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Shock Troops of Redevelopment: Los Angeles' Art Community, 1980s

Rachel Kreisel

"Consider art a guest in Los Angeles"[1]
Marc Kreisel, Artist, Owner American Hotel/ Al's Bar

One late afternoon in 1968 two men sat on the remains of Bunker Hill. Both men, one an artist and the other a Native American, shared an unobstructed view of the Los Angeles skyline. The artist's family immigrated to Los Angeles at the end of the nineteenth century. By the 1920s they had done well enough as merchants to own a home on the hill. "I remember sitting up there looking east toward City Hall," recalled the artist. "And I said, 'Well, this is pretty amazing, you know, I remember when . . . there's nothing there now.' Basically, you could see they were going to change the face of the city. "[2] The arc of Los Angeles's redevelopment began with the razing of Bunker Hill in the 1960s that displaced thousands of elderly pensioners as well as Mexican and Native American laborers. Moving eastward in jerks and starts, it finally ended at the start of the twenty-first century with the gentrification of the civic center and the eventual displacement of the art community. However, throughout the 1980s, the city increasingly recognized the art

[1] Marc Kreisel, *First Functional Painting,* drywall with crayon, pencil, and chalk, 1979, Los Angeles.
[2] Dan Cytron, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 10, 2011.

community as the engine that would power the redevelopment of downtown Los Angeles.

The late-1970s found Los Angeles policymakers in a quandary. On the one hand, they looked forward to the realization of a re-envisioned downtown in the form of the new financial district built at the southern border of Bunker Hill.[3] On the other, a lack of clear vision concerning the use of the left over downtown real estate tempered their cheer.[4] While the City Council and the city attorney wrangled over a poorly planned redevelopment plan on Spring Street, Jim Croak, an artist living above a restaurant supply store in the heart of the old abandoned civic center, put an ad in the classifieds. He offered to sublet his loft asking for a $2,000 key fee.[5] The weekend the ad ran, he received several hundred calls inquiring about the place.[6] While the city dithered over loan-to-value real estate issues, the nascent downtown art community realized they were at the forefront of a market trend.[7] For the better part of a decade the city and the art community engaged in a discourse about the use of public space and the definition of public versus private as well as commercial versus residential space in the name of urban redevelopment.

Scholars of Los Angeles history examine the racialized boosterism that defined most of the city's development. Notably, Mike Davis's impassioned Marxist analysis of Post-War redevelopment served as the cornerstone for modern Los Angles

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[3] John Getze, "Spring St. Exodus…Then There Was 1," *Los Angeles Times,* August 6, 1976.

[4] Getze, "Spring St. Exodus," sec. I, p. 1; Bill Boyarsky, "Council Panel OKs Loan to Fix Building," *Los Angeles Times,* October 19, 1978, IV; Ray Hebert, "Bullock's Downtown Plans Move to 7th and Figueroa," *Los Angeles Times,* August 6, 1979, II.

[5] Borrowed from New York real estate practices, when a tenant transferred his/her lease to another tenant, the first tenant charged a "key fee" which was meant to offset the costs of improving a raw space.

[6] Sydney Littenberg, interview by author, Marina del Rey, California, May 29, 2003.

[7] Littenberg.

theory.[8] In the prologue to his book, Davis begins by eulogizing the failed socialist settlement, Llano del Rio, founded in Antelope Valley in 1914 at the height of the Progressive Era. He offers the scenario of a utopian settlement swallowed up by insatiable capitalism, arguing that downtown Los Angeles in the 1980s stands as the dystopic legacy of unfettered capitalism. Building on Davis' foundation, Eric Avila addresses the cultural issues Davis omits.[9] Avila examines Los Angeles popular culture as a *spatialized* construct of whiteness rooted in "Postwar suburbanization."[10] Yet, both Davis and Avila emphasize the hegemony of top-down Anglo culture omitting community agency.

William Deverell addresses the racialization of Los Angeles through the exploitation and suppression of the city's Mexican community. Deverell argues that Anglo elites created a civic narrative that promised a familiar and exotic experience for the Mid-Western émigré.[11] Sarah Schrank's monograph extends Deverell's analysis by focusing on high art as a booster trope. [12] Schrank examines Los Angeles's often contentious relationship between the city's desire for recognition as a world-class metropolitan region and its counter narrative; rooted in a conservative Mid-Western ethos, nervously provincial and wary of abstraction.

Whereas Avila bases his analysis in popular culture, Schrank emphasizes the conflict between high culture and the civic establishment. However, missing from these works is the examination of the art community, not as a cultural category, but

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[8] Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990; First Vintage Books, 1992).

[9] Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[10] Ibid, xiv-xv, 6.

[11] William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[12] Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

as a group of individuals and active participants in the shaping of urban policy. City elites came to recognize the value of this community, not only as producers of high culture, but as a model for urban revitalization. As a group they functioned as an influential subculture that impacted not only the city's cultural cach , but informed redevelopment ideology.

This article will rely on periodical literature: the *Los Angeles Times,* in particular. Largely due to its own vested interest in real estate development, the *Times* provided extensive coverage of redevelopment policy and activity during the 1970s and 1980s.[13] Moreover, until the 1970s, the *Times,* as a cultural critic, endeavored to keep a lid on modernism through its conservative art critics. But as the city matured culturally, the paper's art criticism became increasingly cosmopolitan.[14] At the same time the paper began recognizing the art community as an influence on urban revitalization. In this way, the *Times* offers a critical insight into the psyche of Los Angeles with regard to the direction of downtown redevelopment. To give balance to the establishment position, I have included interview material from artists who participated in the downtown art community. In addition, City Council President Joel Wachs's archives proved an invaluable resource.

In addition, this article will examine the intersection between the art community and urban redevelopment plans as they occurred in Los Angeles in the mid-1970s through the 1980s. This period saw the emergence of a vibrant art community that coincided with the civic dilemma of an abandoned city center. Civic debates over the uses of urban space played out as commercial and industrial buildings evolved into artists's studios and residences. Hardly passive bystanders, the community forced a re-examination of the uses of public and private space. Then, in the 1980s the art community experienced the arrival of Japanese investment in the United States. The savvy art community knew how to access city agencies and

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[13] Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, *Thinking Big: The Story of the Los Angeles Times Its Publishers, and Their Influence on Southern California* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977).

