

Out of the Shadow

Oakland is no longer San Francisco's quiet neighbor By Melanie Haiken

Call it the second-city syndrome. Just as St. Paul languishes in the shadow of Minneapolis and Fort Worth fights to distinguish itself from Dallas, Oakland has always suffered from its proximity to the City by the Bay. But, as San Francisco continues to recover from the dot-com collapse, Oakland is quietly coming into its own.

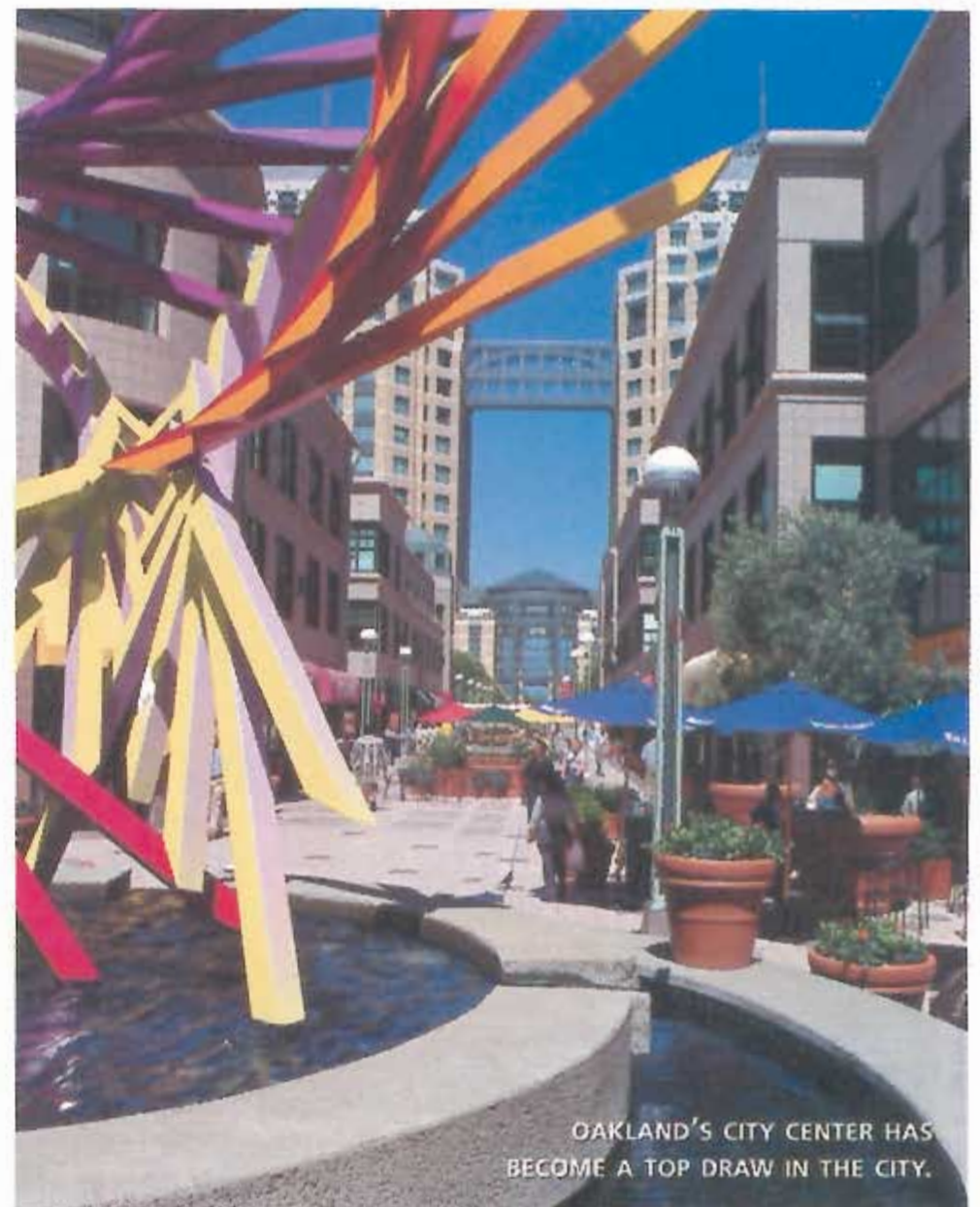
Consider this: The number of arrivals and departures at Oakland International Airport grew a significant 7.4 percent in 2001. This spring saw the completion of the first privately funded commercial high-rise to be built in Oakland in more than a decade, a 21-story curved glass construction known as 555 City Center. Oakland's commercial vacancy rate, though still a high 10.7 percent, is now considerably lower than San Francisco's, which has soared to 12.7 percent.

