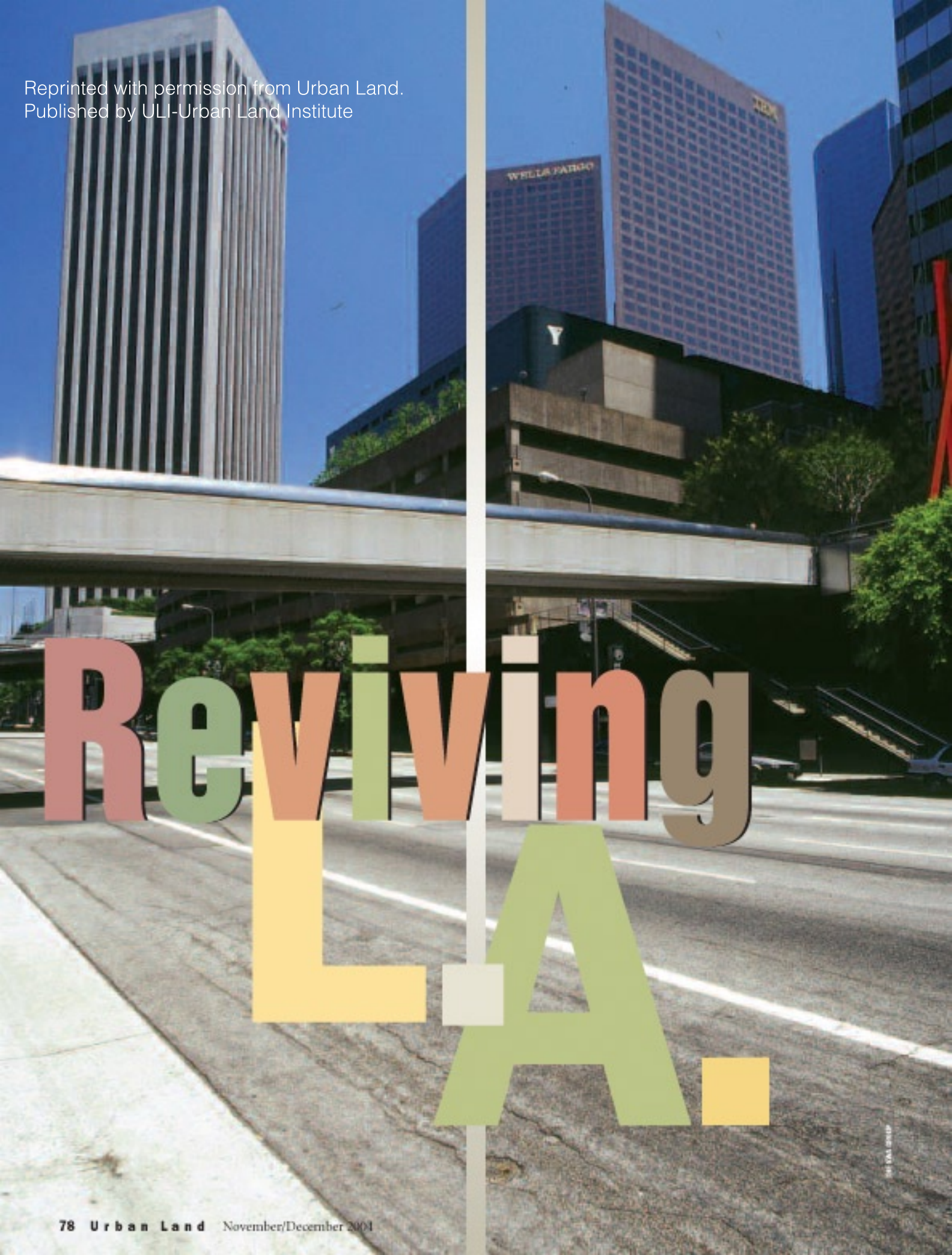

Reviving L.A.

THE SWA GROUP

Basic urban design and planning principles can help downtown Los Angeles become a pedestrian-friendly experience.

SEAN O'MALLEY

Downtown Los Angeles is experiencing one of its largest real estate and investment booms in years. New landmarks—from the Walt Disney Concert Hall on Bunker Hill to the Staples Center a mile to the south—are bringing more people and new vitality to the city's downtown. Run-down and largely empty office buildings, given up for dead years ago, are being converted into apartments and condominiums. Optimistic investors are readying plans for more new developments, like a long-needed hotel near the convention center and the construction of more apartments and offices near the Staples Center. Downtown land values are rising rapidly.

The long-overdue renaissance of the downtown area follows in the wake of billions of dollars in private and public funds spent on earlier efforts to revitalize Los Angeles, programs that raised expectations about downtown Los Angeles's future—but that never came to fruition. The 1950s

Will Downtown L.A. Become 24/7?

Los Angeles has plenty of mini-downtowns where people can work, reside, and be entertained, such as Santa Monica, Pasadena, and Hollywood. But the city's so-called "real downtown," which is central to the greater urban area, does not measure up to the urban centers of Manhattan, San Francisco, Chicago, or Boston—which all have vibrant, round-the-clock downtowns with upscale retail, hotels, residential neighborhoods, dining and entertainment choices, and a significant inventory of office space. Even smaller cities, such as Denver and San Diego, have lively downtowns that stay active beyond 6:00 p.m.

Despite numerous attempts to revitalize the downtown area, it has not really become the dominant nucleus of Los Angeles. Like many other American cities, Los Angeles has evolved into a polycentric urban entity with many competing nodes. Yet, interest in revitalizing downtown is rising. Investment in developing downtown Los Angeles has in the last few years topped $1.6 billion with the recent completion of the Walt Disney Concert Hall. Continuing the trend is the expected development in the near future of several proposed projects such as LA Live!, South Village, and the Grand Avenue Redevelopment project. Besides these large-scale projects, the existing supply of housing units in downtown Los Angeles is expected to increase by nearly 63 percent in the next few years. Parts of the downtown area have a significant stock of architecturally rich early 20th–century buildings, which could be converted to create distinctive residential and mixed-use neighborhoods. In addition, there is a plentiful supply of vacant office space to suit the needs of a range of tenants. What is still needed is an impetus to get people to work, live, and shop there.

Although effort has been focused on making downtown Los Angeles the preeminent central core, is a dominant downtown in fact a desirable goal for the urban agglomeration that is Los Angeles? Perhaps the real objective should be to energize downtown as another significant 24-hour district in a complex urban system of nodes with different roles.

There are several components that make for a vibrant, round-the-clock downtown:

- an energetic and dominant office district;
- substantial residential inventory—from affordable to luxury—to support retail establishments;
- upscale retail; and
- presence of a water amenity, destination entertainment, and sociocultural institutions (museums, concert halls, sports venues) to attract visitors in the evenings and on the weekends.

Office Market. Downtown Los Angeles is the second-largest concentration of office space in the metropolitan area after the Westside, making up 19 percent of the entire metropolitan area's inventory. The vacancy rate downtown has remained fairly high over the past decade and at 18.3 percent is one of the highest in the metropolitan area. High vacancy rates have resulted in fewer office workers shopping, dining, and wanting to live there. The big question is whether desirable employee housing and supporting retail and services will make companies flock back to downtown.

Housing. Downtown Los Angeles contains approximately 16,400 multifamily units, including affordable and market-rate rental and for-sale units. Given its regional context and scale, downtown Los Angeles needs to offer much more in terms of residential choices. The ordinance enabling the adaptive use of historic buildings has helped in the conversion of a number of older buildings into loft apartments and condominiums. Several small- and large-scale projects—under construction, permitted, or planned—will add approximately 10,000 units to the existing inventory. What downtown L.A. still lacks is the presence of high-income households and neighborhoods that would drive upscale retail spending.

Upscale Retail. Downtown Los Angeles definitely suffers from a lack of upscale retail. Its shopping venues pale in comparison with the extensive retail opportunities offered by the Westside and Pasadena. Although downtown L.A. offers unique shopping experiences such as jewelry and fashion districts and enclaves devoted to wholesale trade, which distinguish it from other areas, it is not enough to attract spending by high-income households.

Destination Attractions. When it comes to building bigger and shinier cultural institutions, little expense has been spared. The construction of the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral, and Staples Center are examples of recent activity in the downtown area. There are other large-scale projects on the drawing board, including the second phase of Staples Center, called LA Live! (with entertainment, retail, hotels, restaurants, and an outdoor plaza), Union Station (with 6.5 million square feet of mixed uses), and the Grand Avenue project (with ongoing street improvements along with planned office, retail, and residential projects).

All of this activity raises the following questions:

- Will the large-scale projects infuse life into downtown L.A., bringing in hordes of tourists, culture mavens, and sports fans?
- Will small-scale residential projects and -supporting retail invigorate the currently dead-after-6:00-p.m. downtown?
- Will these patchwork efforts create a few thriving pockets but no cohesive 24/7 downtown?

Downtown Los Angeles has much to offer with its existing stock of high-quality office space, cultural icons and attractions, various niche districts, transportation, and older office and industrial buildings ready for transformation into contemporary housing. However, there is no overall vision for the entire downtown area. The districts are fragmented and unconnected to each other—with activity from one node not spilling onto others.

Though the mixed-use and residential projects in the works will bring residents in, these projects are spread out over the entire downtown area in small pockets, making it difficult for them to have any significant impact in any one area. Downtown needs a way to link the disparate districts together. To date, the South Village development by the CIM Group is one of the very few comprehensive, multiple-block projects that stands to have an immediate impact on the activity level of the surrounding street network.

Empty nesters and echo boomers looking for urban or edgy environments will find downtown living attractive. And since all that is old is new again, downtown Los Angeles has a real opportunity to reinvent itself. But its ability to attract upscale housing and retail remains in question.

It would be a lost opportunity if downtown L.A. remains an underused node within the greater Los Angles area. Investing in housing, destination retail, and lodging, and capitalizing on office and transit infrastructure definitely are crucial to the downtown's transition into a more vibrant center. What needs to be recognized is that downtown will achieve greater prominence in the coming years, but it will more than likely never become the dominant economic, cultural, and social center of Los Angeles.**—Shubhra Jha,** *an associate in the investment research group at CB Richard Ellis Investors in Los Angeles*

clearance of Bunker Hill's run-down late 19th– and early 20th–century residences, for example, was intended to start the development of a new business and residential district on a hill above the existing downtown. That urban renewal project was considered such a failure that some of the Bunker Hill building sites sat empty for decades. The much-touted 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s building boom along the Flower and Figueroa streets corridor (below Bunker Hill and west of the pre–World War II downtown along Broadway and Spring streets) never attracted the necessary mix of uses or achieved sufficient critical mass to become a regional hub. After 5:00 p.m. and on weekends, the area becomes a virtual ghost town.

Los Angeles's planners, developers, and architects have clung resolutely to the belief that "if you build it, they will come—" and people *have* come. They drive into the parking garage of a downtown concert hall or museum, listen to the concert or view the newest museum exhibit, and then drive out of the parking garage and *go home*. Over the last 50 years, Los Angeles's government leaders, real estate owners,

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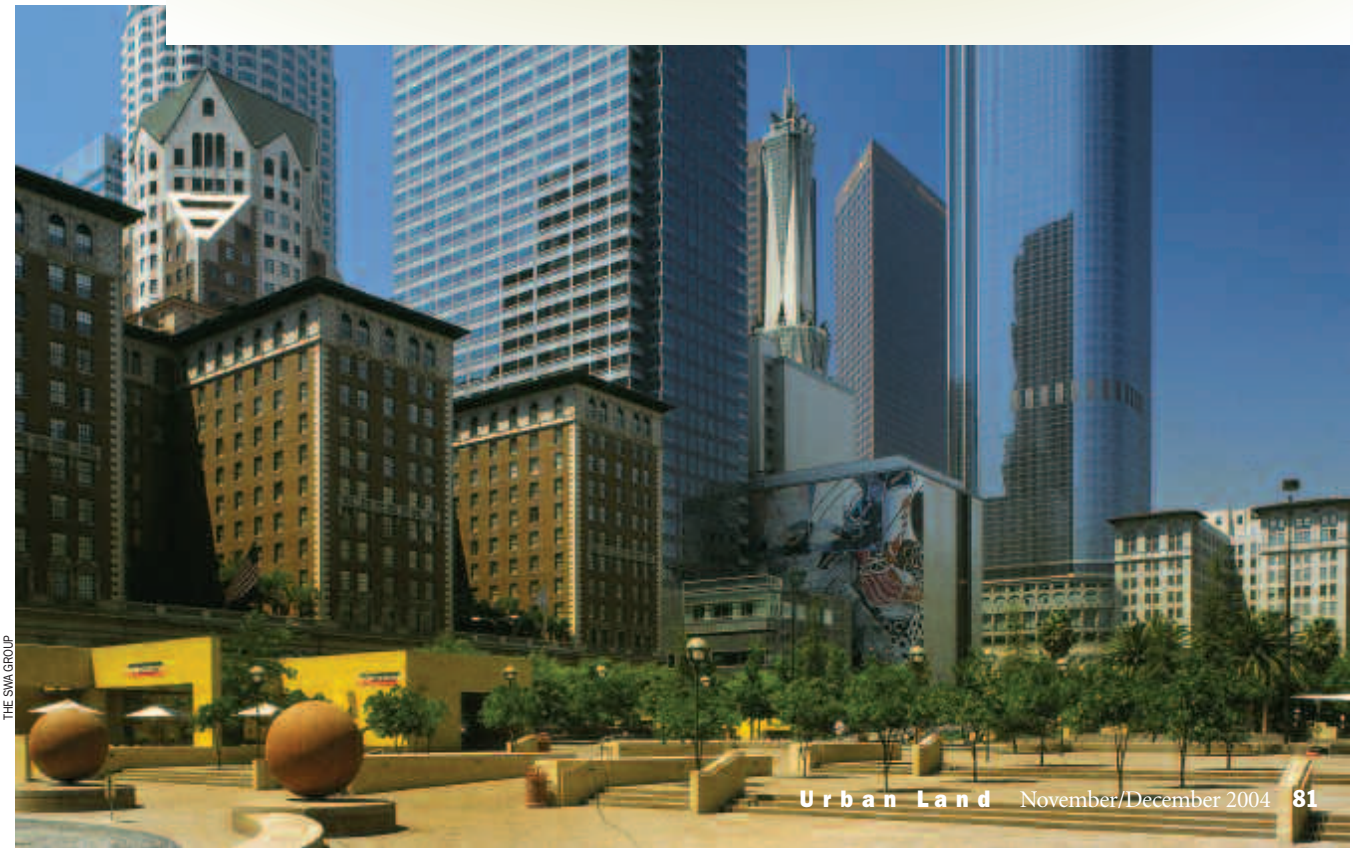

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Unfortunately, the primary objective of the last several decades of planning and development in the heart of Los Angeles was not to construct a traditional, bustling, human-friendly, pedestrian streetscape, but to develop a downtown that was safe and convenient for the automobile. That focus has led to an often-intimidating streetscape of overly wide streets, fast-moving one-way traffic, hostile bunker-style buildings that turn a blank wall to the sidewalks, and barren office building plazas that look good on renderings but break up the street wall with vast expanses of space, all of which convey the idea that pedestrians are not welcome. Not surprisingly, Angelenos are hesitant to take visitors downtown, particularly visitors from Europe, Asia, and Latin America where their downtowns are strong, unified, and attractive public realms. Pedestrian-friendly places like Old Town Pasadena and the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica offer the kind of urban experience that the downtown area now lacks.

