

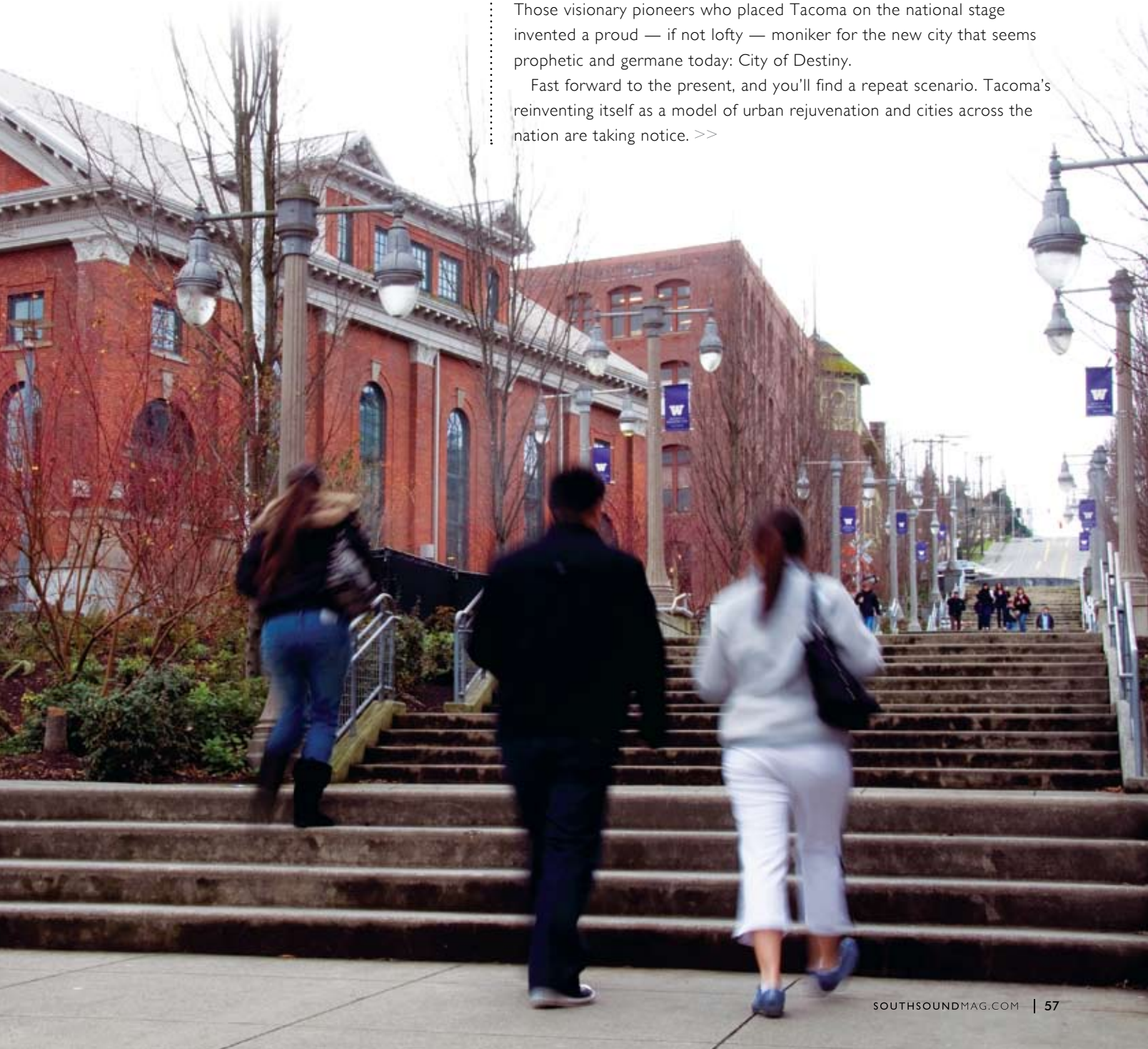
TACOMA

a 21st century renaissance

BY ALLEN COX
PHOTOS BY SCOTT RAMSEY

Tacoma's founders envisioned a promising future when, in 1873, their young city was selected as the Northern Pacific Railroad's western terminus. Northwest lumber and coal were the golden exports and soon the city exploded in its first commercial and cultural boom. Investors took notice. Development projects sprang up and a new cityscape emerged. Those visionary pioneers who placed Tacoma on the national stage invented a proud — if not lofty — moniker for the new city that seems prophetic and germane today: City of Destiny.

