



the point

a brief history of 7th street, Oakland

please excuse


this very, very partial history

there are endless

stories to tell

and many more on the way

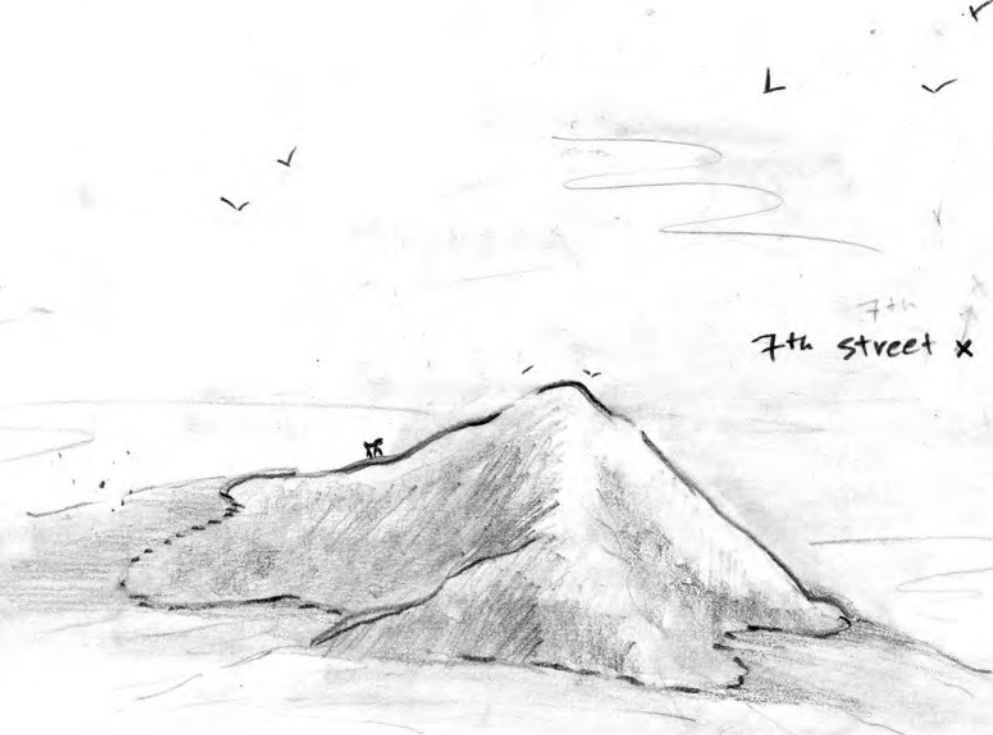
here are a few...



Maybe Mt. Diablo?


CHAPTER 1

The First People



7th street x

Maybe Mt. Tam?



Maybe Mt. Umunhum?

“At the beginning of this world, the earth was covered in water, save for one peak, on which were Eagle, Hummingbird, and Coyote. They stood looking out as the waters continued to rise, until it lapped at their feet. Then Eagle flew up with Coyote and Hummingbird, landing again at Gavilan Peak, and there they stayed until the waters began to recede.”

Coyote went down, and came back to report that the world was dry.”

Ohlone creation myth



These days, we refer to those water level fluctuations as the

ICE AGES

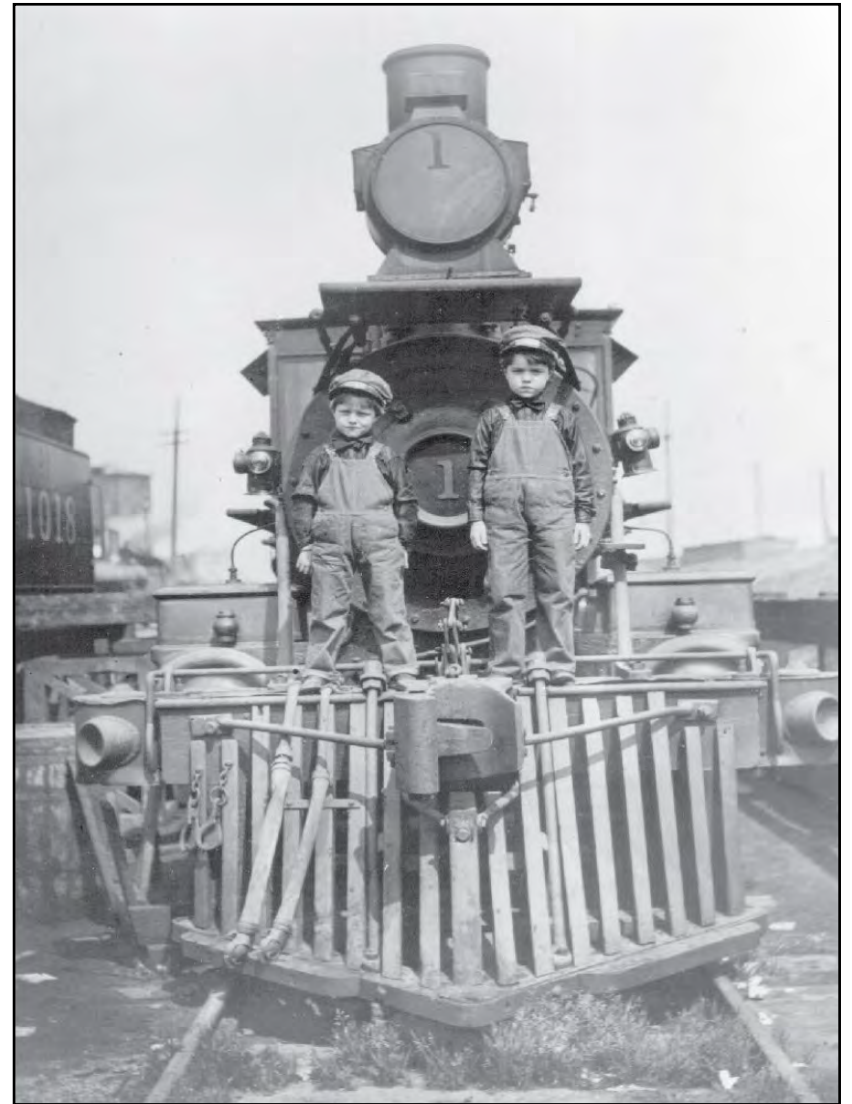
Since the last Ice Age; 10,000–14,000 years give or take; the area that would come to be known as 7th Street was very marshy, a valuable food source for indigenous people, but not a popular village site.



