

# THE ARCHITECTS NEWSPAPER

## MENU

ISSUE 01\_02.21.2007

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## The Birth of Cool

The power of art districts to revitalize downtrodden urban quarters has been proven time and again. Here's a look at some of California's newest art districts, what effect they're having on cities, and how architects and urban planners have helped them emerge.

[THE BIRTH OF COOL  
SCREENS, FINS, AND FOLDS](#)



The MODAA Building designed by SPF:a houses the firm's own studio as well as an art gallery and live/work lofts.

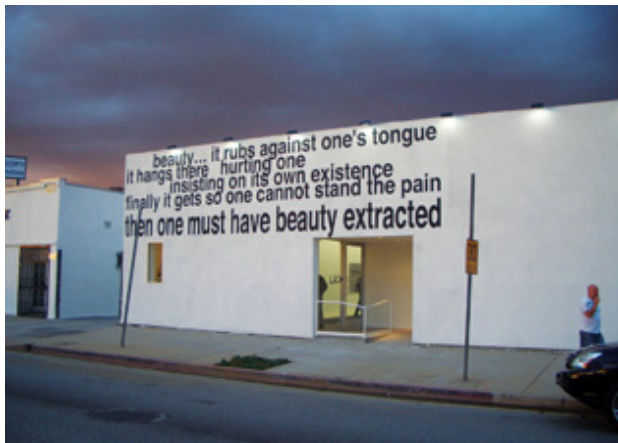


**A**rt galleries usually hop around cities like ping pong balls, following low rents, large spaces, and hip zip codes. Once they've landed they can do much more than raise the coolness factor of a neighborhood. They often usher in economic regeneration—which can admittedly turn into gentrification—and inspire improvements to neighborhood streetscapes and urban fabric, not to mention providing a lot of work for architects. As one gallery owner recently commented, artists are the shock troops for redevelopment. So how do cities attract galleries and help harness their power for development while not alienating existing residents? We look at some of the newest emerging arts districts in California to find out.

Most of the six case studies featured here have used the requisite development tools of zoning and building code to bring in galleries, which have in turn helped these districts consolidate a new image. But some, like Frogtown near the LA River, seem to have popped up all by themselves. That neighborhood is more popular for artist studios and lofts than for galleries, but that is changing, a common progression for arts districts. Gallery Row in downtown LA, simply used a neighborhood name change to draw galleries. Some are in beautiful historic quarters, but most are located in former industrial zones, tough neighborhoods, or abandoned commercial districts that are magnets for artists and galleries because of their low rents and grand spaces. And let's face it, most artists are turned on by grit and edge.

This is just a small sample of arts districts. Emerging areas like NOHO (North Hollywood) and Highland Park in LA, Little Italy in San Diego, and Jinglestown in the Oakland area, are other examples of the potent impact that art is having on redevelopment in California and across the country.

## SAM LUBELL IS AN'S CALIFORNIA EDITOR.



Two galleries by architect Peter Zellner, LAXART on La Cienega Boulevard and Project:Gallery on Venice Boulevard. ZELLNERPLUS

CULVER CITY ARTS DISTRICT  
CULVER CITY

Over 20 new galleries have popped up in Culver City over the last two and a half years, prompting the city to formally designate the area around the intersection of Washington and La Cienega boulevards as the Culver City Art District in 2006. Until recently, the stretch, on the eastern edge of Culver City, had been lined with gritty auto body shops, machine buildings, and furniture and upholstery stores. The shift toward art began with the relocation of highly acclaimed gallery Blum and Poe a few years ago. After its success the floodgates opened, according to Christine Byers of Culver City Cultural Affairs, and galleries began gobbling up the area's cavernous and cheap defunct manufacturing spaces. Culver City helped things along by allowing quicker permit approvals than the city of LA, and by funding streetscape and facade improvements on Washington (La Cienega is actually part of LA), and phasing out the chop shops. With banners and signs, a city-sponsored website that features a detailed gallery map ([www.ccgalleryguide.com](http://www.ccgalleryguide.com)), and a well-attended art night last June, the district is one of the fastest growing in the country, rivaling nearby Bergamot in Santa Monica in terms of the county's highest concentration of galleries.

