

Power To Speak: The Dwellification of Venice

Posted July 22, 2015 by The Argonaut in [Columns](#)

By Oren Safdie

Once a catalyst for experimentation, Venice is letting its architecture get big, boxy and stale



Safdie argues that many of the new homes being built along Brooks Avenue in the heart of Oakwood don't continue a unique Venice style of architecture, they caricature it

Venice Beach has always had the reputation of being on the cutting edge of design and fashion. Numerous architects either live or work in the area, and the shmorgasbourg of styles one encounters from street to street, or even from house to house, turns Venice into a walk-through architectural museum showcasing an eclectic mix of styles that makes Venice — well, Venice.

The Argonaut extolled these virtues last year in a feature article in which several avant-garde houses appeared alongside commentary from their architects. Unanimously, they extolled the freedom they felt designing in a neighborhood that had no historical or stylistic norm to tie them down, a relatively lax building code and a sense that Venice inspired them to experiment.

But look a little closer, and a spat of new single-house dwellings and triplexes popping up along Brooks Avenue (and the rest of the Oakwood section of Venice, for that matter) suggest a much less exciting future.

The Oakwood area has the most potential for growth, as many of the dwellings are prime targets for tear downs. Rising property values and a resurgence of commercial growth along Abbot Kinney Boulevard and Rose Avenue have also made this part of Venice the hip place to live.

But signs of innovative architecture? Not anymore.

Part of the problem has its roots in the most recent housing recession and the tightening of loan credit. Many of the 5,000-square-foot lots became attractive targets for newbie developers who had cash on hand and were able to close without risk. Other buyers included young families who wanted to stay on the Westside but couldn't afford Santa Monica. With a lot of gang activity having been pushed out, Oakwood offered a viable alternative.

For developers, the main concern was to fill up every viable square foot of the property, usually amassing three two-floor units in order to maximize profits. These were then either leased or put up for sale to families looking for three-bedroom, two-bathroom units. And for the families who were able to buy directly, there seems to have been little money left over to

hire a decent architect, with owners sometimes resorting to relying on their own sketches for building contractors to execute. Landscaping was usually shoe-horned into wherever it could fit.

If this were just one or two units per block, it might not be so disparaging. But on Brooks Avenue (between 7th Avenue and Lincoln Boulevard), almost every house is starting to look like a cheap knockoff of the one next to it.

By the best measure, the overriding influence can best be described as a cheap amalgamation of the houses you might find in Dwell. The façades consist of a play between stucco or concrete and shellacked decorative wood-paneling to give the appearance of being environmentally friendly. The iron ship railings give a shout-out to Le Corbusier, and there's sometimes a small twist in floor plan or an angled window to pay homage to the Deconstructivists.

There has been some push-back from people in the Venice community, coming in the form of opposition to “mega-mansions” or triplexes that eat up all the green space, but any sort of restrictions would also drive down property values — so let's just say there aren't that many people pushing too hard.

Given Venice's status as an innovator of housing design and a bellwether of what might be coming down the pike, there's a larger question at hand. Is this one block an isolated case, or are we on the cusp of a new style of architecture: the Dwellification of America?

Oren Safdie is a playwright who has lived in Venice for three years. He recently published “False Solution,” the third in a series of plays set in the world of architecture. Safdie studied architecture at Columbia University and currently teaches playwriting at the University of Miami.

Comments

Cb Barrett

[July 23, 2015 at 10:16 pm](#)

It's not only Oakwood, it's happening east of Lincoln too. The 800 block of Flower & on Rose. Realtors with investors by the lot, tear it down to one room so it's a remodel & then build the 2 story rectangle that uses most of the lot. Absolutely nothing unique or attractive

Holly Mosher

[July 24, 2015 at 11:29 am](#)

You are so right on about this.

Now every time I walk, bike or drive down the streets and see a for-sale sign, it just breaks my heart knowing that in a year it will be another one of these monsters. It seems that most of them are being done on spec too. Not by families who are choosing to make these. Because after they are built, you immediately see another for sale sign go up. It is just so sad. RIP Venice.

Stephen E Gries

[July 24, 2015 at 1:27 pm](#)

It's all over Venice it's awful no attempt to blend in rather to stick out. Most of these places look alike ie industrial. Definitely out of character probably in major violation under The Venice Specific Plan which has been on the books for over 100 years. Every time I see one I laugh because they remind me of a dentist's office bldg, I'm now living under the shadow of a McMansion 3 stories 90% of the entire lot @518 Santa Clara.

This never should have been allowed even under The Coastal Commission's Venice Sign off.

Illegal setback no outside staircase no steel beams to support all four sides no external staircase etc. now our once quaint street looks like someone built a public library on it. No privacy no view anymore less light less breeze. And the kicker here is Bonin never did anything about it even when I told him to his face that all residents on all four sides were never notified or offered compensation (which is the law even under The VSO waivers though when I first inquired to his office I was assured that we would all receive notices from the city in the mail regarding proposed construction and we the neighbors would get our chance to object and discuss. That never happened! So I was lied to by our own elected representative! So if you want Venice to continue to be turned into ReCondo Beach,

Then keep trusting in The VNC and Bonin and The LUPC. A bunch of sell out rats imho.

Stephen Gries

[July 24, 2015 at 2:14 pm](#)

Where are the other comments? Including mine I just posted @2pm 7/24/15?

Deborah Lashever

July 24, 2015 at 2:40 pm

It's like watching a wonderfully eccentric and treasured friend die. Every day we see more and more signs that the end is drawing closer. Breaks my heart. There will never be another Venice.

Cold minds are taking the place of warm hearts here. Lots of money pouring in but many still are forced to sleep on the streets with little to no assistance. In fact developers are calling for more and more criminalization of the poor and vulnerable to drive them out. Property values rule the day.

This slash and burn gentrification that is creating Silicon Beach in place of our beloved Venice is frankly ugly in every way.

David Busch

July 25, 2015 at 11:26 am

Leave it to L.A.s out-of-control developer-political complex:

To turn Venice trash—which for decades has been recognized world-wide as a source of creative treasure. Into developer-trash; which nobody can stand. Kudos to Bonnin!

Too bad Bonin won't recognize that even his mentor, Rosendahl –has now seen much of the errors of his ways in launching all this.

Mike –it's a lot more than a mattreres-o-pocolyps –it's an apcolypsis of our ability to dream in Venice.

Wake up, brother! You, your developer cronies and all your cops are killiing Venice!

Please empty your pockets; get yourself some love –and Stop it!