But soon enough, came the missions,



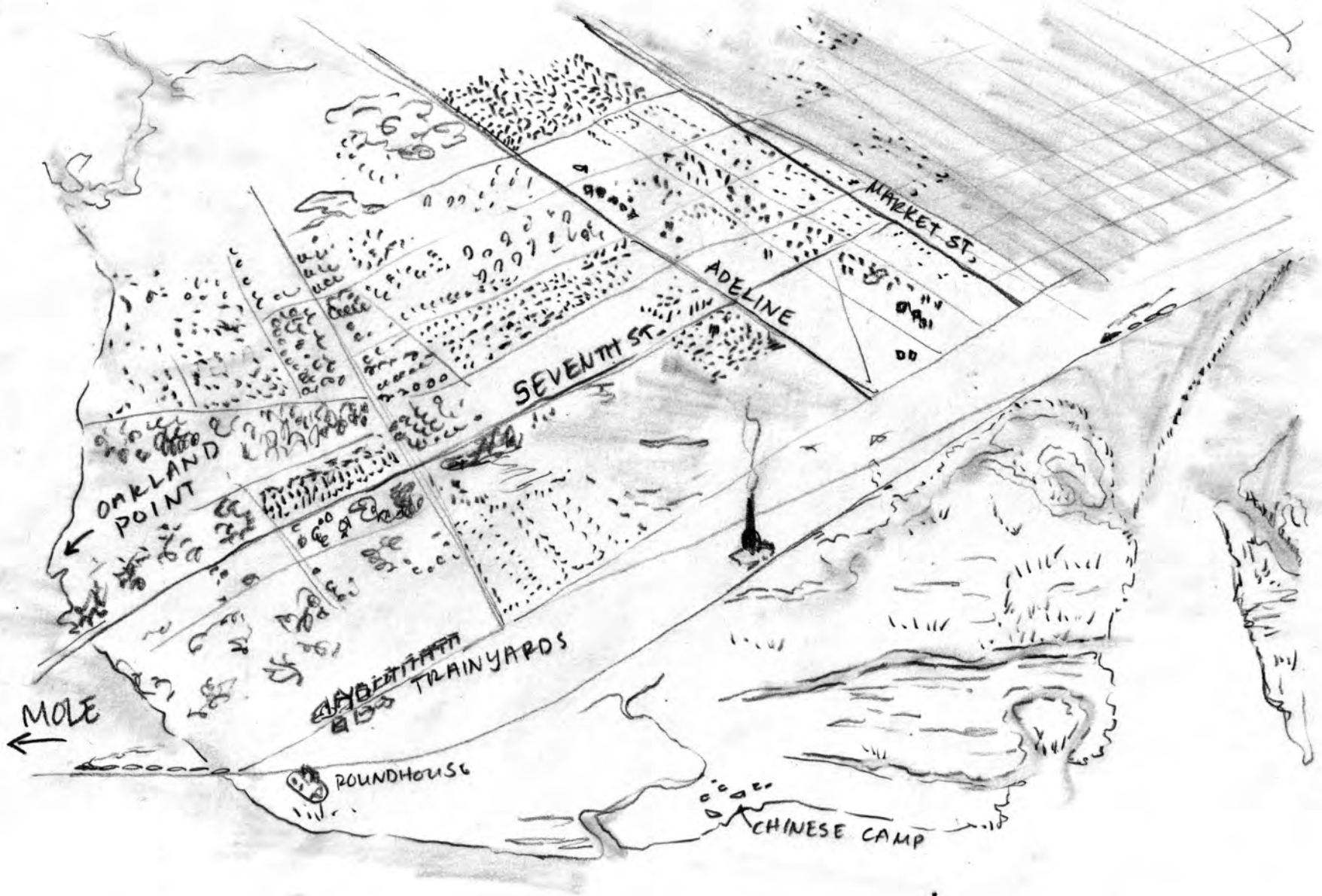
And then the ranches,



And then the railroads.

Railroad Avenue

In 1869 the transcontinental railroad was finished, ending in West Oakland. The city exploded with thousands of railroad jobs and migrant workers of many ethnicities. The largest of all was the Southern Pacific train yard along what is now 5th street.