Architects have played a role in designing the new galleries, including Peter Zellner (Project: Gallery, Walter Maciel Gallery, LAXART, Kinkead Gallery), David Jeno of Perez Design Group (Koplin Del Rio), and Ned Engs of Culver City-based E4 (Corey Helford Gallery). Most have preserved the brick walls, wood beams, truss ceilings, and other features of the cavernous industrial spaces, allowing them to contrast with the slick white walls that most galleries require.

One completely new project is a 28,000-square-foot building, located on Washington Boulevard, the first development project of the LA architecture firm SPF:a. The project houses the firm's own sizeable studio, seven live/work studios, and the Museum of Design, Art, and Architecture (MODAA), a venue that showcases a wide range of art, curated by the architects at SPF:a. The building features an inventive cement fiberboard facade composed of multicolored, multitextured, and multisized squares that also vary in relief. Completed in 2005, the building also contains a hip eatery called Wilson, owned by Brian Wilson's son Michael.

More is coming soon. Johnson Fain is helping the city's planning department assemble a planning document, due out in June, said Susan Yun, senior planner for Culver City. The document will likely zone for continued artisan spaces near the art district, especially on back streets, and encourage less intensive commercial development near residential neighborhoods. "We've talked to shops and the community, and they say they like the artisan uses in their area," said Yun. The only problem with the area's newfound popularity, she pointed out, is traffic on gallery nights, which the department is addressing.

The plan will also call for three new "catalytic" developments further west, on 40 acres near the intersection of Washington and National boulevards. The projects, still very conceptual at this point, will be developed by Urban Partners, Edward Zucker, and Fairfield and Brentwood Capital. Yun said the city is sensitive about not pricing out its residents with all this new

pricing out its residents with all this new development.

"We are working on a plan that does not drive real estate values too high," said Yun. "We don't want developers to build townhouses in these industrial buildings either. After all, this isn't suburbia." **SL**

## RIVERSIDE ARTS DISTRICT RIVERSIDE



Chu + Gooding's sketch of the Culver Arts Center  
COURTESY CHU + GOODING



Gould Evans' Riverside Arts Center.  
COURTESY GOULD EVANS

Much of Riverside, California's downtown looks like a 1960s streetscape frozen in time. No wonder. In the '60s planners decided to "improve" the city by making its once-bustling Main Street a pedestrian promenade for several blocks. The result: Urban vibrancy was replaced with a closed-off, even less successful retail environment.

But a block-long stretch is becoming an arts sanctuary, and much of the city is getting a cultural makeover, thanks to the efforts of the University of California at Riverside (UCR) and the city of Riverside. Located about 2 miles from downtown, the university—encouraged by city officials—decided to move many of its arts exhibition facilities downtown. The school's California Museum of Photography had already moved to Main Street in 1990. Last fall UCR opened the Sweeney Gallery (designed by Peter Zellner) next to the museum, on what's now called the UCR Arts Block, and it is now planning an entirely new facility, the Culver Arts Center, set to open in 2009. This will join more than ten art galleries already in the area and the Riverside Art Museum.

The city chipped in \$2 million for the Culver Arts Center and has invested \$10 million in improving the pedestrian mall's infrastructure and appearance. (Local landscape architect Ian Davidson was behind the mall overhaul.) The city has supplied much more in arts and culture funding throughout the city. It spent \$30 million to renovate the old Fox Theater nearby (designed by LA firm Richard McCann, to be completed 2008), contributed funds to Riverside Community College's School for the Arts (by the Phoenix office of Gould Evans; no schedule set), and has hired the LA-based Historic Resources Group to plan the rehabilitation of other culturally significant buildings in the area. For the past few years, the city has earned about \$150,000 yearly from a hotel tax, which supports arts marketing and coordination. Mayor Ron Loveridge has dubbed Riverside the City of the Arts, and in January, the city appointed its first cultural manager, Jonathan Yorba. The Riverside Arts Council has developed a web site dedicated to the region's art ([www.inlandarts.com](http://www.inlandarts.com)).