[14] Schrank, 67-68,70.

officials, becoming entangled in a turf war over expansion of Japanese business interests downtown. At the same time, the city and the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) recognized the artists as precursors to gentrification and soon the community realized it was ultimately subject to the goals of the power elite. What follows will document the art community as a subgroup that consciously exercised political agency and very much engaged in a discourse around public life.

The City Decentralizes

American cities, battered by the economic privations of the Great Depression, then neglected during the war due to the demand for resources, embarked on a "modernization" program aimed at rebuilding the nation's infrastructure at the end of the Second World War. The cornerstones of this program in the West were California's Collier Burns Highway Act (1947) and the federally funded Title I of the Housing Act (1949).[15] Collier Burns implemented the Los Angeles freeway system designed to coax suburban shoppers back to downtown. Instead, the new freeways that ringed the civic center actually whisked business out to the suburbs.[16] Meanwhile, Title I, an extensive urban renewal program, foundered on plans that favored private developers. The CRA served as the agent of those interests, too often setting in motion cynical redevelopment projects that showed little regard for the health of the city or community.[17]

For Los Angeles, this post-war period saw the implementation of one of the nation's most audacious urban renewal projects. Unlike other cities that razed much of their central core in the name of renewal, Los Angeles created a new

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[15] Avila, 198; Jon C. Teaford, "Urban Renewal and Its Aftermath," *Housing Policy Debate* 11, no. 2 (2000): 443, Fannie Mae Foundation www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/hpd_teaford.pdf (accessed May 23, 2008).

[16] Gottlieb and Wolt, 306-308.

[17] Teaford, 462-463.

financial center on Bunker Hill from the ground up.[18] By the end of the 1970s the old financial district on Spring Street saw the last of its tenants decamp to the new "Gold Coast" on Flower and Figueroa.[19] While the reasons given for relocating engaged a familiar narrative having to do with outdated facilities and crime-ridden streets, in truth, business interests with the backing of the *Los Angeles Times* seized the opportunity to transform L.A. into a major player in the global financial world.[20]

Stafford R. Grady, president of Lloyds Bank California, emphasized that the new location relied mainly on "customer contact," suggesting that the city needed to *look* like a first-world economic center.[21] Determined to reconstruct the city's reputation as a provincial backwater, Los Angeles businessmen eagerly turned their backs on Spring Street and Broadway.[22] Construction of the new financial district also symbolized the shift away from the hegemony of downtown businesses to international corporations and financial institutions.[23]

The other major contributor to the deterioration of the civic center was the post-war highway construction program. First, it encouraged the growth of suburbs that served as white enclaves, extending their welcome to immigrants only as they assimilated into the dominant Anglo culture.[24] Second, the highway system effectively suburbanized the industrial sector. Factories no longer needed to concentrate around a central core

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[18] Davis, 230.

[19] Michele Anne Galassi, "Capital Restructuring and the Politics of Redevelopment: The CRA, Skid Row and High-Rise Los Angeles" (Master's thesis, Dept. of Geography & Urban Analysis, California State University, Los Angeles, 2001) 127-9.

[20] Getze, "Spring St. Exodus."

[21] Ibid.

[22] Lynn Simross, " Squeezing L.A. Into the Big Orange Image," *Los Angeles Times,* January 12, 1978, IV.

[23] Gottlieb and Wolt, 537; Getze, "Spring St. Exodus;" Hebert, "Bullocks Downtown."

[24] Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 192; Avila, 34.

near services and rail lines. That left thousands of square feet of manufacturing space empty in a once bustling downtown.

Plans for Renewal

Across the nation during the 1950s and 1960s, industrial cities such as Boston, Chicago, and Pittsburgh instituted renewal projects aimed at addressing the hollowing out of the urban center. The plans, overseen by community redevelopment agencies, purported to include low and moderate housing. Instead they morphed into schemes by developers to build "lucrative upper-middle-class" shopping districts by razing largely minority and low-income neighborhoods.[25] The CRA, since its beginnings in 1948, had its financial as well as philosophical base in downtown business interests. Though determined to focus its energies on the revitalization of downtown, the CRA repeatedly found itself stymied by ill-conceived revitalization schemes.[26]

By 1975, the deterioration of the old civic center encouraged the CRA to propose a "massive program" to revive the civic center through the "eradication of blight."[27] The term *blight,* as shall be discussed later, had sinister implications of community eradication. The plan called for the "demolition and clearance" of "buildings [and] structures…as necessary to carry out the purposes of this plan."[28] The plan itself, plagued by language that offered little guidance to a city clearly adrift, vaguely pledged "[t]o organize growth and change, to reinforce viable functions, and to facilitate the renewal or rehabilitation of deteriorated and underutilized areas."[29] Ultimately, the real intention behind the plan, according to one downtown insider, was to alter the downtown skyline so it would convey the image

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[25] Teaford, 445-7.
[26] Galassi, 68; Avila, 157.
[27] Community Redevelopment Agency, *Redevelopment Plan for Central Business District Redevelopment Project*, City of Los Angeles, California. July 18, 1975, sec. 314, p 7.
[28] Ibid.
[29] *Redevelopment Plan*, sec. 400, p 14.

of a modern metropolis.[30] Once again, Los Angeles based its civic philosophy on an externalized image of what civic leaders thought a metropolitan center encompassed. Generations of elite Anglos regularly measured themselves against the skylines, cultural institutions, and well-regulated art communities of other established urban centers.

