How to build in South-Central

If we help kids learn a trade, they’ll be able to cash in on a construction boom.

By Manuel Pastor
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The debate about the densification of Los Angeles is in full swing. In one corner, Valley homeowners and Westside residents resent the loss of a suburban lifestyle and worry about increasing traffic. In the other, developers and smart-growth advocates, not the most natural of allies, have joined forces to argue that up-zoning and upbuilding, particularly around transit corridors, will eventually reduce congestion and improve air quality.

Often lost in the crossfire are the ways in which increased density and development will affect L.A.’s other major problems, including poverty and affordability. In many of the newly attractive downtown and mid-city locations, low-income residents worry that gentrification will deliver better streetscapes and neighborhood amenities -- but for an entirely different clientele. In other areas, including large swaths of South-Central, the concern is that the construction and other jobs created by what some estimate to be a $100-billion building boom will go elsewhere, delivering yet another decade of “drive-by” prosperity.

Into the mix has stepped the Community Coalition, a group that cut its teeth on land-use issues in South-Central, specifically the effort to curtail the proliferation of liquor stores before and after the 1992 civil unrest. Having expanded its attention to a wider range of concerns, including youth development and black-Latino dialogues, it is now focused on workforce development -- and the opportunities that the re-urbanization of Los Angeles could bring.

These new opportunities might not initially seem that sexy. Construction work doesn’t have the same cachet as, say, the high-tech sector. It’s the difference between swinging a hammer and engineering a rap album, designing a condo or launching this year’s version of YouTube.

Yet the state’s Economic Development Department is predicting that increased demand for construction in Los Angeles County will just about equal the projected growth in demand for computer specialists.

Moreover, because the average construction worker is near to retirement, it is expected that future openings in construction will be double those in the computer field. Experts project long-term labor shortages in the building trades (once we get past the recent housing blip), particularly if younger workers continue to pursue other occupations.

The Community Coalition is trying to communicate that reality and win converts to construction early, while kids are still in high school. To do this, leaders have embraced one of the newest trends to emerge in the world of education: “multiple pathways” -- a combination of college prep and career education, particularly in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.

The notion is that practical education will slice the high dropout rate by keeping kids engaged and providing them with marketable skills, even as the college pathway remains open. It’s a vision suited to an American workforce facing a new age of lifelong education and job-switching.

To achieve this vision, the coalition wants to create a “Construction Technology Academy”
(including architecture and engineering) at South-Central’s Dorsey High School. Los Angeles Unified School District Supt. David Brewer has offered his support, and Dorsey Principal George Barthelemon has endorsed the concept.

Getting kids into the pipeline for living-wage jobs should be among our highest priorities. The needs are urgent and the demand is there, particularly given the combination of infrastructure bonds, private projects and school rebuilding. Moreover, a vibrant set of community groups is ready to backstop the school’s efforts at student recruitment, build bridges to trade unions and employers and soothe the parent hackles that often get raised over any push for technical education.

South-Central has been at the heart of many “perfect storms” -- the intersecting plagues of poverty, abandonment and crime. It isn’t often that the community finds a way to stop being the poster child for distress and instead takes advantage of the broader forces shaping Los Angeles’ new urban form. Let’s hope that Dorsey, L.A. Unified and the Community Coalition all get in step on a plan for rapid implementation of the Construction Academy. The future of Los Angeles -- and some of the least advantaged young people in our region -- depends on it.