

ADAPTIVE REUSE AND THE MARKETING OF DOWNTOWN LA LIVING: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW URBANITY

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INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles has recently experienced a kind of “urban renaissance”¹ in the dramatic revitalization of its downtown through adaptive reuse tactics that has led to an active branding of the neighbourhood. The aim of this paper is to analyse both adaptive reuse as a planning strategy and the branding of the “new downtown living” associated with it. We posit that a new urbanity is being constructed by a specific set of decision-makers and also through a marketing discourse that we analyse in this paper. We first explain what adaptive reuse is and who the stakeholders involved are in the regeneration of Downtown Los Angeles. After stating the outcomes of the strategy, our aim is to present how the branding of the city centre is now displaying values that are part of the construction of a new urbanity for Downtown Los Angeles. This new urbanity for the central core is part of a broader strategy to retrofit the city towards a more sustainable urban form. New urbanity has been previously identified by Gualini and Majoor as “a new urban policy” that emphasizes “economic development and inter-urban competition” as part of a shift towards market-oriented pursuits.² This involves a subsequent “new era” of infill and redevelopment within urban cores as opposed to outward low-density expansion.³ This additionally challenges the previous notion of the Los Angeles School of Urbanism that suggests a dispersed polycentric urban form and a fragmentation of the city in both its physical and social aspects.⁴ However, it should be noted that the construction of this new urbanity in Los Angeles is not constructed with reference to large-scale flagship urban projects but has happened through an incremental market-led process.

ADAPTIVE REUSE AS A PLANNING STRATEGY

Adaptive reuse has been implemented in different parts of the world, appearing in mainstream architecture vernacular during the 1960s and 1970s as a response to emerging environmental concerns.⁵ It can generally be defined as “a process to ameliorate the financial, environmental and social performance of buildings...that changes a disused or ineffective item into a new item that can be used for a different purpose.”⁶ This process for reusing buildings contributes to sustainability through the mitigation of CO₂ emissions. The built environment has a prominent role to play in the debate on sustainable development and climate change as it demands 40% of global resources and also generates a high amount of waste.⁷

The key component in adaptive reuse projects lies in the previous use of a land or building no longer being suitable with regards to the building itself or its location. By reinterpreting the use to something that is more appropriate for present conditions, the value of the property is ideally increased or

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maximized. The reuse of buildings can include a range of modifications from relating solely to aesthetics to a complete overhaul of a building, including actions such as partial redevelopment of the building to maintain a façade. In the context of U.S cities, as stated by Young, adaptive reuse has become a preferred way of regenerating the downtowns of cities devastated by the decline of American manufacturing.⁸ Young states that this type of strategy does not engender a high cost to the city: “[adaptive reuse] can be seen as an economic incentive for developers willing to bring new life in economically depressed areas...[it is intended] to ease the challenging permit requirements and rezoning processes developers are forced to endure.”⁹ Our interviews in Los Angeles confirm this point: adaptive reuse starts with an action of the city, but afterwards it is a market-driven process where the developers are the leading stakeholders.

Recycling buildings through the process of reuse has continually proved to be an important and effective historic preservation tool.¹⁰ Industrial buildings in particular, are especially well-suited for adaptive reuse practices due to their large and open spaces, as well as the majority of these buildings acting as architectural or vernacular relics from the industrial era.¹¹ It was through the decline of many kinds of heavy industry during the early and mid-twentieth century that a multitude of abandoned and underutilized industrial buildings and sites have become available as potential high-value reuse projects in North American cities.¹²

RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODS

Our research question is twofold and as follows: *How is the product of adaptive reuse being marketed and why? Can we identify the construction of a new urbanity for Downtown LA?*

More than fifteen interviews have been conducted in Los Angeles both in Downtown LA and in the Arts District on the adaptive reuse process and outcomes. We additionally analysed marketing material for lofts sold in Downtown LA, as well as the some of the websites displaying this new urbanity discourse (e.g., the Downtown Centre Improvement Business District).

