WEST OAKLAND MATTERS

West Oakland Matters 2025

From Remembrance to Resistance to Creative Revitalization

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A LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

From Remembrance to Resistance to Creative Revitalization

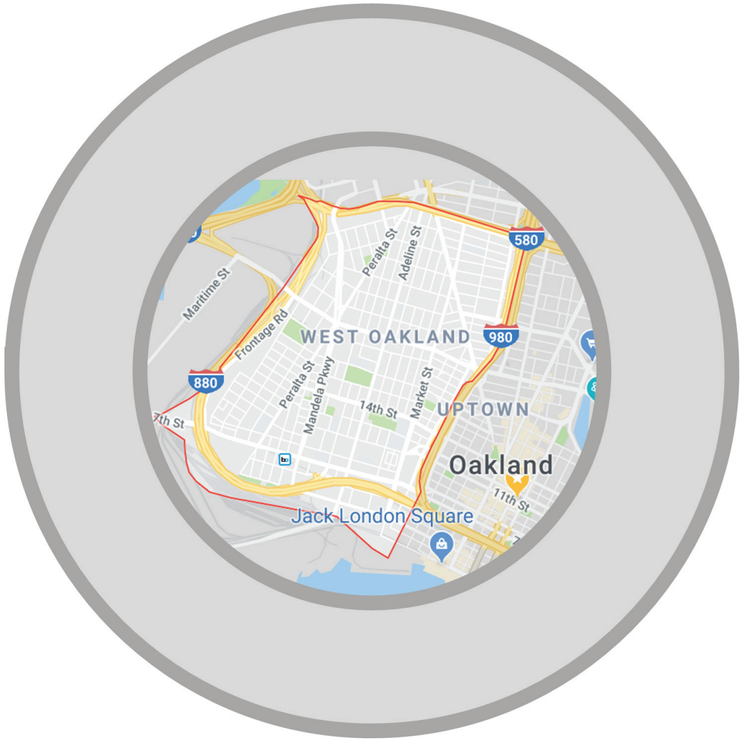
The Challenge

Oakland is nationally recognized as one of the most creative and diverse cities in the country. Yet despite these outstanding attributes, in 2025, Oakland suffers the same ills as many other urban centers in the country, including crime, an affordability crisis, and homelessness. But unlike other cities, powerful and unfriendly outsiders often overlook the attributes of Oakland while focusing on the crises.

We have a different view. To us, the most interesting result of these adjacencies in Oakland is the mix of local people and groups who persistently struggle to hold on to a valuable legacy in changing times, especially when the legacy is slated to be swept away by new changes whose value is often unproved and whose effects are often deleterious.

Too often, the concept of the neighborhood's future has defaulted to something imagined by people with control of the levers of power. And that power has been systemically withheld from the legacy community.

As a result, a history of indifferent destruction has been imposed on Oakland for decades, from industrial collapse, racist policies like redlining, federal and state "urban redevelopment" that destroyed much that was good, municipal



Beginning in the mid-1950s, what had been a vibrant and ground-breaking black middle-class community was demolished in the name of "eminent domain," carved up by freeways, and hovered over by elevated BART tracks and a 1.2 million square foot postal distribution center, built on 20 acres of what had been single family homes.
[Image from Red Oak Realty]

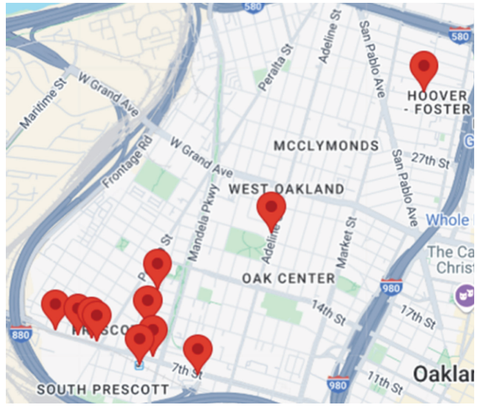
corruption, the trafficking of drugs, media stereotyping, and, today especially, gentrification.

Within that there is *West Oakland*—the locale of a pioneering black middle class, the onetime Harlem of the West, the home of social services standard-makers, and a veritable garden of high-impact artistic culture.

The results have been, on the one hand, intense environmental and cultural destruction. On the other, over many decades, West Oakland has countered with resistance and resilience. And these have not been just political positions. They have been existential necessities.

At the heart of resistance and resilience in West Oakland has always been Community. Our challenge is to translate the energy of the community into self-determined revitalization.

By supporting creative collaboration within the community we—West Oakland Matters—advocate for and partner with others in the neighborhood's regeneration *on its own terms*.



Creative establishments are returning to the Seventh Street corridor, but galleries, studios, and community arts groups are scattered through West Oakland.

We have hit upon the theme *Quality of Life, by West Oakland, for West Oakland*. This means restoring civil society, cultivating social justice, and leveraging inherent strengths in the culture. What makes a civil society, and how can we enhance it in West Oakland? We start to answer

this question by seeking a definition. This is what Google AI gives us:

Civil Society encompasses the realm of *voluntary, non-governmental organizations and institutions that operate independently of government and business, acting as a space for citizens to organize and participate in shaping their own lives and communities*.

Driven by a passion for the arts, we of West Oakland Matters are guided by the community, and we commit to highlighting expressions of what creatives across many walks of life are accomplishing here. We believe that the creativity within West Oakland is the key to its renaissance. As artists, we add to the advocacy and action already underway and welcome many others across cultures, industries, and social and educational backgrounds.

Meanwhile, we know that artists famously take charge of rehabilitation and innovation in distressed neighborhoods. We are guided by recent scholarship that takes into account the profound effect of our efforts.

The economic decline of more recent years, and the rise of crime and violence, paradoxically, opens up neighborhoods to visual artists. It is in the nature of art making that existing resources are explored for new potentials in the way they are combined and shared. The artists' example of research, cooperation and innovation is a clear model for creatives in many disciplines. And the productivity of artists, which thrives on the demand for its human relevance, inspires others to explore and experiment with their own means and methods to create opportunity.

This finds value that is both found in the past and invented for the future, connecting them. We believe the legacy of a neighborhood is the lasting influence of its past on its present and future. This legacy comprises the source of the community's values, how it is motivated by their history, and how it enacts them now.

So West Oakland Matters is both an artists' collaborative and an event, designed to highlight West Oakland's opportunity for its resident creativity to power the development of its near future. In the fantastic civic space that is the 7th West Community Hub, our second annual event looks for ways to:

- leverage cultural preservation into cultural revival
- translate social justice into social renaissance
- convert intervention into inspiration

The future of a neighborhood may depend on its becoming a community of communities; a common identity as not just a geographic group, but a social group. Members share identity or interests, and in gathering they foster interaction that creates a sense of belonging. We invite you to share with us this creative community of communities.