Fortunately, Los Angeles's civic and business leaders are beginning to come around. Grand Avenue on Bunker Hill, for example, has been one of downtown Los Angeles's problem areas. The street is home to the Walt Disney Concert Hall, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Music Center, and a number of other attractions, yet, on weekends, the sidewalks along Grand Avenue are almost deserted. This past August, the city of Los Angeles selected New York City–based the Related Companies to revitalize Grand Avenue by developing 3.2 million square feet of mixed-income housing, retail, restaurants, offices, entertainment venues, and a hotel on four vacant city and county parcels around the Walt Disney Concert Hall. The $1.2 billion project will include $300 million in public improvements, such as the renovation of a 16-acre park between the Music Center and city hall, and the transformation of Grand Avenue into a pedestrian-friendly boulevard.

The goal of reinvigorating the streetscape for people needs to be applied, not just to one part of Grand Avenue, but throughout *all* of downtown Los Angeles.

■ **Rethink how people and vehicles use the streets.** At its core, a street is an extended urban room for people where they can interact face to face in front of storefronts, cafés, and offices. Cars are only a means of transporting people to those locations; thus, the pedestrian environment should take precedence over the car. The street can be reclaimed for pedestrians by reducing its unnecessary width and using the extra space to widen sidewalks and give the streets a more human scale. Traffic can be slowed by turning selected one-way streets into two-way streets, which will also allow motorists to see more ground-floor retail as they drive by.

■ **Widen the sidewalks and use the additional space to reinvigorate an area—for example, to add cafés with outdoor seating.** Wider side-

Cities in Europe offer models for ways to invigorate the streetscape with ground-floor retail, mature trees, and cafés with outdoor seating.

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walks also allow the installation of human-scaled landscaping, which introduces nature into the city's center. Widened sidewalks can even skew the streetscape toward one side of the street or the other, as on the Champs Elysées in Paris, creating varying street functions and intensities from energetic to passive, which can enrich the urban experience and help the critical mass of the built environment to coalesce into a more successful experience.

■ **Plant trees—lots of them—and select large, mature trees—rather than small fledging trees.** Trees help beautify the streetscape, give it a human scale, offer shade during the hot summer months, and clean the air. Paris has used trees to turn its streets into "garden rooms" that attract Parisians and visitors alike. The city of Anaheim, in partnership with the Walt Disney Company, has used landscaping to help transform and revive the Anaheim Resort District—1,100 acres, or 2.2 square miles, surrounding and including Disneyland and the Anaheim Convention Center—which was crisscrossed by unusually wide arterials that intimidated most pedestrians. Various tree species were planted in medians and along sidewalks on different streets to create a distinct identity for each thoroughfare, to help beautify the streetscape, and to shade pedestrians.

■ **Make essential streetscape elements—like streetlights, benches, bus stop shelters, and subway entrances—both human-scaled and attractive.** Avoid the latest, trendiest designs in deference to streetscape elements that are well made, easy to maintain, reasonably priced, and complementary to their surroundings—yet be sure their placement will not clutter the sidewalks or block views into store windows.

■ **Transform alleys from intimidating or barren truck delivery locations into what they really are—ready-made pedestrian-scaled environments—by giving them attractive streetscapes and uses such as cafés and shops.** For example, behind its boulevards, Taipei, China, has a fine-grained system of little back alleys—a maze of narrow, one-lane streets where pedestrians can discover restaurants, art galleries, shops, and cafés shaded by immense trees. The alleys' scale is completely removed from that of the large boulevard, which makes them so unique. In downtown Los Angeles, pedestrians could experience diversity in a similar way; an alley could be used to break up some overly large, empty blocks, like those south of Seventh Street. Downtown Los Angeles could be reclaimed for pedestrian use, with shops and restaurants, as has happened with some alleys near San Francisco's Union Square and on lower Manhattan's Stone Street just off Hanover Square.

■ **Let buildings form the edge to the street, creating a wall that embraces and gives scale to the urban room.** In Paris, a building is secondary to the street. Architects are required to follow a set of standards that have more to do with enriching and scaling the street experience than structuring what happens behind the facade walls. Buildings are designed to strengthen the city fabric, not to indulge in architectural fads or innovative designs that may not even relate to the streetscape—although an occasional civic gem can be a welcome addition. The ideal architecture for downtown Los Angeles improves the streetscape with a street wall, ground-floor retail, and businesses, and provides a catalyst for pleasant outdoor spaces.

