

Friday, December 26, 2008

In Los Angeles, downtown is on an upswing

As once-desolate areas give way to lofts and shops, visitors rediscover a vibrant urban treasure

By Jayne Clark
USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — Dress designer Stella Dottir took a stroll around her downtown neighborhood the other day and marveled at the ordinary.

"There were flowers and people sitting in outside cafes. And it was clean," she says, shaking her head in wonder. "When I moved in, you could get crack, heroin, marijuana and pills. But definitely not milk. This was a supermarket in hell."

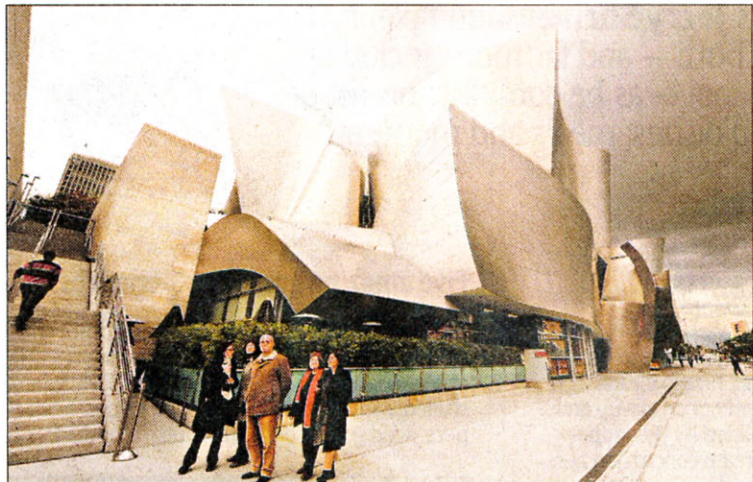
A change has blown through in the three years since Dottir opened her namesake shop, one of the first commercial (or legal, anyway) enterprises on this formerly bleak stretch of Skid Row. Next door is a cheerful-looking Vietnamese restaurant and a DVD rental store. And across the way, a yoga studio and a doggie day-care place.

"It's busy at night. There are restaurants, clubs, music," she says. "It's like a different city."

Indeed. Downtown Los Angeles was for decades abandoned at quitting time, when thousands of office workers hopped in their cars and headed home via a tangle of freeways. Few people visited; fewer lived here, unless you count a teeming homeless population. The streets were dark and dangerous.

Now, downtown L.A. is suddenly hot, thanks to a recent influx of residents, which, in turn, has spawned new shops, restaurants and nightspots and given visitors fresh reasons to venture here. Corralled by three freeways and the Los Angeles River to the east, L.A.'s civic center is really a patchwork of at least 15 distinct neighborhoods that occupy a relatively compact area, from the sleek office towers of the Financial District and over-the-top opulence of the Vaudeville-era theaters lining historic Broadway, to

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By Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY

Culture magnet: The Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Music Hall is home to the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Center Theatre Group, Los Angeles Opera and Los Angeles Master Chorale.



By Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY

Pioneering spirit: Stella Dottir, an Icelandic designer, opened her gallery of custom-made clothing in a downtown area known as Skid Row three years ago.

Neighborhoods run gamut from gritty to glittery

Continued from 1D

the low-slung buildings of Little Tokyo and crowded storefronts of the Fashion District.

But despite major attractions — the collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art, performances at the Music Center, the Mexican crafts stalls on historic Olvera Street, and, since 2003, the wondrous sight of the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall, which has its own guided tours — downtown was lacking the critical mass to be a serious tourist draw.

Cover story

The largest and latest development fueling the boom is L.A. Live, a \$2.5 billion entertainment and sports extravaganza on the southern edge of downtown next to the decade-old Staples Center sports arena. It consists of the year-old 7,000-seat Nokia Theatre, the just-opened and exuberantly interactive Grammy Museum, the 2,300-seat Club Nokia, an ESPN Zone with broadcast facilities, a 1,000-person-capacity nightclub and lots of restaurants. In early 2010, a 54-story J.W. Marriott and Ritz-Carlton will open here. The added 1,000 guestrooms will perk up a sagging convention business, which previously has relied on annual events such as the auto show and a porn convention.

The development surrounds a 40,000-square-foot outdoor plaza that promoters are dubbing the Times Square of the West. It's eliciting raves from civic and business leaders who see it as the lure that will draw people who in the past may have considered making a date in downtown after dark akin to scheduling a mugging.