—Malcolm Ryder

PROLOGUE

The Fierce Urgency of Now

The story of our event and why it matters today

In February 2024, the photographer Malcolm Ryder was looking through a series of images he made in downtown Oakland after the Black Lives Matter protests of May-June 2020. Shopkeepers had boarded up their windows to protect against violence and looting. Street artists had turned the plywood expanses into canvases for their urgent and eloquent pleas for racial harmony and social justice. The streets were empty of people and filled with color and verve.

The photos were strangely beautiful, some of them even lyrical. And the art they captured was entirely ephemeral. Ryder wanted to show the series in June 2024 to commemorate the uprising and also to make a point about the fleeting nature of urban landscapes and urban art in Oakland.

Why West Oakland?

Ryder had also taken a series of photos in an abandoned West Oakland industrial yard that toyed with the same themes. He wondered whether 7thWest—an event space just a mile and from the epicenter of the site of the downtown street art, and right on the central corridor of West Oakland—might host an art show.

Ryder found out that a colleague, the acclaimed photojournalist Ken Light, was preparing to publish

a book of photos of West Oakland in 1974. What might photographs taken fifty years apart, his and Ken Light's, say about a community?

Then Ryder had coffee with Mario Hernandez, a fellow arts writer and a professor of sociology at Mills/Northeastern. Hernandez was just about to publish a book on how the Brooklyn, NY, neighborhood of Bushwick had reinvented itself as a haven for the arts, and in doing so catalyzed economic redevelopment. Hernandez told Ryder he was turning his focus to West Oakland, where he believed the same potential existed. It would be places like 7thWest that would help change happen.

The synchronicities screamed out. The idea of the photo exhibit expanded. What if artists, activists, entrepreneurs, and denizens of West Oakland got together to explore not just the legacy and failed promise of West Oakland, but also its possibilities? What about adding writers and historians and cultural anthropologists to the mix?

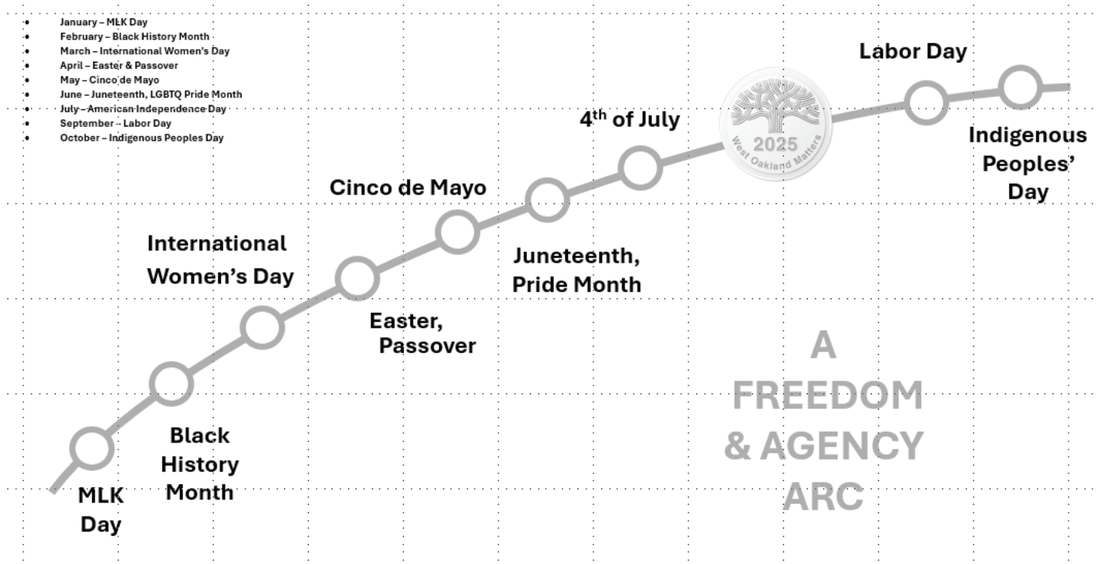
What might happen when an unrecognized community gets recognized? What emerges when people are sufficiently free of racist oppression, social injustice, and economic inequality—or at least supported? And what is possible when we come together to insist on that possibility?

A few months later, Ryder and a team of creative people in several disciplines produced the first day-long West Oakland Matters. It honored the rich past of this mighty but misunderstood neighborhood, celebrated its vibrant present, and invited all to envision the community's future—and to have a hand in making it happen. The event gained a tagline: "art and advocacy in action." And it added a premise to the promise: that West Oakland could be a model for a new kind of urban revitalization.

Why Now?

The team chose a date in late July to complement a series of summer events: the actual anniversary of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis in 2020 (which had set off the Oakland BLM protests), Juneteenth celebrations (which commemorate the end of slavery in the US), and the Fourth of July (which remembers that all of us are created equal, endowed with unalienable rights, and deserve "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness").

The event had several missions: First, to remember the legacy of West Oakland—one of the nation's first black middle-class neighborhoods, the home of the cultural mecca of Seventh Street, and the birthplace of the Black Panther Party, with its unsettling revolutionary ideals and its visionary social programs. Second, it would celebrate the art and creative impulses of West Oakland, an early incubator of the blues



and hip hop, a home for countless artists' studios, and a locus of edgy commercial establishments (Serial Material, Hella Positive, B-Love's Guesthouse). Also to be championed would be the nonprofits and neighborhood groups that are renovating old buildings (Esther's Orbit Room), building new ones (The Black Panther), registering a decaying Beaux Arts beauty (the 16th Street Train Station), and hosting Black Liberation Walking Tours.

Third, it recognizes that we live in a time when fierce economic forces can smother and erase local cultures, and that the culprits often come from *outside* the community. It reminds us that stereotyping suppresses Oakland's grassroots development and that the people who have long lived here ought to have a say in choices about the future.

Finally, there is the goal of simply gathering West Oaklanders together, not just to feel pride and a sense of belonging, but to raise our voices about the direction of a neighborhood in the face of contradictions: gentrification *and* new affordable housing, the hollowing out of lots and a new ballpark, a food desert *and* a new food hall and farmer's market.

Why Does It Matter?

In 1963, at the March on Washington, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. warned of how dangerous inaction is in the face of injustice and inequality:

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there "is" such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.

In the year since our first event, the fierce urgency of our project seems greater than ever. The summer of 2025 might be seen as one of deep discouragement. Civil liberties are being challenged by the federal government itself, racism has reared its head in new ways, and a "Big Beautiful Bill" passed by the US Congress threatens to blow open the gap open between haves and have nots.

It's easy to want to retreat, hide, or weep. But we've been reminded again that unlike forces can exist side by side: The government can try to shutter federal agencies, but it can't keep people from amassing in the streets. ICE agents can be brutal, but citizens with cameras can catch them in action. Politics can divide us into red states and blue states, rich people and poor people, but art and literature can bind our hearts and remind us of our common humanity.

It can be hard to know what to do or how to act. The 1970s slogan "Think Global, Act Local" reminds of the power of an effort as local as West Oakland Matters. And we are reminded of the philosopher Cornel West's words: "Justice is what love looks like in public."