Fast forward to the present, and you'll find a repeat scenario. Tacoma's reinventing itself as a model of urban rejuvenation and cities across the nation are taking notice. >>





DID YOU KNOW?

- Gary Larson, creator of “The Far Side” cartoon, grew up in a blue-collar household in Tacoma.
- Singer and actor Bing Crosby was born in Tacoma.
- Tacoma’s Karpeles Manuscript Museum near Wright Park features some of the rarest and most-important documents in history.
- The Tollbooth Gallery is the world’s smallest gallery dedicated exclusively to experimental video and fine arts. The Tollbooth was once a TV-Tacoma information kiosk that had long since been abandoned and abused. It now features artworks for the public.



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TACOMA’S REVITALIZATION

Much has happened in Tacoma over roughly the last 10 to 15 years. A vibrant urban center sprang from a nearly derelict downtown. Many businesses saw promise and opened operations and even headquarters in Tacoma. Development projects, such as the University of Washington’s Tacoma campus, the museum and theater districts, and the Thea Foss Waterway ushered in fresh civic pride and enriched the city’s cultural identity. New and distinctive architecture gave a fresh look to the cityscape while Tacoma’s rich architectural heritage was valued and preserved. At the same time, some of the city’s neighborhoods tackled big challenges head-on at the grass-roots level, resulting in safer places to live and raise families.

Tacoma’s mayor, Bill Baarsma, reflects on this revitalization with pride. “In the past decade, Tacoma has undergone an extraordinary transformation unlike any city of its size anywhere.”

But before Tacoma’s revitalization projects were even on the drawing board, the city already had a lot going for it. Strategically located at a South Sound crossroad, it’s a transportation hub, halfway between Olympia and Seattle with the Tacoma Narrows Bridge linking it to the Kitsap and Olympic peninsulas. It’s the state’s third-largest city and holds its own as the sixth-largest container port in North America.

David Graybill, President and CEO of the Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber of Commerce, characterizes Tacoma as a big city with a small-town feel. “Tacoma is a dynamic place that attracts many new and diverse residents,” he says. “It’s a community of hard-working people where newcomers are welcome and people can still get to know their neighbors.”

OUT AND ABOUT

With 42 miles of Puget Sound waterfront within the city limits, an ideal location between the Cascade and Olympic ranges, and Mount Rainier only an hour’s drive away, there are plenty of opportunities to appreciate Tacoma’s stunning natural surroundings.

A popular spot to gather on sunny weekends is the scenic Ruston Way waterfront, where miles of paved walkways dotted with parks and restaurants follow the shoreline from Old Town toward the new Point Ruston development, offering views of Puget Sound, Mount Rainier, the Cascades, Browns Point, Vashon Island and the Olympics.

One of the nation’s largest municipal parks, Point Defiance Park, occupies a 700-acre peninsula at Tacoma’s northern tip and houses a zoo, aquarium, gardens, historic Fort Nisqually, a logging museum, miles of old-growth forest zigzagged with hiking trails, a boathouse and even kayak rentals.

Stadium High School, The Museum of Glass, and the Tacoma Narrows Bridge are a few of the most iconic sights that define >>

THE CENTER FOR URBAN WATERS

As a waterfront city that lives and works on the shores of Puget Sound, Tacoma is positioning itself as a leader in urban marine stewardship. One of the newest projects on the drawing board is the Center for Urban Waters, a 51,000-square-foot green (in the earth and sea-friendly sense) facility that will go up on the east side of Thea Foss Waterway. The center will be the new home of the city's Environmental Services labs and offices, UW-Tacoma research labs and offices for Puget Sound Partnership, a coalition of government, private, community and tribal groups whose ultimate mission is a healthy Puget Sound.

A.R.C. GLORIA • COLOMBIA

"La Gloria Colombiana" is a 262-foot long sailing barque based in Cartagena, Colombia.