THE RATIONALE AND OUTCOMES OF ADAPTIVE REUSE IN LA

One of the earliest codes that would encourage reuse-related practices within the state of California and become highly relevant to the case of Los Angeles was the California Historical Building Code (CHBC) passed in 1976. This code was the first of its kind in the nation, protecting the state’s architectural heritage through recognizing the unique construction issues relevant to historic buildings. Building regulations and standards within this alternative code are specifically targeted towards rehabilitation, preservation, restoration, relocation or change of occupancy of designated historic buildings. In order to be utilized, a building must be locally designated as historic or listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Los Angeles has retained one of the nation’s most intact historic downtown areas, due to a lack of demolition that occurred in its seemingly forgotten downtown; this is unlike many other American cities that followed typical urban renewal tactics.¹³

Historic preservation increasingly became endorsed as an economic revitalization tool during the late 1990s.¹⁴ Enacted in June 1999, the city adopted what would later become a milestone in legislation encouraging the conversion of the majority of Downtown’s historic office buildings into apartments, lofts, and hotels. This legislation was known as the Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO), initially expected to be applied only to Downtown, though later expanding to other parts of the city within a few years. The ARO took approximately three years to materialize with the initial idea emerging in July 1996 in a workshop held by the Central City Association.¹⁵ The focus of the ARO is the

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revitalization of the downtown area's cultural resources, as well as attempting to address the housing crisis within the city. The ordinance works to increase the ease in obtaining a building permit through a more streamlined process, which has resulted in the creation of several thousand new housing units that are served by transit and existing infrastructure.¹⁶ Bernstein states that the ARO “played the most important role” in the dramatic transformation from desertion to revitalization within Downtown LA.¹⁷

Furthering the ARO initiative: activism and opportunity

The Los Angeles Conservancy, a preservation activist group advocating for the protection and rehabilitation of derelict historic structures in the city and county of Los Angeles, is one of the most significant catalysts for the success in adaptive reuse the city would soon experience.¹⁸ In July 1999, shortly after the enactment of the ARO, the group authored its own blueprint for Downtown revitalization entitled “The Broadway Initiative” and mentioned the creation of a twenty-four hour district through the conversion of vacant office space into residential apartments as a primary goal.¹⁹

The Conservancy shifted its policy focus to housing creation in the Historic Core area, furthering this initiative through the commissioning of a task force of architects and engineers who would assess the potential for reuse of 273 buildings in the area. This study, carried out in April 2000, would come to be known as the Historic Core Housing Survey; it was able to identify fifty buildings suitable for conversion to housing outlined in the blueprint.²⁰ The Historic Core Housing Survey was an early demonstration of the potential inherent in historic buildings in Downtown and the city itself.

The first project carried out under the ARO was undertaken by Gilmore Associates in what is now touted as the highly successful Old Bank District. The project consists of four formerly abandoned and historic office buildings transformed into over 230 rental apartments with commercial uses on the ground level. These buildings include the San Fernando building (1907), the Hellman Building (1902), the Continental Building (1904) and the Farmers and Merchants Bank (1905).²¹ Following its success, several other developers quickly followed suit in the reuse movement in the area and the Old Bank District project would act as the primary precedent and catalyst for further redevelopment that would spur the dramatic revitalization of Downtown. However, we should say that this success was not guaranteed; the Los Angeles Conservancy played a major role in implementing and marketing the ordinance.²² In 2002 and 2003, the city and the Conservancy organised roundtables in to persuade the lenders to provide money to developers willing to use the ordinance.²³

Outcomes of revitalization through the ARO

While the introduction of the ARO brought large amounts of housing to Downtown through reuse tactics and stimulated the revitalization of the area and preservation of its heritage resources greatly, it did not come without its consequences. Concerns regarding the gentrification of Downtown have become common, as the displacement of low-income residents coupled with a lack of new affordable housing²⁴ has produced an increasingly divided neighbourhood. An entirely new demographic has been drawn to Downtown through high levels of investment from developers undertaking adaptive reuse projects that have transformed certain areas into chic urban spaces.