The redevelopment plan for the Central Business District included the usual language declaring the structures "within the project area" as "deteriorated" and "substandard." It committed to provide "displaced' residents with new housing in the area.[31] But individuals and members of the old power structure largely held real estate in the city center.[32] The national and international corporations that now wielded much of the financial influence, had no ties to the old business district. The booming real estate market of the 1970s made the re-graded land around Bunker Hill a much more appealing investment.[33] Consequently, while other cities razed their historic cores in the name of revitalization, Los Angeles simply walked away.[34]

The Art Community

With the city elite in a dilemma over the corroded city center and its gaze looking skyward, a generation of artists moved into the civic wasteland. Graduates of Otis Art Institute, Art Center, and Cal Arts as well as transplants from Chicago and San Francisco sought out the landlords whose buildings laid fallow for years. In addition, older artists, priced out of Pasadena and Venice by gentrification, as well as some who had lived in the vanished Bunker Hill, found their way to downtown.[35] **"**You

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[30] Galassi, 82.
[31] *Redevelopment Plan*, sec 327, p 10.
[32] Peter Wiley and Robert Gottlieb, *Empires in the Sun: The Rise of the New American West* (New York: Putnam, 1982), 114-16.
[33] Davis, 131.
[34] Ibid, 230-1.
[35] Susan Price-Root, "Home is Where the Art Is," *New West,* July 3, 1978, 78; Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Gail Sansbury, "Lost Streets of Bunker Hill," *California History* 74 (1995/96): 394-407.

drove around downtown and looked above the first floor for empty windows, then hunted down the owner," recalled sculpture Coleen Sterritt. Sterritt and her boyfriend, sculpture Woods Davy, had a two-year lease at $350 a month for the nine thousand square-foot third floor of the Desmond's building on Sixth and Broadway.[36]

Articles began appearing in local papers romanticizing the artists's life style and claiming a "Renaissance" for downtown.[37] In place of the dull syntax of the CRA plan, language of the frontier entered the discourse about these new downtown denizens. *Newsweek* described the artists as "pioneers" who would "stake a claim" in the "wide open *interior* spaces" of the inner city.[38] When a co-operative artists' organization moved into an industrial neighborhood east of Alameda, the magazine also referred to the building as an "art outpost."[39] The mythology of the West provided an appealing narrative for Angelenos who had come to see the city core as "irrelevant," a place where people "who [could] not afford cars" were marooned.[40] Wild West references replaced the bureaucratic language of the CRA; at least the imagery could shift from *vagrants* to *cowboys*.

Columnist Art Seidenbaum, who covered urban issues for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote an analytical piece in which he cited housing experts and planners who forecast the return of

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[36] Price-Root, "Home is Where the Art Is"; Coleen Sterritt, interview by author, Sierra Madre CA, June 7, 2012.

[37] Ursula Vils, "Downtown: Canvas for a Renaissance," *Los Angeles Times,* June 15, 1978, 4; Price-Root, "Home is Where the Art Is,"; Camilla Snyder, "High-minded renters move up to roomy downtown," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner,* Marc Kreisel archives.

[38] Cathleen McGuigan, et al, "The Soho Syndrome: Artists are revitalizing city neighborhoods," *Newsweek*, September 22, 1986, 80.

[39] McGuigan, "The Soho Syndrome."

[40] Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London: Allen Lane, 1971; repr., Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 190. Citations are to the reprinted edition).

whites back to urban centers. Seidenbaum predicted that the "dying centers" would become affluent enclaves while the nonwhites would be left adrift in the suburbs.[41] Over the next one hundred years, the newspaper promised, the demographics of current population centers would invert. "Get ready," the paper seemed to say, reaching out to the Anglo middle class, become part of the new urban America.

Artists living downtown no longer served merely as subjects for the occasional life-style story. Largely white and middle class, the growing art community held real potential as an agent for renewal. In addition to its usefulness as a redevelopment resource, the community also served as an unintentional mitigator to the influx of Latinos downtown. During the 1980s, political turmoil in Central America contributed to a surge in the Latino population in Los Angeles, fanning perennial racial anxieties.[42] The large Latino population that frequented the shops and theaters along Broadway greatly aggravated the boosters. Every couple of years, mention of the street's decidedly Spanish flavor would crop up in a *Times* article about the deterioration of downtown or the dilemma of attracting visitors. The articles reminded readers that Broadway represented one of the "busiest shopping streets outside of Mexico City." [43]

Since the early twentieth century Anglo Angelenos mythologized the city's racial construct by "containing" the Latino presence in the civic consciousness.[44] According to Avila, the ideology of suburbanization that dominated redevelopment planning relieved those anxieties.[45] *Suburbia* as a theoretical construct implied a homogeneous community. Now the

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[41] Art Seidenbaum, "2076: Homesteading in the City?" *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 1976, 4.

[42]Michael E. Engh, "At Home in the Heteropolis: Understanding Postmodern L.A." Review. *American Historical Review* 105 no. 5 (December, 2000) 1679. JSTOR: http://www.jstor.org/

[43] Hebert, "Bullock's Downtown"; Tia Gindick, "The Upgrading of Downtown"; Getze "Spring St. Exodus."

[44] Deverell, 31.

[45] Avila, 55-64.

proponents of urban redevelopment promoted a suburbanized vision of downtown. The *Times* concentrated on lauding the new shopping and financial district rising on the western edge of the old city.[46] Businesses that catered to middle-class Anglo shoppers such as Broadway, May Company, and Bullocks strove to create a new white space that would attract their traditional customers back downtown. Bullock's stood ready to vacate its old location at Broadway and Seventh to become a part of a planned "superblock development" of offices, shopping, a hotel and "theater complex."[47] In Seidenbaum's article, "futurist" Buckminster Fuller claimed that in the coming "post-petroleum age" suburbs would become extinct and urban centers would be the new enclaves of affluent whites. Seidenbaum reassured his readers that they would not be left to fend for themselves on the streets of downtown. Instead, they accompanied an urban sanctuary that resembled the "superblock project" already in the works.[48]

Acting as shock-troops in the repopulation of downtown, artists reclaimed empty spaces in the garment district, warehouses, and vacated department stores. Just as the two sculptors occupied an entire floor of the old Desmond's store on the notorious Broadway, another couple occupied a former shoe factory on the streets of Seventh and San Pedro.[49] So unaccustomed to seeing white women alone in some parts of downtown, the police periodically mistook the women for prostitutes.[50] The push to decentralize the city left individual landlords with buildings that stood vacant for years. Landlords willingly overlooked zoning restrictions, renting thousands of square feet of warehouse and manufacturing spaces for $.02 to $.04 per square foot to eager artists.[51]

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[46] Getze, "Spring St. Exodus"; Hebert, "Bullock's Downtown."
[47] Herbert, "Bullock's Downtown."
[48] Seidenbaum, "2076: Homesteading."
[49] Price-Root, "Home is Where the Art Is."
[50] Bonnie Schroeder, telephone interview with author, October 24, 2010.
[51] Conditional Use Permits, Case No. 29879, note p. 4; Box C-1832; Arts Symposium 1981; Joel Wachs Archives.

