

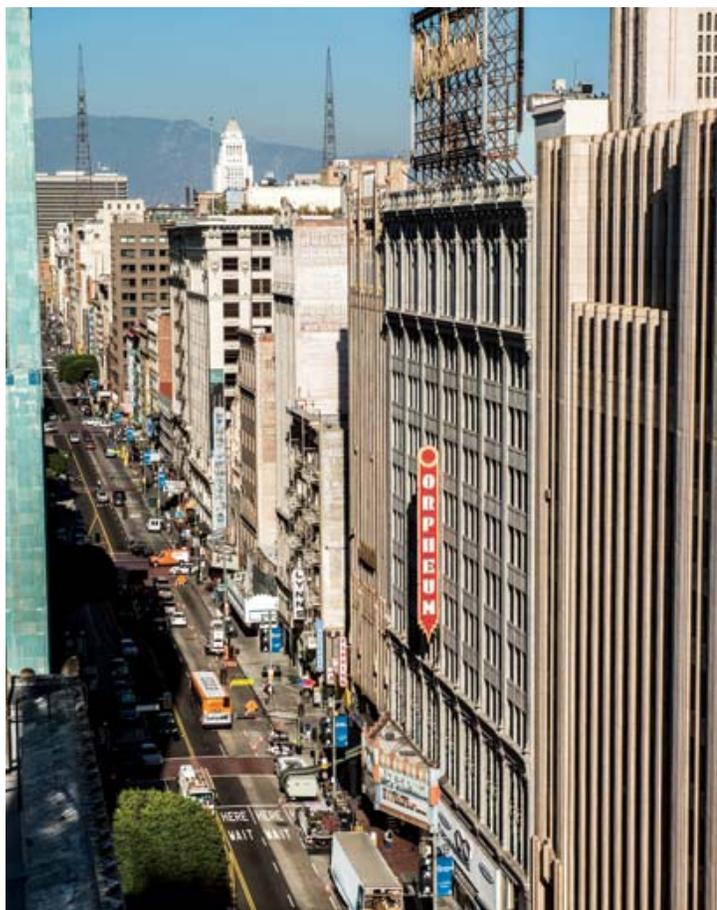
Travel

America's Next Great City Is Inside L.A.

For decades, Downtown has been the dark center of L.A.: a wasteland of half-empty office buildings and fully empty streets. But amid the glittering towers and crumbly Art Deco facades, a new generation of adventurous chefs, bartenders, loft dwellers, artists, and developers are creating a neighborhood as electrifying and gritty as New York in the '70s. Brett Martin navigates his way through the coolest new downtown in America

BY BRETT MARTIN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY PEDEN + MUNK

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"Frontiers!"

Brady Westwater stands on the corner of Spring Street and Fifth Street, Downtown Los Angeles, arms akimbo. He wears a crumpled black cowboy hat pinned up on one side and a hooded sweatshirt of the Elida (Ohio) High School wrestling team. The squad on the sweatshirt changes daily, but this is essentially his uniform.

"This was the Wild West before there *was* a Wild West," he says, all but wading into traffic and gesturing to the buildings around him. "In fact, many people went *east* from here to *make* the Wild West. This was wilder than any cow town in Texas." The buildings on all four corners, he says, were built by a confederate of Wyatt Earp, who spent some time as an Angeleno in the early 1900s.

"The whole history of this neighborhood is a series of frontiers!"

With his hat, wiry arms, and scruffy mustache, 65-year-old Westwater bears some resemblance to a gold-panning frontier sidekick himself. He remembers when Fifth Street, "the Nickel," had the distinction of being one of the busiest drug markets in the world, when the only places to get something to eat were the gas station on Olympic and the twenty-four-hour Original Pantry Cafe on

View from atop the Ace Hotel



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Figueroa, where you can still get home fries with an archaeological mantle of crust. Back then, you could hang around and eventually see all the

Downtown pioneers—artists, filmmakers, assorted bohemians—as they climbed out of their lofts and warehouses in search of sustenance.

Westwater, as he tells it, abandoned Downtown for a while, like most everybody else. He lived in Malibu and traveled the world as a mixed-martial-arts fighter. Then, in 1997, he came back, possessed of a vision of a revitalized urban community occupying Downtown. “I pushed flyers under every door I could find that showed a sign of life,” he says of his mission to match empty spaces with sometimes reluctant new tenants. He wasn't alone. Developers—names like Tom Gilmore and Cedd Moses—were set to begin taking advantage of a new law that loosened regulations on how Downtown's vacant buildings could be developed. Now, charging up the street to Broadway, Westwater points to building after building that has come back to teeming life: This one is lofts. This one houses one of the city's best restaurants. This one is a bar with a pop-up restaurant in the back and a performance space on top of that. Every structure seems to house artists, musicians, designers, tech developers, chefs—the whole *Who are the people in your neighborhood* of the creative class. After decades of being all but forgotten, Downtown has approached a critical mass of cool that even the most hard-core resident of Venice or Santa Monica or West Hollywood or Silver Lake would find impossible to deny.

“And we're still at the tip of the iceberg,” says Moses, whose Downtown bars have done as much as anything to spur on the development. “Right now, Downtown is like Brooklyn, but that's going to change. This is going to be Manhattan. And all the outlying areas, the rest of Los Angeles, that's going to be the boroughs. I don't have a doubt in my mind.”

Westwater, who both leads tours of Downtown and pops up in meetings with developers and politicians, is somehow in the center of this frenzy of activity—something between a fixer, a booster, a town historian, and the local eccentric, part Boss Tweed, part Joe Gould. In other words, the kind of great character produced by great cities. And that, of all things, is what Downtown L.A. is trying to become: a Great City in the heart of the City That Destroyed Cities.



The first time I ever loved L.A. was Downtown.

Nowadays, as the important cultural battle lines have shifted from east versus west to red versus blue, and as New York has become ever more generically American, it's easy to forget the old cosmology of New York and Los Angeles as polar opposites. But for somebody raised in Brooklyn through the '70s and '80s, a knee-jerk hatred of L.A. wasn't an informed choice. It was DNA.

Then, while I was staying in Beverly Hills on a work trip, my friend Oliver, an East Coast transplant, took me to Philippe the Original. Philippe is a wedge-shaped 105-year-old cafeteria on the corner of North Alameda and Ord Streets that claims to have invented the French-dip sandwich. From the moment I saw the sawdust-covered floors, the uniformed ladies behind the counter, the wooden phone booths, the Dodgers game on the grainy TV, I knew this was something different from the plastic, sterile, sunny L.A. I'd expected. We shuffled forward with the rest of the customers—a mix of blue- and white-collars, bookies, hustlers, construction workers, and lawyers. I ordered a lamb sandwich, the clove-scented meat cut off the leg in front of me, swaddled in bread and then double-dipped in jus. I added a side of potato salad. And a pickled egg. And some beets. And a baked apple, a slice of coconut pie, and a cup of coffee. It came to something like \$8. Afterward, we walked down the street to the grandly tiled Union Station, where trains come and go into the night in full view of the Twin Towers Correctional Facility, just about the most *noir* thing I'd ever seen. For the first time, I understood how one—how *I*—could feel deeply for

this city.

Philippe then was a remnant of the urban center left behind when L.A. spread west, becoming the world's model of car-centric suburban sprawl. Even the financial institutions of Downtown had long since left behind their gorgeous Beaux Arts homes for characterless glass towers on Downtown's western edge, with easy egress the moment work ended. The result was something like Panama City's Casco Viejo, the old Spanish Colonial district that was all but abandoned for decades while the country's rich built skyscraper after sterile skyscraper on its periphery: an empty city, preserved in amber, waiting to be rediscovered and reoccupied.

If it proves lasting, the reoccupation will be the greatest example of the phenomenon in which downtowns across America are re-attracting the middle and upper classes that once fled them for the suburbs. It will also be notable for being driven not by the traditional avant-garde of gentrification —galleries, antiques stores, theaters, and the like—but by bars and restaurants, a pointed reflection of what members of those classes are looking for in a city circa 2014.



to enlarge.

Thus, my introduction to the revived Downtown also involved a French dip. Late one night, several years ago, the great restaurant critic Jonathan Gold, now at the *Los Angeles Times*, took me to Cole's, the other centenarian lunch counter that claims to have invented the



sandwich. We had already been to a pop-up restaurant on a block populated by zipper and fabric shops in the nearby Fashion District. Gold led me down a dark deserted street past the Cole's neon sign, through the empty front room, and to an unmarked door. He knocked, and we were admitted to a turn-of-the-century speakeasy. This was The Varnish, the bar Cedd Moses opened in 2009, bringing the serious cocktail movement to Los Angeles. Unlike most L.A. spaces, it was small and intimate. The booths were filled with good-looking young people in groups of two and three. And unlike most Angeleno barflies, they seemed to actually be getting drunk, which suggested they lived within walking, or at least short driving, distance. The suspended bartender took approximately two hours to make each drink, but they were sensational. Once again I felt like I was in a *city*.



Guanciale pizza at Bestia

Out front, Cole's Red Car Bar is charming in its own right, serving a fine old-fashioned, which seems to be the Downtown drink of the moment. And the cognoscenti, Gold included, seem to prefer the revamped Cole's French dip, served on pillowy bread, with a side dish of dark, salty jus instead of being pre-dipped.

So be it. The new Downtown is stimulating, captivating, and in nearly all ways a vast improvement on the old. But in the matter of French dips, Philippe will always have my heart.



It's a measure of how fast-moving the development of Downtown has been that The Varnish now practically qualifies as an institution. So, too, does the Standard hotel. I spent a week there early last year, using it as a home base while I explored the neighborhood. The hotel is housed in the old Superior Oil building, cloaked in twelve-story panels of creamy marble. It has a Warby Parker booth in the lobby and a Ping-Pong lounge where the balls bounce around like quarks in the black light and are scooped up by net-wielding cocktail waitresses. On the room phones, there's a button marked "Fluffer." (Push it and you hear moans and heavy breathing.)

Everybody I talked to that week, from chefs to developers to residents new and old, seemed firmly convinced Downtown was the new frontier. The Arts District was exploding. Massive new buildings, like the seventy-three-story Wilshire Grand Center and the quarter-mile-long complex called One Santa Fe, were on their way, while nearly every old one was in the process of conversion. On the ground, though, it all still felt disconnected and notional. There were nodules of life, but the streets in between were still largely empty at night; you still spent an inordinate amount of time in your car between stops. And while there were a number of excellent new restaurants and bars, few if any passed the all-important L.A. test of whether you'd brave traffic to get there.

Ten months later, I rented an Airbnb in a building of converted lofts off Spring Street. There were reinforced concrete beams and exposed sprinklers above—the ubiquitous canopy of Downtown interiors—and buses wheezing and moaning below. Across the street was a twenty-four-hour bodega; around the corner, a falafel stand, three bars. There were muffled sounds and smells from behind neighbors' doors in the hallways, interesting-looking girls in the elevators with their dogs. (Downtown's

developers have been deliberately dog-friendly in a crafty bid to encourage street traffic.) There was a stack of take-out menus on the counter and a pile of leftover soy-sauce packets in the fridge.

Are these the things that made Downtown suddenly feel like a city? Was it the new T-shirt-and-text-message-ready abbreviation (DTLA)? The penetration into that secret harbinger of gentrification, the sitcom? (As *Friends* was to the West Village, *The New Girl* is to the Arts District; its loft is located at Traction Avenue near Third Street.)

Around the loft were blocks that felt like snapshots of 1970s New York: weird, crumbling arcaded alleys made to look like old village streets and stretches of colored terrazzo sidewalk along which I half expected to see somebody carrying a huge boom box. There were businesses that had no earthly right existing in 2013: pinball arcades, bars offering “hostess dancing,” accordion shops, an entire block of sewing-machine emporia.

All around the Historic Core, you see marble lobbies, hidden ballrooms, and grand balconies—all the trappings of early-twentieth-century architecture as sacred civic space. You grow accustomed to old bank vaults, with their ponderous doors and intricate tumblers, repurposed for other things: coat checks, stations for artisanal-noodle pulling, darkened make-out rooms. At The Last Bookstore, an extraordinary store on the corner of Spring and Fifth, 4,000 square feet of the mezzanine—vaults, balconies, hidden passages, and all—has been turned into a cavernous maze of \$1 books.

Amidst all that, I was at the epicenter of Downtown's very current, quickly maturing dining scene. In one direction lay the duchy of Josef Centeno, a pioneer of Downtown, who opened Little Tokyo's meat-heavy Lazy Ox Canteen as executive chef in 2009. Two years later, he moved to the Historic Core to open the massively celebrated Băco Mercat. (“Băco,” a contraction of “global taco,” is Centeno's proprietary flatbread sandwich.) He was in search of a space with good bones, something more distinctive than the strip malls and low-rises, and a rent that allowed him freedom to experiment. He settled on a block of Main Street, between Fourth and Fifth Streets, that felt like New York's SoHo. “If all else failed, if we ended up with nothing but a hot plate and paper cups, at least we'd still have a good storefront,” he says. “And it was a good enough deal that it *could* be a failure for a while. One bad weekend wouldn't shut me down.”



The storefront for L.A.-based Apolis

All else didn't fail; Băco Mercat became both a hub for the growing Downtown population and one of those rare destinations Angelenos from other neighborhoods felt compelled to drive to. A year ago, Centeno followed up with Bar Amá, which plumbs the safest genre in all of restaurantdom: Tex-Mex. (When every clever, sophisticated food trend has beaten itself against the shore and disappeared into history, there will still be beans and melted cheese.) And then, with Orsa & Winston, Centeno pivoted into fine dining, trading the buzzy clatter of his other joints for a cool gray room and a series of tasting

menus featuring Japanese- and Italian-inspired dishes.

Without Centeno's mini-empire, there wouldn't be the string of galleries, shops, and other restaurants that has come to connect the surrounding blocks. Everywhere now you see young, pretty people: on the streets, in the bars, streaming out of their loft elevators. Downtown's new denizens are overwhelmingly single, employed (*nicely* employed; the median income is near \$100,000), and between the ages of 23 and 44—they eat out, drink well, and socialize like the city is their playground.



The signature puffy taco at Bar Ama is deep-fried and light as tempura.

crunchy *spaghetti al limon* at Terroni, an Italian restaurant housed in a grand old bank lobby; a flattened and seared thigh atop cilantro-infused rice topped with bright pickled onion—a reinvented *arroz con pollo*—at Ricardo Zarate's Peruvian *Mo-chica*.

Crucially, all of the above is located in and around Downtown's Historic Core, allowing me to stay on foot and encounter happy accidents between meals. Killing time before one reservation, I wandered into the back of a Thai restaurant where a *boba*-tea bar had sprung up. A well-meaning, very stoned couple dressed in identical plaid shirts and trucker hats insisted I try a *GreenTeaHeineken*, which was pretty much as described: cool, refreshing, and larded with fat tapioca balls—the kind of thing it's okay to chug when you're about to spend an entire night not getting behind the wheel.

Lunchtimes, I did my best to find myself at ninety-six-year-old Grand Central Market, a riot of stalls old and new: chop suey and Thai street food, gorditas and high-end coffee, endless varieties of mole paste, and sumptuous nouveau smoked brisket at Horse Thief BBQ. “Coming Soon” signs from such businesses as DTLA Cheese and The Oyster Gourmet point to the high-end future the market's developers

And they have ever more places in which to do so. Like Zo, the gleaming new branch of a much beloved and obsessed-over Westside sushi restaurant, on a corner where once the only *omakase* was whatever your dealer happened to have on hand (substitutions politely declined). Or, for sushi lovers on a tighter budget, the more egalitarian, raucous Sugarfish a few blocks away, one of a growing chain from the legendary Studio City sushi chef Kazunori Nozawa.

When I first visited the much-hyped restaurant Alma—not long after its young chef, Ari Taymor, had opened it, for less than \$50,000, in an old kebab house at Downtown's southwestern end of Broadway—the atmosphere in the spare white room had been hushed, almost as pious as the *Chez Panisse* poster that hangs by the door. This time the place was hopping, buoyed, no doubt, by having recently been named Restaurant of the Year by *Bon Appétit*. Couples flirted over savory beignets flecked with seaweed at the chef's counter by the open kitchen.

Mine was a journey of delicious bites: pleasantly gummy Beijing pork dumplings at Peking Tavern, opened a few months ago in an underground vault by a pair of architects tired of seeing their expensive restaurant designs screwed up; nearly

presumably have in mind, but I hope it doesn't come too soon. At the moment, Grand Central Market feels like the most socially and economically integrated public space in America.



Beyond the historic core, though, Downtown can still feel pretty diffuse. “Down here, half a mile can feel like ten miles,” says Bill Chait, who has done as much as anyone to change that. Chait had been successful elsewhere in L.A. for years before even considering coming downtown. Then, in 2007, came L.A. Live—the massive, sanitized entertainment complex anchored by the Staples Center, the Nokia Theater, and the fifty-four-story Ritz-Carlton residence tower, which, glimpsed from the Harbor Freeway at night, looks like a giant nose-hair trimmer. Chait and chef John Rivera Sedlar opened the well-regarded pan-Latin restaurant Rivera nearby. Spending evenings Downtown, Chait couldn't help but look east to the Arts District—so named for the murals that peer out from many of its industrial structures—and the hubbub at a recently converted Nabisco cookie factory. There, Walter Manzke, a chef best known for his stint at the fine-dining bastion Bastide, was cooking at Church & State—a kind of industrial Balthazar, with a brasserie menu served amidst subway tile, brick walls, and exposed ducts. It quickly became a neighborhood center. “You could tell there was really something going on,” Chait says.

Church & State remains a gateway to the Arts District, but its culinary center has quickly shifted to Bestia, the restaurant that Chait and chef Ori Menashe opened in an obscure, unpromising alleyway hard by the L.A. River. Inside, Menashe serves the type of regional Italian fare—perfectly cooked pastas, artisanal pizzas, chest-puffing meat and offal dishes—that has become so ubiquitous it's fostered a backlash of meatballs and spaghetti and veal parmigiana. And, like truffles on a tree's roots, neighboring businesses have begun to pop up in Bestia's shade: Pizzanista!, a Clash-and-skater-inspired slice joint opened by ex-pro-skateboarder Salman Agah; Bread Lounge, which sells massive loaves of country bread, sweet sesame-seed encrusted “Jerusalem bagels,” and a flaky, sausage-stuffed pastry they call an *almoço*.

Most important to many, there's a branch of Stumptown coffee, its gleaming ten-foot-high roaster visible behind the counter. One has to imagine a battle brewing (pour-over style?) between Portland's Stumptown and L.A.'s own Handsome Coffee Roasters, less than a mile away, near the Southern California Institute of Architecture. “We're primarily roasters, so we don't want anything to interfere with the taste of the coffee,” I was told by the neck-tattooed barista there, when I asked after sugar. He explained also that the store eschews such vulgar labels as “latte” and “cappuccino,” preferring a system of labeling by volume, which somehow corresponds to ratio of coffee to milk; I glazed over about the time we got to caffeine-extraction rates. Behind me in line happened to be the great English chef Fergus Henderson, an apt cameo, given how much of our love of reclaimed industrial spaces, and eating heartily inside them, is thanks to his St. John in London. Henderson listened to the neck tattoo's lecture with a look of genial bemusement. When it was done, he blinked, squinted, and finally ordered.

“I'll have a cappuccino,” he said.



One area in which Downtown L.A. has already established clear superiority over the rest of L.A. is in drinking culture. This is almost single-handedly thanks to Cedd Moses.