The Mole

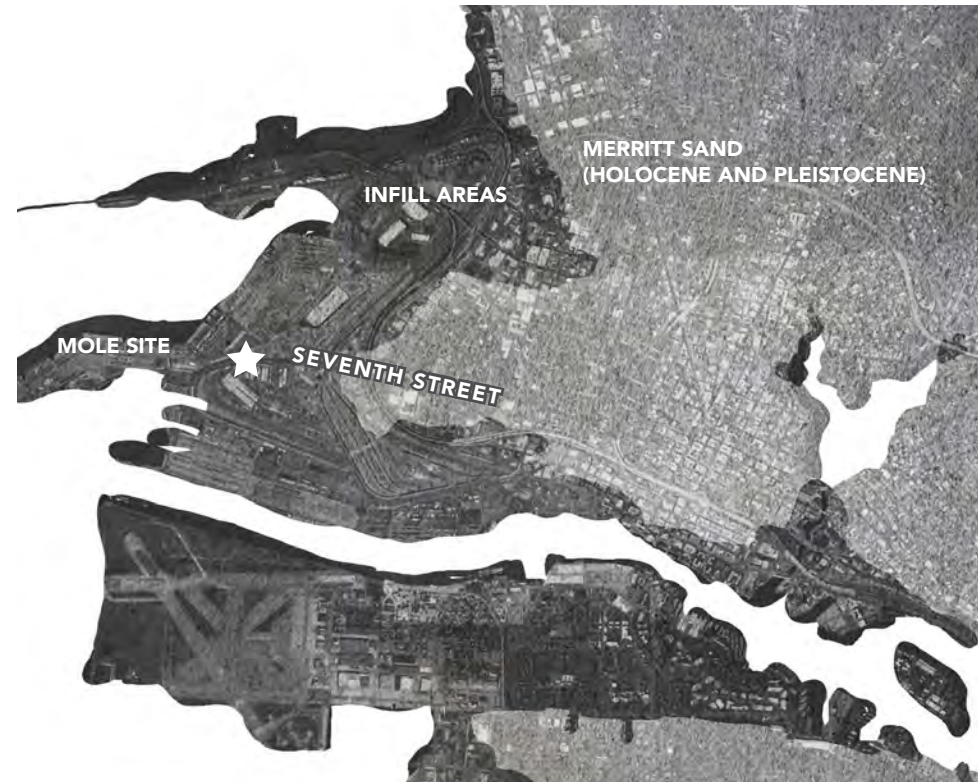
In the mid-19th century, the railroad industry needed more room. Specifically, a way to connect with ships coming from the Pacific. The muddy waters around the “Oakland Point” were too shallow for them to dock.

They built the “Oakland Mole” - a 2 mile pier out into the bay for cargo and passenger ferries, and started filling in the mudflats in the area as the neighborhood spread. Eventually the wharf housed train stations too.

All routes led to West Oakland!



PHOTOS: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



OAKLAND, 2021 FROM GOOGLE MAPS

“The potential density of West Oakland was established in mid-19th century city platting when the street grid was laid over “bay mud” marsh soils. Property lot sizes along Seventh Street were related to expected uses. The lots along Seventh Street were sized for worker housing, 25’ to 30’ wide by 100’ deep”

Hood Design, ‘Seventh Street concept and urban design plan’

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters



“Only Black men were to serve as porters, as the Pullman Company believed it would sustain a natural divide between traveler and porter. In 1925, porters began organizing for union recognition and better working conditions. They chose Phillip Randolph, who had been fired for talk of unionization, to head the union with C. L. Dellums as Vice President, and soon the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was born.”

Jennifer Soliman, “The Rise and Fall of Seventh Street in Oakland”



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

While many porters were overqualified for such positions, the jobs were considered very glamorous and worldly. The porters left home and saw the country and returned with stories of their travels - they were the “astronauts” of their time.

The fight to form the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters took 12 years. When it was finally won, it was the first union of Black workers in the US.



CHAPTER 3

Harlem of the West

The electrification of train cars, around 1910, began the "Golden Age" of seventh street. Electric streetcars were clean and quiet and allowed for shoppers and travelers from all over the city. Seventh street continued to be a hub for train, trolley and ferry travel.



WEST COAST BLUES SOCIETY

Wartime industry, labor shortages due to army enlistments, and its location as a transit hub made it a haven for Black migrants from the South.



OAKLAND LIBRARY

With them came their culture - food, music, and a tradition of home ownership. The economy flourished, and a new Black professional class emerged.

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THEATRES

Lincoln Theatre 1620 7th St...GL 3504

All through the depression years he amassed a fortune based on his philosophy of “calculated risk”, that is, not to cheat but to be honest and give every man a chance.

M.C. Stallings (1968), 'Raincoat Jones was a Gambling Philanthropist'
Combination Magazine

Raincoat Jones

*The Mayor of Seventh Street,
1898-1968*

Charles “Raincoat” Jones was a veteran, a prospector, a bootlegger, a legendary gambler, a philanthropist and the backbone of Seventh Street business culture during the early 20th century. He came to Oakland in the 20’s after making some money running a gambling hall for gold seekers in the Klondike. He became an important and successful investor in the Seventh Street businesses and community, investing in not just gambling halls but also businesses that he thought would benefit the entire community.

He was known to bail people out of jail, pay their union dues for them to allow them to keep working, made down payments for first time home buyers, and most notably, his obituary states that “he wouldn’t let a poor man go without a raincoat”.