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Tacoma, but for a peek at the real Tacoma, there's nothing like exploring the city's diverse collection of neighborhoods. Several districts offer their own sights and a sophisticated array of boutiques, day spas, galleries and restaurants including Proctor, Old Town, Stadium, Tacoma Dome, Sixth Avenue, Pacific Avenue along the UW campus, and others. Each has its own distinct character and draw.

You can't go out and about in Tacoma without taking notice of the public art. Dozens of murals and sculptural installations decorate city neighborhoods — from the 105-foot totem pole in downtown's Firemen's Park, to

whimsical telephone-pole palms that greet Dome District visitors, to the bronze "New Beginnings" that embodies Tacoma's spirit of optimism at the entrance to historic Union Station.

"Tacoma has an extraordinarily active arts community, from painters, sculptors and glass artists to writers, actors and musicians," says Ryan Petty, director of the city's Department of Community and Economic Development. Galleries populate the city and during evenings every third Thursday each month, the Tacoma Artwalk offers a fun and easy way to browse the galleries and meet some of the local talent — for free. >>

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The region's indigenous people aptly referred to the mountain that dominates the present-day city's southeastern horizon as "Tacobet," meaning "Mother of Waters." The European explorers misunderstood the name and dubbed the mountain "Tahoma." Much later, the city's early settlers named their newfound settlement "Tahoma" after the misnamed mountain, and, later still, changed the pioneer city's name to Tacoma. It was Captain George Vancouver who renamed the mountain called Tacobet to "Rainier," after one of his friends. It seems that Tacobet is not only the Mother of Waters but the mother of names as well.



PHOTO BY MARK DELBRUECK

THIRTY FATHOMS UNDER THE SEA

When the original Tacoma Narrows Bridge opened in July 1940, it was a sleek and impressive engineering marvel (or so everyone thought). Four months later, a storm with winds in excess of 42 miles per hour slammed into the bridge.

Who hasn't seen the dramatic eyewitness footage of what followed — Galloping Gertie oscillating wildly, breaking apart, and plunging into the Narrows? But did you know that Gertie has since found new purpose 30 fathoms under the sea? Today, she is enjoying retirement as an enormous reef sheltering an abundance of Puget Sound marine life. Experienced divers can explore the underwater ruin, which has earned a spot on the National Register of Historic Places.

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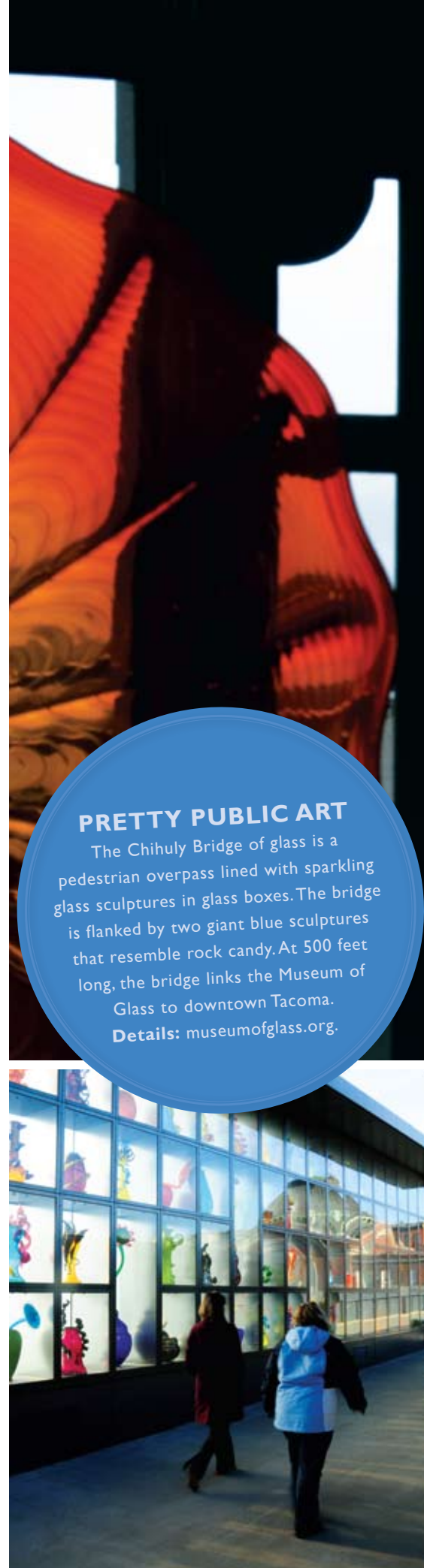
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PRETTY PUBLIC ART

The Chihuly Bridge of glass is a pedestrian overpass lined with sparkling glass sculptures in glass boxes. The bridge is flanked by two giant blue sculptures that resemble rock candy. At 500 feet long, the bridge links the Museum of Glass to downtown Tacoma.
Details: museumofglass.org.





