

THE Grit AND Glam OF Dogtown



Photo by Leah Mower

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Inspiration is the lifeblood of the creative process, and there may be no better way to refresh, reboot and reset a designer's eye than travel. In my case, travelling and living across the globe have informed, deepened and — above all — opened my soul to so many different languages whether it be the language of colour, culture, or context.

Over the last decade Los Angeles has become more destiny than destination for me as my two sons call this city their home. A kaleidoscope of neighbourhoods that stretches from sea to hills and beyond, there is however one district that has the distinction of distilling the very essence of the City of Angels into three square and highly walkable miles: the one and only Venice Beach. The land that was won by Abbot Kinney in a coin flip in 1905 and developed as a festive seaside resort, only to be nicknamed “slum by the sea” half a century later, has come full circle to be one of the most sought-after residential and commercial areas in the sunny megalopolis. Dogtown is Venice's affectionate alias and in skateboard land the one word you want to practise rolling off your tongue to sound local.

Venice Beach was the home of the “Lords of Dogtown”: the Z Boys (the Zephyr team behind the infamous surf shop) brought surfing style to skateboarding. Venice's skatepark now attracts the best and most territorial boarders around.



(Opposite) Skateboard history changed when the urethane wheel came into existence. It can be said that this was the wheel that changed Venice's fortunes. (Above) The constant visual dichotomy of glam on grit or grit on glam is at the core of Dogtown's allure so plainly illustrated here by the otherworldly sensuality of glamour herself: Sophia Loren immortalized on a grainy side wall off of Abbot Kinney. • The Ultimate Dive Bar: Roosterfish on Abbot Kinney. • Flowers for sale in front of the Butcher's Daughter, where patrons can enjoy a flight of five fresh pressed juice shots. • In Venice, street art is not only accepted it is encouraged. Murals go up and down on rotation in order to accommodate every artist with a desire to express their creativity. • "Luxury at a whisper" is best captured by Philip Dixon's door to his 30M house. • Postcard from Venice Beach.

During these many years I have been a backseat observer to the massive influx of money the rise of Dogtown's allure has brought about, and it was not without trepidation that I witnessed the chrysalis of my beloved Venice Beach. Money has a way of asepticizing cities until they become mockeries of themselves and caricatures of tourist traps. Lack of character is the death toll of any town, and where Venice Beach is concerned, it would be a crime.

Today, I can happily attest that no amount of greenbacks will corrupt the small enclave that artists, actors, athletes and rappers now call home. I have tried to put a finger on the why and the how of this small miracle and have come to the conclusion that it stems from a deep

sense of "laissez faire" coupled with a strong urge to "laissez vivre." Both involve a lasting respect for one's neighbour and neighbourhood; no one is right and no one is wrong, although it does help perhaps that oversized fences have been allowed. It turns out that the tallest ones belong to those who think they have the most to lose, but once the neighbour gets over the passive aggressive effrontery, he uses it to his advantage and creates his own private backyard oasis.

Given the current climate and political rhetoric emerging from the very country Venice Beach lies in, this purposefully debonair attitude and penchant for authenticity come as a breath of fresh air tinged with the ocean's salty spray. The poignancy of Rodney King's words –



Exhibit A: a Dogtownite with her office in her bicycle basket is not only not unusual, it is nearly de rigueur.

“Can’t we all get along?” – has lately come to the forefront of my mind, but here in Venice, this famous Angelino and political lightning rod would find his peace.

Contemporary cool and ragamuffin raw co-exist with fervour and flavour. Residents here have been limited in square footage and height by decree and this has brought about the uniquely layered vistas of this neighbourhood. Colourful turn-of-the-century arts-and-crafts wood cabins can be found next to colourless Mies Van der Rohe minimalist concrete cubes. If I had to summarize Venice’s architectural style it would be “Surf Shack meets Silicone Sleek.”

Aesthetically speaking there is something for everyone. Interestingly, the new Dogtown dwellers have not only respectfully maintained a discreet low profile in domicile size, they have also clearly integrated the do-it-yourself, pêle-mêle style into their architecture. Wealth is at a low whisper here and I cannot express how refreshing this is. As those with means contend with discretion, a completely different design language emerges: creativity abounds in the detail. From door numbers to garden gates, the cool factor lies in finding a different way to express the same thing. The immediate analogy that comes to mind is that of a David and Goliath pairing, but Goliath is the same size and both carry the same weapons. When the playing field is even it is surprising what rises to the top.

