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THE ART OF PLANNING

Los Angeles struggles to mold its emerging arts district.



695 S. SANTA FE
COURTESY SHIMODA DESIGN

LA's Arts District, on the eastern edge of downtown, has for years been a center for experimentation. A rough-around-the-edges place far from the clutches of the usual, full not only of artists, but of semi trucks, imposing warehouses, dangerous chemicals, and gritty street art. That character is now facing a major test as a maelstrom of development is being proposed for the area, which is being compared in some real estate circles to the next Meat Packing District.

In order to keep up with the wave of speculation, and to try to maintain what makes the area unique, LA's planning department in late August released a draft zoning overlay called the Arts District live/work zone. The final legislation, which would double the amount of residential units in the Arts District from 1,500 to 3,000, should be put in front of the planning commission by the end of the year.

The update stresses keeping the existing character and uses of the area while addressing some of its livability issues. Among other things it will largely eschew traditional apartments in favor of live/work ones, continue to allow for both industrial and residential land use, and mandate a minimum of arts and productive uses in each new project. To help with habitability, it limits the most noxious industrial uses, encourages pedestrian paseos and plazas, and discourages blank, imposing walls.

Building aesthetics will not be strictly regulated, but structures will need to keep massing in check, utilize transparent street frontages, build close to the street line, and maintain some of the warehouse and loft character that has marked the area for the last few decades since the Artist in Residence ordinance allowed artists to start inhabiting former industrial buildings here.

"We don't want a traditional building that sticks on corrugated metal and calls itself an industrial building," said Bryan Eck, one of the LA city planners overseeing the measure.

The guidelines have the difficult task of balancing the demands of both existing artists and newcomers looking for a place that is both edgy and livable. The big question is what does the arts district want to be? Up to this point, said Tyler Stonebreaker, one of the founders of Creative Space, a real estate consultancy that has been “curating” much of the offerings coming to the Arts District, there has not been a clear conclusion. Like many here he favors an area with type one and two construction and does not want to water down the neighborhood so it looks like other parts of the city. “Is this an artist neighborhood or another sanitized neighborhood that people are going to live, work, and play in?” asked Stonebreaker.



LOHA'S INDUSTRIAL
COURTESY LOHA

In the center of the battle are architects. Many are top-level firms working with the neighborhood and city planning to adapt to the new ordinance, and in some cases to help inspire it.

Shimoda Design's 695 South Santa Fe (formerly AMP Lofts) was already designed with an industrial-inspired aesthetic. But in response to local comments and to the developing ordinance, Shimoda has significantly increased the average size of the project's units to facilitate live/work, added workshop spaces, and made the development less closed off, with permeability to a central open space, and shorter retail and townhouse spaces closer to the street and larger masses in the middle. “They're trying to preserve the character of the community. It's a special place,” said Ryan Granito of Bolour Associates, the developer of the project. “We're interested in figuring out how we can capture the essence of the Arts District,” said Shimoda.

LOHA is building Industrial, a five-story development of live-work units, commercial spaces, and retail near the corner of Industrial Street and Alameda. Founder Lorcan O'Herlihy said that his basic design—a black brick and rusted steel building with large openings in its street wall to a courtyard—has not changed through the process. The building's ground level units will have 18-foot ceiling heights and use type one construction, while above more traditional apartments will have 11-foot-high ceilings and be built with type five. O'Herlihy is not concerned about the use of wood construction in an industrial zone, as some neighbors are. “It's how you work with the material that makes it work,” he said.

Doug Hanson, whose firm Hanson Design is designing the 122-unit 1800 East 7th Street, agreed. His building—which contains all live/work lofts, wraps around a courtyard and a paseo, and features a sculptural glass corner—will be clad with lightweight concrete panels and use type three construction. “People confuse the type of construction with the way they want it to look,” said Hanson.

For those like Stonebreaker, regular living spaces do not cut it. “If you want compartmentalized apartments you should go to areas that already have that kind of housing,” he said. But neighbors are even more concerned with other projects that have raised eyebrows for continuing the unfortunate legacy of late-1990s and early 2000s projects here that took advantage of a policy that allowed

ground-up buildings but did not clearly regulate them. “They became an example of what not to do,” said Eck.



HANSON'S 1800 E. 7TH STREET
COURTESY HANSON LA

So far the biggest offender is 950 East 3rd Street, a 472-unit, mixed-use project on the corner of Traction Avenue, in the long-vacant lot next to SCI-Arc. The developers, Legendary Development and Associated Estates, have not been forthcoming with their plans. But they have received criticism from the community for not reaching out, and for developing a huge amount of units that are not live/work and are out of character with the area.

Maltzan's One Santa Fe has received positive reviews for its design, but some thumbs down for its hulking size, which dwarfs the rest of the area.

Regardless of how these projects turnout, the zoning, a precursor to much larger neighborhood plans in downtown, is still a work in progress. Issues like affordable housing—a vital issue in a place for artists who presumably will not be pulling in large salaries—have yet to be worked out. “We are looking to the community first to see how they want to guide growth in the future,” said Eck. “It’s a real struggle. There’s a lot of development pressure and a lot of speculation.”

Stonebreaker remains vigilant against “creeping other objectives.” For instance, he is guarding against those who want to remove industrial zoning here altogether. “When you’re in an M3 zone you’re choosing to be in an M3 zone. Don’t move to Hollywood if you hate clubs,” he said.

Shimoda, among others, is wary of the guidelines becoming too prescriptive and projects starting to look the same, especially those by developers not interested in pushing the limits. His new plans, some might say, are less unique than the original ones. “I get a sense that planners are trying to make Los Angeles another city and not what it is,” he said. “I get a little nervous when things are a little too pretty. I wonder, where’s the edge?”

Sam Lubell