

Art from start to finish

Discover a new frontier of self-guided culture

BY MELISSA HECKSCHER

>LA.COM

Want to explore downtown but don't want to venture into Los Angeles' only urban frontier on your own?

No problem. Quick Culture, an L.A.-based company specializing in private art-appreciation tours, recently began offering two-hour walking tours of Gallery Row and other downtown districts for those who don't know where to start when it comes to exiting east off of the 110 Freeway.

"It's a challenge to get people downtown because there's this sense of the unknown," said Quick Culture co-founder Charlotte Robinson. "People are intimidated by downtown. ... But there's actually stuff down here." With more than 30 galleries in 14 blocks, Robinson said Gallery Row stands out because of its bohemian sincerity, a natural byproduct, she said, of being a fresh batch of newcomers in a city already teeming with established galleries.

"A number of the galleries are owned by the artists themselves. Some of them have their studios there," Robinson said. "It's a real home that they're trying to create. It's very real." Not to mention, there's the obvious urban advantage: An easy walk.

"It's nice to be able to walk around the neighborhood," Robinson said. "You can go from Point A to Point B and, because you are walking, you can discover things along the way." Those things aren't necessarily inside the galleries. The 12-story Hotel Alexandria on Spring Street, Robinson pointed out, was once the socialite hub of L.A., hosting the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Winston Churchill and President Theodore Roosevelt. And nearby, the Grand Central Market stands as Los Angeles County's oldest open-air market.

Farther west, Angel's Flight, a steep one-block railroad on Hill Street, was known as the "shortest railway in the world."

"What we try to do with the tour is do some gallery stops and some architectural stops," Robinson said. "That way people can learn a little bit about the neighborhood." The downtown tour is the newest offering by Robinson and Quick Culture partner Ellen Greenberg, best-known for their tours of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, where they both worked as docents.

Other art tours explore Santa Monica's Bergamot Station, and the arts districts of the Mid-Wilshire area, Beverly Hills and Culver City.

>M.H.

Editor's note: This is the first in an occasional series exploring the various districts that make up downtown Los Angeles.

GALLERY ROW TOUR

>**What:** Quick Culture tours can include up to eight people.

>**Cost:** \$200 regardless of the number of people on the tour.

>**Information:** (310) 800-6710 or www.quickculture.com.

Like much of downtown Los Angeles, the blossoming 14-block stretch known as Gallery Row was once a veritable no-man's land, a place seen by outsiders as a respite only for derelicts.

But - as with much of downtown Los Angeles - things are changing.

"When I moved here, Spring Street and Main Street were pretty run-down," said Bert Green, who moved his Bert Green Fine Art gallery to Fifth Street in 2003, drawn in part by lower rents and city-spawned financial incentives. It was just over four years ago that the Los Angeles City Council, at the urging of community activists, designated the portion of Spring and Main streets between Second and Ninth streets as Gallery Row.

The area adjacent to Skid Row then was known for its dense homeless population and drug scene. "This is the area of town that in the teens and '20s was the financial district of Los Angeles," Green said, adding that it's also referred to as the Historic Core and the Old Bank District. "There's an opportunity here to restore it and have what is really unique in an area that nobody knows exists."

When Green moved in, his was one of three galleries in the area. Today there are more than 30.

"It's a remarkable time and place right now in downtown L.A.," he said. "We expect Gallery Row to have a natural life span of five to 10 to 15 years. Inevitably, the rent will begin to get too expensive. ... I think eventually it'll take on the characteristics of cities like New York and San Francisco."

Melissa Heckscher (310) 540-5511 Ext.416; melissa.heckscher@dailybreeze.com

Want to know more about Gallery Row? Head downtown and check out these spots:

>Galleries

>**M.J. Higgins Gallery**, 244 S. Main St., (213) 617-1700, www.mjhiggins.com
Fine art, photography and eco-friendly furnishings from Los Angeles-based artists.

>**Crewest Gallery**, 110 Winston St., (213) 627-8272, www.crewestgallery.com
L.A.'s first art gallery dedicated to graffiti artists.

>**Red Dot Gallery**, 118 W. Fifth St., www.weeneez.com, (213) 817-6002
A contemporary art gallery and tapas restaurant combined. (Note: The gallery has wine tastings on select Thursdays.)

>**626 Art Gallery**, 626-A Spring St. (213) 614-8874, www.626artgallery.com
Artist-owned gallery specializing in local, nationally renowned and black artists.

>**Infusion Gallery**, 719 S. Spring St., (213) 683-8827 www.infusiongallery.com
A 3,000-square-foot contemporary arts gallery devoted to emerging and midcareer artists and owned by a husband-and-wife team whose studio is in the rear.

>**Bert Green Fine Art**, 102 W. Fifth St., (213) 624-6212, www.bgfa.us
Featuring the work of established as well as emerging artists, this is one of the more traditional gallery spaces downtown.

>Food/Eats

>**Pitfire Pizza**, 108 W. Second St., (213) 808-1200, www.pitfirepizza.com
Healthy pizzas, pasta, panini and salads, all created using fresh ingredients from local farmers markets.

>**Pete's Cafe and Bar**, 400 Main St., (213) 617-1000, www.petescafe.com
Casual sit-down restaurant featuring all-American fare (burgers, salads and sandwiches).

>**626 Reserve**, 626-A Spring St. (213) 614-8874 www.626reserve.com
Hip, upscale wine bar popular with local loft-dwellers and wine enthusiasts. Light dinner and dessert menu. The bar, attached to the 626 Art Gallery, has regular jazz and wine-tasting events.

>**Weeneez**, 500 S. Spring St., (213) 817-6002, www.weeneez.com
Adjacent (and part of) the Red Dot Gallery, Weeneez features 1950s-style diner decor and a menu of hot dogs, burgers, homemade lemonade and freshly baked cookies.

>Nearby

>**Grand Central Market**, 317 S. Broadway, (213) 624-2378, www.grandcentralsquare.com
The oldest outdoor market in Los Angeles, featuring items ranging from Chinese, Mexican and Italian food to nuts, candy and fresh meats by the pound.

>**MOCA**, 250 S. Grand Ave., (213) 626-6222, www.moca.org
Contemporary art's most renowned home in L.A. features 24,500 square feet of gallery space. (Note: The MOCA store alone is worth the trip.)

>**Second St. Cigars and Gallery**, 124 W. Second St., (213) 452-4427
More of a cigar shop than a gallery, this small smoking space has a humidor filled to the brim with hand-rolled and hand-wrapped cigars.

>**California Millinery**, 721 S. Spring St., (213) 622-8746, www.californiamillinery.net
Most people today probably don't know what a millinery is. Nonetheless, there's something charming about this store, devoted to the making of women's hats and stuffed to the ceilings with bare white, unfinished bonnets waiting to be decorated.

>**Angel's Flight**, on the corner of Third and Hill streets
Originally known as the Los Angeles Incline Railway, Angel's Flight was built in 1901 to connect the original downtown shopping district below with the upscale residential district of Bunker Hill. At the time, it was called "The World's Shortest Railway" and took riders up and down the hill for only a nickel. It closed in 1969 due to neighborhood-wide redevelopment. In 1996 it opened with a new design, but closed again in 2001 after an accident killed one person and injured seven. It is expected to reopen soon but no definite date has been announced.

Want to do it on your own?

Check out "**Downtown Art Walk**," when all Gallery Row galleries open their doors to the public, from noon to 9p.m. the second Thursday of every month. For information, go to www.downtownartwalk.com.