The Artist Paradigm

As early as the 1960s, students of urban planning began to question the accepted orthodoxy in response to the heavy-handed post-war urban renewal projects. Jane Jacobs spoke out against the "dullness" and "regimentation" of projects whose end result was to destroy the city's "vitality."[52] The city planners understood the usefulness of art communities as an antidote for sanitized gentrification. New York's Soho had famously gentrified ten years earlier. Some of the artists priced out of Manhattan moved to Jersey City where the New Jersey City Council "institutionalized" the artists as "part of [a] planned improvement and rehabilitation" program.[53] Old buildings provided the ecosystem for an art community and artists served as the first wave for gentrification. Los Angeles CRA planner, Ari Sikora, declared that "Community Redevelopment want[s] artists in downtown."[54] Urban planners such as Sikora recognized the presence of artists as a critical "component" in redevelopment.[55] "Grimy early-twentieth century buildings are being rehabilitated by artists," proclaimed one writer, signaling a revalorization of the historic core.[56]

Although the *Times* had a deep commitment to promoting the new financial district, it could no longer ignore the influence of the burgeoning art community. A series of articles appeared extolling loft living. In addition to expansive open areas with walls of windows and skylights, the articles

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[52] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 4. Citations are to the reprinted edition.

[53] David B. Cole, "Artists and Urban Redevelopment." *The Geographical Review* 77 no. 4 (October 1987); 395. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/21480; (accessed December 4, 2008).

[54] Memo to Hugh Stevenson from Ari Sikora and Bea Rosenbloom, CRA, 1978 (?); Box C-1844; Joel Wachs Archives.

[55] Cole, "Artists and Urban Redevelopment," 405, n13.

[56] Peter Clothier, "Moving Downtown," *Los Angeles Today,* May 1981, 40, reprinted from *Art in America,* May 1981, File: LAVA; Box C-1832; Joel Wachs Archives.

stressed the "cosmopolitan' life style. Dan Cytron, the artist who ten years earlier gazed over a lost city from ruins of Bunker Hill, spoke of easy access to the Music Center, Grand Central Market, Dodger Stadium, and Union Station. From his studio overlooking St. Vibiana's Church, he mused, "To live and work in the same area is a good life."[57] Vic Henderson, a member of the L.A. Fine Arts Squad, and his wife Shirley, a performance artist, shared a studio on Third Street. They liked the "social milieu" involving monthly dinners with other artists and meeting in local bars. They found the scene "supportive" without the competition that pervaded the Westside.[58]

The Artist-In-Residence Ordinance

The Department of Building and Safety, the city agency tasked with enforcing zoning and building occupancy codes, as well as the Fire Department routinely patrolled downtown due to the fact that empty buildings posed a fire hazard and public safety problem. Aware of the growing number of artists in the city center, the Fire Department sent out a task force to search out illegal studios. "They knew at a certain point that we weren't providing any revenue [because] we weren't pulling any permits," recalled one of the artists living at Citizens' Warehouse. "But even if we wanted to," the artists claimed, "we didn't know what permits to pull."[59] Another tenant complained, "If I had to build it according to code, I wouldn't have been able to afford it." [60]

Tensions piqued when firemen patrolling the warehouse area along the river noticed a little boy standing in the basement doorway of the warehouse. The boy told them he lived there, pointing to the ramp leading to the basement. Within minutes, the fire department and police surrounded the building.

[57] Ursula Vils, "Downtown: Canvas for a Renaissance."
[58] Vils, "Renaissance."
[59] Vils, "Renaissance.".
[60] McGuigan, "Soho Syndrome."

Immediately, they posted a vacate order.[61] A similar incident happened to the owners of a building on Industrial Street about five blocks south.[62] The artist/owners contacted City Council President Joel Wachs. Long promoter of the arts, he began working with the community and the Department of Building and Safety to write an amendment to existing building codes. The ordinance accommodated the "reuse of existing buildings" for artists' live-work.[63]

The new ordinance, passed by the city council in January 1982, modified earlier zoning restrictions pertaining to living in industrial zones. It defined "live-work" as 1/3 housing and 2/3 work space. Within the housing portion of a space, minimal building and safety codes applied with regard to plumbing and electrical and there were no requirements for heating.[64] Concerned, Building and Safety thought that by loosening of zoning laws it would re-introduce high-density, substandard housing, that is, single residency hotels, believed to be incubators for crime.[65] The department included an amendment setting the square footage requirement at one person per 2,000 square feet.[66] In addition, for individuals to qualify for a live-work permit, the city required them to obtain a business license whereby they registered as an *artist*.[67] This gave the city continued control over the use of marginal spaces in and around the city core. Although officials such as Wachs and CRA planner Ari Sikora backed the art community as both an instrument for revitalization and as a cultural asset, conflicts between the artists and Building and Safety continued.

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[61] Marc Kreisel, interview with author, Los Angeles, February 10, 2008.

[62] Ross Gersten, "New Ordinance Feared By Artists," *Civic Center News/Downtown News,* June 29, 1982, Marc Kreisel Archive.

[63] Los Angeles City Ordinance, No.156.279, January 12, 1982.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 8-10.

[66] Ordinance No. 157.364, January 6, 1983.

[67] Ordinance No. 156.279.