Generating sustainable development through adaptive reuse while also providing continuity of social inclusiveness and cohesion is challenging.²⁵ Because reuse projects require large upfront costs, developers often attempt to make their money back faster through high rental fees.²⁶ Policies targeted specifically towards the effects of adaptive reuse, including loss of affordable housing and rent increases, should be considered and explored to mitigate the negative aspects related to gentrification

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within these processes. These types of gentrification issues may be lessened through reuse projects that are devoted to keeping communities intact by considering low-income residents or incentivizing proprietors to maintain the community.²⁷ Evidently, there is a tangible tension between historic preservation, affordable housing, and the creation of mixed-income communities.²⁸

Gentrification related to adaptive reuse that produces housing development targeted towards higher-income groups than those in the surrounding area can be categorized as “new-build” gentrification, as opposed to “standard” gentrification.²⁹ Gentrification issues appear to be common in relation to many kinds of adaptive reuse projects. When rapid physical transformation occurs in historic core areas, gentrification is a feature that usually presents itself. This conflict arguably requires consideration of preservation of cultural heritage related to an existing community alongside the preservation of heritage structures. When adaptive reuse projects become highly successful in short amounts of time, it becomes much more difficult to do so.

While adaptive reuse can be seen as an advantageous green enterprise with significantly lower environmental costs in comparison to new construction and demolition, there is a risk of detrimental effects pertaining to social equity issues and lack of affordable housing available.³⁰ The increasing influx of higher-income and wealthy residents into these new residential developments has produced an exacerbated spatial proximity of social realities that are highly polarized.³¹ At the same time, older buildings that are suitable for reuse are often significant aesthetic, cultural, and economic resources.³² It is imperative to maintain and utilize these structures wherever possible. The ARO resulted in seventy-six projects in Downtown alone producing 9,137 units of new Downtown housing, including 2,479 condominium units.³³

THE MARKETING: “LIVE, WORK, AND PLAY” OR THE RE-CONCEPTUALIZATION OF URBAN VALUES

In this section we examine how Downtown LA living has been branded by analysing the marketing discourse displayed through the Downtown BIA’s website and the imagery used in the advertising of loft apartments. Brett Martin states “...what Downtown L.A. is trying to become: a Great City in the heart of a city that destroyed cities,”³⁴ but is this really the case?

The marketing of Downtown living includes a variety of themes: community, entertainment (dining, sports, etc.) and culture. In this sense, the marketing displays and sells a new conceptualisation of the city that is more individualistic and no longer based on traditional values (alterity, social mixity, diversity) as illustrated in Jane Jacobs’ or Lewis Mumford’s formative works on “urbanity.” To the contrary, advertisements for loft apartments are targeting hedonist single young professionals as displayed in Figure 1.

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Holly
Fitness Journalist
Tea Aficionado
Proud Parent of "Josie"
Santee Village Resident

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from the low \$300s the freedom to be you

unique lofts for your unique lifestyle in LA's fashion district

sign up at Santeevillage.com
716 S. Los Angeles Street, Suite D
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ABN PRINCIPAL REALTY GROUP LLC HOME LOANS

Seller reserves the right to change pricing without notice. Models do not depict racial preferences.

Figure 1. Lofts advertisement (Fashion District)

Source: www.santeevillage.com

As stated by Zukin in *Naked City*, the concept of “authenticity” has migrated from a quality of people, to quality of things and to a quality of experiences.³⁵ This is unerringly how Downtown LA is now being celebrated: as a place where different experiences are possible. The Downtown BIA is branding Downtown LA as a place where you get your “cultural fix,” “rejuvenate yourself,” or experience the “Vibrant City” or “the downtown by night.”³⁶ The new downtown dweller is enjoying a marketed culture and can experience different cities within one. Downtown LA is branded as a multifaceted urban environment that is safe and well-connected to transit.

