

CESAR CHAVEZ: DREAMS OF LIFE ON A DEAD SAN FRANCISCO STREET

San Francisco Chronicle Magazine

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Look Up!

The birds are back along
the Pacific Flyway





Street Dreams

Can one woman's beautiful vision bring life back to Cesar Chavez Street?

BY TIM HOLT • PHOTOGRAPHS BY LANCE IVERSEN

It is one of the bleakest streetscapes in San Francisco — a relic from an ambitious freeway-building era. Six decades ago, city crews began removing homes, businesses and sidewalks on the north side of Army Street, ripping apart the spine of a community to turn the street into a 100-foot-wide thoroughway. A citywide traffic master plan called for Army Street to feed traffic into a new freeway that would be built

through the Panhandle and run alongside Golden Gate Park.

That freeway never got built, but the traffic-choked thoroughway remains. Renamed Cesar Chavez Street, it narrows dramatically when it meets Guerrero Street, marking the spot where the bulldozers were blocked by an anti-freeway revolt. In 1959, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, bowing to citizen pressure, voted to cancel most of the extensive, crosshatch system of throughways

Dozens of pigeons take flight over housing along Cesar Chavez Street, the site of the great divide between the Mission District and Bernal Heights.

and freeways dreamed up by the city's traffic planners in the '40s and '50s.

The stretch of Cesar Chavez from Guerrero to the 101 interchange remains a stark landscape, six lanes wide and choked with traffic circulating in and out of the interchange. It presents a formidable barrier — some residents call it a "Berlin Wall" — dividing Bernal Heights from the Mission District. Surrounded by streets that are green and vibrant, Cesar Chavez remains unredeemingly blighted and monochromatic. Valencia Street, 24th Street, and Mission Street team with foot traffic and small shops. Cesar Chavez is dominated by institutions — churches, schools, the Salvation Army and St. Luke's Hospital; day laborers waiting for work on curbs and street corners are the dominant human presence.



Dog time in Precita Park, an example of what Bonnie Ora Sherk can do when she puts her mind to it. She has a master green plan that includes reshaping Cesar Chavez Street.

On a sunny day this fall, I watch a lame, elderly Chinese American woman hobble across the street, her face a study in grim determination. She has 23 seconds to make it across, which translates to about one stilt-legged stride per second. She makes it with hardly a second to spare. The timed signals, a rare concession to pedestrians, were installed after two schoolchildren, a brother and sister, were struck by a truck while attempting to cross the street four years ago. They both survived, although the young girl missed a year's worth of school.

Other nearby streets, even busy Guerrero, have bike lanes. Cesar Chavez has one block-long bike lane on one side of the street, installed only after a hard-fought battle with neighbors concerned about the loss of parking spaces.

Cesar Chavez is, in short, a traffic conduit virtually devoid of street life. When the city's housing authority replaced some grim, barracks-like public housing units on the street with townhouses, they were designed so that most of them faced away from a street that is clearly not meant to be lived on.

Despite all this, a small, organized group of residents from both sides of the street believe they can turn Cesar Chavez into a living street, one that welcomes pedestrians and cyclists as well as motorists. They call their 2-year-old organization CC Puede. It's a variation on the farmworker rallying cry "Si Si Puede, (Yes We Can)!" — and a fitting name for their improbable quest. When you're tackling a street like Cesar Chavez, you need all the motivation you can get.

Two remarkable women who passionately believe that slogan, Bonnie Ora Sherk and Fran Taylor, sit on CC Puede's seven-member steering committee.

Sherk, an artist and landscape architect, has made a career out of enlivening dead spaces in the urban landscape. In 1970, she placed a few palm trees and a rented cow from Santa Rosa on a partially completed off-ramp of the old Central Freeway. By 1974, she was planting vegetable gardens and herding farm animals onto the no-man's-land adjoining the 101 interchange and Cesar Chavez. "The Farm," as it was called, attracted schoolchildren and urban gardeners from the surrounding neighborhoods. One notable celebration there featured a modern dance troupe performing on the 101 off-ramp. By 1980, Sherk had moved on to other projects, and the space under the interchange was gradually taken over by the homeless.

Currently Sherk's nonprofit organization, Life Frames, is greening streets and planting vegetable gardens in a 9-acre swath of the Excelsior district that includes Balboa High and John Denham Middle School. Sherk is once again working with schoolkids as they break up asphalt and plant vegetation around the surrounding streets and schools.

