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Will This Boom Lead to Another?

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By Marla Cone

For decades a symbol of blight and lost promise, San Pedro's first skyscraper came thundering down Sunday morning in a dusty heap of 1960s-era ruins that city officials and developers hope will symbolize an explosive revitalization of Los Angeles' waterfront.

The Pacific Trade Center, an empty eyesore plastered with rental signs since 1990, was demolished to make room for a new ultra-modern condominium high-rise, in the first implosion of a building to occur in Los Angeles in more than a decade. The vacant 11-story office building, which overlooked the harbor, was a reminder that a 40-year-old redevelopment of downtown San Pedro had been a costly failure.

About half an hour after sunrise, L.A. City Councilwoman Janice Hahn and developer Raffi Cohen stood a block away, their fingers on a button that would trigger explosives for the demolition. Because of the building's unusual construction, involving suspended wires, implosion – the strategic placement of explosives to trigger a controlled blast – was considered the only safe way to demolish it.

“Good morning,” Hahn greeted spectators who gathered to watch. “A wonderful day for an implosion,”

Bringing the building down took just five pounds of explosives and eight seconds,

The head-reeling blast came first, followed by rolling clouds of gray dust emanating from the building's roof. Instead of dissolving in a pile of ashes, the building listed toward the harbor, then collapsed in a heap.

Some spectators marveled that the building looked like the Titanic slipping, into the Atlantic as it keeled over. The debris, still resembling the steel frame of an office tower, is now stacked about two stories high, all contained at the original site. Everything around the implosion was dusty but intact, and a loud cheer rang out from the crowd,

“Wow!” Hahn exclaimed. “That was exciting. When's the next one? What else can we blow up?”

Hahn and city officials have long had unrealized plans for the waterfront area. Officials and developers hope to jump-start the revitalization with the planned construction of a \$175-million, 16-story condominium tower – with a rooftop sky deck, balconies

overlooking the harbor and Rancho Palos Verdes hills, and units priced from the mid-\$300,000s to more than \$1 million. They must, however, contend with shuttered businesses, deteriorating buildings, a low-income housing project in need of repairs and air heavily polluted by the port.

“It is great to see an old, blighted building – a symbol of failure – gone, and the promise of a great new San Pedro,” Hahn said after the blast, quipping that “things are exploding in downtown San Pedro.”

Built in 1965 with much fanfare, the 122,000-square-foot sky-scraper, at 255 W. 5th St., known locally as the Logicon building, was the flagship of a costly commercial redevelopment that failed before it even began. By the time the building opened, downtown San Pedro was starting to slide, as jobs and people moved elsewhere, said Gordon Teuber, director of the city’s Harbor District economic development office.

The fishing fleets were vanishing, the port was becoming more automated, the Del Amo Fashion Center in Torrance was drawing business and shippers away and construction of the Vincent Thomas Bridge opened easy access to Long Beach. People who once lived downtown migrated toward Rancho Palos Verdes.

“For a long time, people were not investing in downtown San Pedro. That was my big push when I took office – to court developers,” Hahn said.

Because of the cost of remediation, no buyer wanted to touch the Pacific Trade Center, despite efforts by city officials to promote the area’s attributes. Its floors were crooked, its ceilings coated with asbestos.

Cohen, president of Beverly Hills-based Galaxy Commercial Holding, bought the building because he saw promise where everyone else saw headaches. But instead of remodeling it, he envisioned demolishing it. Galaxy, best known for developing the Figueroa Plaza twin office tower in downtown Los Angeles, is also converting on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills into luxury residences.

Four years ago, the Urban Land Institute reported that the best hope for San Pedro redevelopment would come not in the form of office buildings but in residential development, restaurants and art venues.

City officials and developers hope they get it right this time. Hahn said the intent is to create “a grand promenade” on the waterfront where people can stroll, watching one of the world’s busiest ports in operation. Today, only two blocks of the original 1960s redevelopment remain, Teuber said, and an estimated 1,300 new housing units are under construction downtown.

“Los Angeles has a waterfront. Los Angeles is a port town. There’s no reason we can’t rival San Diego, Long Beach and other places,” Hahn said.

The condominium project is not technically part of the city's controversial 30-year, \$779-million Bridge to Breakwater redevelopment plan envisioned by Hahn's brother, former L.A. Mayor James K. Hahn, that includes plazas, parks, marinas and cruise terminals. But the condominiums are expected to attract residents.

The glass tower, called Vue, will consist of 318 one- to three-bedroom condominiums when it opens in 2008. Galaxy representatives said that half of the units have already sold, hitting more than \$100 million in sales in the first two days.

The implosion was the first in Los Angeles in 13 years. Nearby businesses, including the Northrop Grumman building next door, were evacuated Saturday afternoon. A block away, guests of the Best Western hotel were warned so that no one would panic. The blue-and-gray glass building had already been stripped down to steel and concrete, and the asbestos had been removed.

Cohen said that the old building was a reminder of economic blight, and now it's gone, even skeptics will see that redevelopment is, in fact, reality.

"It's beautiful, the way it's sitting down. Nobody can put it back now," Cohen said.

The rubble will be gone in two weeks, he said, then construction on the Vue project, designed by GMP Architects of Santa Monica, which also designed Marina del Rey's three luxury towers, will begin this fall.

Robert Hunt, who came to watch the demolition with his son, was happy to see the old eyesore fall.

"All these years I've been looking at that ugly building," said Hunt, who has worked for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service at Terminal Island for 15 years. "This place was dead. It needed something more modern. You can see things are happening around here now."