Slim Jenkins Supper Club

1933-1962

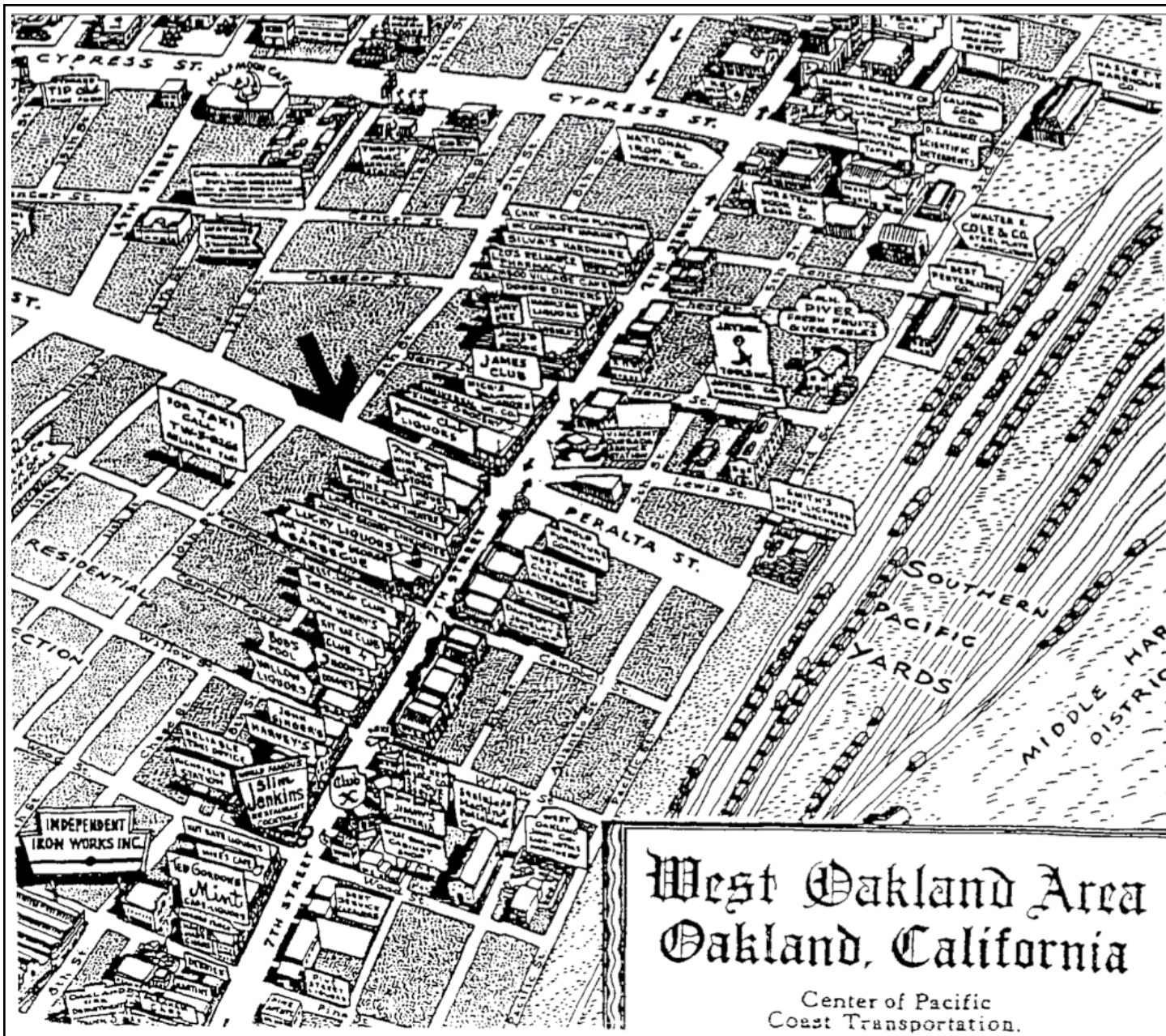
Slim Jenkins deserves a book of his own. The Supper Club at one point was the most celebrated black nightclub on the West Coast. This juke joint turned club had a large dining room and stage that took up most of the block. Slim Jenkins was another big financial supporter of the community, taking an active interest in acts and people that he liked.



Esther's Orbit Room

1959-2011

Esther Mabry was a waitress at Slim's who, with his help, opened her own nightclub down the street. It was a nightclub, bar and restaurant, and the only jazz club to survive past the 70's. In it's prime, people came from all over the bay to enjoy the Orbit Room, known for being cozier and more laid back than Slims.



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The end of World War Two marked the beginning of the end of Seventh Street's Golden Age.

Massive numbers of wartime jobs disappeared, at the same time as the automobile was replacing trains as the preferred mode of transportation. New crane and container technology meant the port needed much less manpower to unload ships. The last remnant of 'Railroad Avenue' was the Oakland Mole pier, demolished in 1960.

Those who had done well for themselves during the war moved to the suburbs. The neighborhoods around the train yards were now full of unemployed people. Couple that with some divisive zoning laws and West Oakland was well on it's way to becoming a 'slum'.

CHAPTER 4

Cranes, Trains, and Automobiles



CALTRANS 1954



Many homes in the neighborhood fell into disrepair. Using that as an excuse, entire blocks of homes were seized under eminent domain per The Housing Act of 1949 and were razed en masse to make way for housing and transit projects.



