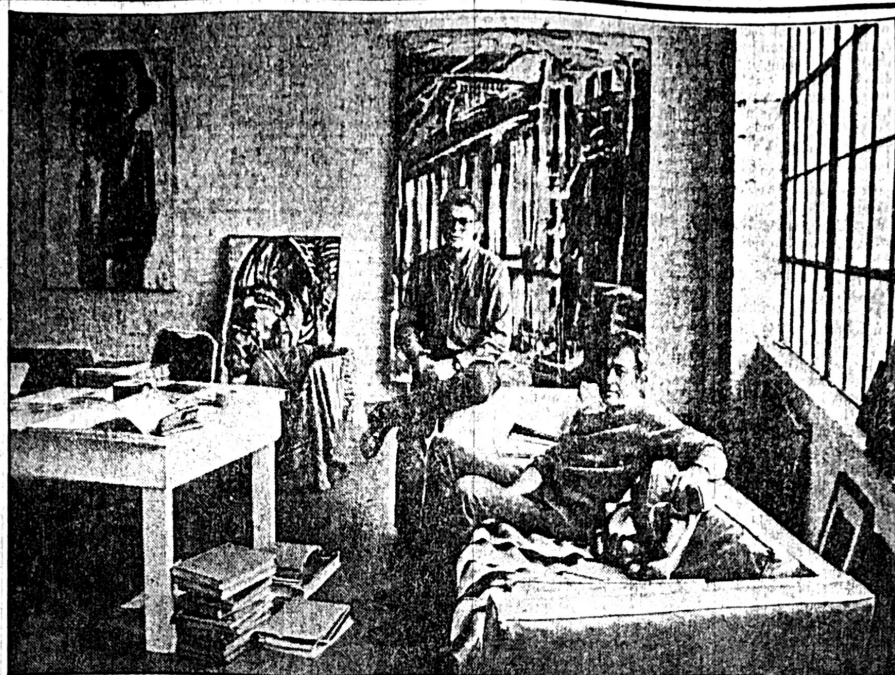


Theater

Writer Jonathan Falla's own experiences as a famine relief worker in Africa have resulted in an unusual and touching play./E-2

Music

Today marks the 100th birthday of composer Jerome Kern, and we're still playing — and loving — his songs./E-9



Sculptor Mark Lere, left, and painter Roger Herman say that rapidly rising rents are forcing them out of their downtown loft studio/home.

LAWYERS and LOFTS

Grungy downtown artists' quarters becoming the right address for young professionals

By Hunter Drohojowski

Today is the close of this weekend's annual downtown art tour sponsored by Los Angeles Visual Arts, an association of commercial and non-profit galleries in the industrial zone. For the past four years, this festival has drawn thousands of art aficionados to visit the 30 art galleries and museums. The old warehouses are decorated with banners and balloons bearing the LAVA logo, and free buses shuttle the visitors around like a mobile party made convivial by plenty of refreshments.

This entire enterprise originated as a celebration of L.A.'s nascent downtown art community. Never before in this dispersed city had there been such a concentration of artists and galleries in one area. Scads of exhibitions were organized to examine the new downtown art; every magazine seemed to publish articles about the thriving loft scene. There was an ambience of optimism, a hope that L.A.'s peripatetic art world had found a locus — a new West Coast version of SoHo.

This is the rosy picture that LAVA paints every year. And L.A.'s downtown does emulate SoHo, but less in terms of art production and gallery proliferation than in real estate speculation. With all the attention to downtown artists came the changed perception of the area and soaring rents. What took place in SoHo over 22 years — a gradual gentrification and influx of boutiques, galleries and yuppies — seems to have taken over



Developers Michael Tansey, left, and Jon Peterson are renovating a former furniture warehouse on the corner of Seventh and Santa Fe streets into what they call live/work spaces.

downtown L.A. in only seven.

As a result, the artists who colonized the area are being forced out as rents have gone from 10 cents per square foot to an average of 50 cents for lofts that often exceed 2,000 square feet — rents leaped from \$200 to \$1,000 per month. In one case, artists have to move out because their lofts are being redeveloped as "artists' spaces." Painter Roger Herman, sculptor Mark Lere, and filmmakers Heinz Legler and Tamra Lee Davis are the victims. Their building, like so much of L.A.'s pre-World War II construction, needs to be structurally reinforced to comply with the city's earthquake ordinance enacted in 1971. Their landlord contacted developer Steve Zimmerman to renovate the entire building at the same time. (The decision was partly influenced by the fact that the Globe Laundry, which takes up the entire block across the street, is also being renovated as artists' lofts.) Zimmerman invited the artists to

return after all the construction was done, but instead of 14½ cents per square foot, he would charge 50 cents.