The ordinance turned out to be a mixed bag for many of the artists. On the one hand, the City Planning Department came to recognize the artists as a desirable community. City Planners realized that these were not squatters or vagrants, but a middle-class population, albeit unconventional. In a memo justifying the conditional use permits that would allow the reuse of industrial space, the department described the artists as "single or couples without children." It went on to say that "[t]hey are intelligent, educated people." Visits by department officials found the studios "large, clean and appealing places to work/live."[68] The implication being that a middle-class (and largely white) population potentially promised the suburbanization of downtown. The Planning Department saw the art community as sharing their vision of downtown.

Relations between the artists and Building and Safety, however, proved much more contentious. Building and Safety was the department tasked with enforcing the new ordinance and, while the artists no longer had to hide their stoves and beds from the fire inspectors (evidence of residence), they found themselves caught in a bureaucratic maelstrom.[69] From the artists's point of view, the ordinance sought to codify a community that was already in place. They felt they had asked little of the city, putting their own money into improving someone else's property and accomplished the revitalization of downtown that had eluded the experts. The costs of compliance were too high; someone paying $125 a month in rent may have needed to spend $4,000 to bring their space up to code. Residents had to submit maps and plans, which meant architects and contractors. A "change in use" of a building created an overwhelming list of residential requirements that could include wheelchair ramps and landscaping. A letter from one artist/building owner to Joel Wachs's office complained bitterly that Building and Safety inspectors were "belligerent and vindictive…insulting and suspicious." One inspector told her, "You…don't belong down here in the first place." She argued

[68] Conditional Use Permits Case No. 29879, File: Symposium 1981; Box C-1832; Joel Wachs Archive.

[69] Littenberg.

that the city would not "burden suburban residents" with the level of fees for repairs to their homes.[70] In response, Wachs's office arranged a meeting between the downtown artists and the department, which ended with Building and Safety inspectors screaming at the artists.[71] For inspectors accustomed to ferreting out clear code violations in an industrial district, an entirely new category overlaid a space that involved a vaguely defined classification of "live/work."

Wachs and the CRA remained committed to the art community as a vehicle for revitalization and a means to raise the city's cultural cach . In a press release issued after the passage of the Artists-In-Residence Law, he spoke of the economic "resurgence" experienced by urban areas through increased property values. He pointed to the improvement in the "quality of life" and pledged to the art community that the city would provide an "environment in which the arts can flourish." Wachs had no doubt the art community played a significant role in urban redevelopment.[72]

Art in the Public Sphere

The 1970s and 1980s, when artists re-envisioned the abandoned city center, coincided with a movement in art to go beyond the confines of galleries and museums. In this era of civil rights and student movements, seemingly benign institutions like museums and galleries smacked of elitism. Painter Matsui "Mike" Kanemitsu called the famed Ferus Gallery "insular" and its stable of artists the "Venice Mafia."[73] Five artists who comprised the L.A. Fine Arts Squad eschewed the gallery as elitist. Instead, the members of the Squad employed "radical

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[70] Karla Klarin letter to Joel Wachs, May 11, 1983, File: Correspondence to J. Wachs & his staff; Box C-1832; Joel Wachs Archives.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Press Release, Joel Wachs' Office, September 9, 1981, File: LAVA 1981-82; Box C-1832; Joel Wachs Archives.

[73] Schrank, 186.

realism" painting incongruous scenes on the sides of buildings.[74] Why not put work in the street away from the mediation of the institution? Allow the viewer to experience the work in their own context, without the intimidation of the gallery.[75] Performance artist, Chris Burden lay down in the middle of a busy street, placing traffic flares at his head and feet.[76] Downtown artist, Jon Peterson installed colorful "bum shelters" on Skid Row and Moira Sheehan painted a traffic island on Temple and Alameda baby blue.[77]

In the early 1980s, two arts organizations emerged as important voices in the discourse around public space and downtown renewal efforts: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), an artists' co-operative, and Los Angeles Visual Arts (LAVA), a membership organization of gallery dealers and artists.[78] LACE offered artists an alternative to commercial galleries and establishment institutions. The director of LACE at that time, Joy Silverman, sought an alliance with Wachs's office and the CRA.[79] With their support, LACE sponsored two notable events.

In 1984, the Cotton Exchange building on Broadway and Third Street was slated for demolition to make way for the Ronald Reagan State Building. LACE got the city to permit two hundred artists to take over the four story building, turning it into an unheard of mixed media art event for five weeks.[80] A banner hung on the outside of the building depicting police brutality

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[74] Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 152-153.

[75] Vic Henderson, telephone interview by author, May 16, 2010.

[76] Linda Frye Burnham, "Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview," in *Performance Anthology: Source Book of California Performance Art,* ed. Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong (San Francisco: Last Gasp Press, 1989), 390-438.

[77] Nancy Drew, "L.A.'s Space Age," in *LACE 10 Yrs Documented*, ed. Karen Moss (Los Angeles: LACE, 1988) 9; Moira Sheehan, telephone interview with author, November 2001.

[78] LACE, Joel Wachs Archives, http://www.welcometolace.org (accessed March 13, 2013).

[79] Joy Silverman, telephone interview by author, October 30, 2010.

[80] *LACE 10 Yrs Documented,* 54.

nearly got the show shut down, but Ed Helfeld, the CRA administrator, intervened with the police, declaring there would be no censorship.[81] The other show took place on a vacant lot owned by the Rapid Transit District. The lot, a homeless encampment on Cesar Chavez and Vignes, now the location of the MTA building, became the site of an apocalyptic performance piece. The San Francisco based art group, Survival Research Laboratories (SRL) built 8-10 foot robots that shot flames out their bodies. The robots had circular saw blades at the ends of their arms, fighting one another to mutual destruction; a comment on war and civil violence.[82] The noisy spectacle went on for several days. Wachs demurred from any official participation in the show, but he saw to it that the police did not disrupt it.[83] This hyperbolic seizure of public space had a dual purpose; it questioned how urban space was defined. A four-story office building became a series of galleries and performance spaces. An exterior wall became a public space from which to hang art and the art conveyed a message of injustice to a city abandoned by redevelopment. Beyond the intended message of mechanized violence embedded in the SRL performance, the fact that fiery robots could battle for days in the middle of the city demonstrated the diminished value space held in the urban center.

