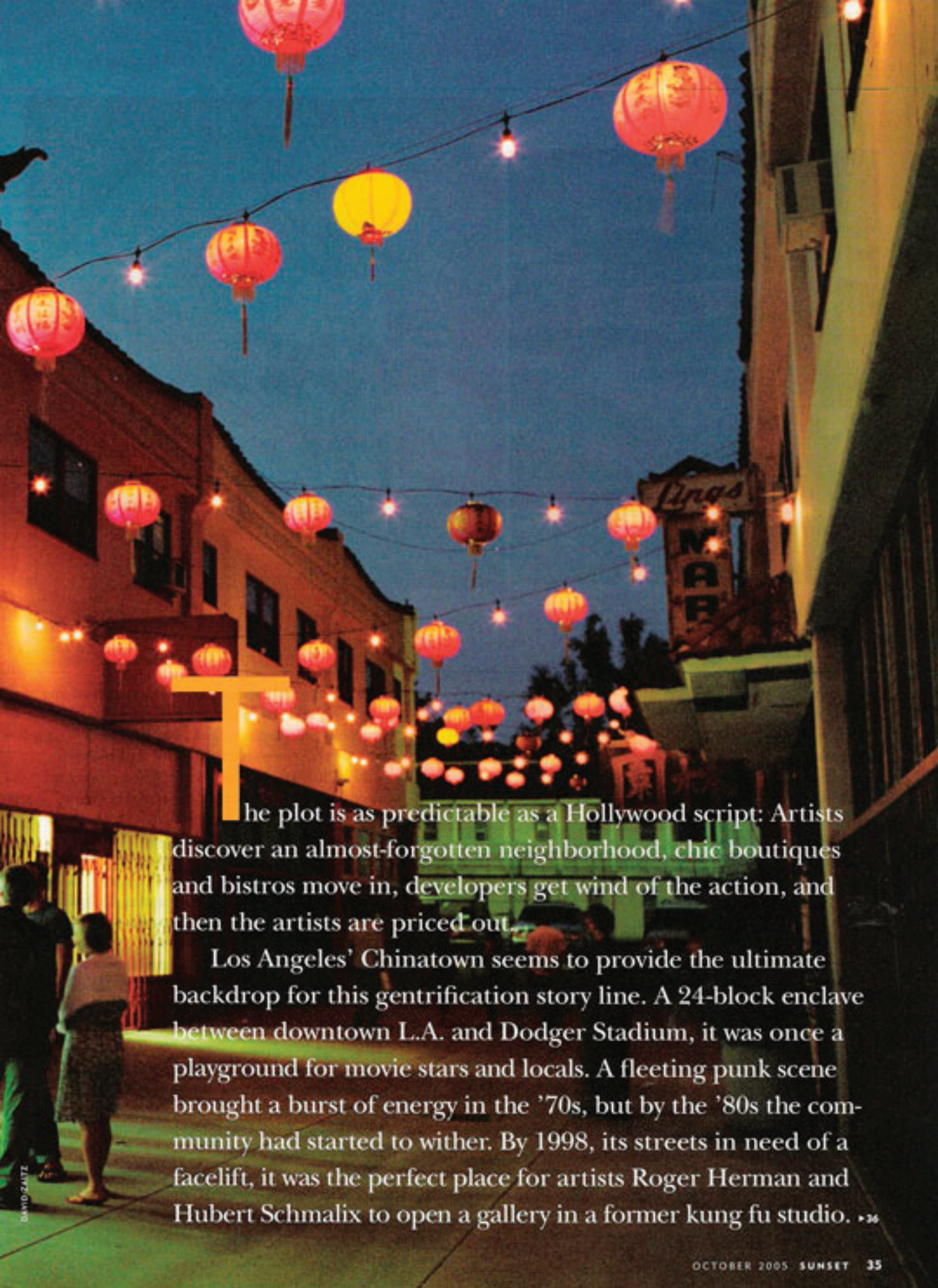


WINDOW ON THE WEST

Once sleepy, now hot, L.A.'s Chinatown strives for a balance between newfound prosperity and artistic soul. ALEXANDRIA ABRAMIAN-MOTT reports on a neighborhood in flux

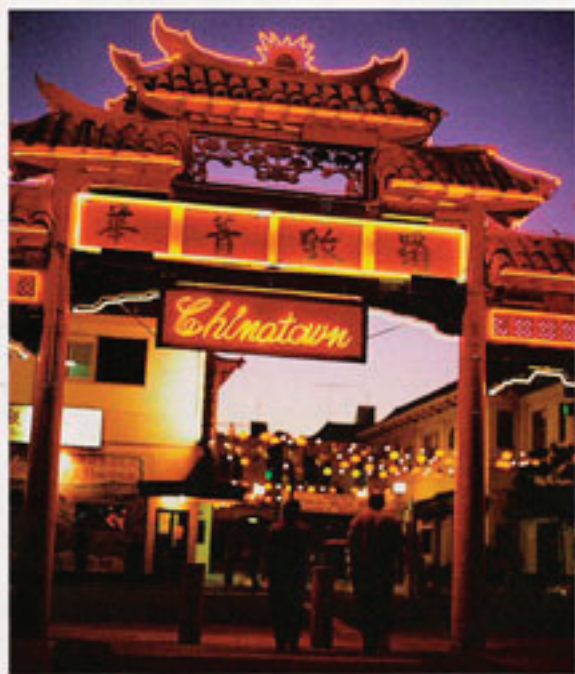
# Orient Express

An exhibition opening at Peres Projects on Chung King Road brings a groovy downtown crowd to Chinatown's nocturnal scene.