Herman and Lere are both philosophical about the decision. Both have bought lots — in Elysian Park and Mount Washington, respectively — and are thinking about building their own lofts. Lere said, "Artists have to have control over their living conditions, and owning something is the only way." Herman added, "I'm not whining. It's the nature of things. The New York art scene was not killed off because lofts were rented by lawyers. But we moved here because it was inexpensive (and now) we are used as a picturesque prop for real estate investors. I feel sorry for the people who move here after us, the doctors and lawyers who buy expensive lofts. What's the big deal about living down here? If I had the money these people have, I'd move to Laurel Canyon

Lofts/E-8, Col. 1

Artists losing a loft cause

Lofts/Continued from E-1

or the beach."

It's true that lawyers increasingly opt to live downtown, close to legal firms and the courts. Other young professionals want to enjoy the high ceilings, and spacious, undivided atmosphere of loft living, especially if they have an interest in art. Some are collectors, others work in the ancillary, often lucrative arts: designers, artists, photographers, jewelers, composers and actors. They can better afford the rents that average between \$650 and \$1,000 a month.

Developers Jon Peterson and Michael Tansey are charging such rents — from 45 cents to 55 cents per square foot — for their converted furniture warehouse on the corner of Seventh and Santa Fe streets. These so-called live/work spaces are downright elegant, with polished oak floors, fireplaces, skylights and brick walls. The complex features such amenities as security parking, a common hot tub, racquetball court and laundry room.

It appears, however, that we expect such determined and instant exhibitions to appear in a midst with about the same frequency as heaven-sent miracles. Los Angeles, the last show I recall seeing that attempted to see through the stylistic and conceptual diversity of recent art was mounted in September — of 1983. "Cultural Excavations: Recent and Distant," organized by critic Robert L. Pincus, was a small show organized without much money and with a modest brochure instead of a perfect-bound catalog on glossy paper. Yet it managed to get a number of provocative ideas ricocheting around in the brain.

In the process, this seemingly unassuming endeavor grew in scale by accomplishing two things: It critically interpreted recent artistic achievements; and it presented those achievements as worthy points of departure for the present. Certainly I found some works to be less accomplished than others; but that assessment was reached by a confrontation with the ideas the art sought to articulate visually — and that the exhibition sought to illuminate. The net effect was a show that turned attention away from mere taste or idle amusement and toward critical discourse about art.

By contrast, the exhibition that opened 11 days ago at USC's Fisher Art Gallery elevates mere taste and idle amusement to a position of prominence. "Sunshine and Shadow: Recent Painting in South-

Of the 39 units, 28 are leased and the building isn't yet finished. (During an interview, actor Terry Knox, who played a troubled doctor on the TV series "St. Elsewhere," waltzed by exulting, "I have the best space in the building.")

The developers offer two-year leases, or 10-year leases with a \$3,000 security deposit.

Peterson, who is also an artist, was one of the first to rent loft space downtown seven years ago. With partners, he would lease an entire building, throw up some rudimentary interior walls and plumbing, and let the artists take care of the rest in exchange for cheap rent. "It's not like the old days," he said. "All these new developments make it more expensive but they make for a better place to live." He also co-owns a building on Hunter and 24th streets, and the church on Sixth and Crocker streets. All these projects have been rehabilitated to meet the requirements of the city's artist-in-residence ordinance permitting artists to live and work in industrial spaces providing they are brought up to the code required by the city's Building and Safety Commission. Although this code allows the artists to live in the warehouses legally, and waives many of the requirements for commercial or apartment construction, the addition of personal utilities, drywall,

the vitality of painting in this part of the country and to reveal important aspects of continuity and innovation in the work of the generations of artists."

Before I doze off, let me ask a simple question: Was any of it ever, in doubt? Prior to the mounting of this exhibition, did a looming question exist as to the vitality of painting in this part of the country? Before a fat check cover shipping, insurance and catalog-production was written by Fellows of Contemporary Art, a free-floating support group that sponsoring the show, were bra all over the Southland wracked fears that no diversity, continuity or innovation could be found in neighborhood art? In advance the nightmare of curatorial paperwork and exhibition logistics, the midnight oil burning throughout Los Angeles as concerned citizens sleeplessly paced the floor fretting over whether or not the generations of excellent artists would work side-by-side in Southern California?

