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News

The Downtowners of Distinction: Honoring the Year's Best Projects

By Jon Regardie Feb 23, 2015



photo by Gary Leonard

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - It may be a cliché, but that doesn't mean it's not true: It would have been impossible a decade ago to predict the kinds of projects that are coming online today in Downtown Los Angeles.

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That's what the editorial staff of Los Angeles Downtown News realized as we were considering candidates for this year's Downtowners of Distinction awards. The community is full of housing, entertainment, retail and restaurant projects that might have seemed unfathomable in 2005. Back then who could have guessed that the Central City would be the hippest nightlife destination in Los Angeles, or that it would be the community of choice for young chefs changing the way L.A. eats? Who could have known that 2014 would be the year when Downtown gains a top-notch concert hall, a destination hotel and a huge batch of housing complexes?

In the following pages, Los Angeles Downtown News runs down the winners of our 14th annual Downtowners of Distinction awards. The prizes were created to recognize the individuals, groups and companies that created projects that not only turned a profit, but also made their community and the whole of the Central City a better place.

The nine district winners for 2014 were selected by the editorial staff of Downtown News, and the awards will be handed out Tuesday, Feb. 24 (prizes were not given in every Downtown district). Next week the Project of the Year, selected from among the individual winners by leaders from each district, will be announced.

This year's Downtowners of Distinction includes a new twist: the inclusion in eight categories of other Notable Projects. Picking 2014 winners was harder than ever due to the unprecedented number of high-quality endeavors that benefit their community. We only give one Distinction award in each district, but we wanted to recognize some of those who took great risks to create new projects.

Following, in alphabetical order by district, are this year's Downtowners of Distinction winners.

Arts District

One Santa Fe

The Arts District changed forever when One Santa Fe opened last September. The development from McGregor Brown Company, Cowley Real Estate Partners, Polis Builders and Canyon Capital Realty Advisors created 438 apartments on a former Metro rail yard across from SCI-Arc. The \$160 million development at 300 S. Santa Fe Ave. not only adds street life to the community, it is also a draw for the neighborhood, thanks to the retail component that will hold about 25 restaurants and stores, including a supermarket and an ice cream parlor. The design by Michael Maltzan features long, colorful expanses and open spaces that pull people in and leave room for future interaction with the L.A. River.

OTHER NOTABLE PROJECTS: Barker Block Phase 2, LA Boulders, EightyTwo, The Springs

*Broadway Corridor***Ace Hotel & Theatre**

The phrase "game changer" is thrown around a lot, and is usually hyperbole. In the case of the Ace Hotel, however, it's accurate. The transformation of the 1927 United Artists Theatre and building at 929 S. Broadway has ignited a neighborhood boom. The 12-story structure with 182 guest rooms is attracting tourists who patronize Downtown businesses, and the restaurant L.A. Chapter has become a hipster destination. Perhaps the most exciting part of the project is the gorgeous renovation of the theater itself, and the 1,600-seat space now hosts concerts and events. The hotel's impact extends beyond its property line: With Ace as the base, Ninth and Broadway is Downtown's new hot corner, with a flurry of shops and restaurants opening.

OTHER NOTABLE PROJECTS: Urban Outfitters, Acme Studios, Oak, Aesop, Broadway Dress Rehearsal

*Bunker Hill***The Emerson**

It would have been easy for developer Related Cos. to walk away after the recession hammered initial plans to reimagine Grand Avenue. However, the company stuck around, and last October was finally able to open its first new Downtown housing project. The Emerson, at 225 S. Grand Ave., is a 20-story structure with 216 residences (20% of them set aside as affordable housing). The slim, tall tower designed by Miami-based Arquitectonica wisely aims to complement the nearby Disney Hall and The Broad rather than try to equal the architectural landmarks. Residents aren't the only ones who will benefit from the \$120 million project — an Italian restaurant run by chef Agostino Sciandri is also on the way.