TACOMA'S CHANGING COMPLEXION

Anyone who's put down roots in Tacoma is aware of the city's remarkable downtown revitalization. Here are a few notable projects that represent a good sampling of how Tacoma residents will likely see their city evolve:

- Public art has and will continue to help define Tacoma as a cultural center in the Northwest. Building on Tacoma's reputation as a glass art Mecca, a new pedestrian "Glass Walk" showcasing glass art exhibits that will connect the waterfront to the downtown core along South 15th Street, is in the planning stage.
- The Brewery District at the south end of downtown is the area to watch. These blocks of historic warehouses and industrial structures are likely to see a public Creative Arts Complex, new galleries, studios, creative business spaces, cafes, boutique hotels and more.
- Connecting the waterfront to the Brewery District and beyond, a 20-foot wide paved trail — the Prairie Line Trail — will follow an old railway line and adorn downtown with a new green space that's both a recreational urban trail and an important downtown pedestrian corridor.

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IT'S ALL ABOUT QUALITY OF LIFE

The same spirit of optimism that inspired the city's early entrepreneurs thrives today. Continued expansion of the UW campus, a new Center for Urban Waters and further development of Port of Tacoma facilities are but a few projects under way.

"This city is full of entrepreneurs and we have the building blocks in place that position Tacoma for even more future growth," says Petty.

Graybill agrees. "Tacoma has an eclectic diversity of neighborhood businesses. In terms of commercial growth, there have been a remarkable number of new businesses and start-ups that believe in Tacoma's renaissance."

In Tacoma, it's all about building a better quality of life, something the municipal government takes very seriously.

The mayor describes three relatively new programs he finds particularly promising: business tax credits for each new job a company creates, a new city Office of Sustainability, whose mission is to reduce the city's carbon emissions and a grass-roots Community Based Services program that partners with neighborhood citizens to identify and tackle the most challenging problems the neighborhood is facing.

No wonder Tacoma has been the recipient of several honors throughout its revitalization, the most recent being the Partners for Livable Communities' 2004 award for Most Livable Region (received in conjunction with Pierce County). "We are doing innovative things here," the mayor said. "Things that no other city in the state is doing." >>

For more information
about discovering
Tacoma, go to
traveltacoma.com or
golocaltacoma.com.

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TACOMA'S MUSEUM DISTRICT

Museum-lovers don't have to walk far to take in three of the finest museums in the Northwest, all concentrated in a short stretch of downtown's Pacific Avenue between South 17th and 21st streets, and across the Chihuly Bridge of Glass.

Washington State History Museum — This venue offers an interactive stroll through the state's past — great for the kids — and houses the largest collection of pioneer and Native American artifacts on the West Coast.

Tacoma Art Museum — This modern steel and glass structure encircles a stone wave courtyard made from 500-year-old pavers from China, and presents 10 to 15 world-class exhibits per year featuring Northwest, national and international artists.

Union Station (Federal Courthouse) — While you're in the Museum District, peek inside this 1911 building's rotunda to marvel at the dazzling installations of Chihuly glass.

Museum of Glass — In case you're wondering what's under that giant silver conical structure across the Chihuly Bridge of Glass, it's a 140-seat Hot Shop Amphitheater where this museum's action heats up. While you're there, be sure to take in the three galleries exhibiting the finest in contemporary glass art. 

Freelance writer Allen Cox is a third-generation Tacoma resident whose grandparents settled in the city in 1910. His upcoming books "Best Easy Day Hikes: Seattle" and "Best Easy Day Hikes: Tacoma" will be released later this year. Scott Ramsey is a photographer who lives in Browns Point, expressivellc.com.

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