Moses was a Downtown habitué in the mid-'90s, when underground clubs populated some of the vacant buildings. Before that, he'd dated a girl whose father liked to take him along to his favorite Downtown haunts. The father was Charles Bukowski.

Around 1999, the way was cleared for Downtown development. Moses looked at the soaring rental prices

and plummeting housing stock elsewhere in L.A., at the commuting times that drove half the city crazy, at the half-million people already working in or nearby Downtown. He had a premonition. "Downtown was coming. All we were waiting for was a spark," he says, sitting in the headquarters of his company, 213 Ventures. "And I knew when the spark came, it would have to be a twenty-four-hour culture." Moses formed 213 and set up shop on Seventh Street, aiming to open ten bars in the next ten years.

Moses is tall, curly-haired, and speaks in a low, distracted, but intense voice. His properties—the most recent being Honeycut, with a lighted *Saturday Night Fever* dance floor on one side and a cocktail bar on the other—are precisely the kinds of places I expect to hate. They are in every way "concepts," that scourge of modern restaurateuring—almost theme restaurants: this one a "craft-cocktail bar," this one a "dive," this one a "mezcaleria." But long before I ever met Moses, I felt sure I knew two things about him: that he had a genuine love for buildings and a genuine love for drinking culture. How else to explain how well he's preserved the Golden Gopher, home to one of the oldest liquor licenses in Los Angeles County, or the thoughtful drink shelves for your cocktail hung next to its urinals? Or the perfect cinematic drama of passing through that secret door at The Varnish? Or the scruffiness of Tony's Saloon, to which he added a portrait of Hunter S. Thompson and not much else: "Basically, he took all the stuff out and put identical stuff back in," says Salman Agah, of Pizzanista! next door. "It feels the same, but you don't come out feeling like you just got hepatitis." Seven Grand, the taxidermy-and-mahogany den above Seventh Street, may attract its share of douchebags—"the weekend problem," as Moses delicately puts it—but it also has one of the best whiskey lists in America. Likewise the Irish-whiskey selection at Casey's Irish Pub and the tequila and mezcal list at Las Perlas. "Every place needed to have its own feel," Moses says, and he's succeeded in creating a rich alcoholic ecosystem.

Would Bukowski like his tarted-up bars? Moses pauses before he answers. "I think," he said, "that he would like their integrity." I think he's right.



A year ago, Alma had only a hostess-dancing club for company on its end of Broadway. With the opening of the Ace Hotel, it is about to have busy neighbors indeed. Ace is one of those brands that both confirm and ensure the hipster credentials of a city or neighborhood. (The hard hat I was offered by general manager Jason Dibler when he took me on a tour of the construction had a Beastie Boys *Check Your Head* sticker on it.) With the United Artists building, they've nabbed one of Downtown's greatest gems—a thirteen-story Spanish Gothic palace built in 1927 to be the headquarters and flagship movie theater for Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks's fledgling studio. For a time, it was the tallest privately owned building in Los Angeles.

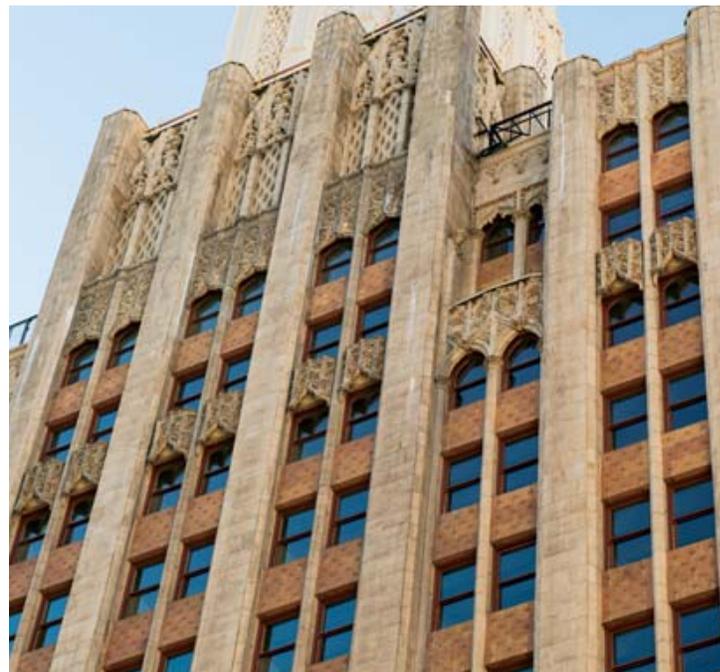
Since then, the building withstood years of disuse and later occupation by the ministry of pastor Gene Scott, for whom the cathedral-like trappings, chosen by Pickford, were a perfect fit. (The massive JESUS SAVES sign that will remain looming outside the windows of the uppermost floors is, in this case, literally true.) The theater itself, dripping in carvings and capped by a sparkling mirrored dome, will be used for live shows while the restaurant out front has been handed over to the crew from Brooklyn's Five Leaves. Judging by the royal-mustard carpet and brass fixtures in the nascent rooms I saw, this iteration of the Ace is going for something statelier and more sumptuous than the deprivation chic of its Portland flagship or the black industrial cool of its Midtown New York digs.