1950s: Cypress Freeway

The new double decker freeway sliced across West Oakland, isolating seventh street from the rest of the city. Traffic brings cars and noise and home values plummet further. Obviously, the homes demolished for this project were not just limited to those in disrepair.



1970s: BART

The West Oakland station was originally intended to connect Seventh Street with the rest of the Bay. But downtown, all the tracks were underground. The tracks running over Seventh Street were an eyesore and the noise of the trains killed any remaining commercial activity in the neighborhood. At this point, all routes led THROUGH West Oakland.

“Nobody wanted to go there with that thing running over your head all day long.”

Vivian Bowie, 'Cross Roads: A Story of West Oakland'



1960s: US Post Office

500 homes and businesses (the original Esther's among them) were destroyed to make way for this massive fortress-like compound. Local rumor has it the building was built with the intention of being an army base if the Russians attacked.

This period of “urban renewal” during the 1960s and 1970s shuttered more than 800 businesses, demolished 2,500 Victorian homes, and displaced nearly 5,000 households.

Arianna Bindman (2020) West Oakland Was Once an Economic Hub for the Bay’s Black Community. What Happened?, *The Bold Italic*

CHAPTER 5

The Bottoms



SLIMS SUPPER CLUB SITE

By the 1980s, Seventh Street looked nothing like the vibrant cultural center it had once been. It was surrounded by an industrial ghost-town. The houses in the surrounding neighborhoods were mainly rented, with only 15% of residential lots owner-occupied. Unemployment was over 20% and 35% of the neighborhood lived under the poverty level.

But change is inevitable, especially when you live this close to a major fault line! In 1989 the Loma Prieta Earthquake demolished the Cypress Freeway. A group of West Oakland activists successfully pressured Cal Trans and the new freeway went around the neighborhood, through the old train yards. West Oakland was reunited with a pedestrian and cyclist friendly parkway that ran along the site of the old freeway.



Urban Renewal, 20th Century Style

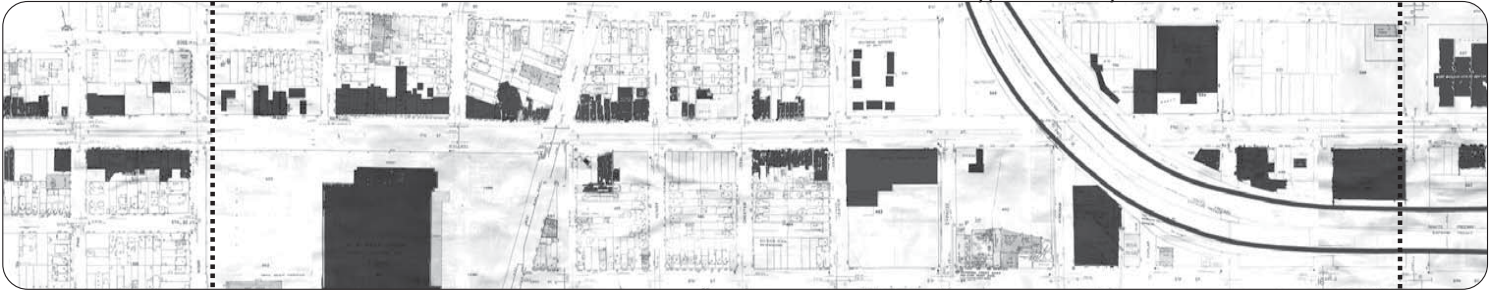
1912



1951



1971



2003



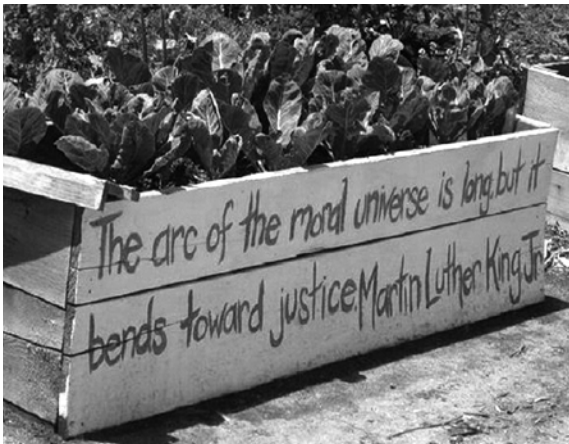
new Cypress Freeway

Post Office Facility

West Oakland BART station

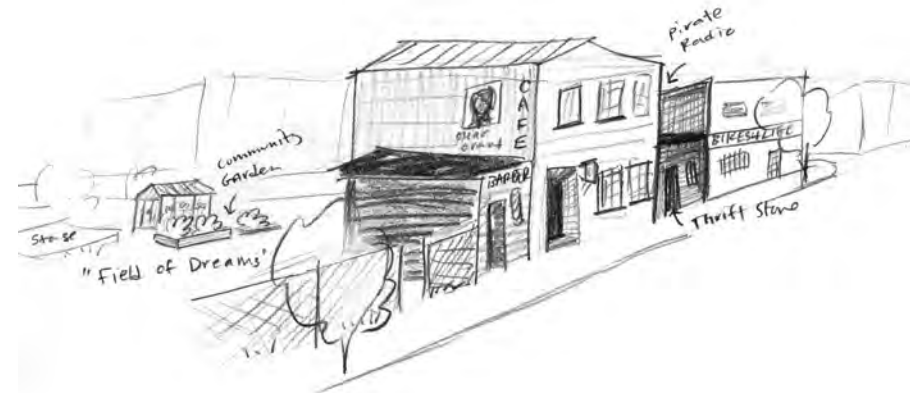
The small number of property owners means change on Seventh Street can begin with the participation of a few significant property owners.

