

# The Laurel

Oakland, California

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Between the impoverished flatlands of East Oakland and the stifling homogeneity of the Oakland Hills is a neighborhood at the crossing of two regionally important arterials, 35th Avenue and MacArthur Boulevard, as well as the crossing of several diverse cultures. At a glance, the Laurel is a place of contrasts, the rich shopping with the poor, races commingling, young and old each utilizing the streets. The neighborhood has changed over the years, but not as much as some places. It is an old neighborhood, with many houses dating back to the 1920s and 30s, but has seen a number of improvements in the last decade. While in most people's eyes, anything on the far side of Lake Merritt from Downtown is considered "East Oakland," this neighborhood should more accurately be described as "Central Oakland." It is not without crime, but it does not suffer from the wanton muggings and auto thefts that West and Far East Oakland do. Murders are not unheard of, but when they occur, they are visibly mourned by the community; crime, it seems, unites this neighborhood, rather than divides or even dissolves it as it has in other places. Residents speak of the diversity and sense of community, almost universally describing it as a "good neighborhood," with a hint of subconscious defensiveness, as if they are making a statement of opinion, despite evidence to the contrary, when in truth, the evidence is on their side. The neighborhood was not without its share of urban decay that befell so many cities with the increased suburbanization of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, but it was able to rebound in the 1990s, unlike many "inner cities." Most of these changes were gradual, however, and if this paper has a thesis, it is that most residents didn't even notice the decline and rebirth until it was all said and done; it seems the neighborhood never got so bad that they noticed anything but normalcy, until one day there were new

sidewalks, planters and signs arching over the main drag. The Laurel seems to be a healthy urban environment, meaning that while it is far from perfect, it is a place that encourages growth, be it economic, educational, or social, without the glitz and glamour of some of its more talked-about neighbors across the Bay; it's no Mission District, Redwood City or Mountain View with visible rebirths, but it is among the likes of some neighborhoods of Cleveland, Milwaukee or Philadelphia: normal, unassuming, yet vibrant urban spaces.



The Laurel District is centered on the shopping district on MacArthur Boulevard between 35th Avenue and High Street, though the residential neighborhood extends much farther. It is bordered to the northwest by the Dimond District at about Coolidge Avenue, to the southwest by the Allendale neighborhood at about Suter Street or I-580, to the southeast by the Maxwell Park District at I-580 and Mills College, and to the northeast by Redwood Heights, somewhere on the hillside before Highway 13, where residents begin to say they live in "the Oakland

Hills." This doesn't completely agree with the accompanying map from an article in the San Francisco Chronicle, but the map does give a good sense of the District. One of the people interviewed commented on the centrality of the neighborhood, and how she could get just about anywhere in Oakland on the bus, usually without making any transfers, and further abroad via a quick bus ride to BART. Quick access via freeway to downtown and Berkeley and to shopping in Emeryville and San Leandro is provided by Interstate 580, though a few people commented on the diversity and completeness of services in the Laurel itself or very close by.

The earliest European settlement of the area was in the form of a Spanish land grant to Don Antonio Peralta, who received the entire East Bay for, as Dennis Evanovsky's website put it, "good soldiering." He

subdivided the land and by 1862, the area now known as the Laurel was owned by two farmers, John Redding and James Quigley (today there are streets in the neighborhood named after them). Personal observation and amateur architectural historical analysis place most of the urban development of the neighborhood in the 1920s and 30s, with some larger apartment complexes built as late as the 1960s or 70s. Of course, with the recent surge of relatively wealthier residents from outside the District, many houses have been obviously remodeled and even rebuilt in the first decade of the 21st Century.

Residents speaking of the diversity of the neighborhood usually mean that black people and white people don't mind shopping together, but the demographic statistics paint a much more colorful picture. According to the previously-mentioned article in the Chronicle, there is no racial majority among the 11,600 or so residents, and the racial plurality, Asian, are only 3.6% more of the population than the next leading race, Caucasian, and they are only 4.1% more of the population than the next, Black/African American, with 31.1%, 27.5% and 23.4%, respectively. As for the remaining 18.1%, Hispanics/Latinos account for 12.5%, and people of two or more races, American Indians, Native Hawaiians or Alaskans, and "other races" make up the remaining 5.6%. As I came across these statistics after interviewing residents, I did not get the impression that anyone would doubt this rainbow of diversity, though I don't think anyone quite knew the extent. It should be noted that these figures are from an article from 2002, and presumably from the 2000 Census; as discussed later on, gentrification has continued, and it should be assumed that there are more people of Caucasian descent now than at the time the figures were compiled.

Most (though hardly all) of the people I interviewed work at Laurel Ace Hardware, my former place of employment, the second largest employer after the Lucky supermarket across the street, a crossroads of homeowners and renters alike with a friendly atmosphere and knowledgeable staff, most of whom grew up in the neighborhood. A good cross-section of ages and races were interviewed, though I must note the lack of any members of the Asian community, of whose size I wasn't fully aware at the time of the interviews. Voices range from the Head Manager in her 60s and the Assistant Manager who just

turned 21 to the Bookkeeper and floor staff, with a few long-winded customers for variety. All spoke of a seeming lack of change over the years, or at least, change that was so gradual, they didn't notice until well after. The only real changes noted were that recently signs arching over MacArthur saying "Laurel" were added, sidewalks were replaced with wheelchair accessibility, and large planters were added (people weren't in agreement when this happened exactly, some said less than a year, some said "a few years ago;" I believe it happened at least two years ago, before I moved to the neighborhood, though I suppose I just didn't notice). I specifically asked most subjects if they'd noticed any demographic shifts over the years, and most said that they were aware of some gentrification, but not necessarily a "whitening" or even a real increase in those of Asian descent. As I learned while writing a paper for another class, Oakland has had a Chinatown near downtown since the 1870s, but apparently the residents, like most those of races in Oakland, didn't restrict themselves to ethnic neighborhoods, and spread out early on. One of the long-winded customers spoke about the pride in the independence of Oakland from broader social trends, noting that while there was plenty of crime, drugs, and gang activity in Oakland in the 1980s through the present, the Bloods and the Crips and other nationwide gangs were never able to make a foothold in Oakland, nor were there any race riots in the 1960s, despite an African-American population presumably just as dispossessed as those everywhere else in the country.

