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New projects promise to change W. Sixth St.

New hotel and bar revamps on tap

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Nick Simonite

Mother Egan's is one of several bars on West Sixth Street scheduled to get a makeover soon.

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Sit at Opal Divine's patio on a Saturday night on West Sixth Street, and it won't take long to realize that the people watching is almost as tempting as the brews.

Every weekend, women in trendy dresses and men in button-down shirts descend on the area heading to the dozen or so bars, lounges and restaurants that are shoe-horned between Lavaca and West streets.

The area has evolved into an upscale entertainment district with a personality that attracts an upwardly mobile crowd in their 20s, 30s and 40s.

Now, hoping to further capitalize on the area's white-hot popularity, some entrepreneurs are separately investing in a handful of new projects in the West Sixth Street entertainment district:

- A 16-room boutique hotel and mixed-use property on West Sixth Street
- A major renovation to the Star Bar
- A revamping of the Hi-Lo bar to convert it into a lounge called District 301
- The conversion of the Mother Egan's bar
- The creation of the Kung-Fu Saloon, a new bar to open in November that will feature vintage arcade games

Chris Horne, who is president of Stratford Property Group, and partner Michael Dickson are working on a mixed-use project that will feature a 16-room boutique hotel, bar and offices. Horne declined to specify the address of the small hotel project, saying only that it would be on West Sixth. They've tapped Furman + Keil Architects and Chioco Design for the art-oriented hotel. Hotel San Jose's umbrella company, Bunkhouse, consulted on the project.

Horne believes the area's proximity to major employers such as Whole Foods Market and GSD&M Idea City, as well as law and creative firms, make it a logical place for a small hotel. He hopes to begin construction in 2010.

"It would be a great place for people to stay. And you wouldn't have to go down 20 stories, you would just walk out and be right in the middle of the entertainment district," he said.

At the same time, Horne and Annie's West owners Ben Cantu and Nick Adams are working on Kung-Fu Saloon at 510 Rio Grande St.

Horne said that while the area is hot, the limited availability of real estate makes it a competitive market to enter.

"There is not a lot of underutilized real estate in the area. There may be a couple of more projects to come on line ... but we expect the demand to outstrip the supply in terms of real estate," Horne said.

Veteran nightclub owner Matt Luckie believes that a good base of well-run restaurant and entertainment venues — such as Opal Divine's, Katz's Deli & Bar and J. Black's — has helped make the district successful.

"Everyone really branched out from there. I think that is how the Warehouse District evolved as well," Luckie said. "There were a bunch of restaurants and then the bar guys followed to fill in the pieces."

Luckie, who owns Red Fez and Lavaca Street Bar, is partnering on several new projects on West Sixth, including District 301 at 301 W. Sixth St. and the Star Bar renovation at 600 W. Sixth St. Luckie has different partners in each venture.

Meanwhile, the Womack brothers and partner Jason Carrier have talked about their plans to transform Mother Egan's into a new lounge more befitting the West Sixth Street vibe. The Womack brothers own the Chuggin' Monkey on East Sixth Street and recently sold The Marq.

Kareem Hajjar, a hospitality lawyer with Hajjar Sutherland & Kelly LLP, expects that competition on West Sixth Street will intensify with the opening of the new venues, and warns that it might be difficult for some operators to be viable.

"Unsophisticated bar and restaurant owners should be very wary of opening in this area," Hajjar said. "The condominium projects projected to surround these new establishments have either been shelved or have been canceled altogether."

One example is the plan to turn the downtown post office on West Sixth Street into a high-rise condo. That ambitious project has been delayed indefinitely.

Luckie said business has dipped a bit in the down economy, but he's looking forward to the arrival of the W Hotel and the planned federal courthouse building.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin