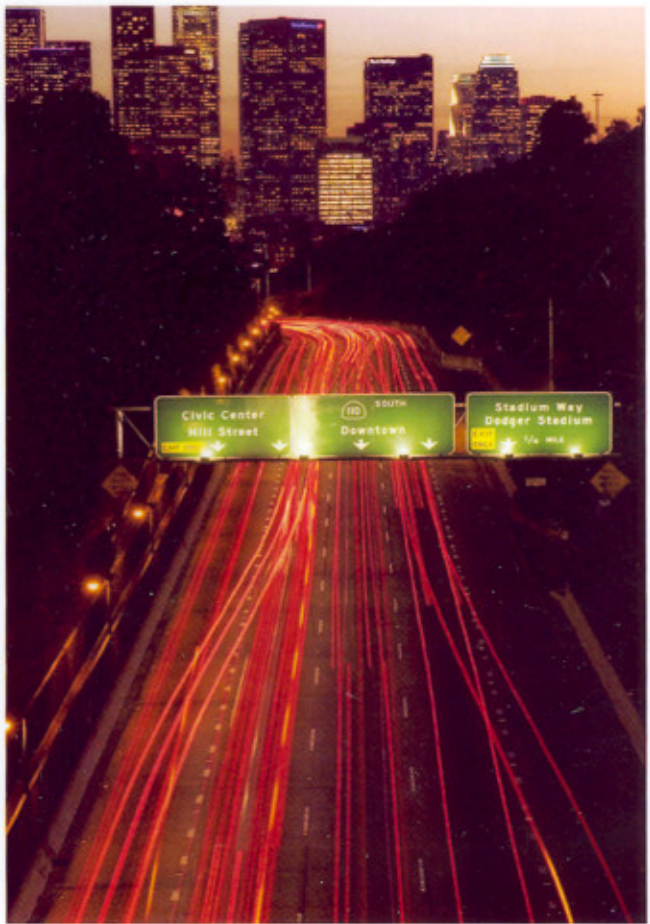


rebuilding los angeles: downtown's renaissance

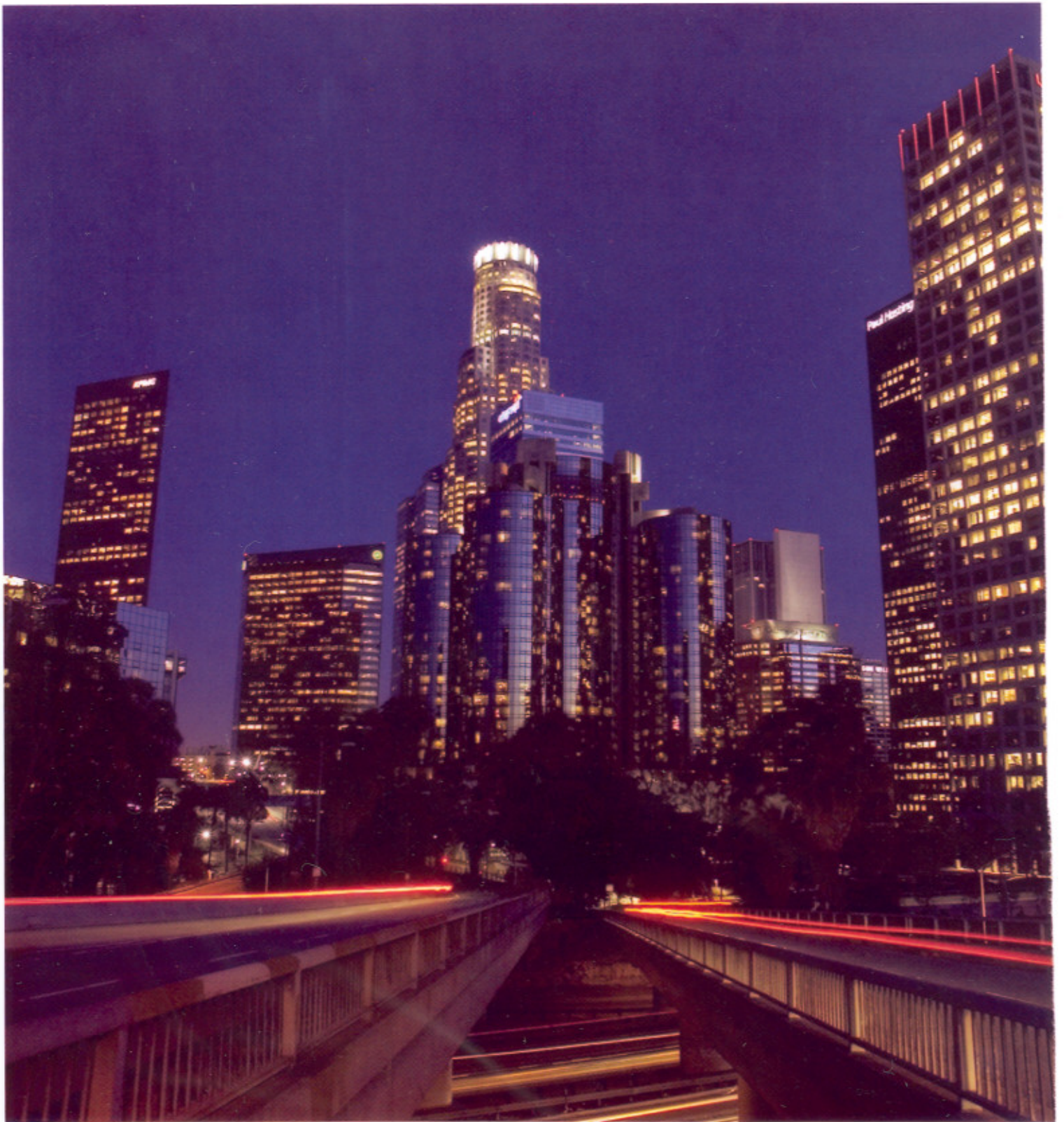
DOROTHY PARKER, THE WELL KNOWN WRITER AND HUMORIST, ONCE SAID, "LOS ANGELES IS SEVENTY-TWO SUBURBS IN SEARCH OF A CITY." WELL, THE SEARCH IS OVER. LOS ANGELES IS IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING.

On April 14th, 1999, it was a pleasant seventy-three degrees in L.A. The Clippers were on a roll, winning consecutive games in their new home at the Staples Center. In the stuffy chambers of City Hall, the LA City Council approved the Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO), paving the way, literally, for unprecedented growth that would transform the decaying and blighted L.A. landscape. The stated ARO purpose was to facilitate "the conversion of older, economically distressed or historically significant buildings to live/work units or visitor-serving facilities." The ARO also awarded generous incentives for new developments, allowing them to bypass the labyrinth of rules and regulations that stall projects in the planning process for years. The result of the ARO and its mandate of a "twenty-four hour city" has been the completion of 7,000 residential units, with another 6,800 under construction and 4,000 under consideration, according to the Downtown Center Business Improvement District.

Major ventures like the two billion dollar Grand Avenue project—a mix of 2,600 condos, a hotel, 400,000 square feet of commercial space, and L.A. Live, a highly anticipated sports mega-complex—are spearheading the \$10 billion transformation. Architects such as Frank Gehry and firms like TVA from Portland (designers of the massive Nike World Campus) are bringing their talents to help transform the City of Angels into a heavenly refuge of commerce and vitality. "This isn't New York; it's not Paris," Gehry said. "It's a different image and we're struggling to find it." That struggle can be seen on a micro level as individual neighborhoods seek to carve out their own identities. Seventh Avenue, between Figueroa and Olive, has become Restaurant Row. The Arts District near the L.A. River is, once again, a haven for Bohemian artists. "It's not piecemeal development," says K. Marie Lim, a realtor with Amalfi Estates. "It's a comprehensive plan. People want the "high-end boutique experience."



Clockwise from top left: Walt Disney Concert Hall, Construction Site (new Police Administration Building), 110 South, Biscuit Company Lofts. Photos courtesy of Sterling Davis.



*Downtown from the Fourth Street Bridge
Photos courtesy of Sterling Davis*

WITH RESTAURANTS, BOUTIQUE SHOPS AND SPORTING EVENTS ALL WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE, DOWNTOWN IS BRANDING ITSELF AS THE MANHATTAN OF THE WEST.

The price tags on residential downtown units currently range from the upper \$200,000s at Shybari Grand to \$4 million for the luxury penthouses at Biscuit Company Lofts. Evo, located at 1155 S. Grand and slated to begin construction in 2008, is a twenty-three story, sculpted glass and metal residential tower aiming for a silver LEED rating from the U.S. Green Building Council. Amenities for projects like Evo routinely include rooftop pools and decks, spas, twenty-four hour concierge service, doormen, internet cafes and much more. And who are the buyers? According to Kim, in addition to those who seek proximity to their work, many buyers are purchasing condos specifically as investments. In suburban developments, this is frowned on. But in downtown Los Angeles, it's actually encouraged. Take Vero at 1234 Wilshire, for instance. Vero allows investors to purchase more than one unit at a time. Its only restriction is six months ownership before a unit is flipped. "We're not looking at exponential appreciation," Kim says, "but we're seeing close to nine percent." And units are selling fast. Some buyers simply want a second home near the energy of Downtown. "It's fun to have a place to drop in for a few days or a weekend," Kim noted. It seems people want the New York experience without having to go to New York. With restaurants, boutique shops and sporting events all within walking distance, Downtown is branding itself as the Manhattan of the West.

New construction may be getting the bulk of the attention, but equally important is the conversion of older historic buildings, like The Toy Factory Lofts (built in 1924), the Hellman Building (1905) and the Barker Block (1880). Residential remodels have been exacting and painstaking, but architects thrive on historical accuracy, at least when it comes to exteriors. Though the state-of-the-art interiors belie the age of these buildings, the structures allow LA's historical identity to live on. There are currently five buildings that have qualified for the Mills Act, a state law offering a forty to sixty percent property tax savings to building owners who rehabilitate and

maintain the historical architectural characteristics of their properties.

Of course, not all buildings are sacred. In March of this year the City Council voted to use eminent domain in the seizure of three properties on Main Street, just two blocks from City Hall, to make way for an addition to the aging Parker Center. According to Sam Tanaka, the city engineer overseeing the project, "Design is complete, and we are in the process of going up for bids." Change moves swiftly. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who used to shine shoes in the 1950s near Broadway and Seventh, witnessed firsthand the slow death of the old L.A. "I remember the heyday of Downtown," he said. "We had more theatres on Broadway than anywhere in the world. Then it went downhill. Now you're seeing a renaissance."

Some wonder, however, if the development will result in an actual identity for Los Angeles. "I think L.A. is still uncertain about its urbanism, unlike New Yorkers, who are fundamentally certain about theirs," says California historian Kevin Starr. "Over and over again we debate this issue: are we or are we not a big-time city?"

But the push is on. The Staples Center is home to five professional ball teams. The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels beckoned not only new growth, but new souls. The Disney Concert Hall, with its curvilinear metallic lines and resplendent form, has become a visual marketing tool. City Hall's 300 million dollar granite and terra-cotta facelift and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's expansion are muscling their way to the top of the cultural heap. Said one partner at a downtown development firm, "We are a collection of individuals, not a community." Perhaps the time has come for L.A. to collect itself and become the community it's always wanted to be. The pieces of the puzzle are in place; the will to make it happen appears to be strong. All that's needed now is for the individuals to come together.

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