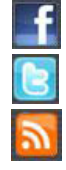


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Downtown's Dynamic Decade, Part 1

A Look at the 21 Most Important Projects (so Far) of the 21st Century
 by **Jon Regardie**

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DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - Downtown Los Angeles has never had a decade like the one that comes to an end on Dec. 31, 2009. Not even close.

The first 10 years of the 21st century have been transformative. Whereas Downtown in 2000 was a community with a massive office population, a handful of inhabitants and little to do after dark, today the area holds approximately 40,000 residents, extensive nightlife and weekend entertainment options, and some of the most architecturally significant new buildings in the country.

Downtown's evolution is the result of a steady stream of housing, entertainment, civic, restaurant, office, retail and other projects. Each one came with challenges, and all required someone, or more often many people, to take a risk and put their money where their dreams were.

From the hundreds of developments during the decade, Los Angeles Downtown News has identified the 21 most transformative projects. These all opened between 2000 and 2009 (eliminating Staples Center, which debuted in 1999). They are not always the most beautiful projects, but rather are ones that, through their existence, laid significant groundwork for other Downtown developments to come. All the new projects played a role, but these are



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arguably the 21 of greatest consequence.

This week, Downtown News details projects 21 through 11. In the Dec. 21 issue, we unveil the top 10.

It's been a heck of a decade.

21) Police Administrative Building (2009)

The \$440 million price tag for replacing (at a new location) the outdated and earthquake-ravaged Parker Center will make anyone blanch. Fortunately, the new headquarters for the Los Angeles Police Department is a stately and worthy home for the entity that has undergone significant change over the past seven years. The 500,000-square-foot edifice offers ample glass, an open courtyard on the First Street side and a small park in the rear of the building.

Impact: The 10-story project that was designed by AECOM Design and Roth + Sheppard Architects is part of the mix of old and new in the Civic Center. It sits directly south of City Hall, and complements both that historic building and the ultra-modern CalTrans headquarters to its east. Its 2,300 employees activate the area. It is not only a civic landmark, but also a symbol of the change and openness that came to the department during the tenure of former Chief William Bratton.

20) Pegasus Apartments (2003)

The 322-unit apartment complex from Kor Group was one of the earliest adaptive reuse projects in Downtown. The \$53 million development transformed a 1949 former oil company headquarters, originally designed by Welton Beckett, into a modern residential hub at Sixth and Flower streets. Architecture firm Killefer Flammang oversaw the transformation of the 13-story structure.

Impact: Although other old Downtown office buildings had been converted into housing, this was the largest by far. With its upscale amenities, it helped establish a residential beachhead in the Financial District, and people were paying \$2.50 a square foot or more right off the bat. The impact continued two years later when a \$2 million outpost of the Daily Grill opened on the ground floor. Suddenly the building was not just drawing residents, but surrounding office workers too.

19) Toy Factory/Biscuit Company Lofts (2004/2007)

In 2004, when residential growth in Downtown was mostly focused in the Historic Core, gutsy developer Linear City put \$25 million into the Toy Factory Lofts, its renovation of a hulking 251,000-square-foot building on Industrial Street at the southern end of the Arts District. The project created 109 modern loft-style condominiums, and three years later, Linear City continued the momentum across the street with the Biscuit Company Lofts, turning a 1925 former Nabisco plant into 105 condos.

Impact: In two large-scale swoops, Linear City established a near critical mass of residents. That has been followed by a concentration of businesses in the live-work space, including a batch of denim designers, as well as the popular restaurants Church & State and Royal Claytons. Altogether, the projects turned a onetime industrial zone into a community.

18) Edward R. Roybal Learning Center/Vista Hermosa Natural Park (2008)

After a decade of problems and \$350 million, the infamous project once known as the Belmont Learning Complex came alive better than anyone expected: A high school for 2,500 students opened on 14 acres at First Street and Beaudry Avenue. It sits adjacent to the park run by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. That 10-acre plot holds picnic areas, winding paths, a soccer field and more.

Impact: Opening the facility allowed the Los Angeles Unified School District to put an embarrassing debacle behind them — the original school had been stymied by the discoveries of dangerous gases and an earthquake fault below the surface. It also helped ease overcrowded conditions in the area that had led to the busing of students. The park, meanwhile, was an urban oasis, a place for the green-space starved community to escape the bustle and exhaust of the city.

17) Orpheum Theatre Renovation (2003)

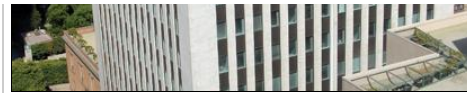
Like most former Broadway movie palaces, the 1926 Orpheum was a gem whose glitter had long since dulled. Then owner Steve Needleman spent \$3.5 million to restore the venue to its original glory, installing new seats, air conditioning and lighting and polishing the marble lobby, the bronze doors and the marquee. The venue was again ready to host theater, concerts and other events. The following year, Needleman turned the former office space above the theater into 37 apartments.

Impact: Although renovations were confined to the building at 842 S. Broadway, the energy was felt throughout Downtown, as well known bands have played the theater and shows such as “American Idol” and “America’s Got Talent” use the space for shooting. More importantly, it demonstrates to other Broadway theater owners that it is possible (and financially feasible) to restore and reopen the faded venues. Today, Downtown waits for others to follow Needleman’s lead.