"When we looked at how we could compete with other cities and the new lifestyle centers, we thought our two greatest assets were our architecture and our arts and cultural institutions," said Dom Betro, Riverside councilmember in charge of downtown.

On the UCR Arts Block, the Sweeney Gallery is a modern space built inside an old bank building with lofty ceilings. The Culver Arts Center will occupy the 1920s Rouse Department Store, which is being renovated by LA firms Chu + Gooding Architects and Harley Ellis Devereaux. It will contain spaces for music, dance, and visual arts, education, as well as research and office spaces. The Rouse building's facade, with its double French doors, wrought-iron balconies, and Spanish tilework



wrought-iron balconies, and Spanish tilework, will be preserved, while most of the open-plan interior will be updated with industrial materials like aluminum and raw steel, as well as walnut wood. A central atrium will contain a multipurpose exhibition venue.

Lastly, Beverly Hills developer Alan Mruvka has broken ground on a slew of live/work artists spaces along Market Street, a few blocks from the UCR block. This is a first for the city. And since there are barely any downtown residents, all this action won't price neighbors out. **SL**



Tracy Stone's architecture firm, TAS Studio, features installations, like this these paintings by Andrew West. COURTESY TAS STUDIO

## FROGTOWN LOS ANGELES

When Elysian Valley was sheared off nearby Silver Lake by the soaring interchange of the 2 and 5 freeways, it rendered the neighborhood along the LA River almost literally an island. This thin wedge of Los Angeles, known colloquially as Frogtown after a legendary population explosion of amphibians in the 1960s, has become home to a small but thriving community of artists, designers, and architects who enjoy the feeling of perceived isolation.

For almost a hundred years, Elysian Valley's working-class community has been clustered densely in a grid of bungalows. (Locals aren't fond of the appellation Frogtown, which refers to a local gang.) "These are longterm residents," said architect Tracy Stone, who moved into a live/work space there three years ago. "Most have been in the same houses for decades, and many used to work in the neighborhood." The relationship between residential and industrial uses is still evident in the swath of warehouses that sits between the houses and the river, housing businesses as diverse as an FAA engine testing facility and the Dolly Madison Bakery.

Slowly, some of the warehouses and factories have given way to creative spaces, but when Stone and members of her office began to organize the first Frogtown Art Walk for November 17, 2006, they only knew of a handful. "We weren't even sure how many artists were in the area," said Stone. "People heard of [the Art Walk] by word of mouth and kept coming out of the woodwork." Seventeen studios opened their doors that night, among them, residents of the Blake Art Lofts (a mix of painters, sculptors and photographers), the Lil' Frogtown Gallery, the only true gallery in the area (though more are being planned), as well as architects, builders, and local business owners. "The turnout was remarkable," said Stone, who noted that many people who came had never even heard of the neighborhood before.

"The area has always been attractive to artists because it has industrial zoning," said Patricia Diefenderfer, who has served as the community's city planner since 2000. "While this is happening organically, it's not the official plan." The land-use plan she implemented in 2000 for Elysian Valley, Silver Lake, and Echo Park determined that a designated arts district did not best serve the residents in the area.

What Frogtown does have, however, is proximity to the LA River. Renewed interest in the waterfront makes it ripe for residential development, and one of the first new projects along the river—a three story, 56-unit condominium complex called River Lofts, designed by Culver City-based Richard Berliner—has been proposed for the neighborhood's far

—has been proposed for the neighborhood's far north corner. But equal attention has also been devoted to Frogtown's public space; perched on the edge of the reforested "soft-bottom" corridor of the LA River, and dotted with Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy projects including the Elysian Valley Gateway Park and Marsh Street Park, recreational destinations continue to nibble at Frogtown's corners.