OTHER NOTABLE PROJECTS: Colburn School's Performance Schedule, Gloria Kaufman Presents Dance at the Music Center

*Central City East***Star Apartments**

Skid Row Housing Trust's Star Apartments, which began move-ins in early 2014, isn't just one of the most striking buildings in Skid Row, it's one of the most striking buildings in all of Los Angeles. Architect Michael Maltzan continued his practice of turning expectations for what low-income housing should be upside down. The \$21 million development at 240 E. Sixth St. utilized prefabricated housing units that were assembled in Idaho, then trucked to Los Angeles and put together on site. The 102 apartments give people formerly living on the streets a new beginning. It's not just housing either: The project includes in-building support services, exercise and art space, and a community garden.

OTHER NOTABLE PROJECTS: City Attorney Mike Feuer's Crackdown on Homeless Patient Dumping, LAPD Senior Lead Officer Deon Joseph's Stand on Crime and Mental Health Issues

*Civic Center***Hall of Justice**

The Hall of Justice was perhaps Downtown's biggest casualty from the 1994 Northridge earthquake, and the historic edifice at 211 W. Temple St. sat empty for more than two decades. That changed on Oct. 8, when the 1925 building reopened following an extensive renovation and reinvention approved by Los Angeles County and handled by architecture firm AC Martin and builder Clark Construction. The \$230 million project has once again made the landmark with the stately columns a vital hub of the Civic Center. In the past the Hall of Justice held 17 courtrooms and 700 jail cells. Now, it serves as the headquarters of the District Attorney's office and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department.

*Financial District***8TH+HOPE**

Many Downtowners have been disturbed by the number of low-rise housing projects opening in the community, feeling a rare opportunity for density is being squandered. That's not the case at 8th + Hope, where Atlanta-based Wood Partners spent \$120 million to build an ultra-modern, upscale tower with 290 apartments. The 22-story structure adds to the residential base in the Financial District, and inhabitants can easily walk to the restaurants and

bars on Seventh Street and the shops and coming movie theaters in the adjacent The Bloc. 8th + Hope is another case of a project many thought would never come: Wood Partners bought the site before the recession and saw its plans delayed. However, the team never gave up, and now has achieved its vision.

OTHER NOTABLE PROJECTS: Q Sushi, Psomas Paper Yacht Challenge, H&M and Zara Open at FIGat7th, Tender Greens

Historic Core

The Regent

Even as the Old Bank District boomed over the past 15 years, the Regent Theatre sat ugly and empty. No more. Mitchell Frank of Downtown-based Spaceland Productions oversaw a lengthy renovation, and in November the 1914 building at 448 S. Main St. was reborn as Los Angeles' best new music venue, with space for 1,100 people and killer sight lines, including from a newly constructed mezzanine. The upgrade modernized the building but paid heed to the past, with a new paint scheme for the original stage proscenium and other moves. Historic Core residents don't have to check out an indie rock show or DJ to benefit from the Regent's transformation — the project also includes the new Love Song Bar and Prufrock Pizzeria, with separate entrances on Main Street.

OTHER NOTABLE PROJECTS: Rebound of Grand Central Market, Return of The Must

Little Tokyo

East West Players

The Little Tokyo theater company East West Players is celebrating a milestone: its 50th anniversary season. This is no small feat for an independent house, and much of the credit goes to producing artistic director Tim Dang, who for 21 years has guided the company headquartered in the Union Center for the Arts at 120 Judge John Aiso St. EWP, which moved to Little Tokyo in 1998, has become part of the fabric of Downtown, drawing theatergoers to shows that speak to the Asian-American experience. The lineup remains adventurous, a mix of new works and revivals of musicals by big names such as Stephen Sondheim. One can only hope that EWP keeps bringing people to the community for another half century.

OTHER NOTABLE PROJECTS: Wolf & Crane, U-Space

South Park

Faith & Flower

The accolades for Faith & Flower have come fast and furious, and include being named one of the best new restaurants in America by Esquire magazine. The buzz is deserved, as the space at 705 W. Ninth St., on the ground floor of the Watermark Tower, is drawing diners eager to sample the small plates with globetrotting flavors prepared by chef Michael Hung. The restaurant, which opened in June, is attractive and airy, and it's frequently packed. While the food stands out, it's got a worthy star at the bar in the form of bar director Michael Lay English Milk Punch — Esquire named it the "Cocktail of the Year."

OTHER NOTABLE PROJECTS: Courtyard by Marriott & Residence Inn, Avant, AEG Dog Park

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