



COOL TO THE CORE

URBAN PIONEERS STAKE THEIR CLAIM IN DOWNTOWN LA
BY **ROBERT AREND**

PHOTO BY CHARLES TOEPFER





For the first time in decades, Angelenos have good reasons to live, work and play in Downtown LA. The arts are flourishing (especially since the opening of Disney's magnificent Concert Hall), dining and entertainment options abound and demand for sophisticated, upscale spaces to call home is being heard loud and clear by developers and citizens alike.

A new report by the Downtown Center Business Improvement District proclaims the renaissance of Downtown Los Angeles is well underway with 154 projects in the works, creating almost 27,000 new residential units by 2015. The residential gold rush has begun and a steady stream of keen urbanites are flocking to the southernmost subregion, South Park, creating a booming downtown neighborhood and slowly but surely transforming. Lush new parks, a variety of great art galleries, boutique shops, bistros, coffeehouses and downtown's first major grocery store (yes, this is a very big deal for the new urbanites) are just some of the exciting things in store for this area.

Oh, and lest we forget LA Live, the massive new entertainment district where ESPN Studios will call the play-by-play, and the state-of-the-art 7,000-seat Nokia Theatre will dominate. Can you say future home to major awards shows like the Emmys?

Also within walking distance lies a slew of SoCal offerings you won't find anywhere else. There's the STAPLES Center for Lakers, Clippers and Kings games and all those blockbuster concerts; Los Angeles Convention Center, home to cool annual consumer events like this June's Home Remodeling & Decorating Show; the fabulous Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising; the historic Mayan Theater, home to many late-night dance parties; and the beautifully ornate Hotel Figueroa where we're pretty sure Aladdin's magic carpet is parked.

Could LA become cool to the core like Manhattan with towering new buildings, hip places to hang, wholesale flower shops, bakeries and all the accoutrements of urban living? Certainly. Expectations are as lofty as residents' dreams of finally owning that "deluxe apartment in the sky."

The truth is, hundreds of hip, young singles and couples are staking their claim in this most desirable Southland ZIP code. They're today's "urban pioneers" — first-time settlers in a noticeably new and improved metro LA which has gone from gritty to pretty. Wide-eyed and energized, they're witnessing firsthand the rebirth of the West Coast's biggest city.

These prospectors of panache are buying luxe new digs and quickly discovering the fun and funky side of centre city that few of LA's locals knew about or dared venture to off the 110 Freeway.

944 met up with some of these urban pioneers who shared their stories and reasons for living *la vida urbana*. They also gave us the lowdown on their favorite restaurants and bars, sure to be the site of many happy hours to come.

They're residents of "South," a neighborhood-within-a-neighborhood consisting of a trio of sleek, brand-new towers called Elleven (move-in began in April); Luma, which sold out in an astonishing seven hours; and Evo, which just broke ground. Other neighbors include the Metro417 building and Metlofts. These downtown dwellers are the residents of the first new residential buildings to grace the LA skyline in more 20 years.

They're Hollywood movers and shakers, teachers, artists and designers. About half are single and half are couples — like LA Kings player Luc Robitaille and his wife and two children who will be just a slap shot away from the STAPLES Center when they move into their modern three-bedroom loft in Luma. Almost half of the residents are under the age of 40 and together they all reflect the rich diversity of the region.

Meet Amy Arroyo, an interior architect who, along with her fiancé Jim Atkins, bought a spacious two-bedroom loft-style home in Elleven. Atkins is a principal developer of the very building he and Arroyo

will soon call home, and Arroyo was the interior designer (talk about bringing your work home with you). They're going for a "comfortable contemporary" design with upgraded penthouse finishes, custom-made furniture from LA's Cisco Brothers (check out their design center on Western), walnut floors and flex walls of opaque glass to enclose both bedrooms, one of which will be a gym.

"We plan to keep it for a very long time," Arroyo says. "This will be our little New York-style condo home." Naturally, she can't wait to open their doors to the neighbors; they plan to have a housewarming shindig in late June. "The fact that the neighborhood is going to change and we're going to be a part of that is incredible," Arroyo says. "The more time you spend here and meet the locals, you see that everybody is really excited about what's going on." She also likes the fact that people moving into the neighborhood are hip, outgoing and young.

Case in point: Jordan Katnik, the 25-year-old co-owner of Banyan Tree Productions. He's stoked to finally live in a "real home" with his partner Bryan Raber after renting places in Hollywood and Downtown LA. "Everyone's tired of the same ol' LA thing ... it's kind of refreshing living downtown," he says. Katnik sees vast potential for the area and looks to build a vibrant community that brings together the downtown art scene with Hollywood industry types.

Through his work with TV and film, it's no surprise Katnik has a good eye for photography. He even created a blog-forum showcasing his talent at www.skyscraperpage.com to document the rapid development of South Park from its once derelict condition to multifaceted gem.

Katnik claims he never used to see people on the street except the homeless. But slowly but surely, the neighborhood is cleaning up and today he sees people driving with their windows down, walking their dogs at night and jogging the once seedy streets.

