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Downtown Buildings Are Creating Art Spaces — and Some of the Art Comments on Downtown

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Photo by Jennifer Swann

A work by Banksy is on display in the U.S. Bank Tower downtown.

By the end of this week, the new residential high-rise at Eighth and Hope streets downtown will have tintype portraits of its initial residents, and the construction workers who built it, in its collection. Artist Omar Lopez took these in a portable dark room he set up just outside the building, which is dubbed 8th + Hope.

A three-week festival of 10-minute plays organized in the building by the nomadic Chalk Repertory Theatre also will have begun. The audience for playwright Ruth McKee's "Right to Post" will walk into the lobby and encounter a concierge, an African-American woman about to face an ethical dilemma. A white woman who tutors a resident in the building will rush in, flustered, having just witnessed a disturbing altercation in the street. What should be done? The two women will disagree. When she wrote the piece, McKee was thinking about the effects of gentrification downtown, how so many different strata of people are interacting with one another in ways they haven't before.

"I haven't seen anything like this in the multifamily industry," says Jonathan Yarnold of Wood Partners, the San Francisco-based company that developed 8th + Hope, about the arts programming he's helped launch. Because they wanted something "flexible and integrative," not static, like so much other art in commercial buildings, Wood decided to include a 12,000-square-foot arts space called the Ground Floor Project, and contract consultant Chantal Lundberg to help find interesting artists. The building opened on Aug. 1 and is more than 30 percent full.

"If we can truly, truly create value greater than a building without it," Yarnold says, the effort will be worthwhile. It will set 8th + Hope apart from downtown peers. "It's still in an experimental phase," he adds.

Downtown has seen a staggering boom of residential, hospitality and multi-use buildings. According to a map published recently by Curbed L.A., there are about 20 new developments within a five-block radius of 8th + Hope. A number of developers are trying to distinguish themselves as culturally savvy — and adding arts spaces often is the way to do that.

In its refurbished theater, the new Ace Hotel has hosted exhibitions and performances that, like the Standard Hotel's longer-running programming, tend to privilege youthfulness and a fashion mag-ready stylishness. The Old Bank District complex now includes a rooftop sculpture garden. But some art in downtown buildings is actually trying to comment on, or at least acknowledge, the neighborhood's changing landscape.

A few blocks north of 8th + Hope, at the U.S. Bank Tower, street artist Banksy's *Haight Street Rat* has been installed in a back corridor of the lobby. It's a big rat on siding because the street artist initially painted it on the side of a San Francisco bed-and-breakfast. Roped off and hanging against neutral walls, it looks a lot more like a commodity that's being shown off than it probably will two months from now, when it moves to a nonprofit in the Bay Area.

"At first I didn't think it was a good idea," says Brian Greif, who saved the Banksy painting from being whitewashed and launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund its preservation. He asked other street artists what they thought of having Banksy in the bank tower. The consensus was that it might actually be kind of cool — "street art in the heart of enemy territory," he says — as long as it was temporary and the public could see it for free. "We appreciate art and the different forms it can be communicated in," reads the statement issued by OUE Limited, which owns the tower.

"Art is used as a social service obligation," says Tim Keating, who, along with Jonathan Jerald, is running the Arts District Center for the Arts, which will move into the massive, soon-to-open One Santa Fe residential building two miles east of 8th + Hope. He means that in commercial and civic spaces, art isn't usually allowed to be edgy and interesting. Keating, who met with architect Michael Maltzan back when the project was first proposed, helped smooth over resentment of an Arts District community that had legitimate concerns about being priced out of its own neighborhood.

"They would never have gotten the building permits without me," Keating says of One Santa Fe, but what he and his colleagues wanted in return was a 5,000-square-foot community art space and screening room in the new complex. After some struggle, they have it on a \$1-per-year lease, as well as two National Endowment for the Arts grants to help with initial programming and buildout. One Santa Fe's management says that space exists, in part, to show the Arts District that the development wants to be part of the community.

These kinds of collaborations between developers and art-space administrators might become even more popular in the coming years. When city controller Ron Galperin audited the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs this spring, he found that the department, which requires developers to either pay fees calculated according to their development's square footage or use equivalent funds to provide art to the public, has been collecting about \$1.3 million per year in those fees but has spent just \$654,000 since 2008. It didn't have "clear plans" for spending the rest.

Galperin had recommendations for changing this, one of which was that Cultural Affairs and representatives from arts organizations in L.A. spend more time strategizing with developers. He ended his report by quoting poet Ezra Pound, who wrote, "All great art is born of the metropolis," and saying he hoped his audit could help Los Angeles bear "more art — and more accountability."

While 8th + Hope's Ground Floor Project space is not part of its Percent-for-Art commitment — it's a separate effort — Emily Hopkins, director of the nonprofit Side Street Projects, hopes it could be an inspiration for developers thinking about how to allocate their arts fees.

Chantal Lundberg cold-called Hopkins when programming 8th + Hope's first exhibition. "They wanted something that honored the construction workers," Hopkins recalls, and she immediately thought of Bettina Hubby, who has done art projects about construction sites before.

It was Hubby who contacted Lopez and other artists who contributed work related to construction and labor. The resulting installation was like something you'd see in an alternative space: some debris in a corner, some video and prints on fabric clipped to chain-link fences.

"It's kind of like reverse gentrification," Hopkins says, albeit in a building that gentrification built.

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