Hood Design, 'Seventh Street concept and urban design plan'



RIGHT FROM TOP: LOWER BOTTOMS COMMUNITY GARDEN PLANNING, BIKES4LIFE COMMUNITY RIDE, PEOPLES GROCERY COMMUNITY GARDEN BEDS, LEONARD PELTIER MURAL

By the early 2000s, several non-profits and social justice groups had taken an interest in Seventh Street. While it was very different scene from the dressed up crowds that used to line up outside Slim Jenkins', some tenacious businesspeople were still going strong, but there was a lot of turnover due to low foot traffic and high crime. Low rents and lots of available real estate had made the area popular with social justice organizers and artists.



Revolution Cafe Complex

The Revolution Cafe was a cheap, community oriented cafe and venue that was open late, and where anyone was welcome. The property also hosted Bikes4Life, a non-profit focused on teaching ex-cons and at risk youth bike mechanic skills, a Pirate Radio station, and an outdoor event space named after the original theater that stood on the site.



Mandela Grocery

A worker owned co-op dedicated to providing healthy food and fresh produce in this "food desert", and supporting local farms and food businesses. They also host events and nutrition classes.

CHAPTER 6

West Oakland Redevelopment Plan

In 2003, the City of Oakland received a Caltrans Environmental Justice Grant in order to revitalize the seventh street corridor and alleviate decades of negative impact of transportation infrastructure in the area. The efforts and planning have been led by West Oakland's Hood Design Studio.

The goals of the plan are:

Return a distinct "character" to the area.

Connect local and new residents to the Seventh Street corridor.

Promote the development of vibrant local shopping amenities along Seventh Street.

Promote pedestrian use of local services.

Make the area more comfortable by improving pedestrian safety along the corridor.

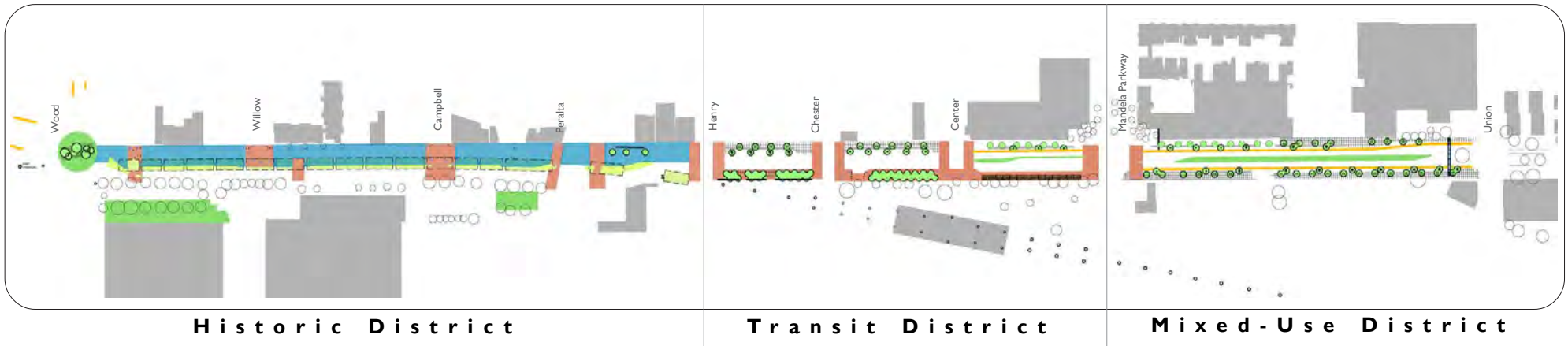
Improve access to the BART station and AC Transit bus services for pedestrians, cyclists, and other transit riders.

Mitigate negative impacts of transportation infrastructure on Seventh Street community residents.

Hood Design, 'Seventh Street concept and urban design plan'



