

A Downtown Worthy of the World Stage

BY JOHN ADAMS

Downtown Los Angeles has long been maligned through a silly tautology: “there is no there there.” Sure, there are parts of what we consider LA—Hollywood, Venice, Santa Monica—that have international cache. But compared to the great cities of the world—Tokyo, London, New York, Shanghai, Paris, Rome—Los Angeles has always lagged behind.

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No more. Despite skeptics who believe Angelenos are so married to their automobiles they’d rather drive for miles than walk to work and catch dinner and a movie on the way home, there now is an undeniable critical mass of development in Downtown Los Angeles. After a decade of promising steps forward it’s pretty safe to say Downtown Los Angeles is a *there*.

Nowhere is this emergence more evident than in the two blocks west of Figueroa Street and Olympic Boulevard. This bustling construction site in the southwest corner of Downtown, across the street from Staples Center and the Los Angeles Convention Center, is LA Live! This \$2.5 billion mixed-use project is designed both as regional sports and entertainment destination and as recreation for a burgeoning residential population.

Major Projects as Bookends

The Gensler-designed Hotel and Residences at LA Live!, at 54 stories the visual anchor for the development, features 224 Ritz-Carlton branded residential condominiums at the top of a tower of glass and steel. Below the swanky condos are an 878-room J.W. Marriott and a 123-room Ritz-Carlton boutique hotel above that. The hotel already is driving up event bookings at the Convention Center, which in turn has lured retailers and other businesses, including one of the first offerings from the newly minted partnership of Ian Schrager and Marriott Hotels, called “Edition.”

During a decade-long development boom more than 10,000 new residential units have been built or converted from vacant office space. Additionally, there are new state-of-the-art entertainment venues, schools, and hotels in what had been a primarily commercial urban core since the Bunker Hill

Redevelopment Project launched in 1955 and flattened housing in favor of shiny new skyscrapers.

Cranes have dotted the skyline in record numbers from the base of Bunker Hill (Third Street) on the north to the Santa Monica (I-10) Freeway to the south. The old days of sidewalks rolling up at 5 p.m. are gone. Today the sidewalks are busy, as are the bars, restaurants and theaters, after work and on weekends as a new urban population forges its own way of life.

Because of their book-end locations and comprehensive mixed uses, Anschutz Entertainment Group's LA Live! and Related Companies's \$2 billion Grand Avenue Project are commonly identified as the anchors that will also provide the final missing pieces to the metropolitan core.

LA Live! is the new mecca for sports and entertainment. Concert venue Nokia Theatre opened late last year and Phase II – the Grammy Museum, the Gensler-designed 2,200-seat Club Nokia, a handful of restaurants, ESPN Zone, Lucky Strike bowling alley and the relocated Conga Room—is slated to bow this fall. A 14-screen movie house, also a Gensler project, is scheduled to open in 2009.

In the shadow of Downtown's cultural arts district—Disney Concert Hall, Music Center, Museum of Contemporary Art—Grand Avenue Project recently received a much-needed shot in the arm when Related Companies announced a \$100 million investment from Dubai. Fueled by a Frank Gehry design, the 3.6 million-square-foot development will bring, in phases, 2,600 housing units, 449,000 square feet of retail, a Mandarin Oriental hotel, a grocery store, a health club and a 16-acre urban park to Downtown Los Angeles. All of it is upscale; all of it seemingly intended to bring Beverly Hills luxury to the city center.

Modern Designs Add to Skyline

Between the two megaprojects, the development of residential units that began 10 years ago continues. While it's true that some residential developers have put a hold on their projects to see how the national housing market shakes out, many more projects remain in construction or on schedule to break ground. The skyline and the sidewalks continue to change monthly as buildings open and scaffolding rises and comes down.

While the Downtown turnaround started with Manhattan transplant Tom Gilmore's adaptive reuse of office buildings in the old Bank District, the new product that's coming online has a cutting-edge contemporary aesthetic.

The South Group, a partnership of Gerding Edlen Development and Williams, Dame and Atkins Development, has three

towers at 11th Street and Grand Avenue in various stages of construction. Elleven, recently certified LEED Gold, is complete and fully sold out. Luma is finished and sales have been brisk, according to The South Group sources, with only three of 236 units available. The third building, Evo, is in construction with a projected completion by the summer of 2008.

With its commitment to sustainability and attention to creating walkable and pedestrian-scaled streetscapes, The South Group has sparked an interest in wide sidewalks, more street trees and pocket parks. The new model city street is paying off, attracting retailers and amenities more typically seen in Pasadena and Santa Monica.

The South Group is not finished. Two more towers in design for 12th and Figueroa streets are on the docket to begin construction later this year. A third tower is pending.

The Hanover Company expects to begin leasing soon the 151 units in its 26-story apartment project at 717 Olympic Boulevard. RTKL Architects designed the mix of one- and two-bedroom apartments and two-level penthouse. The building will be one of the tallest residential towers downtown.

