

# IMAGE

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## FASHION DIARY

Gossip, first impressions, trends in the making, celebrities and style setters

# AN URBAN MAKEOVER

An area once anathema to fashionistas has blossomed into a must-see destination.

**BOOTH MOORE**  
FASHION CRITIC

When I started working at the Los Angeles Times nearly 15 years ago, downtown L.A. was a style wasteland. Sure, there were denim wash houses, sewing shops, designer showrooms and studios, but you wouldn't know it walking down the street. Fashion was something that happened behind closed doors.

When I went to New Moon across from the California Market Center to meet designers over the famous Chinese chicken salad, I didn't feel safe walking the seven blocks from The Times office. Shopping was almost nonexistent, except for the bland Macy's and Robinsons-May department stores, which catered mostly to the career suit-wearing set, and the stalls hawking discount tank tops and knockoff purses in Santee Alley.

Back then, the colorful kimonos in Little Tokyo and embroidered Mexican blouses on Olvera Street were the finds.

Starting around 2000-01, a few pioneering designers held runway shows at quirky locations downtown. Michelle Mason closed off the 2nd Street tunnel one season and the former St. Vibiana's Cathedral another. Jared Gold staged his show in a pungent alley, before upgrading to the Palace Theatre.

American Apparel opened its factory downtown with a lot of pride of place, and founder Dov Charney's aesthetic — love it or hate it — gave the area an edgy vibe.

After Andre Balazs' Standard Hotel opened on 5th Street in 2002, downtown became the destination the next year for the first centralized Los Angeles Fashion Week in some time. And, oh, how people complained — about the traffic, the parking, the nonexistent coffee bars. There was no place to go after the shows ended at night and no reason to stay.

But slowly, brick by brick, things started to change.

Jorge Pardo's Mountain Bar on Gin

Ling Way started luring the artsy set. Then came the nightcrawlers, dressed up like they would for a prom to line up at velvet ropes outside the Edison, the Golden Gopher and Broadway Bar. For awhile, it seemed like it was during the daylight that they rolled up the streets.

In 2006, "Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture" drew a different kind of crowd downtown: avant-garde fashion followers, who came to the Museum of Contemporary Art to see Viktor & Rolf's famed Russian doll collection. (Three years later, Lady Gaga would perform at MOCA's 30th anniversary gala held on a closed off block of Grand Avenue, wearing a dress designed by Miuccia Prada, who hosted a table at the swank event.)

In 2008, downtown L.A. got some seriously cool retail, with the arrival of the Comme des Garçons guerrilla store. It was as if designer Rei Kawakubo was doing some urban planning of her own, all the way from Japan.

Downtown was on a roll. Since that first fashion week event at the Standard, groups have come and gone trying to establish downtown as a runway show destination — Downtown L.A. Fashion Week at the Geffen Contemporary, Concept Fashion Week, BOXeight and on and on. The downtown fashion fervor reached a fever pitch when "Project Runway" decamped from New York in 2008, and Tim Gunn was spotted shopping at the downtown Ralphs.

Cole's reopened, and the Varnish bar with it.

Along came hot restaurants, too, with dynamic young chefs — Church & State, Riviera and Bottega Louie, where the macarons are as lovely as you'd find in Paris. Now, there are so many new places to eat and drink, you can't even get to them all.

When we started shopping for fashion finds for this issue, I really noticed how far downtown has come on the street level. On Central Avenue in Little Tokyo, I saw a gaggle of girls in short shorts with shopping bags from contemporary clothing boutique Number A heading to the Dennis Hopper exhibit at MOCA. In Chintatown, shoppers weren't checking out silk slippers and bamboo plants; they were trying on natural-colored canvas wedge shoes by conceptual clothing label Slow and Steady Wins the Race at a boutique called Ooga Booga. On 9th Street, near Santee Alley, it wasn't the



knockoffs that caught my eye, but the vintage wares at Virgo, where a pixie-haired designer-hopeful was working the counter.

On 4th Street, there is a whole new retail zone, with local labels Skingraft and Elmer Ave. opening up shop. Even the Goodwill store on Broadway near 2nd Street is looking good. (I recently saw a pair of brand-new Christian Louboutin pumps there for \$100, still in the box.)

I used to make it a policy never to come downtown after the work week was over, if I could help it. But lately, I'm breaking that rule a lot. "If you squint, it feels like a Manhattan street," my companion said the other night, as we crossed Spring Street at 6th, passing the Z Loft Boutique vintage store with its door still wide open after 8 p.m.

We were headed to a birthday party for handbag designer and personal shopper extraordinaire Raven Kauffman, who was entertaining friends for the first time in her new loft. The place was on four levels — one of them was her color-coded closet, another an outdoor patio with a hot tub. . All kinds of fashionable people were there, including designers Pegah Anvarian, Barbara Tfank and Michael Schmidt, boutique owners Desiree Kohan (Des Kohan), Lisa Bush (Mona Moore) and Rose Apodaca (A+R), and "House" actress Lisa Edelstein.

Not one person complained about having to come downtown. It wasn't even an issue.

Sipping Champagne and nibbling mini-cupcakes on the roof, with the Standard Oil building and the rest of the skyline twinkling below, it was easy to see why. If you are a creative person living in L.A. right now, downtown is the place to be.

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