

## **Cahuenga Makes a Comeback**

**By MAYA MEINERT - 11/10/2008**

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The stretch of Cahuenga Boulevard between Hollywood and Sunset boulevards was once lined with drug dealers and prostitutes. Now it is becoming a destination location for the young and stylish.

Eateries, trendy lounges and hip retail stores are blossoming in a spurt of microgrowth – in contrast to nearby megaprojects.

But Cahuenga is keeping its edge. Even though its first national retail chain, Urban Outfitters, is slated to open Nov. 21, Cahuenga isn't gentrifying too much: You can still buy a voodoo doll at Panpipes, a black magic boutique.

And Urban Outfitters will be subleasing to a gallery, a restaurant and a bookstore. That's a mix that will help maintain a feel that's more funky than corporate and cater to the young residents of the many new apartment and loft complexes nearby.

"Cahuenga is like the L.A. version of Greenwich Village," said swimsuit designer Ashley Paige, whose retail and studio space is on the street. "Hollywood is synonymous with old-school hip. On Cahuenga there are tons of restaurants and cafes, and the farmers market close by on Sundays. I walk around and get inspiration from the area. I call it home – I love it."

Unlike the Hollywood & Highland Center, which opened in 2001 amid much fanfare, or the new W Hotel and Residences at Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street opening next fall, the businesses along Cahuenga haven't been spearheaded by large developers with millions of bucks. Instead, they're the product of roll-up-your-sleeves entrepreneurs.

Errol Roussel opened Kitchen 24 this summer. It's the first 24-hour restaurant in the neighborhood and serves upscale diner food at midrange prices. He said there's a significant demand for restaurants there.

"It's prime for hospitality," said Roussel, who also owns nearby nightclub Cinespace on Hollywood Boulevard.

Adolfo Suaya, who owned the now-shuttered Hollywood spots Goa and Charcoal, is opening Bar Delux, an art deco-inspired lounge, in the coming days.

Asian-themed lounge Tokio Hollywood has been turned into Ecco Ultra Lounge, which features organic food and drink, energy-efficient insulation and lighting, and recycled wood. There are plans to install solar panels. And hybrid cars get free valet parking.

Nightclub promoter Danny B and attorney Matthew Portnoff, along with nightclub manager David Stratton, are launching the environmentally friendly club this week.

"Cahuenga is blowing up – it's the next big thing," said Stratton, who used to own Club Lingerie on Sunset Boulevard in the 1990s.

Stratton is especially proud of the environmental theme of his new venture.

"Recycling is the new It Girl in Hollywood. I knew this eco-friendly concept couldn't fail."

Urban Outfitters, a Philadelphia-based retailer that sells clothing targeted to young, hip buyers, is turning

the complex at 1520 to 1542 Cahuenga Blvd. into something of a neighborhood showpiece, including a performance stage.

Dubbed Space 15 Twenty, the revamped building – formerly a film equipment warehouse – will also be home to other East Coast retailers including vintage clothier What Comes Around Goes Around and street-wear store Alife.

Another tenant will be Hennessey & Ingalls, an independent bookstore based in Santa Monica, which will open its second location there. Snack Bar, a Philadelphia small-plates eatery, is another tenant, and there will be an art gallery space and a flea market held in the courtyard.

“Urban wanted to introduce boutiques and like-minded shops in an area that is desperate for retail,” said Cara Mullio, a principal of Los Angeles-based Root Development LLC, which served as a consultant for Urban. “They saw more residential going into an area that already had restaurants that serve alcohol, so they’re putting in a place to eat that goes more hand in hand with the daytime shopping experience.”

It’s been a dramatic transformation.

When David Gajda and partner Jose Malagon purchased the building at the corner of Cahuenga and Selma Avenue in Hollywood 14 years ago, the first floor housed a check-cashing store and a needle-exchange program. Homeless people were squatting upstairs.

Gajda and Malagon formed the Cahuenga Corridor Coalition with other property owners.

“We saw how bad the area was,” Gajda said. “But I thought Cahuenga had good bones and it could be this incredibly fun entertainment area. We wanted clubs, restaurants, hotels, theaters to fill the area.”

Little by little, property owners started cleaning up and painting their buildings. The coalition convinced the Community Redevelopment Agency to plant palm trees alongside the street.

### **Clubs, bars, restaurants**

The corridor was included in the Hollywood business improvement district in 1999 when the coalition convinced the district to move its southernmost boundary one block south from Selma Avenue to Sunset Boulevard.

Clubs, bars and restaurants began popping up, including an L.A. outpost of New York’s Beauty Bar, the Burgundy Room and Velvet Margarita Cantina. Retail boutiques also came in, including vintage clothing store Blest Boutique and record store Vinyl Fetish.

Swimsuit designer Paige opened her first store on Cahuenga in 2002. Hers is still the only high-end retail store on the street.

She decided to rent her space there not just because she couldn’t afford the more expensive rents on Melrose or Third Street, but because she appreciated Cahuenga’s grittiness.

“I like that Cahuenga is off the beaten path,” she said. “Ashley Paige is a hippie brand with a heart – it needs to be in an edgier place. We’ll never leave this space. There’s a very good community vibe now in this area.”

Paige is excited that Space 15 Twenty is opening because of the increased foot traffic she hopes it will bring. She also thinks more high-end retailers will take a closer look at the area.

“Just like Betsy Johnson helped Melrose, my presence as an internationally known designer will make

retailers want to come in,” she said. “Amoeba Music and the ArcLight theaters don’t hurt either. It’s a great potion for a great little shopping mecca.”

Coffee shop Caffe Etc. opened in 2004 and restaurant Citizen Smith, which became a celebrity hot spot, debuted in 2005 in Gajda and Malagon’s building. They also own the property that houses Kitchen 24 and have leased out their second-floor office space to sports apparel company Adidas and a special effects company that’s moving from Santa Monica.

Gajda said that foot traffic started to pick up in 2001 when Amoeba Music opened on Sunset between Cahuenga and Ivar Avenue. But the biggest increase has been in the last year.

“Now you go down Cahuenga on a Friday or Saturday night, and it’s like gridlock,” he said.

The next item on Gajda’s list is getting “Cahuenga Corridor” signs for the area.

“David and Jose took a risk purchasing that property on Selma and Cahuenga and articulated the vision of what it could become,” said Kerry Morrison, executive director of the Hollywood Property Owners Alliance, which manages the business improvement district. “The city has no plan that dictates how the community is supposed to revitalize itself. In the absence of that, when you have people who inspire others, it really takes hold. It has been an upward spiral of their vision for the corridor.”

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