The other organization, LAVA, was a more controversial presence in the downtown art community. Viewed by some artists as an intrusion into the freewheeling downtown scene, LAVA was largely comprised of art dealers and gallery owners.[84] It established a network of galleries downtown, sponsoring an annual arts festival in partnership with the Department of Cultural Affairs. The festivals featured guided studio tours aimed at mitigating the perception of downtown as a dangerous wasteland. With the enthusiastic backing of the mayor's office and the City Council, LAVA hoped escorting visitors to member galleries and studios would help dispel

[81] Silverman.
[82] *LACE 10 Yrs Documented,* 55.
[83] Silverman.
[84] Marc Kreisel, interview by author, October 4, 2010.

suburbanite anxieties about downtown and pull in potential art buyers.[85] But artists's studios and the galleries scattered over an eight block area, making walking tours impossible. Organizers instead had buses pick up visitors at the Japanese-American Cultural Center (JACC) and ferried them from one site to another. Public transportation was not an option for affluent Anglos in the 1980s. To have armed festival participants with maps and send them off on buses downtown was unthinkable. Only the poor and minorities used public transportation, besides, suburban Anglos had no experience negotiating a heterogeneous public space.[86] Moreover, the nature of the excursion demanded additional caution. A depopulated civic center with warehouses and manufacturing spaces housed a warren of galleries and studios, creating the "perception of threat" that demanded festival goers be "insulated" from the larger "environment."[87]

The festival held its opening ceremonies at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) in Little Tokyo. Councilman Wachs's opening remarks praised the art

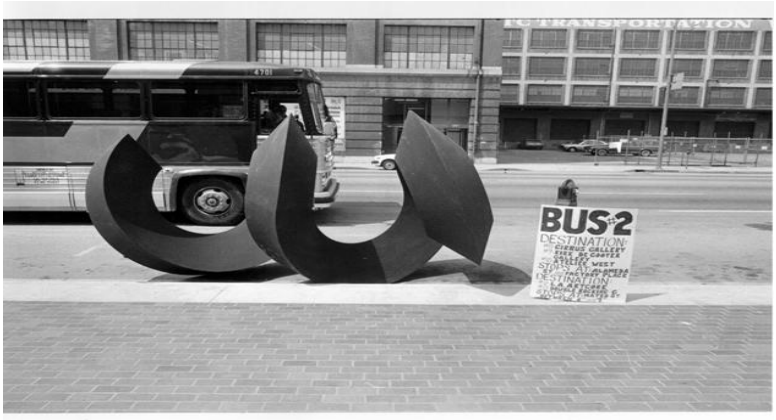


Figure 1. LAVA tour bus waits for passengers.

[85] Suzanne Muchnic, "The Art Tide Turns Downtown," *Los Angeles Times,* September 14, 1982, Commentary, Marc Kreisel Archive.
[86] Avila, 190.
[87] Davis, 224.

community as "what the city is all about."[88] Before the tour, visitors could view an installation in the auditorium titled "An Artist's Living Space" offering a furnished model of how "artists in downtown L.A. actually live."[89] In its coverage of the festival, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that visitors bought little art, but were enthusiastic about the life style--the chic of living in "industrial spaces converted to artistic use." [90] One artist complained that no one bought art, but some visitors offered to buy his bed.[91]

The overly structured LAVA Art Festival rankled some in the community. In order to participate in the studio tours galleries were required to pay a membership fee. In addition, the ARCO Center for Visual Art was one of the participating organizations, raising questions about the corporatization of the art community.[92] Some of the downtown artists felt "exploited" and "put on display" for the benefit of commercial galleries and large corporations.[93]

In response to what they perceived as the elitist nature of the festival, The American Gallery put on a show titled, "The Behavioral Patterns of Los Angeles Art Dealers." One painting titled, "see my dealer," suggested an obscene message in contrasting letters. Another artist photocopied a rejection letter from a gallery and another painted the downtown skyline labeling the buildings with the names of galleries.[94] Tensions reached their nadir when an "unauthorized" artist, Dustin Shuler, staged an elaborate public installation on the outside wall of the American Gallery. The piece involved the "insertion" of an oversized, "two-ton nail" into the wall of the building, using a crane and guy wires. Once the nail was in place, a Cessna plane

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[88] Maria L. LaGanga, "Two L.A. Events Give Artists a Lofty Outlook," *Los Angeles Times,* 1981, File: Reports, Information, Memos; Box C-1832; Joel Wachs Archives.

[89] *Modernage*, 1982. Joel Wachs archives.

[90] Muchnic, "The Art Tide Turns."

[91] Kreisel.

[92] File: Correspondence to Wachs & his Staff, Box C-1832; Joel Wachs Archives.

[93] Kreisel.

[94] Robert Pincus, "Galleries," *Los Angeles Times,* February 26, 1982, 5.

was hung on the nail. The piece called *Pinned* brought local and national news coverage of the event, eclipsing the LAVA festival.[95] *Artweek*, praised the event, saying it "put the L.A. art scene on the map." [96] However, Suzanne Muchnic, the art reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times*, called Shuler an "opportunist." She went on to complain that neighborhood artists, who were not LAVA members, invited tourists into their studios.[97] Not surprising, the *Times* in its role as booster found Shuler's rebellion an affront to planned events designed to revive downtown.