16) Rainbow Apartments (2006)

Skid Row Housing Trust’s 89-unit project was a stalwart example of “permanent supportive housing,” the term for a development that helps homeless individuals turn their lives around by offering not just a room, but a variety of services, such as drug treatment programs and job counseling, all under one roof. The project at 643 S. San Pedro St. was designed by prominent architect Michael Maltzan.

Impact: The six-story cube of concrete and glass, with asymmetrical red windows, an open-air courtyard, common rooms and outdoor corridors, was like nothing Skid Row had ever seen. It raised the bar in design standards, proving that neighborhood structures do not have to be bland gray blocks. Since then, other new low-income projects in the area have also embraced high design. The permanent supportive housing model continues to be effective and today is recognized as a crucial tool in returning the homeless to mainstream society.



Luma (top), Standard Downtown (bottom). Photos by Gary Leonard.



15) SCI-Arc (2000)

A quarter-mile long former rail depot gained new life when the Southern California Institute of Architecture moved into Downtown, leaving a home in Marina Del Rey. The 1906 structure became a hive for 500 students and the school's faculty and administrative offices. Classes were first held in a tent before the building at 960 E. Third St. opened in fall 2001. The renovation was designed by Gary Paige.

Impact: SCI-Arc was an early adopter in the Arts District, and the activation of the 89,000-square-foot space was by far the most important project in the community in decades. The \$15 million development injected new residential and economic life into the area. The array of restaurants, retail establishments and housing projects that have blossomed in the district this decade all follow from the opening of SCI-Arc.

14) Art Walk (2004)

In 2004, Bert Green of the Fifth Street space Bert Green Fine Art helped eight Historic Core gallery owners organize simultaneous openings on a Thursday evening. That opened the floodgates, and in the ensuing years dozens of new galleries arrived in the area, bars and restaurants piggybacked on the activity, and crowds swelled. Although there is currently a debate about the future of Art Walk, following the departure of the leader who succeeded Green, the attendees don't seem to care — more than 10,000 people regularly show up.

Impact: The Downtown Art Walk is the most salient demonstration of how far the once gritty neighborhood has come. The events on the second Thursday of every month demonstrate that the streets of the Historic Core can come alive and draw pedestrians after dark. No wonder big bucks automaker Cadillac is considering becoming an ongoing sponsor of the event.

13) Los Angeles State Historic Park (2005-2006)

For decades, the "brownfield" property on the edge of Chinatown known as the Cornfield was dead land. Then, after the community dodged an effort to turn it into an industrial park, something miraculous happened: Artist Lauren Bon and her team used an Annenberg Foundation grant to make the site a living art project titled "Not a Cornfield" (the city and state helped clean it up). After growing and harvesting corn and holding community events, the California State Parks Department used the infrastructure left behind to create the Los Angeles State Historic Park.

Impact: Suddenly, Downtowners had a clean, vast, grassy expanse not far from the skyscrapers. The park has become a community gathering point, with picnic areas, a dirt running track and plenty of green space. Farmlab, the successor to Bon's "Not a Cornfield" project, holds regular events on site, and the park has hosted concerts and even a circus big top.

12) Elleven/Luma/Evo (2006-2008)

Right now it is easy to see the popularity of South Park. However, Portland developer South Group, headed by Homer Williams, realized the potential years before most everyone else (though Forest City Development had been on the scene), and began buying land and building housing. The \$65 million Elleven opened at 11th Street and Grand Avenue in 2006, bringing 176 condominiums and an elegant steel and glass design. The next year the \$80 million, 236-unit Luma debuted on the same block, and the trio's final piece, Evo, arrived in late 2008. That \$160 million effort created 311 residences.

Impact: Although South Group recently hit financial difficulties, its creation of more than 700 housing units on a single block transformed the neighborhood and led to significant investment from other residential developers, as well as restaurateurs and retailers. The \$305 million investment also made a statement with its attention to environmentally friendly design elements.

11) Standard Downtown (2002)

When hotelier Andre Balazs placed a skull and crossbones flag atop a rehabbed 1956 building at 550 S. Flower St., the area was far from trendy. That all changed, as the 12-story, 207-room hotel drew national attention with its high-design rooms (some, for no apparent reason, included a giant black foot; others boasted beds large enough for NBA players) and especially the rooftop pool and bar scene. The building, once the headquarters of Superior Oil, became an instant magnet for the young, hip and monied.

Impact: Balazs, who made his money in biotech, foresaw that the community could appeal to more than the buttoned-down business crowd. The Standard preceded the Pegasus Apartments across the street, as well as the myriad new-school bars with expensive cocktails and plenty of beautiful people willing to wait to get in. Today, the hotel still has staying power, as the rooms and the bar and restaurant scene remain popular.

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Michael Tagupa wrote on Dec 14, 2009 8:56 AM:

" Keep up the good work. Alot of changes such as more residencial development into renovated office buildings occurred during this decade. Let's continue the trend in bringing more retail business into the heart of the city. Eventually, downtown will be more of a 24 hour community. It will be more liveable and an exciting place to be. "

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