Art and culture emerge from the native creativity of the community. Artists communicate experience, they share meaning, they empower us to be our best and our strongest. Art and culture may be underfunded and under attack, but they will never be underwhelmed. And so we gather, we insist on justice, we express our love publicly, we praise the beauty in our midst.

—Constance Hale

REMEMBERANCE〉RECOVERY〉RENAISSANCE

West Oakland's legacy can be traced by paying attention to a number of landmarks and surviving institutions. Some are in the process of being recovered, some are in the process of being reborn, and some are gaining new power. We remember the most inspiring.

Beaux Arts Behemoth

The 16th Street Train Station

On March 9, a motley crowd of 150 community members, students, and historians milled in a weed-studded empty lot on Wood at 16th Street, before a stunning urban ruin: the once glorious 16th Street Station

The old Southern Pacific depot at Seventh and Broadway (1869).

and Tower. They wore baseball hats and conductor's caps, t-shirts and sunglasses. They were celebrating that the dogged Oakland Heritage Association had succeeded in getting the Beaux Arts behemoth listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Long dwindled in use, damaged in the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989, and shuttered by Amtrak in 1994, the massive 1912 structure is now a derelict shadow of its former self. Its 40-foot-high stone walls have become a canvas for local graffiti artists, and its generous perimeter is encircled by cyclone fencing.

But squint in the sun, and you can see grandeur—in the sheer scale, in the three large arched windows over the main door, and in the open city blocks given to it. And you can imagine the marble floors, walls covered in terra-cotta tiles, and the light dancing on the ceiling frieze.

The station was much more than one of the grand buildings of its day. Built by Southern Pacific Railroad, the 16th Street train station was once a thriving center of transportation during the golden age of rail travel. It was the last stop of transcontinental rail lines, the gateway to San Francisco, and a portal to a city once proud of its own standing.

Architectural historian Mitchell Schwarzer, author of *Hella Town: Oakland's History of Development and Disruption*, painted the scene for the assembled crowd, in dramatic terms. "It was like an airport is today," he said, describing the 50 or more trains from across the nation barreling into the station every day, the hundreds of interurban trains pouring in from all over the East Bay, and the legions of streetcars that would greet the trains and whisk travelers to the Oakland Mole, an 11,000-foot railroad wharf and ferry pier at the foot of Seventh Street.

Former US Congressman and Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums called it the "Ellis Island for the African American community." During the Great Migration, writes Liam O'Donoghue on SFGATE, "countless Black migrants took their first footsteps as Californians through 16th Street Station's 13,000-square-foot main hall. The room's massive, arched windows allowed light to fill the soaring space, which must have provided weary travelers disembarking from a cramped, multi-day train ride some sense of freedom."

The station played a crucial role in the creation and development of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters—the first Black union in the country—and because porters were required to live close to work, the Prescott district, where the station is located, became one of the city's earliest Black enclaves.

"Preserving this building, making this building functional is of utmost importance," says Schwartzer. He isn't the only one who describe stakes in epic terms. Feleciai Favroth of Oakland Heritage Alliance applauds the recognition of the train station's importance and warns that without the more than $100 million needed to retrofit and restore it, "It could turn into our version of the Parthenon, where it has nothing but walls."

The building is now owned by City Ventures, a housing developer based in San Francisco and Irvine. The firm applied with the city of Oakland to build a 77-unit townhome-style development—dubbed "Signal House"—on the areas around the station. The proposal has been under review since May 2023 and does not include rehabilitation of the station.

Once again, a pattern repeats itself: Outside interests commandeer West Oakland's precious resources and develop them in a way that excludes lower-income residents and in fact erases the legacy of the community. (Another powerful earlier example is the seizing, by eminent domain, of 5,000 working-class homes for the building of a regional post office and an elevated BART track, which served as a death knell to the neighborhood's Seventh Street corridor.)

In the 16th Street Station, we see both a symbol and a demand for synergy. We see not just loss but inspiration in a chance to break the pattern. As Schwartzer puts it, the train station "tells us a lot about who we were, who we are, and hopefully, who we can become."

—Constance Hale

Sources: *Website of the Oakland Heritage Alliance, SFGATE, KQED.org, Oakland North, Eville Eye, The Oaklandside, and original reporting*

The Pacific Circuit

An excerpt from Alexis Madrigal's *The Pacific Circuit: A Globalized Account of the Battle for the Soul of an American City* (New York: MCD)

The journalist Alexis Madrigal spent 10 years researching the urban dynamics of Oakland and asking a big question: "Why could money flow through West Oakland as cargo from the port, or government dollars, or even the drug trade, but it never seemed to stick in the area? "The obvious answer was racism, but it felt like it was hard to go deeper than that and say, well, then who is making the money that could go to help people in West Oakland?"

His quest for an answer resulted in a book, *The Pacific Circuit*, which came out in March 2025. In West Oakland he finds a secret to a profound change that gives clues to changes spreading through all American cities. He finds traces of the past, the life of residents today, the pressure of gentrification, and the phenomenon of "the Pacific Circuit," an economic model born out of war-time need and Silicon Valley technology that "drives relentlessly toward scale and flow and technologization.

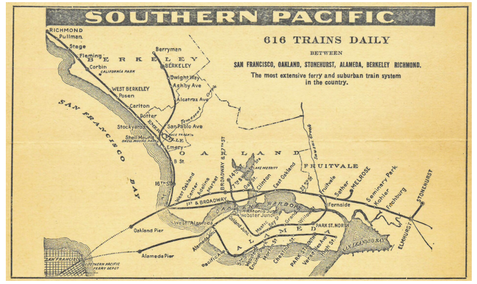
"I returned to West Oakland again and again. I'd sit on a concrete bench outside the post office and just watch what was happening around me. I'd ride my bike around the streets. I'd interview people who lived nearby. I'd dig into the Instagram and Facebook posts of residents. I plotted the homes going up for sale and the developers who were planning bigger things. I'd ask about certain buildings, certain streets, the old train station, the BART, the post office, Mandela Parkway, the railroad, the trucks, the different public housing projects. And then I'd go find the receipts in archives and libraries, tucked into oral histories or long-forgotten planning documents and PhD dissertations.

I had already learned the things that everyone learns about Seventh Street, the lingering memories of the

blues clubs and the complete Black society that grew up in West Oakland. I read a couple dozen books by and about the Black Panthers. I got drunk with the old longshoremen and kept up with some of the tech people who were scattered through the area. I went to meetings and events put on by the phalanx of nonprofits operating in the city. …

It all felt like a big story about capitalism and what a city is for, and what the powerful owe to the people who make a place alive. …

For the first time since 1950, more white people were moving in than out. The young tech workers who had built Facebook and Google and the iPhone were aging into parenthood, and Oakland's bungalows and Craftsman housing stock, built for city escapees not unlike themselves during the 1910s and 1920s, became a hot commodity. Bushrod, where Bobby Seale's parents lived, was on its way to becoming the single hottest neighborhood real estate market in the country. Uber had even purchased an old Sears store in the heart of uptown and became the first major tech company to land in Oakland…ever.



