

Carol Schatz's Wild Ride Over 25 Years in Downtown

As told to Jon Regardie I Posted: Monday, May 11, 2015 3:00 pm

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - I joined the Central City Association on July 2, 1990. At the time, Downtown was dark, dreary and largely empty. There were very few amenities. It was the quintessential 9-5 Downtown. People rolled in for work and rolled out afterwards.

"It was not that I had a plan to go elsewhere, but it didn't seem to be something I would do for the remainder of my career. But it is sort of my personality, if you will, that if I'm going to do something, I'm going to try to make a difference. So I have to make it worth my time and everybody else's. So when I became CEO in 1995, I thought bringing this place back is a very tall order, but I would do my best.

"I became involved with an organization called the International Downtown Association, and it allowed me to visit downtowns all over the country. The first thing you learned was that a business improvement district is probably the best way to provide resources to a particular commercial area. I began to see what places like Denver had done with a BID, Houston, just about everywhere but cities in California.

"In 1994 I got our Assembly member to author a bill that would allow property-based-BIDs in the state. That bill went into effect in the beginning of 1995. The Fashion District was the first BID to be formed under that bill. We were the second BID to go into effect in Los Angeles. Our BID opened up for business at the start of 1998.

"I have always said the BC and AD of our revitalization effort was the opening of Staples Center in 1999. We were involved in that effort from '97 on, when the decision was made to try to build an arena at its current site. The importance of it was it gave people a reason to come Downtown. Many residents of L.A. had stopped coming Downtown unless they worked here or had a subscription to the Music Center. So it gave people an opportunity to take another look.

"The other critical event was the passage of the adaptive reuse ordinance, which made it easier to convert old office buildings into housing. That went into effect in the spring of 1999, and Staples opened in October of 1999.

"I was surprised to see the change that followed. If you had asked me at the time, would adaptive reuse have spawned all of this, I would have said, probably not, and I would have been wrong. We had Tom Gilmore at Fourth and Main, which was the most unlikely place I could have imagined as the cradle of our residential movement. It was the edge of Skid Row. Then we had other pioneers like Izek Shomof [in the Historic Core], Jeff Lee [in South Park] and Mark Weinstein [in the Fashion District] who saw how the ordinance shaved a lot of money off their development efforts and made these initial investments, which were hugely risky, possible. People forget that now: Who ever thought people would move to live in the heart of Downtown?"

"Another big step was in 2001. I went to see Eli Broad, who has been a hugely important pioneer of what we have in Downtown, with his work at MOCA and Disney Hall. I said, 'Eli, do we have enough going on to go to New York, hold a conference for investment bankers and developers, to tell them what is happening in Downtown L.A.?' He said he thought so. He led each one of these delegations — we had them in 2002, '04 and '06. Mayor Jim Hahn came, so did our chief of police and Tim Leiweke of AEG. As a result of those conferences, we had people who came out to Los Angeles to tour, and put money down here in terms of investment. It opened the eyes of people who had written off Downtown as a place to invest.



"If someone in 1990 told me what Downtown would be like today, I would have thought they were crazy," said Carol Schatz. "I couldn't envision this happening."

"Downtown has grown by leaps and bounds despite the problem of homelessness. But this problem keeps Downtown from fulfilling its full potential. Solutions seem to be very difficult there don't seem to be solutions that really give you hope that this can be resolved. Obviously we want to see more services for those that are addicted and are mentally ill, and there has been a failure at every level of government, in my opinion, to provide the resources to do that. But we also know unfortunately there are people who live on the streets who have continually resisted the outreach and services. What do we do in those situations? How do we help those individuals who may not want to be helped?"

"When people ask what do I want to see going forward in the next five years, I answer with one word: 'More.' I want more housing, more office, more cultural institutions. I want to see more restaurants, bars and clubs. This is the place where you can and should have density.

"This is something I continue to enjoy. I am a workaholic, so the idea of retiring, I can't even imagine what I would do with myself. I have no plans to leave. As long as it remains something I enjoy, I will do it.

"If someone in 1990 told me what Downtown would be like today, I would have thought they were crazy. I couldn't envision this happening. When I got to CCA I acquired the knowledge and skills I think I needed to help push this forward, and had staff that were just as passionate as I was about making this happen. Little by little we made it happen. What I tried to do was set priorities and pick out things we could to make a difference, and fortunately I think the initiatives that we pushed did make a difference.

"There is still room for growth. All you have to do is look at Downtown from any vantage point, and you see a very small collection of buildings that are sticking up over the vast, flat metropolis. There is a lot more investment that we can tolerate here, because we have, in a sense, just begun to create the Downtown that the second largest city in the country deserves to have."

regardie@downtownnews.com

A Downtown Treasure Trove

Every spring, the Central City Association expands its borders a bit, hosting the "Treasures of Los Angeles" event that honors people who have pushed the city forward. The happening takes place Thursday, May **14**, at noon at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel (404 S. Figueroa St.).

Five prominent Angelenos will be feted, starting with CCA President and CEO Carol Schatz, who will receive the organization's Heart of the City Award for her 25 years of work to improve Downtown. The Spirit of Los Angeles prize will go to Fourth District City Councilman Tom LaBonge, who will be termed out in July, and Treasures of Los Angeles honors will be given to Marvel Comics mastermind Stan Lee and Howard Marks of StartEngine LLC. A Special Recognition award will be presented to Los Angeles World Airports Executive Director Gina Marie Lindsey, who is retiring soon.

Tickets and additional information are at ccala.org.

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