For the moment, however, the anonymous factor that lures creatives to Frogtown's quiet streets remains intact. "I think people who like Frogtown like to be on the edge, out of sight," said John Conneely, a design-builder. "You can access civilization while not having to be a part of it."

**ALISSA WALKER LIVES IN HOLLYWOOD AND IS EDITOR OF THE DESIGN BLOG UNBEIGE.**



The Ego Park Gallery was among the first in the area.  
TURK KAUFMAN

## LOWER TELEGRAPH OAKLAND

The area around Telegraph and 23rd Street in Oakland began changing a few years ago, following the well-established pattern of cheap-rent-seeking artists and developers taking over neglected buildings. The once-thriving city center suffered typical late-20th-century white flight but is eager to have its downtown repopulated. Since 2002, Alameda County has been offering cash incentives to those who restore and remodel blighted buildings, and the Oakland Community and Economic Development Agency has been working to stimulate investment in nine redevelopment areas. The Lower Telegraph art corridor falls within one of these areas.

Artists have long colonized the city's industrial western edge, fashioning live/work studios from a rich industrial building stock. Now a new constellation of galleries is taking advantage of existing storefronts in the city's former commercial center.

Gallery owner, artist, and contractor Kevin Slagle opened the Ego Park Gallery on 23rd Street in 2001, in a space that had been used for storage for the previous 25 years. Property owner Haig Mardikian received a grant through the Community and Economic Development Agency's Facade Improvement Program, which paid for half of the exterior renovations to Slagle's gallery. Three neighboring galleries received similar financial support. Many newcomers to the area have also taken advantage of the Downtown Oakland Tenant Improvement Program, which offers \$10 per square foot toward the cost of interior renovations to commercial spaces. The city also provides an additional \$5,000 toward design assistance if businesses use architects who are preapproved by the city.

Streets once deserted after dark come to life the first Friday of each month when galleries stay open late. The new scene, which can draw up to 500 gallerygoers, is called Art Murmur and has gained the attention of the City of Oakland Arts Commission. The commission is considering designating the area south of Art Murmur—which encompasses an old Sears department store and the 1928 Fox Theatre, now undergoing renovation to become the Oakland School of the Arts—as an arts and entertainment district, called Art Walk. The goal is to bring even more art to the area, including public art and lighting schemes.

Berkeley architect Brian Laczko, a consultant on



Pharmaka Gallery, designed by Christoph Kapeller  
COURTESY SHANE GUFFOGG

the effort, envisions light projections that outline public spaces and enliven streets.

"The creative energy is coming from the artists themselves," said Laczko. "[With Art Murmur], they created something out of nothing."

**LAURI PUCHALL WRITES AN ARCHITECTURE COLUMN FOR THE *EAST BAY MONTHLY*.**

## GALLERY ROW LOS ANGELES

In 2003, downtown Los Angeles' historic core was experiencing a resurgence of urban activity when artists Nic Cha Kim and Kjell Hagen approached their neighborhood council with an unusual request: that the area between 2nd and 9th streets and Spring and Main be designated Gallery Row. "This wouldn't have been remarkable if there were art galleries in the area. But, there were none. We saw the potential," recounted Hagen.

And they weren't the only ones. The LA City Council championed the proposal and within a year street signs were installed at the four corners of the newly designated Gallery Row.

Filled with abandoned and underutilized early-20th-century buildings, the new gallery district offered ample ground-floor spaces prime for conversion. And the price was right. Even while developers were converting the upper floors to live/work lofts, there didn't seem to be a clear plan for the storefronts.