—Alexis Madrigal (pages 249-251)

Spotlight: Ken Light

Ken Light has worked as a documentary photographer focusing on social issues for more than fifty years. He began shooting in West Oakland upon his arrival in California, in 1974 and will publish a book of that work in 2026. Ken teaches photojournalism at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism and is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, among others, including the Dorothea Lange Fellowship. His work has been published in twelve monographs and presented in more than 230 exhibitions worldwide, including one-person shows at the Oakland Museum of California and the International Center for Photography in New York City.

▶ To watch a video of a conversation between Malcolm Ryder and Ken Light, go to: **www.westoaklandmatters.org/media/content**

Spotlight: David Peters

Living and breathing the past

Everyone has a migration story, but not everyone can say theirs began because their grandparents ran out of gas. For David Peters, that unexpected twist perfectly introduces his family's long history in West Oakland, which he shares on his Black Liberation Walking Tours.

Driving all the way from Houston, Texas, Peters's grandfather—a trained welder during World War II—set out for Portland after hearing about job opportunities in the shipyards. But wartime gas rationing stopped him short in Oakland. Instead of turning back, he decided to stay and build a new life there. Since then, multiple generations of the Peters family have lived on the same block, with David now living right next door to his childhood home in the Hoover-Foster neighborhood.

According to David Peters, the Southern values that Black migrants, like his grandparents, brought to Oakland—like greeting neighbors warmly and entertaining friends with good conversation and brown liquor—are part of the "secret sauce" that makes the town so special. On warm summer nights, you'll often find Peters on his front porch, puffing on a cigar and waving to everyone who passes by.

▶ David Peters as seen in the West Oakland Cultural Action Network video at **www.thewocan.org/about**

An accountant by trade, a nonprofit founder by day, and a walking tour guide by night, Peters is a connector—bringing people together and linking them to the neighborhood's living history. It's hard to imagine someone so charismatic and full of stories once being a shy introvert at St. Mary's High School. But be careful if you bring up baseball—his rowdy alter ego, "Bleacher Dave," might come out, yelling and cracking jokes from the stands as an avid A's fan.

Peters lives and breathes oral history. Even his home is mere seconds away from his favorite spot on the Black Liberation Walking Tours, The Dellums House, home to C.L. Dellums, an underknown (a word that Peters cheekily coined) foundational leader in the West Coast civil rights movement. Through his tours he hopes to spotlight the resilience and achievements of West Oakland's Black community, taking the focus away from trauma, and keeping the stories of his neighborhood alive for generations to come. "The land has memory," Peters once said on a tour. "The streets have memory. You just have to know how to listen."

—Christina Fang

RESISTANCE › CREATIVITY › SELF-DETERMINATION

Say “Oakland” and many people will think “Black Panthers.” Why do so few people think, instead, “one of the most creative cities in the country”? Did you know that that is how *Forbes* magazine has ranked it? As for West Oakland, the area has long been a hotbed of political action (the birthplace of the first Black union in the country, the home of the Black Panthers). And it has been a hotspot for creativity—from jazz and blues to rap and hip hop, from street photography to urban landscape, from killer barbecue joints to kick-ass graffiti.

The Black Panthers

Founded in 1966 and rooted in West Oakland, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was the era's most influential militant black power organization. Its members confronted politicians, challenged the police, and protected black citizens from brutality. The party's community service activity—called "survival programs"—included safety campaigns, free breakfasts, clothing programs, alternative education. Rather than integrating American society, members wanted to change it fundamentally. For them, black power was a global revolution, self-determination the goal.

Spotlight: Jilchristina Vest

At Home in Activism. Literally.

Some people's destinies come later in life, but you could say Jilchristina Vest's calling was written in the stars the moment she arrived on Earth. Or perhaps it was just a coincidence that Vest, curator of The Women of The Black Panther Party Mural, would be born the same year that The Black Panther Party started in 1966.Whether it's serendipity or a universal hiccup, there is a cosmic beauty knowing that the Free Breakfast for Children program, a community service effort spearheaded by women from the Black Panther Party, would later feed the girl who would be responsible for honoring their legacy.

Growing up in Chicago as a mixed girl with a Black identity, life was not without struggle for Vest, but was full with access and purpose. In 1986, after moving from Chicago to New York (via Arizona), she fell in love with the Bay Area when she witnessed women with hair like hers and families that looked like hers walking down the street. Vest went to San Francisco State University to study Black and Women's Studies and found herself learning from brilliant Black women like Angela Davis, Donna Hubbard, Johnetta Richards, and Laura Head. She continued following her passion for justice at the University of San Francisco, completing a master's in International and Multicultural Education.

In the wake of the 2020 uprisings and after Breonna Taylor's murder, Vest felt herself in the pits of a raging despondency. She decided to use her sadness to fuel her focus and to honor the incredible accomplishments of powerful Black women. With funds raised by her community, she dedicated her life and home to activism by making the outside of her house the first public mural for the Women of the Black Panther Party, the first floor of her home the first ever Black Panther Party Museum.

"History is the story of what people did," she shared with me, "History is NOT the study of what was done to you." Vest's twin projects have inspired another Black Panther Party museum, opened in 2024 in downtown Oakland by the Huey P. Newton Foundation. Working hard to make her ancestors proud, Vest says, "Even though I know sometimes they are sucking their teeth, most of the time I know they are smiling."

—Christina Fang

Jilchristina Vest's home

Art

Spotlight: Simone Nia Rae

Simone Nia Rae is a painter, media artist and veteran arts teacher. A force of nature who never stops painting in her Vallejo studio, she is also the curator of the West Oakland Matters 2025 art gallery. The show, "Bold Identity," expresses her own vision in celebrating artists who render present experience with fearlessness.

▶ *Check out Rae's video featuring Oakland murals done by local artists during the time of Covid, as well as candid testimonies and interviews about racism and violence against Black people:* **www.westoaklandmatters.org/media/content**

Music

This year's event features our own West Oakland Playlist, which includes music made in West Oakland from across the years. Listen to the Playlist here: **www.westoaklandmatters.org/art/music**

Spotlight: Loove Moore

Kakoli Mitra interviews Loove Moore, the West Oakland musician, dancer and community documentarian who interviews people about topics ranging from current events in the Bay Area to their idea of love. Sometimes called "Dr. Do-A-Lot," he is known for his interview series *The Loove Moore Show* and for making songs that sample classic Bay Area tracks.

▶ Watch the video on our website: **www.westoaklandmatters.org/media/content**

Fashion

THE 2025 FASHION SHOW: A LIVING HERITAGE

Our celebration of fashion takes inspiration from messages of the past and explores the legacy and promise of Black Fashion in terms of status, style, and beauty.