"A year ago there was almost nothing to do downtown at night," says Mark Liberman, president of LA Inc., the city's tourism promotion agency. "Now we're seeing lines" of people.

In the fledgling Gallery Row area, east of L.A. Live, Thursday night art walks are attracting thousands to a once-desolate area. And a few pioneers, such as Gary Cypres, owner of the new Sports Museum of Los Angeles, are pushing the boundaries beyond downtown's borders, betting on spillover from other venues. His cavernous museum houses an eye-popping collection of 10,000-plus sports artifacts.

The Los Angeles Conservancy, which has long offered various downtown architectural walking tours, reports demand is up 30% over last year, thanks to positive buzz about the area.

"We've gotten hundreds of calls from people saying, 'You've got theaters down there?'" says Conservancy spokeswoman Cindy Olnick. "They had no idea.



By Damian Dovarganes, AP

Chill out downtown: Pershing Square, an outdoor concert and event center, offers a winter holiday ice rink through Jan. 19.



By Reed Saxon, AP

Little Tokyo: Young Japanese-Americans are returning to the neighborhood, enticed by new apartments, shops and public gardens.

And when you get them out of their cars, they see these amazing buildings that couldn't be built anymore."

The current renaissance began in 1999 with new ordinances that encouraged converting long-empty office buildings into residential lofts. At present, an estimated 39,000 people have moved in.

"Converting old office buildings to housing is what really made the difference," says Carol Schatz, president of the Downtown Center Business Improvement District. "It poured life onto the streets. People demanded places to eat and places to shop. That's what created the boom in downtown."

The economic crisis hasn't spared this area, however. Loft conversions and new condos once intended for sale are for rent instead. Judging from the profusion of "For Lease" signs, there's plenty of availability. One ambitious venture, the Grand Avenue Project (touted as the Champs-Élysées of L.A.), which would have added a park, a luxury hotel, housing and retail, is on hold. The number of weedy, fenced-off parking lots indicates other plans are, too.

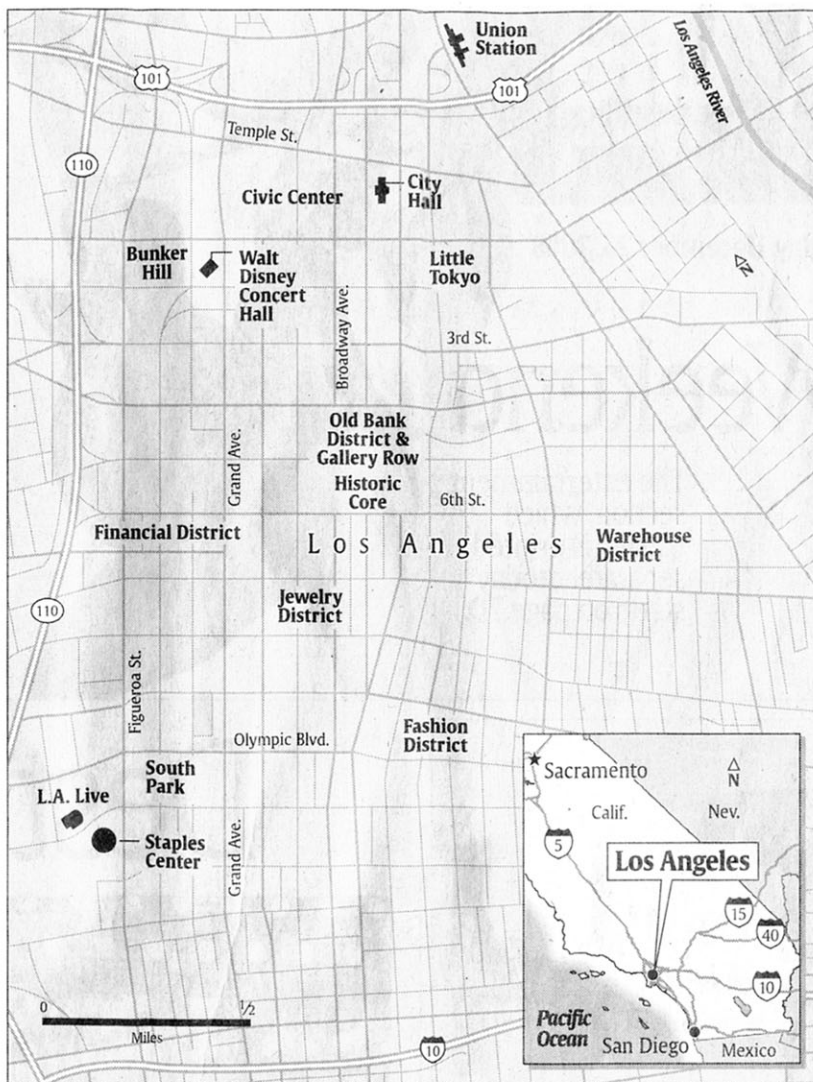
Nor has downtown lost its grittiness. A 2007 report estimated