The biodiversity of Los Angeles is also immediately striking. Where else in the world do roses and cacti, magnolias and scarlet larkspur, pine and lemon trees coexist with such unruly abandon and punchy panache? In Dogtown, where I have now declared that showy excess is heresy, nature chomped the bit and doubled down. Pinwheel jasmine clings to back-alley sheds, artichokes blossom on city-owned sidewalks, morning glories run rampant up telephone poles. As if these uncontainable floral fireworks were not enough, it seems as if residents have taken up a new hobby: guerrilla gardening. As garden space is at a premium, Dogtownites have claimed the strip of dry earth between the sidewalk and the street in front of their homes as their own. Walking down the narrow roads of Venice, these mini extensions of personal space and taste are little sandbox treasures. Aloe grows amongst grasses, succulents over white pebbles, garlic harmonizes with lavender, orchids fight with bamboo, wilting poppies flutter in a sea of lilies and asters. It isn’t so much June gloom as it is June bloom.

Fruit trees and flowers attract song birds, so if you are a light sleeper you may not get to sleep past dawn when they trill on cue in symphonic Dolby surround sound. The vintage whir of small planes permeates the air, punctuated every now and then by a happy dog bark. And that is it.



The longest shadow cast over California was the loss of Bernie to Hillary. The election of Trump was only the nail to an uncomfortable coffin. Bernie was not only idolized he was beloved. • The new “Gjusta” is the perfect example of glamour gone gritty by design. • The perfect example of Silicone Chic architecture popping up in Venice. • The heavenly “Gjusta” on Sunset brings the art of Deli to a whole new level. • The evolution of Dogtown as seen and interpreted by Mary Beth Fama and Francisco Letelier. • The wonderful land of the mainstay “Zinque” on Venice Boulevard.

Venice Beach is quiet. Motors are rarely heard as hybrids are de rigueur, but even better, soundless solar-panelled scooters are the preferred mode of transportation for the cool set in this seaside neighbourhood. Cloaked in birdsong and peaceful silence, this town full of bustling successful creatives feels, sounds and looks like a vacation.

I may have saved the best for last: Foodies, strap your seatbelts on; this ride is wild and free. Keeping with the freestyle form of Venice, restaurant design follows the laid-back boho vibe off of the street into repurposed factory spaces with peeling exposed bricks, steel beams, crocheted wool wall hangings, repurposed mattress ticking and grandma’s garden furniture. From the eponymous Butcher’s Daughter on Abbott Kinney to the newest Gjusta on Sunset, the main constant and overall name of the game are fresh and fresher. Locals not only

consider their bodies as temples, they have also managed to figure out how to serve their spiritual sides too. Café Gratitude On Rose practises “sacred commerce” where patrons are encouraged to “step inside and enjoy being someone that chooses: loving your life, adoring yourself, accepting the world, being generous and grateful every day.” Needless to say, I chose to be the unbending and intractable Canadian I was born to be and took my grateful stubbornness straight down the street to Rose Café instead and downed a concoction of tequila, carrot, turmeric, lemon and agave peach bitters called Retox. Ah, the sweet irony of living the dichotomous Dogtown life.

Brunch is possibly the power broker meal here, and Gjusta, the little sister spinoff of big brother and dinner-crowd favourite Gjelinas, has cornered the market by offering highbrow food in a low profile, cozy corner.



When “Venice of America” opened on July 4th, 1905, Kinney had dug several miles of canals to drain the marshes for the residential area of his seaside resort. Today they are as beautiful a draw as ever.



The not-to-be-missed Indonesian “Wallflower” on Rose.

This grocery-style space serves over-the-counter delicatessen meats and salads to shrivel up and die for. I tried to share my soft-as-cloud gravlax; I failed. Chalk it up to the Retox.

Lazy afternoons ultimately bring me back to Zinque on Venice Boulevard, the one café I will never miss visiting when in town. Marc, the maître d', is as French as France itself and greets you by name with as much flourish as an unhinged windmill. You are basically already soaked in happiness and Marc-induced importance before you order your first rosé. This is a tapas place beyond compare. The flatbreads are as thin as skin and play a supporting role to the smorgasbord of delicious toppings offered. Mushroom lovers take note.

Each visit I discover another slice of edible heaven, and this jaunt was no exception: Wallflower cannot be missed. I think I may have come across the next very big statement in the culinary world:

Indonesian cuisine. Here the spices are so exotic and aromatic, the portions so delicately layered, that you are rolling your eyes at first bite. (Not a good look.) The food is so good, it's a conversation killer, so I would come here with either family or a long-term sidekick. This is not a first-date place unless you want to fall in love and wonder later how exactly that spark happened. (It was the food, stupid.) I will make my case by sprinkling some of the ingredients into your consciousness. This is a teaser, not a spoiler alert: jicama, ebi, candlenut, acar pickles, rending spice, sambal matah, konbu galangal and kaffir lime leaves. In case you were overthinking this, Westjet has an easy and cheap flight, and Venice is a 20-minute ride from the airport.

The late and very great Anthony Bourdain once said: “I want you to feel the way I see things.” As a wordsmith neophyte I took his words as my aspirational road map to write this piece. (See you at the beach!) 🌊