Vintage Forward

At last year's inaugural West Oakland Matters, we acknowledged the connection of history and future through creativity by premiering the "Tapestry Collection," part of the **Saint Maurice** line by designer Ellias Fullmore. The show was a powerful example of what happens when local artists, creatives,

and the community come together with purpose. “For us at Saint Maurice Clothing, it was especially meaningful—not just because it honored history and representation, but because it happened steps away from where we were founded in West Oakland,” says Fullmore. “This is home, and this is why we create.”

In this second year, we reach back to celebrate how wearables act both as a community-forming language and as an individual expression of identity.

It’s a two-part show, first featuring “Decades of Dope- ness,” a vintage-inspired show co-curated by Full- more’s fellow fashion entrepreneurs Jeanette De Mello and Jakki G., of the store **Serial Material**, with Sarah Bass of the arts review **MidBrow**. With clothing provided by Serial Material, the show looks back across several decades. Fullmore then showcases his very 21st-century designs in “Renaissance Runway.”

The idea, an extension of last year’s, is to connect West Oakland’s historically creative identity, in messages and style, to its dynamic future.

Communication by Design

Like music, fashion is a language—one that brings people together over shared identity while also heightening awareness of individual self-expression.

With music, we share the song; we share the words; but magic can come from an individual voice. With fashion, we share the shapes; we share the colors; yet draped on a given person, the common meaning can take a new form, or the form can have new meaning.

Both music and fashion create a community like-mindedness while, paradoxically, they allow us to appreciate individual personality—the inventive variation on the shared themes we recognize.

One unassailable fact about Oakland is that it is one of the most diverse cities in America. Consequently, the norm here is that many fashions —the “languages” of many cultures—cohabit our streets.

But fashion is a broad-stroke time marker. The histories behind an era’s fashions reveal how we have seen ourselves and each other. They express belonging in the community, with the embrace of each other’s *presence*. The 2025 West Oakland Matters fashion show, reflecting the neighborhood’s predominant culture, is rooted in the idea that Black fashion from the early 40s to the late 70s inspires us as we imagine our future, and it animates our ability to revitalize the community itself. It draws from how the community’s fashion culture has expressed the spirit of *resistance* and *creative resilience*.

The Fashion Economy

Historically, fashion can be separated into hierarchical layers, often determined by cost (on the manufacturer’s side) and price (on the consumer side). The layers on the lower end of the hierarchy include handmade clothes, thrift items, and even work-related uniforms for service jobs; the layers at the top culminate in haute couture.

In the history of West Oakland, haute couture was never an important factor. Buying power was usually in the hands of lower-class, working-class, and middle-class people. Which isn’t to say that fashion aspiration didn’t play a role, notably for one’s “Sunday Best” or for socializing at night. West Oakland’s heyday in the 1950s and 60s conspicuously brought high-style consumption and high-end fashionwear together at music and dining clubs such as Esther’s Orbit Room and Slim Jenkins’s.

Distinctive fashion in this community, though, would emerge for other reasons as well. For many women, retail stores—whether I. Magnin on Broadway or Sears, Roebuck on Telegraph—didn’t necessarily feature clothing that fit their bodies or their vision for themselves. Some designed and sewed clothes themselves or went to trusted seamstresses and dress shops.

Thelma Williams, one of those resident seamstresses, and a longtime employee at Esther’s, says that West Oakland residents patronized a men’s clothing store called Nick’s, on 7th Street, the Hat Library in downtown Oakland, and Smith’s Clothiers on Broadway & Clay. (In its 102 years, William Smith’s store was also known as The Famous Clothing Company, Smith Money-Back Store, and Money-Back Smith.) People also shopped at Goodwill, she says, and by choice, not because they lacked money.

As for the entrepreneurs, she remembers Curtis Baker

(aka “Black Jesus”), who was known for his dashikis, and Henry Delton Williams, a designer who used fabrics with African tribal patterns, but also imported European fabrics for suits, religious gowns, and costumes. His most recent innovation is the “jazket,’’ a jacket inspired by both jazz and gospel music.

As part of maintaining one’s presence in *this* community, individual problem-solving, invention, and imagination became a norm.

West Oakland Fashion’s Messages 1940s–1970s

How did wearables in West Oakland act both as a community-forming language and as an individual expression of identity? When we look at periods of successive decades (plus or minus a few years), and when we look specifically at Black fashion, we find fashion periods both changing and overlapping over time.

Very generally, key themes emerge:

40s—50s Blacks arrived in Oakland from elsewhere, and they aimed for societal respect beyond the boundaries of their community through their dignity and industry. That was an early message of their clothes.

50s—60s With local labor losses because of changing industries, and with more global and increasing racial hostility, clothing spoke loudly in terms of self-protection, a righteous pride, and self-respect.

60s—70s After a period of fashion mainly extolling self-reliance and demand for equal rights, a broader sense of the need for positivity found footing in the more relaxed aura of sports, glamour, and entertainment (increasingly observable in modernizing media that broadcast examples from many places and cultures). The arts and entertainment boomed as influences, signaling societal value in multicultural awareness while also provoking personal imaginations.

Throughout these decades, the relationship between the group and the individual, the society and self-identity, balanced *achieving belonging* while emphasizing *presence*. In fashion, the idea was to own a shared story but tell it in a personalized way.

The Dynamics of Dress

We find the richness of the past informing and inspiring what we do next through the timeless elements of **Status, Style, and Beauty**. These live in fashions for both men and women, as well as across generations, from the young through older adults.

A simple way to understand these elements is to recognize that when a person has a certain status, it is commonplace to choose a style that is appropriate to the status, and then to personalize the style with distinguishing aesthetic preferences that “beautify” the style.

That is a fairly regular set of relations, but it is not a rule. We see that people frequently do something else in fashion, for any number of reasons that result in “standing out.”

In those three perspectives, we can recognize similarities and differences over time in what fashion (“dressing”) has communicated, whether at a community or individual level. We can compare men and women of a given period but also compare men or women across different periods.

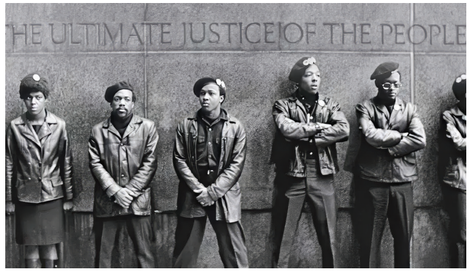
Status

Continually facing economic, political and environmental challenges, West Oakland responded with social norms that reflected resources available to them and sought recognition for their contributions to society. Uniforms were statements of pride, and the men and women of an emerging successful middle class dressed to express their own drive towards equal opportunity.