The plot is as predictable as a Hollywood script: Artists discover an almost-forgotten neighborhood, chic boutiques and bistros move in, developers get wind of the action, and then the artists are priced out.

Los Angeles' Chinatown seems to provide the ultimate backdrop for this gentrification story line. A 24-block enclave between downtown L.A. and Dodger Stadium, it was once a playground for movie stars and locals. A fleeting punk scene brought a burst of energy in the '70s, but by the '80s the community had started to wither. By 1998, its streets in need of a facelift, it was the perfect place for artists Roger Herman and Hubert Schmalix to open a gallery in a former kung fu studio. ▶ 36



Cut to seven years later, and Chinatown has morphed from an area littered with FOR LEASE signs into something approaching official hot-spot status. More than 20 galleries coexist with a handful of nightclubs, boutiques, bookstores, and cafes. The Metro Gold Line's Chinatown Station opened two years ago; bulldozers are poised to raze Little Joe's Italian restaurant (one of the area's more important, if improbable, icons) to make way for a mixed-use development; and filmmaker Quentin Tarantino will reopen the classic King Hing Theater by year-end.

But while some fear it may turn into another Old Town Pasadena, dominated by high-end chain stores, others are convinced Chinatown can craft its own comeback tale—one in which pioneering artists won't necessarily pave the way for another Prada boutique. "The normal cycle is that artists come, rents go up, artists leave. That's not going to happen here," says Mark McManus, a Pasadena-based architect and part owner of the Mountain Bar, epicenter of the area's creative scene. "The community here is about a reputation economy, not a money economy," he adds, referring to the fact that most of



Clockwise from top left: Chinatown's landmark West Gate; Mark McManus (third from left) and staff at the high-design Mountain Bar; Gim Fong showcases one of his classic miniatures.



Chinatown's real estate remains family-owned and is carefully conferred to new business owners. The area's old guard agrees. Gim Fong, owner of Fong's antiques shop for more than half a century, says, "This is the first time property has been leased to outsiders, so it's important that people know you."

For Richard Liu, an architect who grew up near Chinatown, the balancing act is part of the neighborhood's essence. In 2002 he purchased a long-abandoned restaurant in Central Plaza and reopened it as Realm, a cleverly updated gift shop where colorful glassware, elegant coffee-table books, and eclectic home accessories replace the usual Chinatown trinkets. "In the '70s, stores here were open after dinner, and the area had life. I want to do anything to bring it back," he says. His collection of vintage postcards offering a colorful history of Chinatown are blueprints to guide him in his restoration efforts. "I want the area to have unified lighting, benches, and planters, as well as later business hours. But I want to avoid gentrification," he adds, echoing almost every business owner, new and old. "It's all about the balance."

Today, scenesters and longtime residents pass one another in Central Plaza, the pagoda-overloaded square where brightly painted two-story buildings

Curio shops and cutting-edge boutiques unite under a canopy of sun-faded paper lanterns



with carved brackets and flamboyant tilework form an amusement-park version of Chinese architecture. Drab, red-linen restaurants with no air-conditioning mingle with cool, concrete-floored galleries like Flux. A walk along Chung King Road, where most of the galleries are clustered, creates a split screen of now and then: Graduate-student types set up art installations in one storefront while retired residents play mah-jongg under fluorescent lights in the next. "It's relaxed, not high-speed, and we all know each other. I like it the way it is now," says artist and Black Dragon Society gallery co-owner Roger Herman of Chinatown's half-rejuvenated state, in which the curio shops and the cutting-edge boutiques unite under a canopy of sun-faded paper lanterns.

On gallery nights, which happen about every six weeks, Chinatown's streets and plazas flood with an art brigade imported from all parts of L.A. But even when the galleries are filled to capacity—sometimes with as little as three or four objects on display—there's always the din of TV and cooking noises from second-floor apartments, which remain home



**Clockwise from top left:** Exquisite ceramics are on hand at the minimalist Flux; Richard Liu in his home accessories store, Realm; a tasseled paper lantern at Realm.

to some of the community's 15,000 mostly Chinese and Southeast Asian residents.

Gallerygoers inevitably end up at the Mountain Bar, one of the area's more dramatic crossroads. Owned by Steven Hanson of China Art Objects Galleries, artist Jorge Pardo, and Mark McManus, the bar was once one of Chinatown's oldest eateries; now it is its hottest nightspot. The fact that Brad Pitt showed up for its opening was enough to earn some dire "there goes the neighborhood" predictions, but McManus insists they're far from focused on the Hollywood scene. "We're a bridge between the art and Chinese communities," he says.

Not that every encounter between old and new goes smoothly. In front of the Seven Star Cavern wishing well, another of Chinatown's unlikely landmarks of high kitsch, Richard Liu is not exactly pleased. The problem isn't the stalactite statuary. It's the shiny new carnival-style car rides for kids parked in front that bug him. "There's no architectural sensitivity," he complains. "Bringing Chinatown back will take more than a few more businesses. It's going to take strong-willed people." As if to support the effort of maintaining an appropriate equilibrium, the wishing well's closest coin target reads: "Good luck." ●