To Bay Area residents, the concept of Oakland having a lower vacancy rate than San Francisco is mind-boggling. And Oakland's rate for class-A space is holding steady at about \$30 a square foot, only slightly below San Francisco's current average of \$33 a square foot.

But it is the hotels that tell the real story. The 160-room Courtyard by Marriott opened in April. Also brand new is the Hilton Homewood Suites, a hotel catering to long-term business travelers. The commanding 486-room City Center Marriott recently unveiled a complete renovation designed to accommodate Oakland's growing conference business with 17 meeting rooms and 89,000 square feet of meeting space. Another Hilton property, the Gardens, broke ground across the street from the new Marriott. "There's definitely a hotel boom happening," says Manette Belliveau, executive director of the Oakland Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Such dramatic changes are thanks largely to the popularity and zeal of Oakland's maverick mayor, former California governor Jerry Brown. Now in his second term, the famously iconoclastic Brown has doggedly pursued an Oakland renaissance, defying both obstacles and ridicule. In fact, Brown has even done some ridiculing of his own. Last summer, Bay Area residents were treated to a series of clever television ads poking fun at fogbound, overpriced San Francisco (one featured a doghouse sporting a \$400,000 price tag) while lauding Oakland as sunny and affordable — with plenty of parking to boot.

Brown's proudest achievement may be a matter of sheer numbers — the ambitious "10K plan," which aims to lure 10,000 new residents to downtown Oakland.



OAKLAND'S CITY CENTER HAS BECOME A TOP DRAW IN THE CITY.



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- President of Athena Institute
- Ph.D., U. Penn in biology; Postdoctoral at Stanford
- Author of 6 books and 35 scientific articles
- Co-discovered human pheromones in 1986 (Time 12/1/86; Newsweek 1/12/87)

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It's not yet time for triumph, but Brown can boast a fair amount of progress, says William Claggett, executive director of Oakland's Community and Economic Development Agency. Out of the 6,500 units slated to house the proverbial 10,000 occupants, "1,000 are completed, 2,500 are in the pipeline, and 3,000 are in the planning stage," he says.

Growth is most apparent in the area known as City Center, which is pushing out toward Chinatown, Lake Merritt and the waterfront. "The term City Center is starting to have a fair amount of cachet," says Belliveau, "and businesses want to be associated with that term."

Culturally, no one can argue that Oakland isn't stepping out of San Francisco's shadow. Three new galleries opened in the spring, as did the long-awaited African American Museum and Library. Labor Day weekend will feature the second annual Art and Soul culture festival, an extravaganza of food, arts and crafts, and live music on four stages. Last year's inaugural event drew more than 25,000 people to the newly renovated downtown.

Businesses are also embracing the city. Rainin Instrument, Zone Technology and the famed San Francisco pastry company Just Desserts have recently relocated to Oakland to take advantage of the city's welcoming business climate, says Joseph Haraburda, president of the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce. To anyone thinking of making the move, he adds: "Come on down and we'll show you around. This is a truly engaged business community." ■

Melanie Haiken is a freelance writer based in San Rafael, Calif.