The on-again off-again Glass Tower, designed by DeStefano + Partners for The Kalantari Group, is a 23-story mixed-use project at 11th Street and Grand Avenue. With its one corner of strategically aligned stacked cubes of glass the project includes 128 luxury condominiums and 20-plus retail options at street level.

DeStefano + Partners also designed Concerto, a three-building project at Ninth and Figueroa streets comprising a mid-rise loft building flanked by two towers. The project calls for 600-plus units and 27,000 square feet of retail.

Activity Downtown is not limited to residential. AT&T Center, not far from where The South Group is building, is in the midst of a comprehensive repositioning undertaken by owner Layton-Belling & Associates. The building is getting a new Gensler-designed skin and crown, as well an improved lobby, food court and street-level restaurant with outdoor dining.

More Than Condos

To date this wave of development has been supported by private development funding, but there likely will be a shift to more public-private investments in public spaces and infrastructure. As more people show up Downtown, whether setting up residence or simply taking advantage of the increased attractions, the need will continue to grow for improved roads, utilities, public safety and civic and cultural spaces.

In Los Angeles, as in most cities, young professionals and artists, along with empty nesters, are the pioneers of urban living. With young professionals come young families who need schools. Already Los Angeles Unified School District is building a 24-acre school campus on the site of the former Ambassador Hotel just west of Downtown. A \$14 million expansion of Cathedral High School opened in late 2007 and High School #9, a daringly designed visual and performing arts magnet school, is under construction and should be completed this fall. Austrian superstars Coop Himmelb(l)au designed the \$232 million school at 450 N. Grand Avenue that is marked by its futuristic design and a spiraling tower—an abstracted No. 9—that rises 140 feet. The design, funky enough on its own, is further articulated by its location just across the Hollywood (US 101) Freeway from the Rafael Moneo masterpiece Cathedral of Our Lady of Angels.

Another necessity to attract and keep families Downtown is open space. There is hope here, too—at least on the boards. There's the park in the Grand Avenue Project, but there's also the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan put forth by Mia Lehrer & Associates in collaboration with Tetra Tech, Inc., Civitas, Inc. and Wenk Associates, among others. The plan aims to transform 32 miles of the concrete channel that was the Los Angeles River into public green space. The plan presents a vision for transforming the River over several generations, creating a significant public legacy for the children and grandchildren of those who will witness its implementation.

Hargreaves Associates won a competition to design the Los Angeles State Historic Park on a 32-acre site between Chinatown and the Los Angeles River. Long known as the Cornfield, the one-time rail yard will become a key to urban connectivity, responding to culture, and adapting to Lehrer's work on the river park and nearby Elysian Park. To express the site's interwoven histories and cultural significance, the design provides a plaza for gatherings and events, gardens and recreational spaces, pedestrian and fauna bridges, wetlands and interpretive centers.

Even the Dodgers are getting into the act. Owner Frank McCourt hired HKS Inc. to design renovations to Dodger Stadium that enhance the fan experience and bring a mid-century modern aesthetic to the venerable stadium.

Plenty of Work To Do

All that good news certainly is cause for optimism, but let's not be naïve. New condos and concert venues do not a community make. Challenges remain if Downtown Los Angeles is to become a truly 24-hour urban hub on the global stage.

Always a bone of contention in Los Angeles, transportation infrastructure is in desperate need of expansion and upgrade if this nascent community truly is going to thrive. There is hope on this front: Currently under construction, Expo Line is a light rail train that will travel along an existing railroad right-of-way between Downtown Los Angeles and Culver City, about 10 miles west. Eight new stations will be constructed along the Expo Line route, which will run parallel to the heavily congested Santa Monica (I-10) freeway. Phase 1 is scheduled to open in the summer of 2010. Estimated travel time from Downtown LA to Culver City is less than 30 minutes. That's longer than it takes to drive on an open freeway, but when does that happen?

Other possible transportation projects include new trolley lines within the city center to help Angelenos move around the city once there.

Another challenge is to create clearer identities for Downtown's distinct sections, such as the Artist District, the Historic Core, South Park, and the Financial District. This is a branding and identity project that is not financially prohibitive.

Of course there are the plainly political issues that all the money in the world won't solve. Primary among those are public safety and homelessness. These become tougher to solve in a time of economic uncertainty when state and local governments face budget shortages. A considerably optimistic sign is the construction of the new Los Angeles Police Department, which could have been moved out of the Civic Center, but after a lengthy and rewarding public process is rising across the street from City Hall. Designed by DMJM, the building has significant public space and is a powerful statement of the city's commitment to protect and serve this emerging community.

The good news is that people are rediscovering the attractions of living in a dense and diverse environment. The desire to live and work Downtown will continue to establish the critical mass needed to force solutions to the issues above, and make LA reach its potential as a truly global, 24/7 city.

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