When art began to move outside the confines of the traditional gallery setting, the question of what constituted legitimate art space extended into the civic space. Spaces were "set up and run" to accommodate the art.[98] When Shuler put that nail in the wall of the building, effectively crashing the festival, he took a poke at LAVA's audacity in trying to control the artist's role in the public discourse. LAVA's membership requirements and orchestrated tours were anathema to that exploration of the meaning and use of public space.[99] Some artists questioned the purpose of LAVA: Was it to promote Los Angeles artists or commercialize the downtown art scene? "LAVA never helped the artists," complained Marc Kreisel, artist and owner of the American Gallery. "They didn't help with our property issues; they never put any money into the community or helped the artists."[100]

Even with the support of the CRA and the city council, the LAVA Art Festival only managed to last four years. Downtown had no street life and lacked the cohesiveness of New York. The controlled organization designed to ease visitors' anxieties, created instead a confining, stilted experience. Without

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[95] Joan Hugo, "Nailed," *Artweek,* October 2, 1982, 110.
[96] Hugo, "Nailed."
[97] Munchnic, "The Art Tide Turns."
[98] Drew, "L.A.'s Space Age"
[99] Joshua A. Shannon, "Claes Oldenburg's 'The Street' and Urban Renewal in Greenwich Village, 1960," *The Art Bulletin* 86, no. 1 (March, 2004), 155-8, JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/3177404 (accessed December 4, 2008).
[100] Kreisel.

the spontaneity of the street, without the "informality of public life" to engage with the art enthusiasts, visitors continued to feel alienated from the city center and it remained a frightening place.[101] William Wilson, the art critic for the *Times,* observed that, "without 'street-level development" downtown would never revive.[102] Ironically, the gentrification that LAVA hoped to spur attracted mainly developers. One LAVA dealer complained that developers had come in and driven up real estate prices, pricing out the galleries.[103]



Figure 2. Shuler hangs plane from hotel

The Artists versus Little Tokyo

The 1980s witnessed an economic shift that had implications for the West Coast and Los Angeles in particular. In 1980, Japan loosened restrictions on capital outflow. Coupled with a weakened dollar, investment in the United States became increasingly appealing for Japanese business. Real estate

[101] Jacobs, 57.

[102] William Wilson, "Downtown—Is The Lease Up on a Dream: [Home Edition]," *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 1985, PROQUEST http//www.proquest.com.ezproxy.lapl.org/.

[103] Ibid.

especially attracted Japanese investors, so that by the mid-1980s, foreign investors held seventy percent of "downtown's major properties."[104] For the Japanese, California property was cheap and the Japanese-American community offered a cushion of "cultural comfort."[105] The president of a Mitsubishi facility in Compton remarked, "At times…[land in California] almost appears free to us."[106] As the Japanese presence in downtown Los Angeles grew, the art community became engaged in a turf war with Little Tokyo business interests, putting the artists on the defensive in both a political and a racial discourse.

In the 1970s, the CRA, in partnership with private Japanese and Japanese-American business interests, transformed Little Tokyo into one of the most successful redevelopment projects in downtown.[107] Unlike the new corporate power brokers on Bunker Hill who abandoned the historic core, the Japanese community remained committed to the neighborhood. Little Tokyo Towers, a senior housing complex, replaced dilapidated single residence occupancy hotels. The Japanese Village Plaza offered shops aimed at affluent Asian tourists and the New Otani Hotel, built by Japanese investors, provided a high-end anchor to the revitalized community.[108] By 1981 with land values rising, business interests, with the enthusiastic support of the CRA, stood poised to further expand Little Tokyo east of Alameda into the "old industrial area along the Los Angeles River."[109]

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[104]Mina Wilkins, "Japanese Multinational in United States," *Business History Review* 64, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 617 n111; Davis, 135.

[105] Tyson Freeman, "Too Easy Money Fuels A New Building Boom!" *National Real Estate Investor* (September 30, 1999), 40; as cited in Galassi, 157; "Japan-California 'Connection' Vital," :[Home Edition]." *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1981, PROQUEST http://www.proquest.com.ezproxy.lapl.org/ (accessed October 3, 2010).

[106] "Japan-California 'Connection' Vital."

[107] Ray Hebert, "Growing Pains: Little Tokyo Has Bloomed—Perhaps Too Richly," *Los Angeles Times,* July 5, 1983, 4.

[108] Hebert, "Growing Pains"

[109] Hebert, "Growing Pains."

The city quietly neglected the area east of Alameda. Small manufacturers, a print shop, warehouses, a couple of residential hotels, and a truckers's bar were among the entities that sat on lots where streets ran at odd angles. Along with the businesses, a few dozen artists lived below the radar in a few of the empty buildings. Two brothers converted the four stories of the Johannes Brothers Building on Traction Avenue and Hewitt Street into artists's lofts. A group of artists bought a former pickle factory, known as Citizens Warehouse, on Center Street, turning it into twenty-three studios and a former truckers' bar on Hewitt Street became a popular artists' hang-out. [110]

The plans to expand Little Tokyo threatened to overwhelm the nascent community, and they mounted a vigorous opposition campaign that eventually caused the CRA to back down.[111] Property owners and community members understood that redevelopment could carry sinister implications for groups considered marginal by developers and eager city officials. The CRA, acting under the guidelines of Title I, had the authority to declare an area "blighted." Once an area was designated as blighted, the CRA could seize private property under eminent domain. In the past, private developers then bought the property from the agency at below market prices.[112] The community east of Alameda feared the sort of land grab that destroyed the mixed community on Bunker Hill in the 1960s, replacing it with high-end housing and stalled projects.[113]

When developer friendly City Councilman, Gilbert Lindsey, commissioned a study in early 1981 to analyze the feasibility of expansion into the industrial zone east of Alameda, the art community held no illusions. Lindsey loved the modern skyline at the western edge of his district and saw expansion of the eastern boarder as part of his legacy, "I want to clean up the east side of downtown and this would be a great [way] of doing

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[110] Littenberg.
[111] "CRA Halts Plans for Alameda Area," *Civic Center News,* January 5, 1982.
[112] Shannon, 137.
[113] Gottlieb, 260-261, 266-268.

that." [114] A feasibility study would determine if the area considered for redevelopment was *blighted,* allowing the city to exercise eminent domain.[115] Since the city and Little Tokyo interests conveniently saw the area as "declining," the artists had little doubt as to the study's findings. To one member of the community organization representing the owners and artists east of Alameda, the Japanese community of Little Tokyo had a growing "appetite for acquiring property." "I don't believe," he complained, "private property should be taken over for private use by an ethnic group." [116] What this individual expressed reflected the sentiments of many Angelenos. Japanese presence became so pervasive that some felt that "America did not seem like America" anymore. A *Newsweek* poll found twenty-three percent of Americans considered Japan a greater threat than the Soviet Union.[117] The community felt itself outgunned by their city councilman and the CRA, both clearly backing the Little Tokyo interests. In that atmosphere, the discourse crept close to racist.

