

Los Angeles 2019 Venice

How is Venice presented?

Preconceptions:

A number of members in our group had preconceptions of Venice, particularly the Venice beach area which is represented through a number of video games and films such as Grand Theft Auto and the TV series Californication. The beach is depicted as being very bohemian and hipster associated with drug culture, skating, rollerblading and an attraction for tourists. Venice beach is additionally presented as a place for everyone, illustrated as communal, friendly and sociable. These preconceptions were indeed, matched by the Venice beach tourist board- “the spirit of bohemian style in the heart of a beach town”.

Venice Beach:

Upon arriving to Venice beach, it was clear that much of its authentic, venetian architecture had been re-purposed or replaced with modern shop fronts, buildings and bright tourist attractions. Being a Saturday, the area was full of tourists, as we expected and many appeared to come from afar or not reside in Venice, like ourselves.



The products sold in many of the shops along the promenade mirrored this. For example, novelty t-shirts, souvenirs, fast food, sweets, and local merchandise stores dominated the area and we noticed that the remainder of the shop space was governed by weed dispensaries, tattoo parlours and health stores. We noticed similarities between Venice and other locations previously associated with a bohemian lifestyle such as Camden and Brighton. All of these areas were at some point run down, derelict and lacking investment, allowing for younger, artistic individuals to move here and develop a distinctive, anti-establishment culture such as the Beatnik enclave that moved to Venice in the 1950's and 60's. The resultant culture attracts gentrifiers and other investment, creating the spaces we see today. The areas still manage to retain much of their original spirit, but signs of gentrification are clear, with many having mixed opinions on this new cultural landscape.

Our experience of Venice demonstrated this through ongoing developments to luxury housing, tourist driven business and repurposed venetian style buildings. Despite the prevalence of tourism in the area. Venice is still associated with an active lifestyle, enjoyed by locals. This is made apparent through the basketball, tennis and squash courts, skatepark, cycle paths, swimming and surfing and of course the “legendary Muscle Beach”, associated with famous American celebrities such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno.



Moving east:

As we began to move away from the hustle and bustle of the beach, parallels with Venice began to become increasingly ostensible in the form of canals, bridges and venetian architecture such as tiled roofs and balconettes. However, modern housing developments appeared to have moved away from this original style, opting for materials like concrete and glass, private parking and fence-lined gardens. Such a replacement of this architecture is a product of the discovery of oil across the coast in 1927 which harried modern development and investment into the area. The canals area had a very different atmosphere to the beach, with signs listing the prohibited actions of people walking by, the presence of large family homes and general tranquillity that flowering gardens and flowing water exude.



A free Venice?

One of the things we noticed while walking through the canals, was the presence of signs harking to different campaigns such as 'Anti Trump', 'Help the Homeless', the embracement of all cultures and religions and the rejection of new housing developments. This mirrors the notion of Venice as an anti-establishment, bohemian area which we found interesting and somewhat ironic. Much of the signage advocating change were erected on the properties of large, luxury housing. We speculated that these people may have always living in this area due to many of the residents being elderly and purchasing houses prior to the recent property boom. One resident we spoke to George (a local resident with whom we carried out an unstructured interview with) stated that property prices were at a minimum of \$1 million.



These high prices are exemplified by the prevalence of homelessness in the area. Along the promenade, there were benches occupied by homeless men and women which were generally avoid by tourists and Venetians perhaps suggesting that there is an essence of 'them' and 'us' or being included or not. This is supported by the 'monster on the median' campaign where residents around Venice are attempting to prevent a community of affordable housing being built in order to support the homeless. The local resident George added to this by stating that it felt 'sketchy' at night due to the high homeless population, but residents are very resistance to change. This demonstrates that not all people and bodies are accepted along Venice beach and that there could possibly be 'unspoken rules' about who can use certain spaces. A secession, or 'Vexit' from the city of Los Angeles is being considered, in an effort to manage the growth of high-end developers and retailers, who may be putting the individuality and identity of Venetians at risk. George 'through city council meetings, the community fights to keep Venice authentic. We don't want high rise buildings and high-end stores, we want to keep it Mom-and-Pop'. Venice is becoming increasingly unaffordable, encouraging the presence of wealthy residents, whilst forcing long-term inhabitants out. Through observing Venice beach, I observed that it still accommodates a diverse community of bodybuilders and hippies, however this culture may be vanishing, paving the way for a large homeless population who have fallen victim to how much 'tougher' Venice has become.



Californian Body Culture

From walking around the beach, it was obvious to us that wellbeing and fitness was at the heart of Venice beach culture, evident through the wide array of areas along the seafront dedicated to sport and exercise such as tennis courts, basketball courts, volleyball courts, and a skate park and the famous Muscle beach gym. These spaces along the beach not only could be used to keep fit in the sunshine but could be used to display a level of self-confidence, or even vanity, due to the openness of the spaces to the general public. The numerous athletes were exercising in minimal clothing and seemed to be well-experienced in weightlifting.

George claims that Muscle beach is legendary, as something that has existed in this fashion before anywhere else and in this way carries a rich history which he seemed proud of. He described Venice as the 'nucleus' of fitness culture in Los Angeles, and that this is the point from which fitness culture extended outwards. Interestingly, George, as a local resident who always lived in Venice, he says 'where else can you play basketball in front of the sea?', to which we later disagreed.

Upon carrying out these two interviews along the beachfront; we encountered another man, Jonny, making use of the weight equipment at muscle beach. Jonny attends Muscle beach gym twice a month to make use of equipment, solely to exercise and not to use the beach for other typical activities we may associate with the beach such as lounging, and swimming.



The space on Venice beach has clear divides which dictates what space is used depending on the time. Muscle beach gym is usually used by body-builders potentially in an egotistical way and to demonstrate what 'the best' looks like. As we walk towards the basketball courts and tennis courts, we felt there was more inclusiveness in a sense that there were diverse groups of people playing basketball together, a member of the group was invited to play, showing that all are welcome at Venice beach. Further along, near the skate park, there was an exhibition in accordance with Earth Day, demonstrating that the beach is a free space for people to express themselves however they feel appropriate. The skate park had a similar inclusivity of the courts where all age ranges were welcome, from observing for around 15 minutes we spotted an age range from around 7-65 proving that there is very low discrimination in this area.



To add to these observations and inferences, it is important to mention the time of day and how this contributes to the dynamics and demographics of what we saw on the day. For example, as it was a Saturday there were a wider variety of people seen such as children, families, people who would usually be working during the week, and people visiting for the weekend.

Us exploring the area and a google mapping task:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1ELW6Qu4C-faVNRsUCjHMLc1vA-4X9ZJb&usp=sharing>