I suppose that if the answer any of these questions was yes, the "Sunshine and Shadow" might be

sprinkler systems, windows and exits still boosts the costs, and therefore the rent. Said Peterson, "If the building department didn't exist, certainly spaces would be cheaper for artists. It might not be as safe though. This is also cheaper than other areas, like West Hollywood or Venice, and the only place you can get the high ceilings and skylights. People are renting smaller spaces, or sharing a large one."

Peterson also protested that most of his tenants are artists. "I don't see evidence of the gentrification that everyone is so terrified of. I think it's going to evolve differently here than in SoHo. It's a different demographic. Physically, we're not an island. We don't have their incredible housing shortage."

Certainly, artists will continue to move downtown, but LAVA festival visitors may be surprised to see how the area has changed. Just five years ago, Traction Avenue was an empty boulevard of warehouses where only impoverished artists would consider living. In the evening you might drink at a dingy bar called Al's, and in the morning, have breakfast at the cramped Sango coffee shop. The neighborhood was scruffy and desolate, offering a perverse charm in a city that favors the extremely new. Al's is still a hangout, but its American Hotel building has been spruced up with bright blue paint.

Other buildings on Traction Avenue amplify the tale. Across the street, the ground floor of a red brick warehouse is now the Big Bang, selling vintage clothing and espresso. Up the street, the old United Tire Company is now a pink-walled complex looking as though it belongs on Melrose Avenue. Inside live a congeries of commercial artists and photographers, a banker, real estate manager, two jewelers and one lawyer: Joe Austin. He moved downtown to have room to pursue his painting and house his art collection close to a community he admires, within walking distance from his office at Tuttle and Taylor. Dressed casually in jeans, sneakers and sweatshirt, Austin enthuses about the dead silence of downtown at night. The brick walls of the large two-story studio are hung with works by Joe Fay, Gary Lang and Jim Morphesis. "I think the space itself is beautiful," said Austin. Contrary to most opinions, Austin also feels safer from crime in his isolated area. "It's quite safe, you have the whole neighborhood to yourself." Just a few blocks away, in the old Challenge Dairy, live Austin's Harvard law school classmate David Vena and his artist wife, Carol Vena-Mondt. It is one of the most impressive renovations in the area, a collaborative effort with architect Fred Fisher and artist Eric Orr. Fat concrete columns break the open space between the tiled kitchen and vast living room. The 5,000 square feet of space is illuminated by lighting and skylights designed by Orr. In fact, installations of Orr's art are integrated throughout, from the steel front door leading to an anechoic chamber to a small water fall in the black tiled bathroom. But

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Architect Fred Fisher, center, designed the renovation for the 5,000-square-foot downtown loft of lawyer David Vena, left, and his artist wife, Carol Vena-Mondt.

Why would people with the resources to live anywhere in the city choose downtown? Vena, who works for Latham and Watkins in the Arco towers, quickly asserts that the kind of space they wanted, with undifferentiated stretches of wall space, was not affordable elsewhere. "When we found houses that had acceptable walls, they were \$700,000 or \$800,000," he said. They completed their loft for about one-third that amount, and now have a space that perfectly met their needs: storage for art and wine, an expansive kitchen since they both like to cook, a studio where Carol works and abundant space for David's collection of such artists as Michael Kelly and Bruce Nauman.

The Venas are limited partners in their building, which is also home to a lawyer, an accountant, a designer, a jeweler, an architectural consultant and a painter. It's an elegant setting renting for 50 cents a square foot.

The big drawback of living downtown, according to both, is the virtual absence of conventional services such as a grocery, dry cleaners, and restaurants offering something besides sushi. "It's so dead at night here, you feel like you couldn't even walk a block and be safe," said Carol. But David added, "In five or 10 years, with all the housing being built around here, there will be a more complete city here."

Indeed, just a few blocks west on Third Street and Central Avenue, a consortium of Japanese, Japanese-American and American developers are completing Little Tokyo square, which will provide a Yaohan supermarket, Yaohan department store, 40 lanes of bowling with a coffee shop/lounge, (both open 24 hours,) two movie theaters, and a plethora of boutiques and restaurants. In addition, the developers are building a 430-room hotel and three condominium towers in the same area. This is just one example of the Little Tokyo expansion that is further exerting pressure, raising not only the rents in adjacent areas but the cost of land and buildings.

