

Art Town

Turning Downtown's Main Street into LA's Next Art Destination

Written by Jeannine A. Denholm

In a short time, the Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk has turned into an evening thousands can't miss. From groundbreaking mixed media installations to breathtaking photography, the urban art scene is exploding. 944 sat down with Bert Green, the founder and owner of Bert Green Fine Art Gallery, for an insider's look at the rapid growth of a downtown mainstay.

944: Why did you start Art Walk?

BERT GREEN: I started the Art Walk in 2004 to coincide with the opening of my relocated gallery, which I had moved from Los Feliz, after being there for five years. While in Los Feliz, I ran the Silver Lake, Echo Park, Los Feliz Art Crawl for four years with fototeka gallery owner Robin Blackman. I realized that starting a gallery in a new area not known for art would be a tough draw without a signature event to attract people and to encourage other galleries to open shop nearby. When we began in September 2004, there were eight participating galleries and about 75 skittish attendees. Fast forward four years, and we have over 45 venues and at least 5,000 visitors.

Describe what Main Street and the surrounding areas looked like when Art Walk started.

In 2004, Main Street was still heavily populated by drug dealers and users. The perception of the area as a homeless magnet was partly true, but the real problem was not the homeless, but the drug activity, which has significantly disappeared since then. The people who have lived along Main Street all these years can now enjoy a much cleaner streetscape.

When and how did you know Art Walk was a success?

a thousand visitors in 2006, and the number of galleries passed 30. Until then, it was always a struggle, but after that turning point the media started to come to us and the event was seen by the community as the rallying point for downtown revitalization.

and is filthy and desolate after daytime hours. But, as with any other inanity, one must consider the source. Getting information about Downtown Los Angeles from people who never go there is always a bad idea. Even worse is taking the word of confirmed suburbanites, who view all urban space as inherently

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What do you think it has done for the Los Angeles art scene?

The Art Walk has shown that Downtown Los Angeles has taken its place within Los Angeles as another destination for visual art. The scene in Los Angeles is large and varied, and downtown occupies a specific niche, more D.I.Y. and grassroots than other areas, and as a result, has a larger range of styles and quality. The possibilities for experimentation are vast, and are only beginning to be realized. This is partly because the cost of space is well below that of other areas known as gallery districts.

What is the common misconception of Downtown Los Angeles?

I have heard people say the most bizarre and uninformed things about Downtown Los Angeles. The single most common misconception is that downtown

dangerous and suspect. Los Angeles has an urban core which is the largest business district west of Chicago, and is filling in its gaps, adding culture and residents at a rapid pace. It always amazes me that so many people are incapable of perceiving this.

What is your hope for the future of Art Walk?

I would love to see it maintain its premier status as the primary cultural lever for the revitalization of Downtown Los Angeles, and when that revitalization is successful, to continue as an event that acts to promote and focus the visual arts scene downtown. I expect it to morph and change as time goes by. In the past year, it has been expanded to include additional venues, such as restaurants, bars and retail services that can sponsor us and be listed on the Art Walk map, which helps us to expand our marketing efforts.