there were 5,000 homeless on Skid Row alone. A sign warning No Drugs No Dealers is plastered on a down-and-out residential hotel down the street from a pet boutique selling \$300 dog carriers. A Pilates studio borders a swap meet hawking \$5 shoes. A Latino *botanica* offering tongue reading for \$20 is near a posh day spa offering \$220 body polishing.

But that rich diversity is what many residents — and visitors — find so compelling.

Craig Martin, 47, who moved into a loft in the former gas company building eight months ago, says when he heard people were moving here, he wondered, "Where do they get food?" (An upscale Ralphs grocery opened in 2007.) Initially, the seafood importer merely wanted to live near his work to avoid L.A.'s legendary traffic snarls. Now, he wouldn't live elsewhere.

"Culturally, it's a great mix of people. You have old guys who've lived here since the '30s and students and young professionals and tons of dogs," he says. "And yes, there are dangerous areas. I don't know where they are — I just know when to turn around. But things are changing all the time. It just takes one decent store or one new thing to change everything."



Source: USA TODAY research

By Karl Gelles, USA TODAY

If you go ...

Where to stay: The grande dame of downtown hotels is the elegant 1923 **Millennium Biltmore** (866-866-8086; millenniumhotels.com) across from Pershing Square. Rates start at \$159, double. The **O Hotel** (213-623-9904; ohotelgroup.com.) is a pleasant 67-room boutique lodging rehabbed from a former residential hotel. Rates from \$139. For the truly budget-minded, the new **Stay** (866-935-7829; stay-hotels.net), a 138-room hotel/youth hostel carved out of the larger Cecil Hotel, has kicky décor and rock-bottom rates — from \$35 per person in a four-bunk-bed room; \$65 double, with private bath.

Where to eat: Several new restaurants opened this month at the L.A. Live complex, including **Fleming's** steakhouse and **The Farm of Beverly Hills**. More will follow this spring. For a quick lunch, the **Warung Cafe** serves delicious Asian tapas (\$4-\$11). In the fine-dining realm, Italian chef Celestino Drago just opened **Drago Centro** in a former Bank of America, with a private dining room in the vault. (Dinner entrees: \$24-\$35.) Jan. 25-30 and Feb. 1-6 is dineLA Restaurant Week (dineLA.com) with 160 participating restaurants serving prix-fixe lunches (\$16-\$28) and dinners (\$26-\$44).

Getting around: Unlike much of L.A., downtown is walkable. (But watch for keen-eyed bicycle cops who show jaywalkers no mercy.) DASH Downtown bus fares are only 25 cents, and there's handy subway access (yes, L.A. has a subway, albeit of limited range). A ban against hailing cabs has been lifted in downtown, though the cabbies still tend to congregate outside hotels.

Don't miss: A **Los Angeles Conservancy** walking tour. Docent-led and self-guided tours include the Broadway theaters and the Historic Core. 213-623-2489; laconservancy.org. Two new museums: the **Grammy Museum** at the L.A. Live complex (213-765-6800; grammy-museum.org), \$14.95; and the **Sports Museum of Los Angeles** (888-540-8223; sportsmuseum-la.com). If you're visiting on a Thursday, drop by the **Colburn School Conservatory of Music** (called the Julliard of the West) for free weekly performances at 11 a.m. (Call ahead: 213-621-2200; colburnschool.edu.) Also Thursdays, the 3-11 p.m. art walks in the Gallery Row neighborhood draw hundreds.

Information: 800-228-2452; discoverlosangeles.com.