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When the Next Wave Wipes Out



Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

THE SLOW LIFE There is little foot traffic in the retro design shop owned by Kelly Witmer.

By SCOTT TIMBERG
Published: February 25, 2009

LOS ANGELES

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Stephanie Diani for The New York Times
The quiet Eagle Rock neighborhood at the smoggy edge of Los Angeles.

WHEN Emily Cook, a screenwriter, bought a house four years ago in Eagle Rock, a neighborhood on the Northeast side of Los Angeles, she fantasized what the area might look like in a year or two, with cafes and boutiques replacing tattered old businesses. "It was like fantasy football," said Ms. Cook, 38, who also sings in a band named Fonda.

A sad flower shop on the corner, she thought, could become a miniature Whole Foods. An upholstery store could be a gastropub where she and friends would grab a beer, and a neglected 1940s diner could become a retro spot for a quick meal.

But Ms. Cook has stopped fantasizing about what might be, and started worrying about what might shut down. The flower store has closed; no gourmet market is moving in.

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The New York Times

THEATER

Lucy Finch, a vintage boutique, folded last month. That Yarn Store, a hangout for crochet-heads, didn't survive a bad winter.

And what will become of the storefront that once housed Blue Heeler, which sold Australian imports?

"Please don't make it another martial arts studio," Ms. Cook pleaded. "What is it about Eagle Rock and martial arts?"

The deep recession, with its lost jobs and falling home values nationwide, poses another kind of threat: to the character of neighborhoods settled by the young creative class, from the Lower East Side in Manhattan to Beacon Hill in Seattle. The tide of gentrification that transformed economically depressed enclaves is receding, leaving some communities high and dry.

For long-time residents, the return to pre-boom rents may be a blessing. But it also poses a rattling question of identity: What happens to bourgeois bohemia when the bourgeois part drops out?

Over the last five to six years, Eagle Rock became the glamour girl of Northeast Los Angeles, a crescent where the asphalt jungle meets the foothills. The neighborhood of 35,000 or so has attracted screenwriters and composers, Web designers and animators, who labor on their laptops in cafes, discuss film projects at Friday night wine tastings, and let their children play with the handmade wooden toys in a Scandinavian-style [coffee](#) shop, Swork.

It is easy to sniff at such urban affectations. But the downturn endangers more than precious shops; residents worry that as stores close, the fabric of a bohemian utopia — with its [Jane Jacobs](#) mix of commerce and public spiritedness — will also unravel.

Less than a decade ago, Eagle Rock was an unlikely candidate for gentrification. For decades, students at Occidental College — who have included Luke Wilson, [Ben Affleck](#) and [Barack Obama](#) — complained to friends that there was nothing to do in their college town.

Tracy King, a real estate agent, said that when she moved to the neighborhood in 1983, "there were 79 auto-related businesses on Colorado and Eagle Rock Boulevards."

But as housing prices rose, bohemia expanded beyond the Los Angeles neighborhoods of Venice on the Westside and Silver Lake east of Hollywood. Eagle Rock filled with parents needing a place to roost. Hair salons with monosyllabic names like Loft quickly followed. Density increased, and so did foot traffic; shoppers could walk from store to restaurant to bar.

Real estate followed the national boom: a three-bedroom house in Eagle Rock that sold for a median of about \$260,000 in 2000 more than doubled to \$620,000 in 2005, before slumping a bit (to about \$570,000) over the last year.

As the population changed, so did the culture. Jeff Tritch, 53, has worked for decades at his family's store, Tritch Hardware. He wears plaid shirts that likely pre-date [Nirvana](#).

"Back in the '70s," he recalled, "the guys had 9-to-5 jobs and would only come in on the weekends. People nowadays come in all times. They have different kinds of jobs — on the Net, in the entertainment business. We don't have that Saturday rush anymore."

The new residents brought prosperity and, the locals say, a little arrogance as well. "They

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sounded the trumpets and announced a vision of something like Silver Lake or Los Feliz,” said Bob de Velasco, who runs Commercial Printing Network, a copy shop. “But it’s not going to happen. Eagle Rock wasn’t meant to have that. Eagle Rock is an old-fashioned, atmospheric town.”

Indeed, in this downturn, Mr. de Velasco’s printing shop doesn’t seem to be hurting, nor is Tritch Hardware. The shops at risk are the ones playing the Decemberists in a continuous loop.

“Some of them tried niche things,” Mr. Tritch said, with no gloat in his voice. “That didn’t work out.”

Kelly Witmer, 38, the owner of Regeneration, a retro-design shop that opened in 2006, looks exhausted by the drop in business. She recently rented out half her space to keep afloat. “It seems a little slow in Eagle Rock right now, in spite of people saying it’s the next big thing, or the new Silver Lake,” she said. “At least on my side of the street, there’s not a lot of foot traffic.”

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Correction: An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of a band. The correct name is the Decemberists.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 12, 2009

Because of an editing error, an article on Feb. 26 about Eagle Rock, a Los Angeles neighborhood whose gentrification is being slowed by the recession, misspelled the name of a rock group whose music is typically heard in some of the neighborhood’s boutiques. The are the Decemberists, not the Decembrists.

A version of this article appeared in print on February 26, 2009, on page E1 of the New York edition.

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