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# Los Angeles Revival

**Sprawl has hit the wall so history is suddenly hip in downtown L.A. where derelict office buildings are being converted into funky bars, boutique hotels and art galleries.**

Apr 28, 2007 04:30 AM

**SUSAN PIGG**

LOS ANGELES, CALIF.—It's Thursday night and the streets outside Shane Guffogg's Pharmaka art gallery are bustling with parents pushing strollers, young couples cruising for canvases and a movie shoot that's shedding some light on what used to be a dark corner of the downtown.



SUSAN PIGG PHOTO / TORONTO STAR  
 The once-derelict streets of downtown L.A. have taken on new life in the last few years, including the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Adding to all the activity are about a dozen cyclists who've just rolled onto 5th St. They're here for the monthly Downtown Art Ride, an offshoot of the Downtown Art Walk that attracts hundreds of visitors to the area's 31 galleries and makes for a lively night at nearby bars, restaurants and sidewalk cafés.

"When I came to see this space about three years ago, there were hundreds of homeless people and drug addicts just sitting around here with their crack pipes, leaning against the windows," says Guffogg of the gallery he co-founded at this once-notorious intersection of 5th and Main Sts. "I was told that 75 per cent of the heroin traffic from Southern California was coming through this corner."

It took the offer of two years' free rent – as well as "a moment of blind stupidity combined with an inner vision" – to convince Guffogg that he needed to join the handful of gallery owners setting up shop in the derelict downtown. So he gutted and rebuilt the 3,600-square-foot main floor of this old apartment building, which included a "vile" Chinese restaurant.

"See that brown up there in the archway?" Guffogg asks, pointing to a spot next to the gallery's soaring front windows. "That was the grease from the Chinese restaurant. Once you took it out of context – and once you got rid of the smell – it had a certain beauty to it."

That "certain beauty" is being exposed all over downtown L.A. thanks to some \$17 billion (U.S.) worth of development that has taken place, or is underway in a 65-block area pretty much abandoned since the race to the suburbs in the decades after World War II. Elegant, old 10- to 13-storey art deco and beaux-

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- ✦ The ultra-hip Gansevoort West hotel will open next year in the 1914 Beaux Arts building that housed the city's first permanent philharmonic orchestra. The 170-room hotel will incorporate the old 1,800-seat concert hall.
- ✦ A 275-room Mandarin Oriental is slated to open

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arts office buildings are being converted into funky lofts, condos and even boutique hotels. New restaurants and bars are springing up almost monthly.

Grand old movie palaces along Broadway that were pretty much left for dead – or turned into cluttered retail shops – after Hollywood took hold are now getting a second look, thanks to a concerted fight by the Los Angeles Conservancy, a non-profit preservationist group.

L.A. Live, an 11-hectare development with restaurants, bars, hotels and an entertainment complex for sports, live theatre and movie-going is under construction next to the convention centre and Staples Center at the south end of the downtown, home to the L.A. Lakers and four other professional sports team. The Grand Avenue project, 4.5 hectares of housing, stores, bars, restaurants, as well as a hotel, is slated for development at the downtown's north end, near the iconic, Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Even upscale hotels such as the Ritz and Marriott are breaking ground here.

There are now 30,000 people living downtown, up from 21,000 in 2000, with another 12,000 expected in the next two years.

"I think that the downtown has the potential to be what SoHo is in New York," says Guffogg. "There's a history here that people suddenly want to tap back into. It's the only place in Los Angeles that offers that."

"When somebody comes downtown and asks 'What's cool?' this is where you bring them," says downtown resident Eric Richardson, creator of the informative blogdowntown.com, stepping onto the rooftop bar of the old Superior Oil building, now The Standard hotel.

Andy Warhol would have fit right in here, sipping Campari and vodka while taking in the 360-degree view, lounging in a waterbed "pod" (they look like giant red Hersey's Kisses) or watching an old movie projected onto the adjacent office building.

Locals universally credit the 1999 "adaptive re-use ordinance" for the downtown boom by allowing developers to convert abandoned old office buildings into lofts, condos, apartments and hotels. The Standard literally set the standard with its landmark rooftop bar, still a big draw for tourists and locals.

But kick-starting a pulsating nightlife – and attracting leery visitors to LA's notorious downtown – has proven to be a tougher task. It took the creation of popular local eateries like Pete's Café & Bar, just down the street from Guffogg's gallery, and the host of funky bars, art galleries and eateries that have followed in the Standard's wake to create some pockets of life after 6 p.m.

"What we have now is neighbourhoods that are growing as micro neighbourhoods and eventually they're going to merge together and then they will be walkable from one end to the other. At least, that's my dream," says Hal Bastian, the dynamo dubbed L.A.'s "unofficial mayor" for spearheading much of this redevelopment as director of economic development for the Downtown Center Business Improvement District.

"What we're really doing in downtown L.A. is rediscovering ourselves because the sprawl has hit the wall. There's no more (affordable) land, so we're coming back here. I don't want to compare ourselves to New York, because we'll never be New York, but even in Manhattan when things are shut down, the streets are interesting to walk because there are storefronts, there are dressed windows, there are things happening. Here, we've had roll-down metal gates – not too exciting."

All the conversions from old to new not only proved that if you build it, they will come. It showed they would bring their bikes,

downtown in 2010 as part of a 48-storey Frank Gehry-designed tower.

✚ The 72-year-old Griffith Observatory is open after a five-year, \$93 million (U.S.) renovation and expansion. Tickets are free, but advance online registration is required. Closed Mondays. See [www.griffithobservatory.org](http://www.griffithobservatory.org) for information.