But the building's literal and figurative crown is the roof, with its vaulted, latticed cupola. Inside that structure will be a bar; surrounding it, places to sit and gaze toward Downtown's ever expanding frontiers: Toward Little Tokyo, with its perennial lines outside Daikokuya Ramen, its



mall of Japanese-novelty shops, pan-Asian at the Spice Table, jazz at the Blue Whale. Toward Bunker Hill, where a massive, and free, new museum designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro is rising to house the modern-art collection of Eli and Edythe Broad, another bead in a necklace of blockbuster cultural institutions that also includes Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall. Toward the intersection of Traction and Third Streets, where those without apparent jobs sit in the sun drinking German beer and eating exotic sausages from the cafeteria-style Wurstküche, while others shop at travel-oriented designer Apolis. (They'd given me an iced tea upon entering, and somehow I left with an unstructured blue cotton suit.)

Standing beneath the Ace's crown, the wind whipping up Broadway, I felt I could just glimpse all of this, a patchwork carpet stitching itself together by the day. Somewhere out there, in the direction of the setting sun, the palms of Hollywood. Suddenly, they seemed awfully far away and strangely irrelevant.



The Ace Hotel in the United Artists Building



Downtown is still very much a series of frontiers—shifting, not fully formed, at times dangerous and self-defeating. What's left of Skid Row is still a shocking tent city reminiscent of *The Wire's* “Hamsterdam.” The homeless and mentally ill population that fan out from it daily are a major part of street life and a problem that won't be solved by being pushed into a smaller area or different part of the city. New entrepreneurs complain that all the hype has spurred landlords to get ahead of themselves, jacking up rents and scuttling some development before it even gets started.

None of this, says Moses, changes the inevitability of Downtown L.A., its inexorable rise.

"The fact is," he says, leaning forward and making eye contact for the first time, "Downtown is the *only solution to the problem of L.A.*"

And that, truth be told, is when the last of my skepticism begins to dissipate, the moment I finally grasp the vision so many people have so excitedly tried to communicate: that Downtown isn't a bet on hipsterism, not on dumplings or cocktails or cool shops or food trucks. It's a bet on urbanism itself, a conviction that the past fifty years of outward, sprawling cul-de-sac development was just that: a dead end. That *this* is how we want to live, amidst the spark and jangle of humans pressed up against humans. Even in L.A.

There was a time, Brady Westwater says, when the ten square blocks around Spring and Fifth housed everybody you needed to know—the pioneers of moviemaking, aerospace, agriculture, the oil business, all the industries that built modern Southern California. What was past is now future, he says. “Picture a place where you can walk from MoMA to the Main Library to SoHo to Madison Square Garden to the best restaurants and bars in the world. Every single urban amenity, within walking distance. Where you walk outside and can't help but run into *everybody*. This is the only city that can offer that. And that's why *L.A.*—not Dubai or Singapore or anyplace else—that's why L.A. is going to change the world!”

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