

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

#ArtsDistrict #DTLA: 21st Century Soho and Chelsea

Allon Schoener · Thursday, March 24th, 2016

When Hauser & Wirth, the Zurich based global art dealers, opened their sixth gallery on March 13, 2016, in the Los Angeles Arts District, it contributed to the transformation of Los Angeles from a provincial outpost in the international art scene to the potential of its becoming a major player.

Called Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, the new gallery is the tipping point in this neighborhood's transformation. (Schimmel represents Paul Schimmel, former curator at MOCA, who is now a partner here.)

Its first exhibition, "Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016," attracted 6,000 on opening day with daily attendance hovering around 600. A *New York Times* art critic published his assessment of the exhibition three days after its opening.



Courtyard at the Hauser Wirth & Schimmel opening. Photo by Allon Schoener

Can the city of beaches, twenty-foot hedges and a million strip malls breed a gritty urban arts neighborhood? It's happening at an astonishing pace that confounds everyone. Dilapidated and not-so-dilapidated factories and warehouses are being renovated and converted into residential lofts, art galleries, studio space, bakeries, bars, breweries, coffee shops, restaurants, modernistic furniture stores, wine shops, organic only food markets, and even a vegan spa.

Unquestionably influenced by New York's Soho and Chelsea neighborhoods, where the conversion of commercial and industrial spaces into loft studios and residences was expanding, in the mid-1970s a group of Los Angeles artists commenced a similar practice. In 1981, the City of Los Angeles passed its AIR (Artist in Residence) ordinance legalizing residential occupancy of former industrial and commercial spaces. The appellation "Arts District," with appropriate signage delimiting its boundaries, was a product of the City of Los Angeles' practice of providing distinctive names to various neighborhoods. The "Arts District," a three-square-mile area, abuts the downtown business district on the west and the Los Angeles River on the east.

Since LA was a stagecoach stop on the western frontier until the railroads arrived in the 1860s, it does not possess the grandiose Civil War era factory lofts that are the heart of SOHO. In the LA Arts District, nothing is much more than a hundred years old reflecting the mongrel commercial architectural style of the 1920s. In contrast to Soho's pre-elevator endlessly exhausting stairway loft access, the twelve-story Biscuit Factory Lofts (former National Biscuit Company west coast headquarters) and Toy Factory Lofts of equal height, are reminiscent of Chelsea's architectural

inventory of similar buildings. With illuminated crowns towering above their mostly one-story neighbors, these two buildings serve as beacons of identity much as The High Line does for Chelsea. Fortunately, there are few street level commercial spaces, hopefully limiting the invasion of global clothing brands.

With so little residential space available, conversions of some of the few remaining century old factories, such as the multistory brick structure which housed the Ford Model T assembly plant, are underway. As a concomitant, like Chelsea, developers have plans for a phalanx of new bland residential towers similar to the ones that are omnipresent throughout LA. Already blotting the horizon is One Santa Fe, a four-story modernist snake with mandatory fitness gym, rooftop swimming pool and street level shopping mall. It offers Studio, One Bedroom and Two Bedroom units for \$1,770 – \$4,380 per month. Construction details are shoddy, worse than most Post-War New York apartment buildings.

A new subway station is being constructed at the district's Southeast perimeter. From there, it will be possible to travel throughout the city and even to distant Long Beach or Pasadena without changing trains. The demolition of the Sixth Street Bridge and construction of a distinctive new one on the western periphery of the Arts District will contribute desirable public amenities. A large public park is being planned in the river basin beneath the bridge.

About a mile away, one subway stop and a steep climb if you're walking, is LA's Lincoln Centeresque cultural complex of five constituents: The Broad, a museum of contemporary art, opened in September (Diller Scofidio and Renfro design), Disney Concert Hall (Frank Gehry design), MOCA (Arata Isozaki design), plus the architecturally undistinguished Chandler Music Hall and Ahmanson Theater. Grand Park, a landscape architecture design disaster, wiggles its way down the hillside. Footnote: The Broad registered 400,000 visitors since it opened six months ago in September.

Within the designated boundaries of The Arts District or on its surrounding periphery are to be found: SCIArch, an avant grade architectural school, the often somnolent Geffen MOCA abutting the new subway station, the Architecture and Design Museum which abandoned its established Wilshire Boulevard home across the street from LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) for a new location within 100 yards of the Arts District's boundaries, plus Hennessey + Ingalls, LA's best bookstore, just moved from Santa Monica to the One Santa Fe complex's mini mall.

The Hauser Wirth & Schimmel gallery occupies a former flour mill renovated with architectural sensitivity by Evan Raab of Creative Space into a 100,000 square foot complex containing a spacious open courtyard and numerous abutting pristine white spaces serving as galleries in which works of all dimensions can be displayed. The renovation clearly evokes an art museum experience; however, at the same time, it retains details of the building's past. Echoing works by Philip Guston of the 1960s, the eroded painted plaster covering the east facing brick wall of the courtyard was preserved and remains in tact. Such eroded walls can be seen in some of the galleries as well. Attention to detail is a concomitant of everything that happens here whether it be displaying works of art with advisory docents stationed in the galleries or the display of books and catalogues. Order is not disconcerting; rather, it exudes a welcoming persona.

Modeled after the Hauser & Wirth facility in Somerset, England, the LA venue is not solely a commercial enterprise focused on the sale of works of art. It seeks to embrace its neighborhood and welcome residents as participants in its programs. Stretching from its Third Street main

entrance to its Second Street back door, there is a *passage*, similar to the interior public arcades common in Paris. With an excellent bookstore focused on the work of contemporary artists anchoring one end, with a courtyard in the center accommodating a restaurant (Utilizing food grown in the complex's garden, it is scheduled to open in May or June.) and abutting galleries, the Parisian metaphor works. As a take away experience, it feels more like a museum than a commercial art gallery.

What will the LA Arts District look like in five years? With so much raw undeveloped territory, if the economy does not tank, the LA Arts District and its neighbor Downtown LA will threaten, if not replace, New York's fading Soho with its Broadway Bloomingdales, downgraded Dean and Deluca and its evident newly minted millionaire hedge fund manager residents as a trendsetter. Perhaps Cadillac will see the handwriting on the wall and relocate its offices from Soho to LA? Chelsea will remain the dominant gallery scene, but the LA's Arts District and bordering DTLA are evolving into one of the most interesting urban neighborhoods in this country.

Top image: Ursula von Rydingsvard, Untitled (Nine Cones), 1976 Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York; Installation view, Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947, Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, 2016; Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; Photo: Brian Forrest

This entry was posted on Thursday, March 24th, 2016 at 4:49 am and is filed under [Architecture](#), [Lifestyle](#), [Visual Art](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.