

Everyone's Art Walking in L.A.

Gallery Row and the Downtown Art Walk transform once desolate downtown Los Angeles into a metro oasis

By Dana Bean

Los Angeles native Jens Fleming spent his entire life ignoring promises of the rebirth of downtown with a healthy dose of skepticism. "Downtown always felt super seedy – like it was hit by the apocalypse," said Jens.

But last year, when he and his girlfriend decided to move to a neighborhood that offered community, creativity, and an escape from Los Angeles car culture, they were surprised to discover that downtown's Gallery Row offered everything they were looking for.

Where there were once decaying buildings and deserted streets, they discovered a buzzing community with rehabbed architectural gems, boutiques, friends dining at sidewalk cafes, joggers circling the block, and loft-dwellers walking their dogs.

This is the new downtown. Sadly neglected for over half a century, the city's historic core has experienced a startling revival during the last five years, due largely in part to its burgeoning art scene.

Dubbed “Gallery Row” in 2003, the district between Spring and Main, bordered by 2nd and 9th, is now a thriving corridor of art, commercial and residential spaces that have rapidly transformed the area into one of LA’s most vibrant communities.

“It’s the center of one the biggest cities in the world and it’s been asleep for 60 years!” said Jens. “It’s such a community now. And it has the excitement New York doesn’t have – It’s still creating itself.”

When the Great Depression and the advent of the automobile a created mass exodus in favor of the Westside and suburban Los Angeles, Broadway’s marble movie palaces and Spring Street’s banks were abandoned.

Thanks to this desertion, many of the city’s oldest buildings withstood the harsh hand of redevelopment. “It was preservation by neglect,” said Mike Sonsken (aka Mike the Poet), a Los Angeles historian and docent on the Downtown Artwalk.

Today’s downtown boasts Art Deco gems the largest collection of Beaux Art Architecture in North America. Adaptive reuse is updated the interior of these buildings while maintaining the integrity of the exterior.

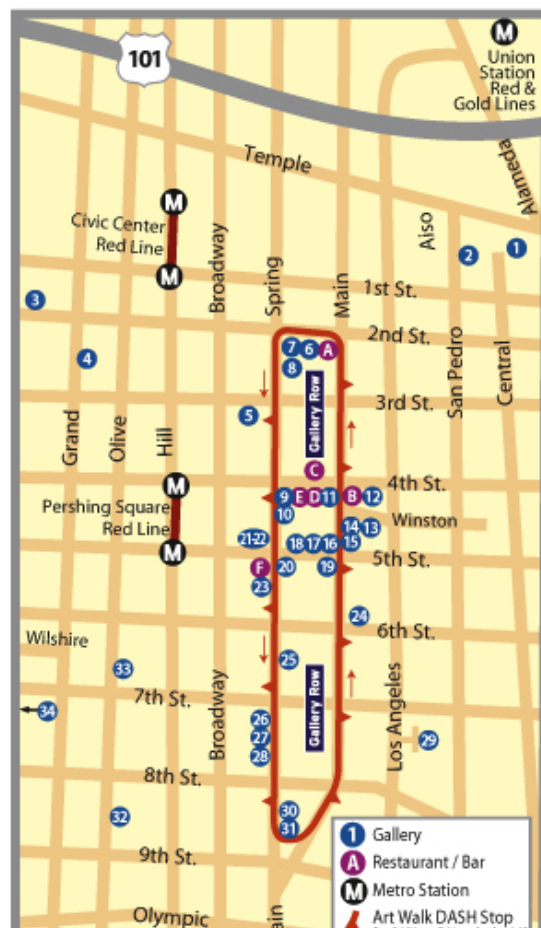
“Developers understand that history is a commodity.”

Bert Green, owner of Bert Green Fine Arts and founder of the Downtown Art Walk, is a pioneer of this new metropolitan vision. Bert witnessed the rapid regeneration of lower Manhattan in the 1970s and 80s, and of San Francisco's Market Street in the 1990s.

When Bert moved downtown in 2004, the area was inconvenient, inaccessible, and undesirable. But he instantly recognized that cheap rent, open lots, and historical buildings were a recipe for incredible growth and possibility.

By 2004, the groundwork for an urban arts village had been made possible. A 1999 ordinance allowed residential habitation of commercial and industrial spaces, and Gallery Row was established four years later. Bert's creation of the Downtown Art Walk was the final step of ingenuity needed to transform the area.

Today, ever-bustling Gallery Row is most lively on the second Thursday of each month, when thousands



gather for the Downtown Art Walk, a self-guided tour of more than 35 galleries, museums, and non-profit art venues.

The event has unified gallery owners, given Angelinos incentive to explore downtown, and created a walking culture in a city where most people rarely leave the protective bubble of their car.

“The change is remarkable regarding attitudes towards downtown,” says Bert. There were handful of galleries and only 75 visitors that attended the first art walk. Today, there are 37 participating galleries and 3,000 visitors at each monthly event.

“The first time we saw the Downtown Art Walk, it was shocking. I’ve never experienced anything like it!” said Jens. “The

Creative Commerce

The DIY attitude of downtown has allowed for unconventional ways of doing business. Check out the galleries that are doing things a little differently.

Art walkers with an appetite can get their art fix while they chow down. **Julie Rico Gallery and Bistro** has incorporated a hot dog stand into its art space. Wine, beer, and tapas are also available.

At **M.J. Higgins Fine Art and Furnishings**, you’ll find incredible works by local artists alongside eco-friendly furnishings for your home.

The founders of **Pharmaka** believe that the success of art as a business is its failure as art. This non-profit venue alleviates the need for high profit margins and trendy styles, and instead functions to provide a haven for creation and open discussion.

In addition to its gallery space, **The Hive** rents fourteen studio and exhibition spaces, where artist can create, as well as exhibit their creations during the bimonthly shows.

streets were packed with pedestrians. You never see that many pedestrians in L.A. unless you're on the beach."

The neighborhood is not the only thing that has changed. Inexpensive rent has attracted many first time gallery owners and an experimental set of artists, who are redefining the business model of operating an art space.

"Downtown is more DIY, people doing it by themselves without a lot of money. It has a funkier vibe – it's less slick," says Bert.

This allows for a great amount of diversity. "Within the 30+ spaces that participate in the art walk, there's everything from warehouse spaces to the Museum of Contemporary Art."

The art walk is accessible via the Civic Center and Pershing Square Metro Stations. Trains run past midnight. Street meters and paid lots are available for visitors traveling by car.

Downtown Art Walk is every second Thursday of the month, 12–9pm. For more information, visit www.downtownartwalk.com.