One of the best known buildings downtown is called 1308 at Factory Place, which houses three art gal-

leries, a host of artists and a few young professionals. Owner Lou Mann's seven new lofts rent for an average of \$800 a month.

Yuppies like downtown, he says, because "they want to be in the milieu and talk art with the artists. They live out their secret ambition here. They live one life, then come to the other life in the evenings and on weekends. I'd like to attract lawyers, doctors who would bring their knowledge and experience to mingle with people who are 100 percent in the arts."

Michael Kamen, of Mika Company, is one of the largest, most established of the downtown loft developers, an owner of some 30 properties. His newest project, the Binford Building on Traction Avenue, is geared toward a monied crowd — 65 cents a square foot — with loft rents ranging from \$875 to \$1,450 per month. Kamen has put \$2 million into renovating the building, which he bought for \$1.5 million, and rentals begin in March. Kamen said, "Basically we are renting to the more successful artist than so-called starving artists. We don't want the cocktail set who think it's trendy to live downtown."

"Our commitment is to the arts, to the community, and to the culture of L.A. Artsy people have an aura about them that's unmistakable. We want people with that aura. I think we'll get commercial artists, photographers, designers, architectural people. We want someone who comes downtown to be secure, and not be concerned with what's going on in the streets."

Kamen, a supporter of arts institutions like Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, insisted "Buildings are like my palette and to me that's my art form. Some might do it in oils, I do it in concrete and stone."

All this snowballing interest in downtown is the inevitable result of a master plan by the Community Redevelopment Agency to draw residents and business to the deteriorated downtown area. The CRA has been generally supportive of the arts: They engineered the building of the Museum of Contemporary Art downtown, instigated the legislation requiring a percentage

of a developer's costs be spent on public art, compiled a collection of contemporary art and most recently loaned \$228,000 to the artists' space LACE for the renovation of galleries and construction of four live-in lofts for artists in a new building on Industrial Street. So how can they help artists fight rising rents and stay downtown?

Ed Helfeld, administrator of CRA, said, "We knew from the beginning (what to expect) because of the SoHo experience. Artists were creating the market and landlords were raising the rent. So we started doing real estate transactions where the property is rehabilitated with assistance from us."

John Maguire, the CRA's deputy administrator for housing and public affairs, explained that the agency has started to view artists as any other citizens of low to moderate income requiring housing. The CRA will loan money at low interest rates to developers who will rent to artists below the market rate, at around 35 cents a square foot. These lofts would be available to artists making less than \$24,200 a year. These include the lofts at LACE and two in the Pico Union area. The CRA hopes to add 28 with a building on Winston and Main, and 50 in the massive Artists' Colony. Says Maguire, "Anybody we participate with must have a management plan that identifies how they're going to select tenants. (In this case,) what type of artist they have to be. As long as they conform with that management plan, OK. If we find violations, we have the right to call our loan."

But who is an artist and who decides such a question? "We're treading on new ground here, says Maguire. "Maybe a peer group would determine."

When the artists first started living in downtown lofts, they were illegal in the eyes of the Commission of Building and Safety. As the artist population grew, the issue could no longer be overlooked, and Councilman Joel Wachs sponsored the artist-in-residence ordinance. However, there was no way to verify that a loft resident would also be an artist. The requisite license can be acquired by anyone, regardless of profession, claiming to be an artist and writing a check to the city clerk's office for \$20.18.

A temporary solution comes with the Artists' Colony. Marvin Zeidler, of Zeidler and Zeidler shoes, is an art collector who sympathized with the artists' dilemma. With artist Leonard Skuro and loans from the CRA, he bought five buildings on 3 1/2 acres on Santa Fe and 24th Street. The 50 studios will rent below market value at 35 cents per square foot. Skuro said, "The project has been set up since day 1 to discriminate for artists. There will be a board of review, and you would apply to get in. You know who are artists because of their history. People just out of school or in transition, we'll look at portfolios and decide by that."

Skuro and Zeidler will be able to make a small profit, but the project is largely altruistic, an attempt to brake the careening downtown redevelopment. Says Zeidler, "I want to encourage artists to stay in Southern California. If we run them out of downtown, I'm not sure where they can go."