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ROW DTLA: The Vast Complex of Historic Structures Is Transformed Into a Downtown Destination



One of downtown’s historic structures. (Jim McHugh)

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“It’s really one of the most beautiful formal spaces on the West Coast, with a symmetry that could be a courtyard in Paris,” says architect Mark Rios. The space he’s describing—originally known as the L.A. Terminal Market in downtown Los Angeles, now known as the 7th Street Produce Market—is a central component of ROW DTLA. One of the area’s most anticipated and largest

developments, ROW weaves together retail, restaurants and creative office spaces to stunning effect. Sprawling over 30 acres—from 7th Street to 8th Street, and from Central Avenue to Alameda Street—the mixed-use property straddles the rapidly changing boundary between the Arts District and the Industrial District. “When I first saw it, I was blown away by the scale of it,” Rios remembers. “I just thought it was amazing.”

The six buildings and expansive courtyard that form the backbone of the space—designed in part by famed Los Angeles architect John Parkinson and built between 1917 and 1923 by the Southern Pacific Railroad—once played a significant role in the distribution of produce throughout the country. In fact, 1 percent of the fruits and vegetables on America’s tables still originate from here. Eighty-five feet tall and constructed from board-formed concrete with vast stretches of multi-paned windows, the buildings have large, open floor plans and were created to warehouse produce below and offices above. In the skillful hands of Mark Rios and his team at Rios Clementi Hale Studios (House and Robertson are the executive architects), they’ve been reimaged as a vibrant commercial center that pays homage to the city’s industrial and agricultural past while promoting what promises to be a vital future.

“Luckily, we were working with someone who didn’t want it to feel like a mall had been dropped down in the middle of this historic area,” says design principal Sebastian Salvado, referring to developer Jeffrey A. Goldberger. “He wanted to extend the neighborhood.” Goldberger, the New York-based principal of Atlas Capital Group—a real-estate investment, development and management firm—had first encountered the area while dining at Bestia, the lauded Italian restaurant that opened nearby in November 2012, and had immediately seen its potential. “He described it as the Meatpacking District of L.A.,” Salvado remembers.



Retail storefronts, restaurants and recreation spaces are popping up along ROW’s “streets,” former produce-loading docks for the Southern Pacific Railroad. ((Jim McHugh))

“I told Jeffrey that what he had was such a gem, he had to be really careful not to ruin it,” says Rios. “We really thought a lot about what happened in those buildings and how we could honor them while at the same time making places for all these new industries.” That it could have gone very wrong is apparent with a close look at Building One, whose thick concrete frames and whitewashed exterior are the remnants of an earlier development attempt. But given Rios’s insistence on “keeping as much of the age and the old paint and the dirt and the grit as possible,” things took a “less Disneyland approach.” The result blurs the line between old and new, past and present, fusing seamlessly with the neighborhood and the burgeoning arts-driven community that surrounds it. Upgrades are barely discernible: Worn streets have been freshly paved; roll-up doors were removed to create shaded arcades; backlit pallets, a reference to the wooden fruit crates, illuminate newly installed staircases; trees were shifted or added.

Although it may be hard to remember, when the Grove opened in 2002, its ring of stores centered around a park imploded the conventional idea of a mall. In the intervening years, with its skillful blend of retail and recreation, it has become a gathering place as much as a marketplace. But the release of the iPhone in 2007 and the subsequent rise of online socializing and shopping has dramatically shifted our relationship to retail. ROW DTLA announces the next phase. Harkening back to the traditional downtown, it relies on an idiosyncratic mix of independent merchants and emerging brands, as well as a built-in audience of creative tenants, to give it life. “We’re really only interested in putting people down there who don’t have a ton of distribution in other parts of L.A., or they’re opening their first store ever,” says David Fishbein of Runyon Group, the complex’s retail-leasing agent (CBRE handles office space), who cut his teeth stocking his own development, Culver City’s Platform.



Andy Griffith and Rose Apodaca, owners of A+R ((Jim McHugh))

Rose Apodaca remembers that discovering ROW DTLA was “thrill at first sight.” She and her husband, Andy Griffith, who run A+R, the high-end furniture and lighting store, were the first tenants, grabbing a choice spot at the end of Market Row. They’ve since been joined on the long street (it’s the equivalent of eight New York City blocks) by Poketo, Rappahannock Oyster Bar and Bodega, a cutting-edge Boston-based menswear

store. Like the other streets, whose names reflect their working-class past, it's quickly filling up. Dock Street, its raised sidewalk punctuated with pavilions, is anchored by San Francisco's Tartine Manufactory, a 38,500-square-foot food hall that will open early next year, and their pizzeria collaboration with Chris Bianco. Health and wellness offerings—Shadowbox, Bender Yoga, Nova Arts Salon—dominate the street that parallels the garage. There are rumblings that The Narrows, still under construction, will sport a hotel; and word is that a garden will eventually replace the flat stretch of the old American Apparel parking lot that borders Alameda, further integrating the property and the neighborhood.

Though it's easy to find parking in the ten-story garage—with 4,000 parking spaces and a landscaped roof, it's the largest structure of its kind in the county—don't expect it to remain that way for long. "The complex is so beautiful, it's really nice to open it to Angelenos and make it a public space," says Rios. "The original buildings were just really great, so it was fun to make them the stars."

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