Design Concept

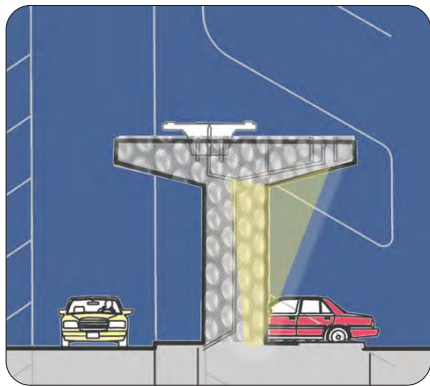


Historic District

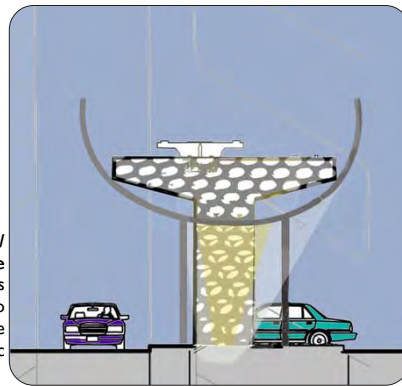
Transit District

Mixed-Use District

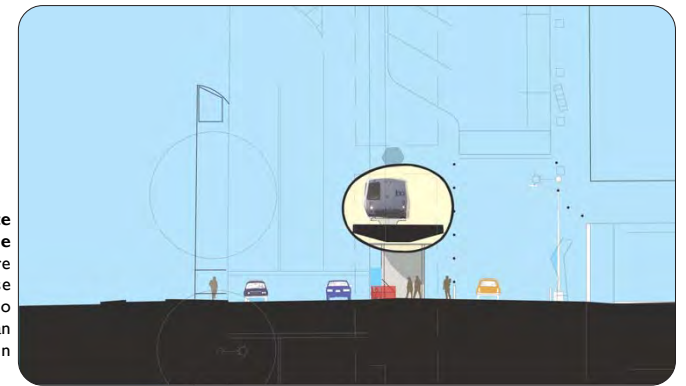
Bart Noise Mitigation



2. Metal Plating
Metal is punched, rolled, and cut to create visual interest and reinforce BART's architecture.

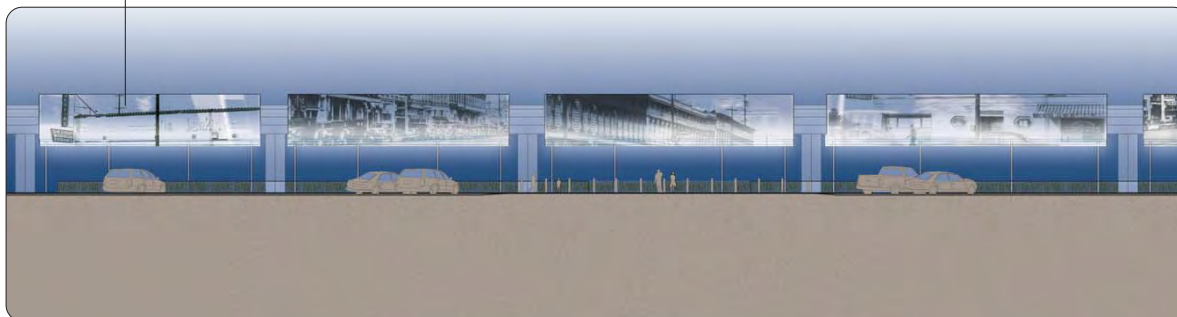


3. Noise Wall/ Reflective Surface
Acoustical baffles create a new wall to the street and provide a surface for historic interpretation.

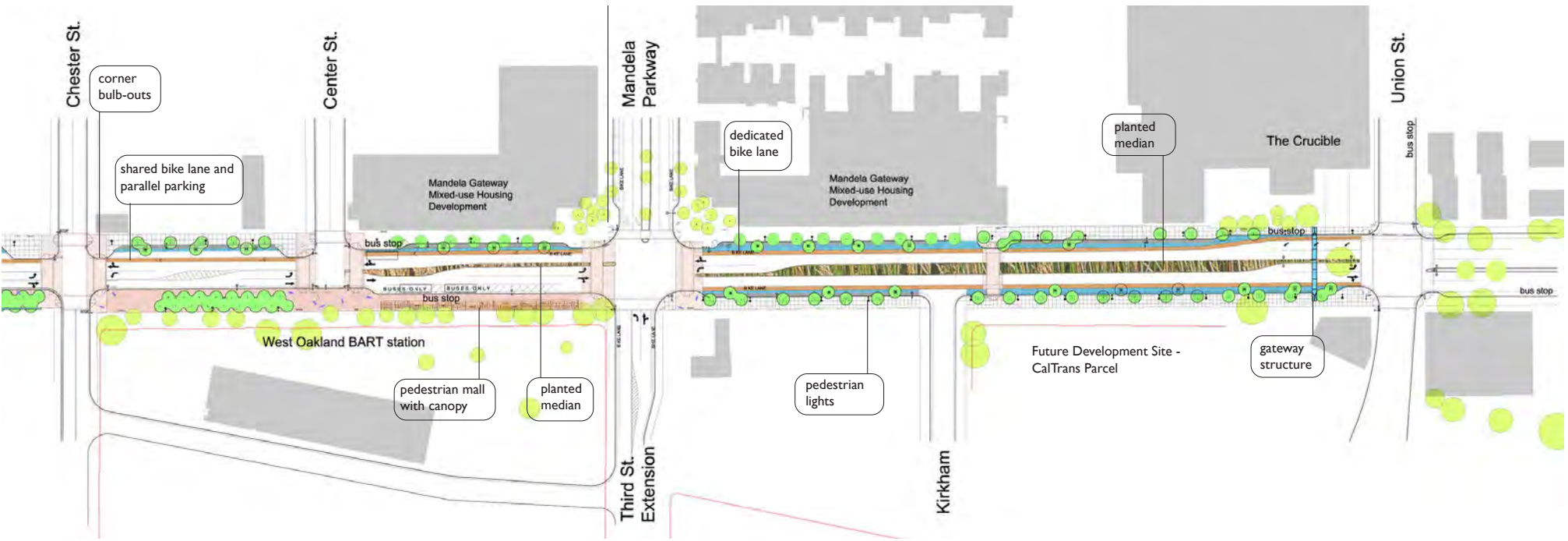
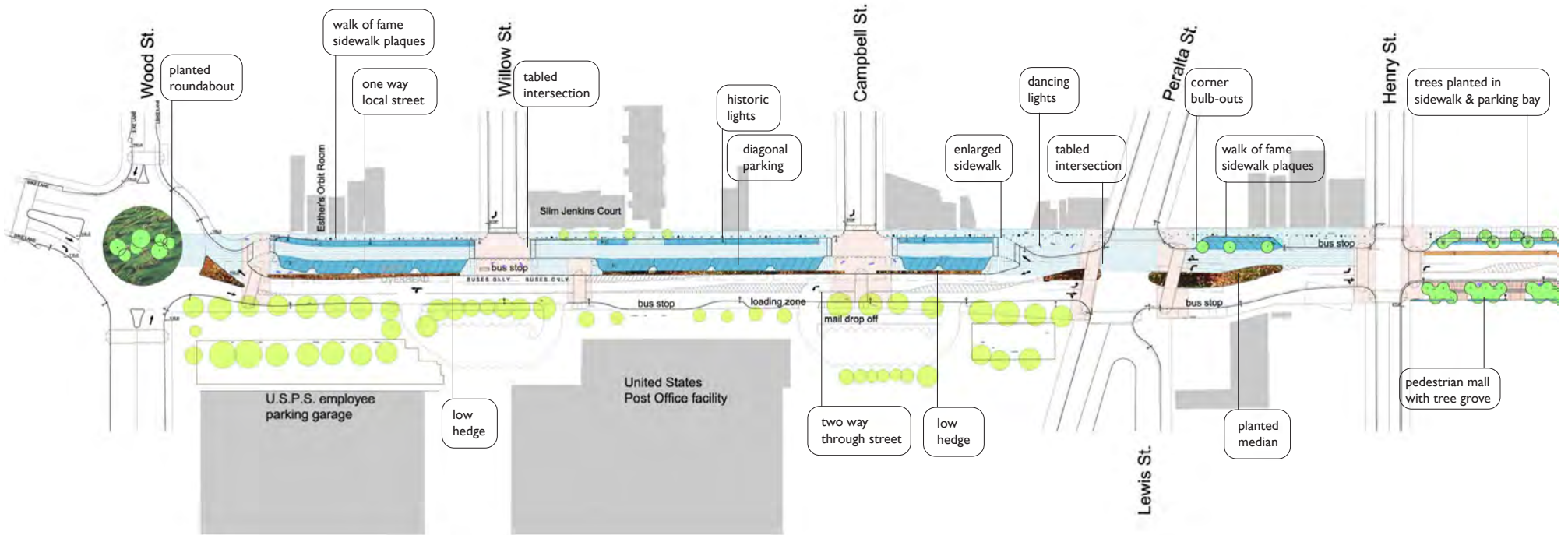