Pullman Porters · Image: Geoffrey’s Inner Circle

Pullman Porters Women's Auxiliary · Source: Oakland Public Library

Decades later, in the 1960s and early 1970s, West Oakland's **Black Panther Party** broadcast its intense pursuit of social justice, which blended its peaceful community programs with an overt public persona of readiness in self-defense. "The Black Panther Party uniform was iconic for being eye catching and for its unisex appearance," writes Nateya Taylor for the National Museum of African American History and Culture. From the symbol of a sleek black panther to their leather jackets and berets (the latter adopted in homage to French Resistance Fighters), the group used dress to communicate a complex message about personal and political power.



Source: Oakland Public Library

Similarly, the women of the Black Panther Party adopted a distinctive and purposeful look that was powerfully conveyed their pride in their Black identity, and commitment to revolutionary change. Their attire defied societal norms. But it was less about "fashion" in the traditional sense and more about a unified, militant statement. Their Afros "defied Eurocentric beauty standards that were pushed onto Black people," Taylor writes, adding that their hair styles celebrated "the variety of skin shades, hair textures, and physical features that made up the African Diaspora."

Stephen Shames 2022

Style

After the 60s, cultural innovation became one hallmark of the community's self-expression in fashion. This spanned from an elevation of practical informal streetwear to an ethnocentric interpretation of glamour applied both backwards and forward across decades. At the same time, increased confidence in publicly expressing individual personality stands out both as freedom of expression and role playing.

This became especially evident in media coverage of celebrities and entertainers who became trend setters.

(Above) Kenneth P. Green

(Left) Music's The Three Degrees · Tim Graham / Getty Images

Music's Soul Generation

TV's The Get Down Crew

In the mid-1970s, Black men's fashion in many urban centers was a vibrant mix of broader 70s trends, cultural pride, and local influences—including the enduring impact of the Black Panther Party in Oakland in particular. Overall, black men's fashion in mid-70s Oakland was characterized by a confident and expressive style that blended comfort with flair, reflecting the cultural shifts and burgeoning music scenes of the decade.

Beauty

Black fashion drew from the Black experience, influenced equally by the contemporary shared realities for communities, and by aspirational imagination. Much of the commonly shared social

27 of the Best Black Fashion Icons from All Eras, by PureWow

experience remained preoccupied with standing up proudly against urban hostility and disadvantage; but meanwhile aspirational visions became more commonly influential, including the Exotic, Tribal, and Futurist.

How a Harlem fashion show started the Black is Beautiful movement

A complexity in fashion is that an individual may have a highly influential personal iconic look, but an iconic style can also draw in individuals to adopt it, laying down a common theme. The unique becomes the ubiquitous.

"A St. Louis-born entertainer, Josephine Baker was known for her glitz and glam from Harlem to Paris,"

Dena Silver writes on the PureWow website. “But it wasn’t all sparkly dresses and marabou feathers; the singer and dancer was also a Civil Rights activist and part of the French Resistance.”

The “Black is Beautiful’ movement reached a much broader audience than the Black Panthers image, though the two were coincident in time and informed each other. and was launched in the early 1960s after a fashion show called *Naturally ’62: The Original African Coiffure and Fashion Extravaganza Designed to Restore Our Racial Pride and Standards*. Held at the Purple Manor jazz club in East Harlem, the event was organized by the African Jazz Art Society and Studios (AJASS) and led by Kwame Brathwaite and his brother Elombe Brath. It promoted natural hairstyles and African-inspired fashion, challenging the prevailing beauty standards but also echoing the Civil Rights era focus on racial pride and empowerment.

In all of the above, the complex blend of influences encouraging either group unity or individualism means that sometimes the former reins in the latter, but at other times the energy of imaginative individuals offers a new shareable identity that sparks the evolution of the group.

Re-visioning Through Fashion

Today social media has become the dominant channel of fashion communication across all of the country’s diverse subcultures. But its blended, multimillion user audience has not diluted the force of fashion as both a mirror and a window onto any given culture. Rather, it has even further elevated consciousness of fashion’s power.

To ponder this, go no further than New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, widely recognized as America’s preeminent cultural museum, which gave fashion—and Black fashion—the brightest spotlight available, as high art, in spring 2025. The museum’s ongoing Design exhibits dramatically highlight fashion’s enduring creativity and social influence. The boundary-breaking exhibition ***Superfine: Tailoring Black Style*** showcased solo artist Tyler Mitchell, a young fashion photographer, who remarked in a **New York Times** article that the show meant “we are for the first time talking about specifically the history of *Black* men’s wear,” which, he added, “lives on through photography.” Mitchell emphasized that he felt an urgency in the work “to go beyond simply object documentation and go into real human lifestyle.”

Revisiting legacy lifestyles, our *Living Heritage* dives into the social environment of earlier emergent fashion and amplifies our notion that new fashion will likewise both form and reflect the community’s future.

—Malcolm Ryder

Sources: *This article was written by Malcolm Ryder, from research comparing and compiling observations taken from public libraries, commercial periodicals, independent writers on weblogs, academia, fashion websites, and newspaper articles, with the assistance of Professor Deirdre Clemente of UNLV, Ellias Fullmore, Constance Hale, and the Google Gemini AI Search engine.*

Decades of Dopeness

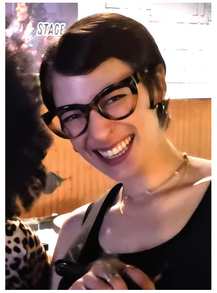
West Oakland and the midcentury fashion evolution

In a post-WWII America, access to new fabrics, mass production, and a loosening of the puritanical expectations of decades past prompted a wave of innovations and explorations within the world of fashion that bloomed steadily from the 1940s through the 1970s. As offerings grew increasingly out-of-this-world, outfits and styles became highly individualized, often genre-and-gender blending. This thirty-odd-year sweet spot in the timeline of fashion history was full of artisanal and old-school sensibilities paired with the latest and greatest technologies of the times. This confluence bred a ravenous hunger for abundance and excess, futurism, and just plain fun for fashion-forward Americans.

Looks moved from more muted tones and restrictive silhouettes, workwear and ultra-conservative hemlines, to wild prints and colors, flamboyant flares, and larger-than-life collars. In West Oakland, as a middle class stabilized, with superior salaries and education, a culture and community built around the neighborhood's home sewists, their churches, and the legendary jazz clubs that lined 7th Street. Being seen and showing up as your most authentic self were paramount. This freedom of expression and form brought about a thriving fashion scene, with even the simplest looks holding up as standouts today.

Black designers and consumers have long led trends, dictating where culture will be heading next. Many pieces from the era remain relevant and timeless, even half a century or more on. These looks are inspired by that progression and creativity, and by the love of the art of clothing.

—Sarah Bass



Sarah Bass likes to consume art, touch plants, and care. Loved things last. Follow @bass.sarah on Instagram for more.

