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A CONVERSATION ABOUT PRESERVATION

[Theo Douglas](#) Mon. September 14

Developers, architects, and city folk discuss saving our history

As a way to showcase all their hard work restoring the East Village Creative Offices—the official name for the three buildings of office condos at Fourth Street and Linden Avenue—the folks behind the project threw open their still-being-finished doors Friday for a panel discussion on Adaptive Reuse in Long Beach, a concept they said could some day expand to embrace the entire city and its panoply of historic architecture.

The names of the folks involved read like a Who's Who of Long Beach commercial development and redevelopment: emcee Becky Blair of Blair Commercial Real Estate, which is selling the office suites; Long Beach Planning Officer Derek Burnham; Walker Building Lofts developer Bill Lindberg; Insurance Exchange Building developer Dan Peterson; Studio-111 principal Alan Pullman; and Art Theatre developer Jan Van Dijs (who's also doing this project).

But in a way, even they were there to hear from Central City Development Group's Hamid Behdad, one of the masterminds of Los Angeles's adaptive reuse ordinance and its downtown revitalization—and what he could tell them about Long Beach.

His advice?

“Try not to change the world overnight. That was our approach from Day First,” Behdad said at one point, after Van Dijs, Peterson and Lindberg had spoken rather candidly about their dealings with the City of Long Beach. “Let's start with one area and see what happens. We started with a cluster of buildings downtown.”

Behdad, former director of adaptive reuse projects for the City of Los Angeles, was honored for his preservation efforts by the Los Angeles Conservancy in 2007.

But while the three developers present were warm in their words toward the City of Long Beach—which they said is increasingly aware of the history present in each vintage commercial structure that remains—each offered anecdotes of exactly how difficult it had been, mobilizing a small army of workers to make an ancient building reusable.

“When we started doing this project, it was eight years and one day ago,” Peterson said, speaking on Sept. 11, 2009—and meaning that, yes, the Insurance Exchange Building restoration broke ground Sept. 10, 2001. A day later, he said, and no one would have come. As it was:

“We had to prove to the city, ‘This is what we're going to be doing.’ Beverly O'Neill was the Mayor at the time and she said ‘Oh, can I see inside?’ ” Peterson recalled. Today, of course, it's restored, and he lives in the building's penthouse—but in 2001, it was vacant, moldering, and bearing evidence of previous tenants such as pigeons.

“She opened up the door and looked inside, and she goes ‘Oh, my God!’ ” Peterson remembered. “It's the process of starting with something that's worse than nothing and then you have to build on that.”

Van Dijs, whose restorations also include the Ebell Club, said the Creative Offices redo—which includes restoring the historic 1920s Art Deco former Cytron Furniture building—has in some ways been his easiest project.

“I would say that of all the buildings we've done in Long Beach, this was the most pleasant experience, and that was due to [the] Redevelopment Agency,” Van Dijs said, offering some sobering words to a packed room of financial types, developers, at least one Redevelopment Agency board member (John Thomas) and Walker Building residents:

“Cities,” he said, “are non-essential. You don’t have to come downtown to shop. You can go to the mall.”

This is the quintessential problem which Long Beach has been grappling with ever since the Army Corps of Engineers built the breakwater, Disneyland opened, and the Segerstrom family gave us South Coast Plaza: we don’t have to come downtown; they have to make us want to.

In past years, the city’s vision of making that happen extended to levelling blocks of historic buildings in the traditional retail district—but now, thanks to the economy and to an increasing awareness of Long Beach’s historic worth, that doesn’t happen as often.

“We need to have the mindset that we need to preserve things and stop tearing them down, and I think we’re gradually getting to that,” said Burnham, the city planning officer. “We certainly have some of the regulations in planning to do what we want to do, but there are some things we could do better.” Thomas, the RDA board member, seemed to agree.

“The policy makers need to totally get behind adaptive reuse,” Thomas said. “The ’60s are 50 [years old]. Midcentury buildings are becoming historic. The interconnection and the understanding of different agencies is paramount.”

“It’s a shame that we have to learn from the experience of the trailblazers,” Burnham said, “but we have.”

Others, like Behdad, have been watching Long Beach and forming their opinions of us.

“When Long Beach came onto our radar about eight years ago,” Behdad said, “we said constantly, ‘This looks like a place where you can live and walk somewhere.’ ”

Now, thanks to a growing number of adaptive reuse projects like the Masonic Temple lofts, the Insurance Exchange Building lofts, the Walker and Kress buildings; survivors like the Ocean Center and Wards Pharmacy buildings; and vintage former hotels like the Dolly Varden, Broadlind and Lafayette, that’s becoming a reality.

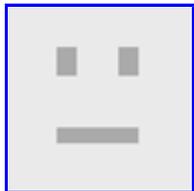
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