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Building boom gives Hollywood pause

Some worry that a proliferation of high-end projects will bury the charm of the storied area's golden past.

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Construction cranes hover over Hollywood as the movie industry's historic home undergoes another sweeping -- and sometimes wrenching -- transformation.

More than a dozen multimillion-dollar projects have been announced, launched or just completed that promise new shopping and restaurants, thousands of new apartments and condominiums and towers of glass and steel.

Glitzy clubs dot once-sketchy street corners. Residents swim atop the former Broadway department store at Hollywood and Vine. Construction projects cuddle up to Grauman's Chinese Theatre and are popping up in the shadow of the landmark Capitol Records tower.

The changes can be both impressive and alarming to those who know Hollywood best. Residents and business owners marvel at the improvements around them. Yet they prize the lingering charm of Hollywood's golden past and fear that the place they love is slipping away.

"My worst-case scenario is that it loses the special flavor that is unique to Hollywood," said neighborhood activist Cheryl Holland, who has lived there for almost 20 years.

"We want some give and take" with planners and developers, she said. "Our streets are unique because we abut commercial property." But, she added, "this is a very historic neighborhood with streets that are quaint and charming."

The love-hate battle over development that is playing out in neighborhoods all over the Southland and elsewhere is amplified here. Every construction permit faces questions about parking, open space, blocked views, historic preservation and the stress on basic city services.

To be sure, some outsiders may dismiss the concerns as grouching by people who don't appreciate how good they have it. After all, this is a neighborhood of growing affluence seeing an explosion of new entertainment venues and luxury housing and hotel rooms that would be the envy of much of Southern California.

Not just a neighborhood

Reinventing Hollywood is a challenge more daunting than most city centers ever face. "It's a place of dreams, a metaphor and not just a neighborhood," said urban expert Joel Garreau. People have so many different visions in their mind of what Hollywood is, he said, "you are going to get incredible culture clash, economic clash and political clash."

Since the days of Cecil B. DeMille, Hollywood has been larger than life and still holds a grip on people's attention and fascination with Southern California. Changes like those underway today come with protest, boosterism, second-guessing, excitement and angst.

With traffic already awful at many hours, fears multiply that congestion will make Hollywood truly unbearable if developers aren't reined in. Parking has become a fractious issue, too, as prices rise at a diminishing number of lots and local leaders debate whether to build more garages.

Between the traffic and parking difficulties, "it's not much longer that we are going to be able to come down there," said Hollywood Hills resident Daniel Savage. "There is a fantastic domino effect that happens when traffic backs up."

For many, it is all a mixed blessing. No one seems to miss the bad old days dating back to the 1960s, when the neighborhood started losing its luster as many prosperous residents decamped L.A.'s urban core for the suburbs.

Entertainment industry businesses fled too as teen runaways, drug dealers and prostitutes populated the boulevard and traditional Main Street-style stores gave way to strip joints, tattoo parlors and touristy trinket shops.

The neighborhood's reputation was so bad by the 1980s, recalled honorary Hollywood mayor Johnny Grant in an interview shortly before his death in January, that "it was tough to get people to come accept a star on the Walk of Fame."

Grant's boosterism was a source of amusement, he recalled. "The big sport was laughing at me because I kept saying that Hollywood was coming back."

Observers stopped laughing a few years ago as investment exploded in Hollywood. Nearly 5,000 condominiums and apartments have been built or are soon to be underway in the blocks around Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street, where a glitzy W Hotel is also under construction.

Plans have been announced to add 10 stories of office space atop the historic Pantages Theatre to complete the original 1920s design. And nightclubs seem to be opening on every block -- there are, according to police, about 100 establishments in the core entertainment district licensed to sell liquor.

Meanwhile, crime in Hollywood is down 32% from 2003, said Capt. Clayton Farrell of the Los Angeles Police Department.

"We don't have the endemic crime problems that Hollywood experienced in the '80s and '90s in spite of an increase in the number of persons coming to Hollywood for entertainment," Farrell said. "The nightclubs bring in alcohol and other issues but also a lot of affluence and people" who patronize other businesses.

'A little tawdry'

In the years after World War II, Hollywood was "a glamorous little town," said writer Milt Larsen, with chic nightclubs, elite restaurants including the Brown Derby and live theater. He enjoyed going from studio to studio to sit in the audiences of radio broadcasts by the likes of Jack Benny, Fanny Brice and Groucho Marx.

Magicians still perform to crowds in the legendary Magic Castle that Larsen founded in Hollywood in 1963. But by then, he said, Hollywood Boulevard was "starting to get a little tawdry."

Now it's on the upswing again. In five years, the boulevard "will be a cross between Melrose Avenue and the Third Street Promenade" in Santa Monica, predicted developer Richard Heyman. He is working on a \$12.5-million refurbishment of the Art Deco-style former Kress dime store that later became the flagship of racy lingerie seller Frederick's of Hollywood.

When the Kress opens in a few weeks, it will house a nightclub, restaurant, sushi bar, banquet room and rooftop bar. Owner Michael Viscuso also has acquired other property nearby, with plans to add more stores and to build a 15-story hotel-condominium.

Viscuso said he had watched Hollywood for almost a decade but "the streets looked pretty rough." Around 2005 he could see change coming and wanted to get in on it. "It's amazing now."

The heady pace of that change -- more than \$2 billion worth of development since 2003 with an additional almost \$1 billion approved and ready to start -- is unnerving people like Hollywood Hills resident Savage, who is also president of the Hollywood Knolls Community Club homeowners group.

"It's all going way too fast for me," said Savage, who fears that growth will overwhelm roads, mass transit and other public services. "I'm not a Luddite," he said. "I generally believe in the free market, but I think someone needs to call a timeout and let the infrastructure catch up."

Pendulum swings

Hollywood has long been known for low rents and as a destination for starving artist types such as actors and musicians as well as home to a large number of immigrants. Losing such residents would reduce some of the "economic diversity" special to Hollywood, says City Planning Commissioner Michael Woo, a former City Council

member. "I anticipate more concern about gentrification and people being pushed out."

But there is probably no stopping it. Hollywood is going through a type of dramatic change that is sweeping many of the country's city centers, said analyst Christopher Leinberger of the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. "What we are dealing with here is the pent-up demand in this country for walkable urban places."

By Leinberger's reckoning, there are two models for real estate development: "walkable urban" and "drivable suburban." After more than 60 years of focusing almost exclusively on the latter, the pendulum is swinging back toward urban living in the United States, and the Los Angeles region is woefully short of neighborhoods where residents can work, shop and entertain themselves on foot, he said.

"Great urbanism attracts people," Leinberger said. "Places that do have it are going to have overwhelming demand."

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