■ **Use the proposed construction of a downtown Los Angeles surface light-rail line to link tourist, historic, and destination sites and tie it into the existing mass transit system to create a more user-friendly, finely scaled, block-to-block surface transportation system.** San Francisco, for example, has done this with its vintage Market Street trolleys. But since Los Angeles is a city that looks to the future, not the past, modern light-rail equipment can be used.

■ **Look beyond transit to create other linkages—like the functional connections between buildings and the street, and between the different downtown districts.** The Anaheim Resort District, for example, uses landscaping to link together the attractions—Disneyland, the Anaheim Convention Center, and hotels—within the redevelopment area.

■ **Identify, restore, and promote the one-of-a-kind attractions that will lure southern Californians and visitors throughout the daytime and nighttime hours, seven days a week.** Hundreds of apartments and loft units have already been created in the once-ignored pre–World War II office buildings in the old downtown. The old downtown east of Pershing Square contains ten long-neglected 1920s and 1930s cinemas that together comprise the largest collection of pre–World War II "movie palaces" in America. Like the rest of downtown Los Angeles, they could be reclaimed and given new life.

The goal of a better downtown in Los Angeles is not beyond reach, but it will take strong political will, significant private investment, and enlightened architectural and planning measures. Creating a downtown for people—not just cars—is an essential step in the city's long hoped-for renaissance. ■

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A Sustainable Community Outside L.A.

The new town of Centennial is still just an idea on an open landscape of barren hills and fields stripped of vegetation by 100 years of cattle grazing. Located a few miles away from the traffic on Interstate 5 at the edge of Los Angeles County and 60 miles north of the city, the new master-planned community will be bounded on the north by the farmland and small towns of the San Joaquin Valley, expected to become the busiest new population center in California over the next 30 years.

The 11,700-acre site of a former cattle ranch is well outside the congested metropolitan area and buffered from other development by millions of acres of national forest. The founders of Centennial—Tejon Ranch Company, Pardee Homes, Lewis Investment Company, and Standard Pacific Homes—are proposing that the new town should include the many dimensions of sustainable design—architecture, landscaping, water and energy conservation, mass transit, and even control of light pollution. The idea, say its founders, is for the new community to embrace smart growth by maximizing the benefits of intelligent land use such as preserving large amounts of open space, incorporating paseos and bike paths, offering all types and prices of housing, creating village centers, and, in general, establishing compatibility between humans and nature. Most challenging of all is the stated goal of discouraging the urban sprawl associated with "leapfrog" development.

Located along the historic Ridge Road, the forgotten highway that was the chief route between northern and southern California before Interstate 5 was constructed in the 1950s, Centennial will be built on the site of a historic Mexican land grant on a vast "rancho" that has remained intact since the 19th century. The site is adjacent to Quail Lake, a natural body of water that is part of a statewide system of reservoirs joined by concrete aqueducts that snake across the land in S-shaped channels.

The planning for Centennial is based on the principle that well-planned and -executed large-scale communities in noncontiguous areas can be consistent with smart growth and sustainability, offering benefits that cannot be provided by piecemeal, small-scale development, while also fulfilling the need for workforce housing in fast-growing urban areas. Centennial's planning aims for a small town quality, not entirely unlike Reston, Virginia, or Seaside, Florida, with housing grouped into several villages. Each village will have a center containing neighborhood-serving uses such as shopping, daycare centers, and small professional offices. By the time the final phase is built, it will be a place where a significant percentage of residents can work in the same community in which they live. Approximately 23,000 homes are planned, with a 12 million-square-foot business park and another 2 million square feet of neighborhood retail centers, accommodating 30,000 jobs. The rate of homebuilding will follow market conditions, with an estimated 1,000 homes coming online annually.

About one-half of the site will be preserved as permanent open space. Much of this already forms a natural ring of hills around the community, which will be planted in native grasses and wildflowers. Natural drainage areas will become landscaped greenways serving as linear parks and pedestrian paths throughout the community—a demonstration of how flood control measures can result in open space that is both active and attractive.