✚ One of L.A.'s best-known cultural landmarks, the Getty Villa, reopened last year after a nine-year renovation. You must book your free tickets at least three weeks in advance. See [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu).

#### Just the facts

✚ L.A.'s "gallery row" runs along Main and Spring Sts., although galleries are scattered along 5th and 4th Sts. as well. The downtown art walk is the second Thursday of every month, from 12 to 9 p.m. See [www.downtownartwalk.com](http://www.downtownartwalk.com)

✚ The Los Angeles Conservancy offers some 13 downtown historic tours, including the Evolving Skyline and the Broadway Historic Theatre District tours. \$10 prepayment is required. See [www.laconservancy.org](http://www.laconservancy.org) or call 213-623-2489.

✚ The Rooftop Bar at The Standard is at 550 S. Flower St. and there can be a long wait. See [www.standardhotel.com](http://www.standardhotel.com)

✚ The Edison is at 108 W. 2nd St. See [www.edisondowntown.com](http://www.edisondowntown.com)

✚ Seven Grand is at 515 W. 7th St. Don't be put off by the abandoned storefront, it's worth the climb to the second floor, if just to play pool and marvel at the tartan carpet.

✚ Golden Gopher at 417 W. 8th is one of LA's oldest liquor licenses, built into a former flophouse, and draws a young, rock-and-roll crowd. [www.goldengopherbar.com](http://www.goldengopherbar.com).

✚ Broadway Bar is a little more glam than the Gopher and attracts a lot of the



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their dogs and their six-figure salaries in search of something different.

Just one example is the five-month-old Blue Velvet, one of the more talked-about new restaurants in downtown L.A., which has been aptly described as the set of some "futuristic film noir." Its contemporary American offerings are served up in surroundings almost annoyingly hip and cool, from its outdoor patio overlooking the downtown to the sunken granite lounge table you can share with strangers.

Blue Velvet is touted as "the house restaurant" for The Flat, which is a bit of a laugh since it's just an old Holiday Inn that's been converted to apartments. It's one thing to have to walk up the hotel's parking ramp to get to Blue Velvet's door, but quite another to have to endure the whinging of the playwright dining beside you, drowning his sorrows in a Sapphire Martini because he's turning 30.

Thankfully, there is the Golden Gopher, Broadway Bar and the newly opened Seven Grand bar if you want a little more of what passes for reality in La La Land.

"What's happening down here – this much investment – is on a scale unlike anything we've seen in Los Angeles," says Cedd Moses, 47, a former financial whiz kid who, along with creative designer Ricki Kline, has made the Gopher, Broadway and Seven Grand destinations in themselves. He hopes to open a boutique hotel and is currently renovating a landmark downtown restaurant, Cole's, famous as much for its French-dip sandwiches as being the main terminal for the long-disbanded Pacific Electric streetcars.

"Nobody knows exactly what's going to happen, but there's going to be more and more life generated down here," says Moses, as staff put the finishing touches on Seven Grand, which officially opens May 10 but is already drawing crowds. This whisky bar and "urban lodge" is a refuge from downtown traffic and incorporates many of the historic touches – from rich mahogany panelling to brass jewellery trays – that graced this former jewellery store 84 years ago.

But if you want to see L.A.'s newly minted nightlife at its best, you have to drop in – quite literally – to The Edison, an eclectic bar with a nightclub feel just steps from the must-see Walt Disney Concert Hall. Rich kids hand over the keys to daddy's SUV at valet parking before taking a few steps down an alley and descending stairs into what looks like Batman's cave – complete with old generators and even a boiler room that doubles as a private lounge in what, back in 1908, was L.A.'s first privately owned power plant.

Sure, there are still lots of unsightly storefronts and urban streetscape downtown where needy men search for a place to sleep. (God knows what's happened to the others displaced by this civic cleanup.) And for now, at least, it can be a hike to get from one happening place to the next.

There's talk of reviving the beloved "red cars" – much like Toronto's old Red Rockets – and creating a loop that will run from Staples in the south, to the Disney Hall in the north, a costly endeavour that may be just wishful thinking.

In fact, it all is, according to Abraham, a cab driver who's lived in L.A. for 20 years and chides a female visitor for walking downtown at night alone.

"They say they're going to make the downtown like Chicago. Chicago? I don't think so," he says through the cab's Plexiglas shield. "There are so many beautiful places here – Hollywood, Santa Monica, Venice Beach.

"Why would anyone want to spend their time downtown? It's a business place."

rasnion-district crowd.

It's next door to the restored Orpheum Theatre and lofts. See [www.thebroadwaybar.net](http://www.thebroadwaybar.net).

☒ **Pete's Café** is a lovely neighbourhood restaurant with an outdoor patio at the corner of 4th and Main. See [www.petescafe.com](http://www.petescafe.com) or call 213-617-1000.

☒ **Cole's Pacific Electric Buffet**, a local landmark famous for French-dip sandwiches, is undergoing a mini-makeover and won't open for a few months. See [www.colespebuffet.com](http://www.colespebuffet.com)

☒ Visitors can do a 45-minute, self-guided audio tour of the iconic **Walt Disney Concert Hall** weekdays, except Tuesdays, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. For guided tours check [www.musiccenter.org](http://www.musiccenter.org) or call 213-972-4399.

☒ For more information on L.A. see [www.seemyla.com](http://www.seemyla.com)

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