George Rollins, owner of the Johannes Brothers building, formed an ad hoc organization, the "Alameda First Street East Businessmen's and Property Owners' Association." As the group's president, Rollins wrote a letter to James Wood, chairman of the CRA, formally expressing the group's concerns. The association of landlords and artists questioned the neutrality of the study, "initiated" and "financed" by Little Tokyo business interests without any "input" from residents and owners in the study area. In the letter the association objected to the term "blighted" used in reference to the area and complained that the agency had excluded them from their redevelopment plans. "We do not trust the agency!" the letter declared. The association made clear it did not want any part of the CRA, instead

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[114] Hebert, "Growing Pains."
[115] Bill Boyarsky, "In Dubious Battle with a Doubtful Enemy: Plans: Who Chooses?" *Los Angeles Times,* October, 16, 1983, 5.
[116] Hebert, "Growing Pains."
[117] Wilkins, "Japanese Multinational," 625-626.

preferring to "allow the free market forces already at work to shape the future development of the area."[118]

The combative stance of the Businessmen's and Owners' Association paid off. Late in 1981, after a contentious community meeting at the neighborhood's Maryknoll Catholic Church, the CRA abandoned its plan to create an overlay east of Alameda.[119] Edward Helfeld, the CRA administrator, claimed Councilman Gilbert Lindsay initiated the disputed study. But Rollins, representing the Association, pointed the finger at Little Tokyo developers.[120] As one artist put it, "Little Tokyo is starting to look like Big Tokyo."[121]

Little Tokyo, as it stood in for Japanese business interests, loomed large for the art community. In the 1980s, real estate prices in Japan soared, making the United States the go-to investment for smart money. For the Japanese especially, by the mid-1980s, foreign investors held seventy-five percent of major commercial property downtown.[122] The Southern California chapter of the Society of Industrial Realtors (SIR) hosted a seminar for Japanese investors at the New Otani Hotel a few months before the art community and Little Tokyo faced off at the local Catholic school. For the art community, living below the city's radar and with their own councilman a stalwart of development interests, it looked like a real estate tsunami threatened to wipe them out.[123] But by 1991, Japan's "bubble economy" collapsed and Japan began pulling out of its overseas

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[118] Letter from George Rollins III, president The Alameda First Street East Businessmen's and Property Owners' Association to James Wood, chairman Community Redevelopment [*sic*] Agency of the City of Los Angeles, December 30, 1981, Marc Kreisel Archive.

[119] "LT East CRA project rejected, plan cost $75k," *Kashu Mainichi: California Daily News,* December 10, 1981, 1.

[120] "CRA Halts Plans For Alameda Area," *Civic Center News,* January 5, 1982, 1, Marc Kreisel Archive.

[121] Peter Zeker, artist, at community meeting with Redevelopment Agency, December 9, 1981; Marc Kreisel, interview by author, Los Angeles, California, October 18, 2010.

[122] Davis, 135.

[123] Boyarsky, "In Dubious Battle."

investments. [124] Japanese backed plans for Little Tokyo expansion never materialized, leaving the art community to its own devices.

Conclusion

The downtown art community grew from a grassroots need for large cheap space. Artists willingly defied zoning laws and "inhospitable" situations. Developers and civic boosters saw the art community as good for business, labeling it "Soho West," as a convenient marketing device.[125] Before the downtown art community could establish a strong regional narrative, before the community could "take root," boosters tried to hurry the process.[126] By 1985, the scene moved to Melrose Avenue; a friendlier mix of urban and suburban. It became the gentrified version of downtown. People strolled the street, dropped into the galleries, shopped, ate, and felt safe. Downtown cultural leaders feared that the shift to Melrose would stall plans for downtown redevelopment.[127] In 1986, the *Times* did a story on next wave of urbanites, labeled "yuppie pioneers." The old bohemian life held no appeal for these young professionals, who instead preferred the condominium developments on Spring Street and Bunker Hill.[128]

By 2000 a New York transplant, Tom Gilmore, began buying buildings in the Historic Core and converting them to *loft-style* apartments. "[People] are hungry for the kind of

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[124] Sonni Efron, "Will Japan be Able to Change Fast Enough?" *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1997, 1; "Sanwaw to Close Most U.S. Branches," *Los Angeles Times,* November 6, 1998, 10.

[125] Wilson, "Downtown."

[126] Snyder, "Soho West"; McGuigan, "The Soho Syndrome," 81.

[127] Wilson, "Downtown."

[128] Mike Teverbaugh, "Urban Pioneers Sink Their Roots in L.A.'s Downtown :New Housing in Heart of City Appeals to Many," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File), January 5, 1986, H1. Retrieved November 3, 2010, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 - 1987). (Document ID: 1065860762).

neighborhood we are going to build," he declared.[129] The old guard of the art community saw their lifestyle vanish, but business interests were ecstatic calling the area around Fourth and Main Streets "the city's new hotspot."[130] Beginning in 2004, gallery owners on Spring Street organized a monthly Art Walk which drew thousands of visitors to the once desolate financial district.[131] In the 1980s the art community feared Japanese-backed Little Tokyo would swallow it up, but it took fifteen years then an explosion of gentrification to change the character of downtown.

Los Angeles, like other American urban centers, recognized that the art community offered a model for urban redevelopment. Whether the city missed the opportunity in the 1980s to enact meaningful redevelopment in conjunction with the art community is open to debate. Clearly, however, the art community helped redefine the modern approach to urban revitalization by offering a new version of an old paradigm. Artists engaged in public discourse around city planning, race, and the use of public space as vital influences in urban redevelopment.

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[129] Galassi, 186-211.

[130] "Loft Pioneer: Tom Gilmore," *Los Angeles Downtown News,"* July 28, 2003.

[131] "Art Walk Comes of Age," *Los Angeles Downtown News,"* June 15, 2012.