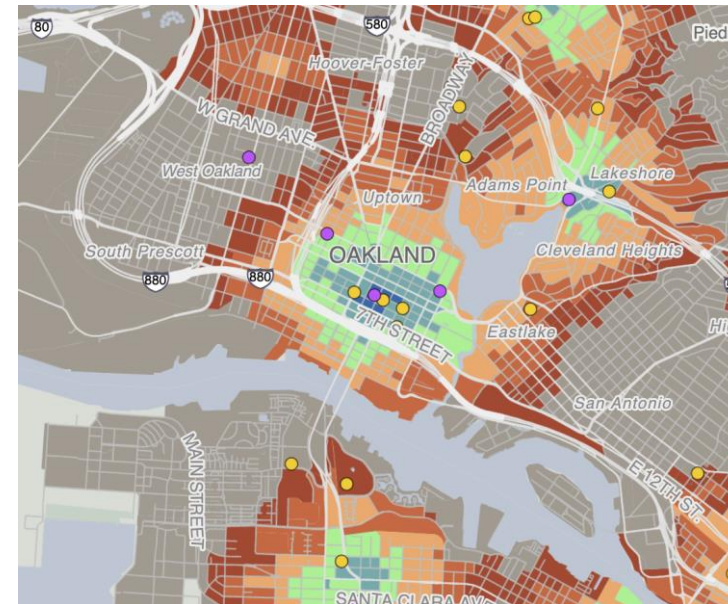
Staying there involves big trade-offs, and greater isolation. In the grandparents' still standing house, do renters keep it viable, or do small homeowner landlords unduly suffer under the city's current regulations? Do developers flip blocks around that house to make room for far richer West Bay migrants or transient up-and-comers? How far from the house can the grandchildren who live there go safely, to where, and at what times of what days?

“Closecity” (<https://close.city/?x=-122.27021&y=37.79959&z=15.59905&r=0&l=11111>) is a popular interactive map that attempts to grade different neighborhoods using a set of defining criteria about what is important in a locality. By doing this, it markets a “model” of a best locality, and although it is just grading what already exists, it inevitably becomes prescriptive as well.

Destination details

Close aims to classify amenities using the same standards nationwide. Some details for particular destinations are laid out below:

Destination	Details
Supermarkets	Close distinguishes supermarkets from convenience stores and other markets using two criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least two aisles of fresh produce • At least two aisles of home goods
Convenience stores	Includes general stores, corner stores, gas station stores, bodegas, and other markets that do not meet the criteria for a supermarket
Farmers markets	Includes both produce markets and weekly farmers markets
Libraries	Public libraries, not including university libraries
Public transit	Subway/light rail: Also includes trams and streetcars
	Passenger rail: Includes both inter-city and commuter rail
	Frequent stop: Stop on a route that meets the following criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ≤10 minute headways on weekdays 7-9 AM and 4-6 PM • ≤15 minute headways on weekdays 9 AM-4 PM and weekends 7 AM-6 PM
Public schools	Alternative schools, career and technical schools, schools focused on special education, and charter schools are split into separate categories. Travel time is calculated to the nearest matching school in the same school district. Some districts determine school attendance using smaller geographic zones; these attendance zones have not yet been added to Close, so school travel time estimates should be cross-checked against attendance zone maps provided by the district.
Playgrounds	Designated play spaces for toddlers and children, usually including playground equipment. Must be open to the public. Does not include playfields for organized sports.



Currently, West Oakland appears in one of the highlighted “most walkable” areas in the map. The easy thought here is to compare what the community says about itself against what that map promotes to a general citywide audience or a roving populace of visitors. But in that comparison, it must be understood why any differences are found. Who speaks from the community, and what is being emphasized?

One of the buildings on 7th Street holds rooms that had headquartered the Black Panther Party's daily operations, school, and community food services. In (year x), the Party Manifesto spread widely as the Ten Point Plan. Closely resembling a local Constitution, the permanent universal value of its ethics stand above almost all else as the foundation of West Oakland's culture.

Yet reading it, one has no choice about feeling the phrase "We The People". The Ten Points make it very clear who "We" are. And the strain of continuity throughout West Oakland's challenges is that what the neighborhood's dwellers always held onto is each other.



West Oakland Matters brings the neighborhood to journalists and artists in a project focused on what kind of forces the community says it suffers, and on what ways the community creates the identity it embraces for itself, culminating in an exhibition event.

Developed by East Bay collaborative Oaktown Pictures with West Oakland residents, the imagery, text, and discussions that make up the event blend work based on direct expressions by residents and advocates, both creative and by historical observation.

Creativity old and new is explored as representation of identity and as evidence of resilience. History conveys the perspective and authenticity of its observer.

The project culminates in an exhibition event hosted by a West Oakland landmark location. The event includes painting, photography, video interviews, documentary film, a discussion panel, and individual speakers or presenters from the neighborhood itself. The wide array of exhibited content and information spans many decades and highlights the community history as told by current resident elders of West Oakland and renderings of the themes by Oakland artists.