Spotlight: Serial Material

For a look that kills

A vintage clothing and collectives shop co-owned by Jeanette De Mello and Jakki G., Serial Material is one of its kind. In a world of fast fashion, the West Oakland store (1634 7th St, in the heart of the iconic jazz and blues district) offers a kaleidoscope of colors and textures, with timeless true vintage from the 1950s on. Ball gowns and streetwear, leather, lace, and lingerie, with inclusive offerings to suit a range of sizes and styles. Every item has a story to tell, and a new life waiting to be lived. Jeanette De Mello has been collecting vintage for many years, a love borne of her childhood experiences with her ballroom-dancing grandmother. She can't wait to help you find your perfect piece.

Serial Material is open by appointment, with fair prices and true-to-you finds. DM @serialmaterial on Instagram to schedule a personal shopping experience.

Jeanette De Mello co-owner of Serial Material, and the project manager and social-media director of the West Oakland Matters producers. Photo by Sarah Bass.

Jakki G., co-owner of Serial Material, and one of the producers of West Oakland Matters. Photo by Sarah Bass.

Renaissance Runway

Ellias Fullmore and St. Maurice Clothing puts regal imagery on hot fashions

In 2021, Ellias Fullmore was living in West Oakland and working in tech when he had an epiphany. The then–43 year-old had earned a bachelor's degree in Marketing and Business at Morehouse College, got a record deal a week after he graduated, worked as a hip-hop artist and film production assistant in Atlanta and LA, and, after picking up a graduate degree in in Multimedia and Applied Media Theory, was enjoying a career in user experience and product design and working for companies like Charles Schwab and Roche.

Ellias Kenneth Fullmore was born in LA, in 1978, to an Ethiopian mother and an African American father. His mother's aristocratic family had fled their country after a Marxist-Leninist regime replaced Haile Selassie's empire. His father, from El Paso, was a jazz musician and former Black Panther who joined Marriott as an executive. The family moved around the US, with Ellias graduating from high school in South Bend, Indiana.

Inspired by TV shows like *Different World*, Fullmore set his sights on attending an HBCU, especially Morehouse College, the alma mater of Rhodes Scholars, Martin Luther King Jr., and Spike Lee. He got in, and later he went to grad school at Cal State East Bay. But his intellectual range was hardly contained by the academy. The most important thing he learned in his applied media theory classes, he says, is that software "is just an extension of cave drawing. It's a form of cognitive offloading."

That may give you a sense of the unusual way Fullmore views human expression. "I'm just a nerd," he says, joking and not joking. His true love is history, especially the 5,000-year-old history of his Ethiopian heritage. "That frames my sense of people," he says. In 2021, Fullmore had gone to a conference in Switzerland with Roche, stopped in Berlin, and found himself captivated by a museum piece depicting St. Maurice, a 3rd century Roman army officer of Nubian origin who was martyred in Switzerland for refusing to persecute fellow Christians. St. Maurice is the patron saint not just of soldiers, armies, and weavers and dyers, but also of the German Holy Roman Emperors. He is venerated in Vienna, and his namesakes include Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, St. Moritz in Switzerland, and St.-Maurice, a commune in the southeastern suburbs of Paris. Not to mention a sprawling Catholic church in New Orleans.

On top of all that, the Black saint is credited with bringing the imperial eagle—symbol of the Roman Legions, Napoleon, and, eventually, the Nazis—to Germany. "The entire US government, down to its buildings and its coins, is influenced by this visual motif," Fullmore notes. "I like that irony. This global image originated in Africa!"

Back in California, Fullmore attended the Black Joy Parade in February 2021 and had his epiphany: he would become a fashion designer, his company would be named St. Maurice, and he would debut his first collection at Black Joy in 2022. "I stood in my room for hours and hours," he remembers today. "I realized that fashion is a medium accessible to everyone, and that it would be my way to upend preconceived notions of race and class. And St. Maurice sounded like a brand."

As a musician, Fullmore says he used Ethiopian history "to recontextualize the Black experience in America, to bridge the gap of the diasporas." With St. Maurice, he found something that would bridge different gaps. "I thought of the iconography of St. Maurice—the military dress, the banner, and the sword. I thought about the rich history of Black creativity. I thought about how I could show images of Black and Brown people in motifs associated with Europeans—to change ideas of status and turn the idea of cultural appropriation on its head." St. Maurice, he adds, "reminds us that Black brilliance helped shape the world long before modern narratives took hold."

“Saint Maurice is more than a clothing brand—it’s a cultural statement,” Fullmore adds. “Through our designs, we invite our audience to question dominant narratives and imagine a world before white supremacy. Perhaps there’s more to the story than we’ve been told.”

For his first collection, Fullmore put an image of St. Maurice on a lightweight bomber jacket.

In his Tapestry Collection, he used imagery inspired by a 15th Century German textile, *The Wildmen and The Moors*, at the Boston Museum of Fine Art.

Today Fullmore has moved from West Oakland to Lake Merritt, but he appreciates the Seventh Street creative nexus. He debuted the Tapestry Collection at West Oakland Matters 2024 and serves as an integral part of the 2025 team. As for what he presents in this year’s fashion show, he describes them as “clothes and accessories for proud global citizens of color.”

—Constance Hale

RESILIENCE 〉 COMMUNITY 〉 REINVIGORATION

In West Oakland, some people are “putting their money where their mouths are,” finding new ways to fund projects, build housing, be art entrepreneurs—and making the neighborhood healthier.

Esther's Redux

Noni Session finds a way to fund an innovative community center

What do you do if you are a third-generation West Oaklander, you have heard tales of "The Harlem of the West," you remember when your parents would have lost their home in 2008 if not for an uncle, you have watched poverty and bad policy and a myopic media degrade the place you come from, you do not personally have piles of money, and you believe in the power of positive change?

If you are Noni Session, you come back from Cornell (where you did your doctoral studies in cultural anthropology) and Kenya (where you did ethnographic research) and help start an organization called the East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative. And then you and your partners go and buy an icon of the Harlem of the West, a lodestar for those who dream of a revitalized West Oakland, a legendary blues club called Esther's Orbit Room. And you start the long process of turning the abandoned, tagged relic into a gem of West Oakland again—a Black cultural center, an avatar of mixed-use development, a hub of a reimagined 7th Street corridor.

A team of us from West Oakland Matters met Noni Session at Esther's in late May, on one of the last days before the reconstruction began. We waited on the sun-drenched sidewalk, opposite the hulking USPS Processing and Distribution Center and under the elevated tracks of BART, as trains thundered, whizzed, and clanked by. Suddenly, Noni threw open the double doors and unlocked the black grill. She was in her work attire: an emerald green sweatsuit, braids carefully wound into a knot on top of her head, her round face somewhat inscrutable, but her smile wide and welcoming.

As we walk in and gawk— the gold-glittered black ceiling! the Christmas lights! the long dark wooden bar! the red leather barstools! the hand-written drink menu!—she quietly stands back.

Soon, we are joined by lithe models, the owners of Serial Material, the fashion designer Ellias Fullmore, and denizens of the neighborhood, who try on vintage clothes and share stories of their many decades in West Oakland. It is an afternoon of gaiety, fashion, and fun.