We maintain that the traditional idea of what is a city is now being challenged. In the imagery and discourse displayed in the marketing ads, the individuals presented are part of an urban tribe and evidently do not represent everyone (e.g. the single with a dog, the young couple, etc.). The marketing of lofts located in Downtown LA is clearly targeted towards a specific category of the population. This statement concurs with concepts associated with the postmodern society: “tribes developed around preferences and lifestyles and are replacing social classes.”³⁷ The way Downtown LA is being marketed fits well with the way the postmodern consumer is being depicted: “the postmodern consumer is more active than its modern predecessor, in constant search of stimulation through events and images, experiences and pleasure are important, the postmodern consumer is engaged in different lifestyles.”³⁸ In other words, the new Downtown LA dweller - as portrayed in the marketing of lofts -

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is the antithesis of a key figure of modernity and urbanization, the flâneur: “the detached observer, a pleasure-seeking stroller...a loiterer, frittering away time.”³⁹ This concurs with the identification of the postmodern agenda as reconsidering the significance of the city centre and acknowledging the potential for the consumption of increasingly marketed culture.⁴⁰ This rediscovery of the city centre in a city which has continually and forcefully expanded its edges outward through automobile dependency is evidently significant.

Table 1. Defining Downtown LA urbanity against modern and postmodern archetypes

	Modern metropolis	Postmodern urbanity	Downtown LA urbanity
Social	Diversity/social mix (key figures of the flâneur and the stranger)	Privatopia/enclaves/edge cities as a new urbanity	Urbanity “À la Carte”/single young professionals are the target
Economy	Progressive decentralization towards the suburbs	Dominant role of edge cities	Recentralization towards the city centre, concentration of economic activities in selected hubs (transit-oriented development)
Governance	Top-down	Entrepreneurial	Hybrid
Planning	Functional zoning	“Laissez faire” High tech corridors	Retrofitting the city, strengthening the urban core with the “Live, Work, and Play” concept

Source: Authors’ research.

In Table 1 we illustrate that adaptive reuse is the starting point for a new model of urbanity for Los Angeles. This will be achieved through the “Re:code LA” zoning code revision initiative, which will begin in the Downtown; it will be a two year process that will serve as a pilot project.⁴¹ This project outlines the following priorities: 1. Distinct neighbourhoods; 2. Housing affordability and diversity; 3. Centres and corridors; 4. Transportation choices; 5. Jobs and innovation; 6. A strong core; 7. A healthy city.⁴² “Re:code LA” is also part of a long-term goal of retrofitting LA into a transit-oriented city.⁴³

CONCLUSION

As indicated by Bernstein, critics have been concerned with the displacement of low-income groups and the limited opportunities for providing affordable housing.⁴⁴ In fact, only 797 units created out of 9000 units were produced as affordable housing.⁴⁵ However, the ARO is also recognised as one of the most successful strategies in most recent years as the ARO’s formula combines historic preservation and economic development.⁴⁶ In this paper we displayed that adaptive reuse strategies in the downtown have been the starting point of a retrofit of the city towards sustainable development. Nonetheless, the way Downtown LA living is marketed participated to the construction of a new urbanity that may not be shared or embraced by all if strategies are not implemented to counteract the negative effects of gentrification. While it is true that “the greenest building is the one that already exists,”⁴⁷ the benefits related to sustainability inherent in reuse projects must be accurately weighed

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with the potential negative impacts on the existing social and cultural fabric. Future research may be guided by this notion of attempted balance through policies and strategies in examining the potentially powerful gentrifying features of adaptive reuse, as demonstrated in this paper. Can a middle ground be identified or even achieved in some form within this context?

To directly respond to our initial research question: Downtown LA living is marketed to attract high income population groups/visitors in the downtown. The new urbanity that has been created contradicts the very notion of “urbanity”⁴⁸ and highlights the growing complexity of the LA condition. We end by suggesting further research in careful examination of the impacts of this new urbanity in Downtown LA and consideration of this as a potentially new archetype for the city’s traditionally polycentric, fragmented urbanism.

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