The customer, a Mason who one of the employees commented after he'd left "must be running for public office or something," also spoke of the stability of the neighborhood in a different way. He mentioned that the neighborhood was a mix of newcomers and the third generation, grandparents who'd been here since they had kids themselves mixing with young urban professionals; this hints at the contrast of stability and fresh meat that seems to make diversity work in any neighborhood. When everyone is an old-timer, stagnation prevails, and when there is only young blood, roots cannot take hold, and no community develops. It seems that some residents with a sense of history are required, but new ideas to challenge their old habits are just as necessary. When this variety of backgrounds is present, a ghettoized neighborhood simply doesn't happen, and a sense of healthy stability develops;

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constant chaos is not stable. When such stability is allowed to flourish, new businesses open, parents are able to focus on bettering their children's schools, and community events can occur. Many people spoke of the power of the recent Laurel Street

Festival to psychologically unite the community, even if all it really did was give people sunburns and wreak havoc on traffic for a Saturday. The growth of the street fair was also an element of pride for residents, who saw its gradual expansion from one side street, to the entire Lucky parking lot, to MacArthur itself from 35th to 39th Avenues (almost to High Street) as a sign of increasing prosperity for the community. If nothing else, it gave people a chance to greet neighbors they hadn't seen in a while, and to buy an "Oaklandish" sweatshirt. The very fact that almost every person interviewed mentioned the street fair is a testament to its power.

Most people were aware of gentrification, to one degree or another, and seemed to link it in their minds to their perception of crime. The long-winded hardware store customer mentioned above said that as "gentryites," as he called them, had never really thought about urban crime until they moved to the Laurel, but that they are, despite possibly pricing existing residents out of the market, were helping to form communities. The desire for cheaper housing seems to have spilled over the Bay, after the gentrification of the Mission spilled over into Noe Valley, Bernal Heights, Potrero Hill, and even Berkeley had raised property values prohibitively high for many looking to buy their first home who didn't want to sprawl out beyond Antioch or Livermore. The Assistant Manager of the hardware store, who went to high school with many people who have since moved away, commented that the people displaced had moved out of Oakland to these new suburbs, or out of California entirely to cheaper markets. Still, despite this increase in the cost of land, some degree of crime persists, with more than one person stating he didn't like coming to the neighborhood at night. Others, however, when asked to describe the area, said that it was still "safe," and as mentioned before, that it was a "good neighborhood," despite the "hoodlums sittin' on the corner." One employee, herself African American, pointed out that while these "hoodlums" (a word used by more than one person) were usually black, they

weren't being singled out because of their race, but because they would stand out on the corner in groups, often in front of her house! When asked directly, she also commented on the fact that despite these hoody individuals, there weren't bad race relations in the neighborhood, a point confirmed by the fact that there isn't any one race in the majority, that people seem to get along well enough. She then went on to point out that with the opening of the Laurel Bookstore a few years ago, there is a sense of more culture in the neighborhood, part of a growing trend that has fueled and is fueled by the gentrification of the area; while not specifically mentioned, she implied that the majority of the new businesses in the neighborhood seem to be catering to a specific kind of young, urban professional, including the bookstore, a consignment shop, a boutique, and a women's nightclub (Oakland has one of the largest gay and lesbian populations in the country now, with a number of members of that community also fleeing higher housing costs across the Bay). Finally, the Head Manager seemed to hit the nail on the head with the matter of crime and gentrification, by commenting that the stores are all well maintained and when it occurs, graffiti is quickly painted over, and that "people don't think they're coming into the slums" when they arrive in the Laurel.

This paper serves as a snapshot, a cross-section of a specific place at a specific time. Change seems to take a bit longer in the Laurel than in a lot of places, for ill or for good. This should come as good news in the light of recent world events, with the banking industry perched to collapse at any moment and with an uncertain populace seemingly undecided about the fate of the nation and its next President. Perhaps this means that if another Great Depression is waiting in the wings, that it won't have the same Crash that is bound to occur in other less stable, more speculative real estate markets. That said, it should be noted that I was forced out of the neighborhood when my former landlord was foreclosed upon; sub-prime mortgages and predatory lending practices happen everywhere, and few things destroy a sense of community more efficiently than when residents are forced to move out *en masse*. Whatever the outcome of these uncertain times, there will still be a Laurel in 50 years, and it will still most likely be a healthy, vibrant and diverse urban environment.

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# Bibliography

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from <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/object/article?f=/c/a/2002/05/10/EB225192.DTL&o=0>

## Interview Subjects:

Nathan Whitehead, Assistant Manager, Laurel Ace Hardware

Gregory Ott, floor staff, Laurel Ace Hardware

Raymond Mieger, floor staff (who knows *everything*), Laurel Ace Hardware

Jim Salisbury, floor staff, Laurel Ace Hardware

Sukari Campbell, Bookkeeper, Laurel Ace Hardware

Linda Mieger, Head Manager, Laurel Ace Hardware

Benjamin Haywood, Mason and hardware store customer

A + Brilliant. You give a  
marvelous spin to the  
material and the way the perceived  
and changed. I strongly suggest  
you submit this. I am a fan of your  
work.