And, in a way, it is a precursor of fun to come. This is the Esther's Orbit Room Cultural Revival Project, soon to be Esther's Commons. It has been envisioned, designed, and permitted, and the rebuilding has started. It will have a Blues Kitchen, the historic Esther's bar, an arts retail space called Huey P. Newton's, an art lab called The Barn, and The Porch, a space for performances and community gatherings. There will also be co-housing for seven working artists.

Esther's Orbit Room has always been more than a place to get a bite; it was a gathering place and even an art space for five decades before it closed in 2009.

In a recent profile on KALW's "Crosscurrents," Session reflects upon what the neighborhood was like before her time—before BART, freeways, and urban redevelopment cut it into pieces. "This corridor supported over 250,000 black folks with entertainment, essential businesses, cobblers, tax accountants, dry cleaners, restaurants," she says, adding that the 7th Street strip also boasted banks, shops, dentist offices, and grocery stores.

Session grew up in the neighborhood in the 1970s and 80s, next to what she calls Lil Bobby Hutton Park. (Its name on a map is De Fremery Park.) Session remembers her family's grocery store and the playground that stood in the shadow of the Cypress Structure. And she remembers stopping by Esther's Orbit Room on the way home from fishing on the 7th Street pier. Her father would buy a bag of ice and, for his daughter, a cream soda.

By then West Oakland was a changed place. City planners had declared it "blighted," beginning an

"urban renewal" era that saw thousands of homes torn down and many more people displaced. Freeways cut through the cultural hub and BART tracks changed the soundtrack on 7th Street.

And then it changed again in 1989. Session was 14 when she witnessed unspeakable horror in the name of Loma Prieta and a pancaking Cypress Structure. She remembers running over to the collapsed freeway from her grandmother's house and finding the area once in the shadow of the elevated freeway flooded with sunshine. And, for the first time in her life, it was quiet. "There were birds tweeting," she told The Oaklandside. "It was like another planet."

Decades later, Session and associates in West Oakland wanted to restore the 7th Street corridor to something closer to the vibrant economic and cultural hub it was before the eminent domain, the freeways, and the neglect. Esther's Orbit Room had become a locked-up eyesore, its quaint hand-painted signage no match for the assertive graffiti.

Session had a dream but she also had the skills to make it concrete (or rather wood and siding): she co-founded the East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative (EB PREC), an innovative, crowd-funded investment vehicle, which lets regular community members, along with foundations and traditional financial institutions invest in the cooperative and its projects. The group's mission is to allow "Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and allied communities [to] cooperatively organize, finance, purchase, occupy, and steward properties, taking them permanently off the speculative market."

Noni Session, with a legacy-steeped West Oakland neighbor who is modeling vintage wear for commemorative fashion shoot in June at Esther's.

Session saw her vision come to first fruition when EB PREC bought the Esther's property for $1.5 million and raised $6 million to renovate it. Session is the group's executive director, and her co-founders and colleagues are Ojan Mobedshahi, the director of finance, and Shira Shaham, the projects director.
Session says she promised herself, when she returned from graduate studies in Nairobi in 2011, that if she ever had the opportunity to help with the homelessness and suffering she saw in her hometown, that she would "do it in righteousness, and with a whole heart." In Esther's, she is applying her training as well as her personal history, her moral sensibility, and her spirit. And when Esther's re-opens she can add "giving joy" to the mix.

—Constance Hale

Spotlight: The Panther Building

At 7th and Campbell Streets, The Black Panther is a groundbreaking affordable housing community that supports very low-income and formerly incarcerated individuals. Its developer is Elaine Brown, an activist, writer, and singer who is the former Black Panther Party Chairwoman and is currently serving as COO of Oakland & the World Enterprises, which she founded in 2014.

Spotlight: Sterling Art Services

A fine-art framing company located at 1558 7th Street, Sterling Art Services boasts a local, national, and international customer base. Founded by George Sterling in 1981, it now run by Chris Barnett, who has kept up the renowned attention to detail, high standard of craft, integration of museum methods and materials, excellent customer service, and knowledgeable, personable staff. Barnett is an early supporter of West Oakland Matters, donating easels, frames, and lots of good will.

Spotlight: Mandela Grocery Cooperative

A worker-owned grocery store that sources from local entrepreneurs and farmers in California with a focus on black and brown farmers and food makers. The store, at 1430 7th Street, features fresh, pesticide-free produce, high-quality meats, hormone-free eggs and dairy, local bread and a growing sundries department.

▶ Listen to a conversation about greens, grit, and grooves between Kakoli Mitra and the the co-op's James Bell: **www.westoaklandmatters.org/media/content**

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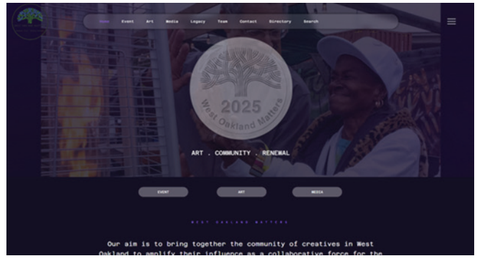

It's launched and updated: *www.westoaklandmatters.org*. Our 24x7 presence online captures and supports artist-driven community-centered collaborations past, present, and future.

Browse our event activities and get to know our participants, collaborators, and supporters. See the artists and other key creatives who are connecting the startling legacy of West Oakland's resilience to its renaissance. Browse the Library, Playlist, and Galleries holding growing collections of work by artists, writers, and community culture workers.

RECOGNITION

Our Mission

To bring together the community of creatives in West Oakland to amplify their influence as a collaborative force for the community's self-determination and cultural renaissance.

Our Team

Malcolm Ryder Creative Director, Founder; owner of Ryder Foto and Oaktown Pictures. Board of Directors, Oakland Art Murmur and East Bay Photo Collective.
Constance Hale Editorial Director; writer, editor; author of six books; former program director, Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism.
Janice Edwards Media and Development Director; CEO, Edwards Unlimited Productions, Producer/ Host of Janice Edwards TV Bay Area Vista.
Jeanette de Mello Project Manager, Social Media Director, Community Liaison; co-owner of Serial Material Vintage.
Jakki G Community Liaison, co-owner Serial Material Vintage.
Ellias Fullmore Marketing and Production Consultant; Creative Director, Saint Maurice Clothing; Independent Entertainment.
Christina Fang Event Coordinator and Writer
Kweli Kiuruwi Intern

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Mario Hernandez PhD, Associate Professor of Sociology, Fletcher Jones Sociology Chair, Mills College; author, *Bushwick Bohemia*.
Deirdre Clemente PhD, Associate Director of the UNLV public history program, 20th century American Culture, Fashion and Clothing.
Donna Brinkman co-Founder, co-owner, 7th West Community Hub.

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Hella Positive
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Oakland Heritage Alliance
Self-Help Federal Credit Union
Serial Material
Sramani Institute
Saint Maurice Clothing

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WEST OAKLAND MATTERS
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