"There was an availability of good spaces in these old Beaux Arts buildings," said Bert Green, owner and gallery director of Bert Green Fine Art, one of the first galleries to open in the area. "You could draw parallels between the emergence of this district and Soho in the 1970s. The impulse is similar: access to premier spaces." Green was lucky to get a corner space with high concrete ceilings, an exposed concrete floor, and storefront windows.

Across the street from Green's gallery, in a space formally occupied by a Chinese restaurant, a group of artists opened Pharmaka, a nonprofit gallery. Rather than create a typical white box, the founding artists hired architect Christoph Kapeller to design something more akin to a stage, with original exposed floor and ceiling and a striking, curvilinear exhibition wall.

One of Pharmaka's founding artists and board members Shane Guffogg said when he first started working on the space, gangs ruled the adjacent street corner and junkies would drop their dirty needles on him from the upper floors of the building. A local who stopped in to see what all the construction was about scoffed when Guffogg told him they were going to install art.

But within a year of designation, Gallery Row had attracted 15 new art galleries, many of them raw, experimental spaces that are open by appointment only. Green organized the first self-guided Art Walk in 2004, and the event attracted not only art lovers but also hordes of new downtown renters and home buyers. Their presence has paved the way for retail businesses and restaurants.

Gallery Row now touts nearly 30 art galleries representing a wide range of artists, while the demographics of the historic core have dramatically changed. Gangs no longer control



Chung King Road

the corner and young professionals and students from nearby SCI-Arc and the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising occupy new sidewalk cafés.

Green's Art Walks have become a monthly event that attracts Angelenos from all corners of the city. For many, it's their first introduction to downtown. "Now, architecture is one of the biggest draws for visitors who come down here," said Green. "It's becoming a center for the city again."

**ALLISON MILONIS LIVES IN DOWNTOWN LA AND WRITES ABOUT ARCHITECTURE, URBAN ISSUES, AND POLITICS.**

## CHUNG KING ROAD LOS ANGELES

A world away from Gallery Row, Chung King Road was hot before LA art collectors knew the city had a downtown. The modest, 500-foot pedestrian street in the heart of Chinatown has matured into one of the most interesting art scenes in the city.

In 1998, artists Roger Herman, Chris Sievernich, and Hubert Schmalix were looking for a creative space outside of their respective homes and studios when they stumbled upon Chung King Road. Like the rest of the once-thriving Chinatown, the street had fallen into decline and nearly half the storefronts were for rent.

Within a few months the three opened the Black Dragon Society, paying a mere \$500 a month in rent. The informal space was used for events like concerts, art exhibits, and fashion shows, and revelers usually spilled out into the street, which is strung with red glowing lanterns. "It's a magical place," said Herman. "It has this real character and feels very urban."

At the same time the Black Dragon Society was experimenting with their space, China Art Objects, a commercial gallery, opened two doors down. At first, local shop owners and residents of upstairs apartments were skeptical of these creative endeavors but within a year the little side street was drawing sizable crowds. Somewhat organically, Chung King Road morphed into a vital art scene.

Eleven spare, white galleries now line the street; their presence has improved business for adjacent shops selling Chinese porcelain and other trinkets. Unlike Gallery Row, the area is not being gentrified—at least not yet. "The Gallery Row scene is tougher, a bit more extreme," he said. "It's either expensive lofts or the homeless. Chinatown seems more normal and is still underdeveloped."

Also unlike Gallery Row, Chung King Road doesn't have the same architectural allure, but what it lacks in midrise Beaux Arts buildings it gains in streetlevel charm. On nearby Gin Ling Way, another pedestrian-only street between Hill and Broadway, hip cafes and shops have opened alongside the Mountain Bar, a popular nightclub owned by artist Jorge Pardo, architect Mark McManus, and gallerist Steve Hanson. Pardo and McManus designed the interior, including the propeller-like paper lamps and textured walls. The bar plays host to a remarkable line up of events, including Forum Night at the Mountain, a monthly event sponsored by LA Forum for Architecture and Urban Design. **AM**

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