It was probably inevitable that Sherk would turn her attention to one of the deadest, bleakest streets in the city — one that's a few blocks from her Bernal Heights home.

In her quest to bring life to the urban environment, Sherk has long been fasci-

nated with the city's underground creeks. Three of them converge at the Cesar Chavez-101 interchange. She proposes to uncover one of them, Islais Creek, and create a pond in the middle of the interchange — after reconfiguring the tangled ribbons of asphalt. She wants to put a tall windmill next to the pond to, in her words, "create a new, gorgeous and dramatic southern gateway to San Francisco." She also wants to reconfigure Cesar Chavez into a serpentine shape to mimic the creek that runs along it, and line it with trees and riparian vegetation.

It is tempting to dismiss all this as a lovely vision that has no chance of being realized. But Sherk has a track record of implementing her improbable visions — and a strong commitment to this one. She views the city's underground creeks as a unifying force, oblivious to neighborhood boundaries. The creeks that converge at the interchange — Islais, Precita and Serpentine — run through nine adjoining neighborhoods, including not only Bernal Heights and the Mission District but also Potrero Hill and Bayview-Hunters Point. Sherk envisions a day when daylighted creeks provide a network of waterways linking San Francisco's neighborhoods.

At this early stage in the Cesar Chavez campaign, Sherk offers a vision of life and hope in a landscape devoid of both.

Where Sherk's visions roam free, Taylor's remain firmly grounded, steeped in the language of the traffic engineer. Owl-ish-looking, thoughtfully intense, Taylor is determined to take down the wall that separates the Mission from Bernal Heights. The 58-year-old Taylor, a medical editor, freely admits that beneath her calm exterior there is a lot of anger and outrage at the "traffic sewer" a block from her Mission apartment. She rails against the nearby freeway, "that gated community for cars." She rails against the city's Department of Parking and Traffic, its "cob-web-covered desks," its conservative, do-nothing attitude (an attitude she grudgingly admits has begun to change in the past few years). She is determined not to rest until she has nudged the city bureaucracy and her neighbors toward making Cesar Chavez safer and more inviting by taking out traffic lanes, greening it and adding more space for pedestrians and cyclists. She and other CC Puede stalwarts collected 600 signatures on a petition to do just that, prompting the city's Planning Department this fall to begin a yearlong study of their proposals.



This page:
scenes along
Cesar Chavez.
Top right,
Bonnie Sherk;
below Sherk,
Fran Taylor,
member of CC
Puede, a
grassroots
coalition of
residents trying
to slow and
reduce traffic.



Some of the very little human activity along the thoroughfare that is Cesar Chavez Street.

There are others making significant contributions to this effort. They include Gillian Gillett, a software engineer in her 40s who's raising two children on Guerrero. Like Taylor, she steeped herself in the language and principles of modern traffic science, while leading a successful effort to tame traffic

traffic is overwhelmingly residential. "People do live on Cesar Chavez, but with all its institutional uses, and its role as a freeway feeder, it's been pretty easy for traffic engineers to write it off as a high-volume arterial," she says.

Residents on the gentrified Bernal Heights side tend toward the same view as the traffic engineers, and worry that traffic taming on Cesar Chavez, especially any reduction in its traffic lanes, will cause a spillover to their quiet residential streets.

Much of the opposition to CC Puede's efforts has come from the Precita Valley Neighbors, a Bernal Heights neighborhood group. When Taylor and her cohorts began promoting their traffic-calming ideas and circulating their petitions two years ago, Precita Valley co-chair David Robinson expressed his firm opposi-

tion to any removal of traffic lanes on Cesar Chavez: "We'd all like to see Cesar Chavez not so ugly and not so fast, but that's not the practical reality," he told *The Chronicle*.

For all of Taylor's anger and outrage, she has been careful not to aim it at the Precita Valley folks, not even when they put out misleading flyers charging that CC Puede wanted to reduce traffic on Cesar Chavez to one lane in each direction.

Instead, in what was a crucial turning point for the Cesar Chavez campaign, Taylor and two other CC Puede members sat down earlier this year with Robinson and his co-chair, Demece Garepis. The CC Puede folks were determined to deliver a conciliatory message.