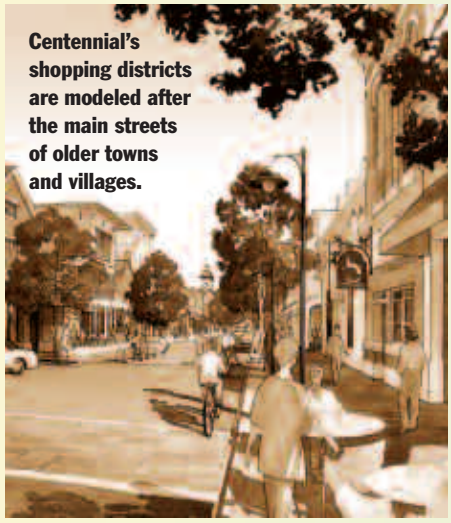
Sustainability at the individual home level also is being addressed. The goal is for each home to lower its electricity use by 15 to 20 percent, and its water use by 20 to 25 percent, compared with most homes of comparable size. To avoid wasting water, recycled water will be used for watering and irrigation of parks, common areas, public medians, and two golf courses. A satellite hookup that anticipates both temperature and rainfall will regulate computerized sprinkler systems to prevent water waste. All homes are required to obtain "Energy Star" certification that sets increased standards for insulation, heating, air conditioning, and energy-efficient appliances. The community will be landscaped with plants that are native to California and require little or no water. The plan also includes optional use of sustainable materials, such as carpeting made of recycled materials, flooring made of bamboo, and solar panels. The architecture is to be regionalized for California climate, with houses including deep overhangs for shade, as well as abundant plantings of shade trees.

The intent of Centennial is to be a self-contained, self-reliant community that achieves what Californians call "the jobs/housing balance"—a strategy that seeks to lower traffic on regional arterials and cut the negative effect on air quality by encouraging people to live and work in the same community.

Centennial will have an internal transit system as well as two transit stations from which buses will shuttle residents to job centers and regional malls in nearby cities. The buses will connect in Santa Clarita with the Metrolink train as well as with commuter bus services that run into downtown Los Angeles, Pasadena, Burbank, west Los Angeles, and other business centers in Los Angeles County.

One of the hurdles facing Centennial, says Centennial vice president Greg Medeiros, is the notion of building a stand-alone new community, rather than adding onto an existing urban area. Critics of the project contend that this is leapfrog development that fosters unplanned sprawl. Medeiros emphasizes that Centennial's infrastructure is "sized to the project, including the housing, the commercial development, police and fire stations, schools, parks, a library, and medical services." In other words, he argues, "There is no excess capacity to support any further development down the road. And with a wide margin of open space surrounding the community, it will be difficult for sprawl to trickle over into, or out of, Centennial."

Designed to help fill the huge housing gap in Los Angeles County, Centennial will offer homes priced to fit the budgets of teachers, firefighters, seniors, and young families, as well as a lifestyle built around small-town living, points out Medeiros. Two of the biggest demographic markets for the housing, he notes, will be "echo boomers," the children of baby boomers who are seeking affordable housing, and empty nesters who are seeking a quiet community. Apartments also are planned as part of the project.



Centennial's shopping districts are modeled after the main streets of older towns and villages.

Currently, the partners are completing the required environmental studies and taking the initial steps in the public process. Surprisingly, Medeiros notes, the majority of Centennial's future neighbors say they want urbanity, or, in his words, "They want something more or less like 'Main Street.' The project will bring a wide range of housing, jobs, shopping, medical facilities, cultural amenities, and educational institutions to an area that currently is without most of these services, he adds. The partners will be funding the entire infrastructure, including eight elementary schools, two high schools, two to four fire stations, a police station, a library, two water reclamation plants, and hundreds of acres of parks and public spaces.

While it is not possible to build a new town without its having some impact on the natural environment, Centennial, according to Medeiros, represents an attempt to create a pedestrian-styled community that provides the most benefits to residents and does the least harm to the land, and every attempt will be made to intelligently reconcile those two different agendas.**—Morris Newman,** *a Los Angeles–based writer*