4. Complete Noise Enclosure
Acoustic structure mitigates for noise and contributes to quality of pedestrian experience on Seventh Street.

Noise Baffles on Overhead BART Tracks



Landscape Plan



By 2021, very few of these plans have materialized.

“When that gets built, who does it cater to?”

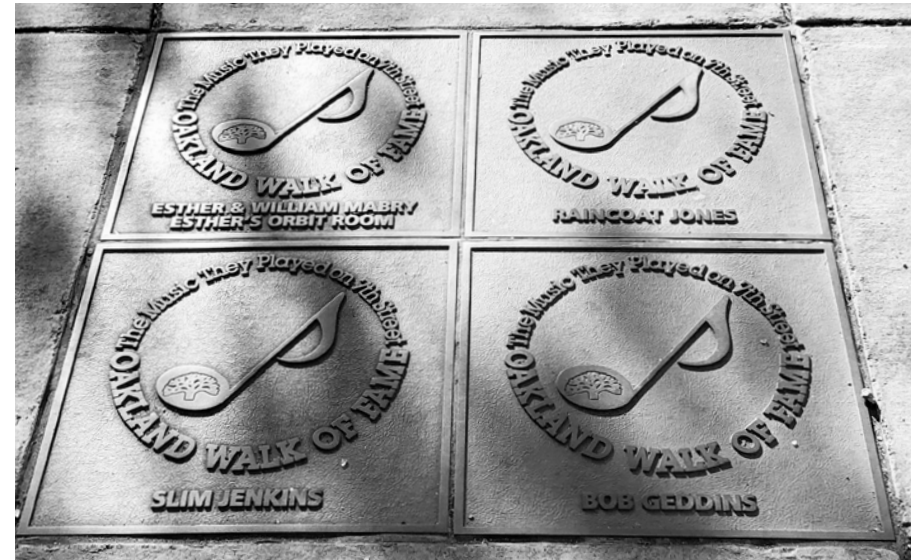
This is the struggle... We’re fighting to maintain, preserve, and document the Black migrant culture...

[Federal and state partners must be] as intentional about community restoration as they have been about funding its destruction.”

David Peters, West Oakland Neighbors



ABOVE: COVER FOR INVESTMENT PROPOSAL
RIGHT FROM TOP: 7TH STREET GATEWAY BY HOOD DESIGN,
BIKE LANES AND SYCAMORES, 7TH STREET WALK OF FAME





URBAN FARM RESIDENTS GRAZE BEHIND THE NEW LINCOLN THEATER,
BUILT OUT OF A LARGE SHIPS' BRIDGE, AS THE BART GOES BY