"We wanted them to know that we supported a holistic approach, that we were not just viewing Cesar Chavez as an isolated street," Taylor says. Specifically, they emphasized that taming traffic on Cesar

"We'd all like to see Cesar Chavez not so ugly and not so fast, but that's not the practical reality," says David Robinson, Precita Valley Neighbors co-chair.

and green Guerrero. She has been an inspiration to Taylor and her cohorts, and currently sits on CC Puede's steering committee. Taming traffic on Cesar Chavez, Gillett notes, is a more daunting challenge than she faced on Guerrero, which for all its heavy

Chavez should go hand-in-hand with a vigorous traffic-taming program in Bernal Heights so that any traffic spillover from Cesar Chavez could be minimized.

The city's Parking and Traffic department had already implemented a limited traffic-calming program in Bernal Heights that consisted mainly of speed humps and pedestrian "bulbouts" (a round extension of the sidewalk at street corners that "bulbs" out into the parking lane). But Taylor and the others supported more ambitious parts of the plan, not yet implemented, that would transform major entryways into Bernal Heights into clearly designated residential streets, greened and designed to send a clear message to anyone turning off Cesar Chavez that they are entering a residential environment.

"It was a good meeting," Garepis remembers. "David and I came out of it feeling that we were all on the same page." She has since expressed a willingness to look at the possibility of taking out lanes on Cesar Chavez.

In a recent interview, urban design consultant Elizabeth Macdonald sketched out her ideas for a dramatic makeover of Cesar Chavez. Macdonald and her husband, Allan Jacobs, a former San Francisco planning director, designed bike- and pedestrian-friendly Octavia Boulevard and recently completed a pedestrian-friendly redesign between 33rd and 35th avenues on International Boulevard in Oakland's Fruitvale district. They are on the Planning Department's short list of consultants available for the reworking of Cesar Chavez.

Macdonald's suggestions for the street include wider sidewalks, bulbouts and narrower traffic lanes, all of which will make those perilous pedestrian crossings shorter and less intimidating. She is also a big promoter of trees on the edge of sidewalks, both as a buffer from traffic for those who live on the street and as a traffic-calming signal to motorists. (One single tree, planted on the street this last spring to commemorate Cesar Chavez's birthday, has already had a noticeable calming effect, according to Garepis.)

In Macdonald's view, it is possible to accommodate relatively heavy volumes of traffic on a street like Cesar Chavez, "while taking space out of the vehicle realm and putting it into the pedestrian realm."

More is at stake here than the fate of one

street and its adjoining neighborhoods. Behind the efforts to green, pedestrianize and narrow many of San Francisco's streets is a shift toward a new traffic paradigm, one that challenges the time-honored assumption in traffic-engineering circles that reductions in traffic on one street will cause increased congestion on others. This traditional notion that traffic is a zero-sum game often results in one neighborhood being pitted against another.

"Traffic engineers tend to think of the number of auto trips as fixed," says Mission District resident Tom Radulovich, who heads up Livable Cities, a local nonprofit. "But if you reduce traffic capacity on a street while making alternative transportation modes more attractive, you can actually see a net reduction in auto trips."

In Radulovich's view, reducing traffic

spillover on nearby streets," notes Laurel Muniz, who chairs the North West Bernal Alliance. "Hopefully the city's study will come up with similar (projected) results."

Back in the late '90s, when Taylor, an avid cyclist, was struggling to get bike lanes on Cesar Chavez, she learned an important and rather surprising lesson: She had a lot in common with the neighbors who opposed the bike lanes. Like her, they were disgusted with the volume of traffic on Cesar Chavez and the idea that their neighborhood was a dumping ground for levels of vehicular traffic that would not be tolerated in other parts of the city. That they did not see bike lanes as part of the solution to this problem was less important than the fact that there was common ground for future efforts.

Taylor and CC Puede have been building

A man pushes his shopping cart up Hampshire at Cesar Chavez.



lanes on Cesar Chavez, while widening sidewalks and putting bike lanes and bulbouts throughout adjoining neighborhoods, could result in less vehicular traffic.

No one, including Radulovich, can confidently predict that's what will happen. The Planning Department's study will include projections on how much spillover traffic, if any, will end up in Bernal Heights and the Mission if traffic lanes are taken out on Cesar Chavez.

At least one Bernal Heights resident is optimistic about the results. "When they cut back traffic lanes on Guerrero and put in bike lanes, there was no noticeable traffic

on that common ground over the past couple of years, and their efforts seem to be paying off. As part of that experience, they've learned there were other formidable barriers beyond that notorious "Berlin Wall," barriers they are dismantling, brick by brick, through persistent effort and a patient determination to reach out to everyone.

For creek maps, check out www.livinglibrary.org.

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