Tom Cody, a principal of The South Group, is proud to be a part of the transformation and points to the people who will make this a neighborhood. "When all is said and done this will be a bustling borough of gardens, pathways, places to gather and shops for folks to run their daily errands. We want to bring people out of their homes and cars; encourage them to mingle with their neighbors and explore downtown."

Robitaille, the NHL's highest-scoring left wing who recently retired, says he enjoys the convenience of being able to walk to the STAPLES Center and other attractions, as well as the diverse downtown dining scene. He gives Cody and his team a "green thumbs up" for being urban innovators and creating an environmentally sustainable community for him and his family to call home.

Katnik recalls when he first reserved his place: "Friends thought I was crazy. Nobody knew of anything downtown." But he was driven by a vision and knew more and more people would be drawn to the area, too. He would say, "Let's all come together and see what we can start doing to create a whole new vibe for downtown."

944 received a glimpse of Katnik's "oasis in the city." A place where his love for the Hawaiian islands is fused into his "tropical modern" dream home, complete with carved tikis and saltwater fish tanks surrounded by sweeping views of the ocean and the illustrious LA skyline.

Andy Bishop, a single, 36-year-old VP of mobile entertainment for Sony Pictures Television International also found the digs at South very appealing because of the panoramic views, as well as the towering architectural design and concept of living in an entirely new development of luxury lofts. "It's very attractive and I like the idea of



FIGUEROA HOTEL PHOTO BY AARON LUCY

high-rise living," Bishop says. He also loves the emerging downtown scene, comparing it to San Francisco. "I have a lot of friends in SOMA in San Francisco and I saw [a] parallel to Downtown LA," he explains. "There's a Bay Area vibe ... people are more interesting, have an intellectual sensibility and are creative."

You heard right. Downtown LA, once a typical 9-to-5 town that drove everyone back to the suburbs or the Westside after work, is now a hip and happening playground for artists, musicians and the literati. It's a bit too early to call it SOMA or SOHO, but Bishop describes it as very up-and-coming. He likes being one of the trendsetters. To him, downtown is "exciting, mysterious and adventurous."

Teresa Wang, 24, and her partner Melissa Lopez have relocated together downtown after living in Silverlake and Los Alamitos. Wang works as a sports information director at Cypress College, while Lopez is a teacher for LA Unified School District. The ambitious duo view their 10th floor loft in Elleven as a wise real estate venture and one reason for making the big move to the heart of the city. They also want to be a part of the downtown boom. Teresa admires the South Group developers for making the most of their hard-earned investment and turning the surrounding neighborhood into a pedestrian-friendly place to call home. As she says, "We're all in this together."

"We're young and downtown is pretty lively with nightlife," she continues. "There's this undercurrent. You can feel things stirring up a little with all the construction."

South Park and its surrounding areas are a tantalizing tremor that is sure to make waves of Angelenos keen on the future of Downtown Los Angeles. Starting with these young urban dwellers staking claim at the epicenter of it all, our once-dilapidated downtown is now a blooming beacon that will shine for countless years to come.

SCENE TO BE SEEN

- BROADWAY BAR, 830 S. Broadway
- GOLDEN GOPHER, 417 W. Eighth St.
- GROUNDWORK COFFEE COMPANY, 811 Traction Ave.
- VERANDA BAR, 939 S. Figueroa St. (Figueroa Hotel)
- HANKS COCKTAIL LOUNGE, 838 S. Grand Ave. (Stillwell Hotel)
- CASEY'S IRISH BAR & GRILL, 613 S. Grand Ave.
- BONAVENTURE BREWING COMPANY, 404 S. Figueroa St. (Westin Bonaventure Hotel)
- ROOFTOP BAR AT THE STANDARD, 550 S. Flower St.

THE DISH ON DINING

- BEST BITES BEFORE A SHOW: Kendall's Brasserie and Bar, 135 N. Grand Ave. at Walt Disney Concert Hall
- BEST CELEBRITY SIGHTINGS: The Palm, 1100 S. Flower St.
- BEST COMFORT FOOD: The Daily Grill, 612 S. Flower St. (Pegasus Building)
- BEST CUBAN: Cuba Central, 333 S. Spring St.
- BEST INDIAN: Gill's Cuisine, 838 S. Grand Ave. (Stillwell Hotel)
- BEST ITALIAN: Zucca Ristorante, 801 S. Figueroa St.
- BEST LATIN NUEVO: Ciudad, 445 S. Figueroa St.
- BEST NEW YORK-STYLE DELI: Yorkshire Grill, 610 W. Sixth St.
- BEST PIZZA: Pit Fire Pizza, 108 W. Second St.
- BEST SEAFOOD: Roy's, 800 S. Figueroa St.
- BEST STEAKS: Arnie Morton's Steakhouse, 735 S. Figueroa St.
- BEST SUSHI: R23 Japanese Restaurant, 923 E. Second St.

DOWNTOWN CLICKS

- www.downtownla.com
- www.exploresouthgroup.com
- www.downtownnews.com
- www.metlofts.com