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## SEARCHING FOR LOST CIVILIZATIONS IN DOWNTOWN L.A.

Like Anthropologists Unearthing Clues to an Ancient Culture, Visionary Architects, Developers and Investors Work to Find the Treasure Beneath the Blight

*by Thomas W. McCaslin, Executive Vice President, Tishman Construction Corporation*

Imagine men in tuxedos and women in glamorous gowns socializing in the lobby of the Orpheum Theater on Broadway. Or well-dressed, white-gloved society ladies shopping and lunching at the great department stores that once dominated the downtown skyline. Rumor has it that Jack Benny met his wife at the May Company perfume counter where she was employed as a sales clerk. And did you know that the big bands used to play in Pershing Square, and that the streets of downtown were used regularly for massive celebrations of political and sports victories?



It's hard to picture downtown L.A. as a fresh, new metropolitan hub where average middle class families shopped, dined and played alongside the affluent and glamorous. But between the 1920s and the 1940s it was just that...a thriving cultural and commercial center anchored by grand theaters, fine restaurants and distinguished department stores. Hollywood and Beverly Hills were still mostly rural at the time, and downtown was the center of life, functioning just like a traditional downtown is supposed to. But as the city spread and the suburbs rose up, downtown moved into the background, and regional "downtowns" --

like Westwood and Burbank -- became central to the suburban communities that surrounded them.

While some parts of downtown continued to be developed, other parts were neglected, and sadly, some of these contained our most important architectural treasures. Piece by piece, one by one, these treasures are being discovered and revived, and one of the most interesting areas of revitalization is the once-vital stretch of Broadway between 3rd and 9th streets.

The Los Angeles Conservancy is deeply involved in the "Broadway Initiative," a project designed to breathe new life into the area. The Conservancy oversees dozens of projects that address the preservation of historical buildings, but the Broadway plan differs because it focuses on culture rather than just architecture. Most of the classic buildings on Broadway are in good shape and aren't threatened with demolition, which frees the Conservancy to concentrate its efforts on stimulating human activity. Their walking tours and film festivals in the old theaters attract more than 10,000 people to the area every summer. While three of the theaters -- The Palace, The Orpheum and the Million Dollar -- still operate as entertainment venues, others have been adapted for re-use as everything from retail outlets to churches.

A prime example of the ways in which developers and designers make classic buildings serve new purposes can be seen in one of the most extensive adaptive re-use projects downtown. The old Broadway Department Store building, which was built in 1914 as the flagship headquarters for the store, has been transformed into the Junipero Serra Building, which will house offices for the state of California. With the cost of space in the building working out to about \$1.20 per square foot, developers, architects and contractors were able to create highly efficient office space at less than half the cost of new construction.

The 500,000 square-foot structure has undergone a \$52 million rehabilitation and retrofit which took more than three years to complete. The building reflects the



beauty and grace of a bygone era, and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and the California Register of Historical Resources. The project is a much-needed catalyst in the revitalization of the blighted Broadway district, and acts as a centerpiece for the L.A. Conservancy's action plan to return the six block strip to its original splendor. Projects like this trigger further investment, and that's the kind of domino effect developers like to see.



The Broadway/Junipero Serra transition is representative of how modern technology can integrate seamlessly with tradition. The office center meets the computer-related needs of its tenants with the latest in telecommunications technology, including fiber optic cabling, satellite tv equipment, card key security and DDC energy management systems. At the same time, the building's original Italian revival design themes were adhered to closely, and features like high arches, large framed windows and decorative cornices were retained. All the building's artwork has been created by a range of California artists, and focuses on local life, culture and history.

Similar re-use projects are helping to alter the character of downtown with the intention of turning it into a true 24-hour urban center by transforming old buildings into residential space. Tom Gilmore of Gilmore Associates already has 50 people on the waiting list for the first phase of his old Bank District project. This collection of 7 buildings on 4th street, Spring and Main is being converted into apartments aimed at a young, upscale demographic. But Tom's concept isn't limited to simply creating living space. He sees it more as building a neighborhood.

While the building facades, interiors and landscaping are changing, it's the people that really make a neighborhood, and the demographic target for these residential projects represents an eclectic mix. The age group is roughly between 22-35, and they're reasonably educated, employed full-time in mostly creative businesses like computers, the arts and entrepreneurial endeavors. As Tom Gilmore describes it, "they're a group of people who don't buy into the traditional segregationist view of L.A. They want a diverse urban environment and a sense of community where they can mingle in a better density than the suburbs can offer."



Finally, it's interesting to note that Los Angeles is among the last of the major cities to jump onto the re-use bandwagon. Denver, Seattle, Oakland, Baltimore and many others have pioneered these ideas, and now we're finally catching up. Progressive-thinking developers who are willing to break new ground, combined with architectural masterpieces like the old Broadway building, are ingredients that can make magic happen, and make a

lost city come to life again.