

## NEWS

### On to Greener Pastures

#### A Downtown Art Pioneer Walks Away from the Street-front Gallery Scene

by Ryan Vaillancourt

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Print Page

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - No single person can claim credit for the past decade of growth in Downtown. But it's safe to say that the Historic Core would not be the burgeoning hub of nightlife and art galleries that it is without Bert Green.

Green spurred the neighborhood's evolution into an enclave for creative types when he brought his gallery, Bert Green Fine Art, from Los Feliz to the southwest corner of Fifth and Main streets in 2004. That same year he founded the Downtown Art Walk.

Last week, Green moved out of his gallery in the Rosslyn Hotel — it is now occupied by the Los Angeles Center for Digital Art — and is taking his business private, by appointment only in his Historic Core loft.



In 2004, Bert Green helped pioneer Downtown's gallery scene. Nearly seven years later, he's moving his gallery into his home loft. The founder of the Downtown Art Walk will leave Los Angeles later this year. *Photo by Gary Leonard.*

Later this year, Green plans to leave Downtown entirely — he's moving to Chicago, to join his partner. Last week, Green discussed the evolution of the Downtown art scene and the bittersweet nature of departing a place he helped create.

**Los Angeles Downtown News:** *Do you have mixed feelings about closing the street-front gallery?*

**Bert Green:** No, I'm ready to move on. What I did here was this whole process of getting involved in and then helping to change Downtown. I'm insanely proud of what's happened down here. My expectations were exceeded; what we were able to do here and what it's turned into is amazing.

**Q:** *What were your expectations?*

**A:** There was an opportunity here to be in an urban environment, to not necessarily have to commute to work by car and to create sort of an L.A. version of what happened in New York in the 1960s and '70s with SoHo, where there was this incredible opportunity of architecture and urbanism and revitalizing the core city. I don't know that I had specific expectations. My vision was maybe we'll attract five or six galleries; maybe we'll have this little scene happening here; maybe we'll be able to get people to pay attention to it. I had no idea that five years later the Art Walk would be attracting 25,000 people or that it would start to become the hip place to live, which hasn't necessarily been a great benefit to the galleries, but has been great for the neighborhood.

**Q:** *Is it inevitable that the galleries will be priced out of the Historic Core?*

**A:** No. From my perspective, I had the opportunity to get in here on the ground floor at a very inexpensive price, so I took advantage of that opportunity. What interests me is the transition. That shift is mostly now complete and I almost feel like now it's just time for me to move on. The bigger story of the neighborhood is that we launched a gallery district. There is this area called Gallery Row that people all over L.A. know about. It's populated by a few very specifically high-quality galleries and a large number of experimental spaces, many of which will come and go.

If a gallery does well in a space there's no reason that they can't continue to pay whatever the rents are. But if there are still, as there are now, a decent amount of empty storefronts there will always be less pressure to push out the galleries.

**Q:** *How do you think Gallery Row stacks up against more reputed art centers like Culver City, Bergamot Station in Santa Monica, even Chinatown?*

**A:** It depends on who you talk to, but from my perspective, if you're interested in a particular gallery you're going to deal with that gallery no matter where it is. In the art world and among serious art buyers, they're interested in the art and not the neighborhood. Culver City is a great convenience and right now is pretty much the epicenter of contemporary art in L.A. and that's a good thing. Downtown is not trying to compete with that.

**Q:** *You referenced the large number of "experimental" galleries in Downtown. The average L.A. gallery-goer might just say "not good."*

**A:** No. I disagree. Yeah, you might be talking about people who are in the general public, but those are not collectors, and we're businesses. We exist for our collectors. Collectors aren't stupid. They know where to look for what they like. And if they see a gallery that they like, whether it's in Downtown or in Siberia they're going to go there or pay attention to what goes on there. We have a core group of collectors that never walk through the doors of the gallery. They were communicated with over telephone or email.

**Q:** *So is there not a collective aspiration among Downtown gallery owners to develop an identity as a hub of premier contemporary art, akin to Culver City?*

**A:** I don't know if it's an aspiration. I think it's a hope. It would be great if the premier galleries in town were willing to locate around the corner from me, but we have issues that I don't have so much of a problem with, but that people who would do those kinds of businesses do. I mean, we have Skid Row adjacent to us.

We changed the perception of Downtown in the minds of the overall city and this is actually a more important achievement than anything regarding the district's identity as a gallery scene. Downtown's perception in the eyes of the world and of L.A. has completely transformed in the years that we've been here and we've been a large part of that. But there's a limit to what you can force to happen as far as which galleries are going to open here.

**Q:** *Moving to Chicago is mostly a function of your personal life, but how does taking your gallery private in the short-term, and ultimately out of L.A., affect business?*

**A:** My business is following the reality: It's been great to have a 4,000-square-foot gallery open to the public with big display windows, but actually 99% of my business didn't come from having that space. The fact that I've had a gallery for 12 years makes this move possible.

**Q:** *Was it bittersweet moving out of your space of nearly seven years?*

**A:** There's a lot of bittersweet to it. As a business decision, it was something of a relief to get those expenses off my back. But when the gallery was absolutely empty last week, when I had moved everything out and the new guy hadn't started moving in, I photo-documented the entire thing; the empty windows; the empty interior. I'm sure a year from now I'll look at that and I'll shed a tear.

Bert Green Fine Art is now at 451 S. Main St., #1206. For more information, or to schedule a gallery visit, go to [bgfa.us](http://bgfa.us). Artist Randall Cabe will be featured during April.

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**page 6, 03/07/2011**

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