

Venice Beach - 13th April 2019

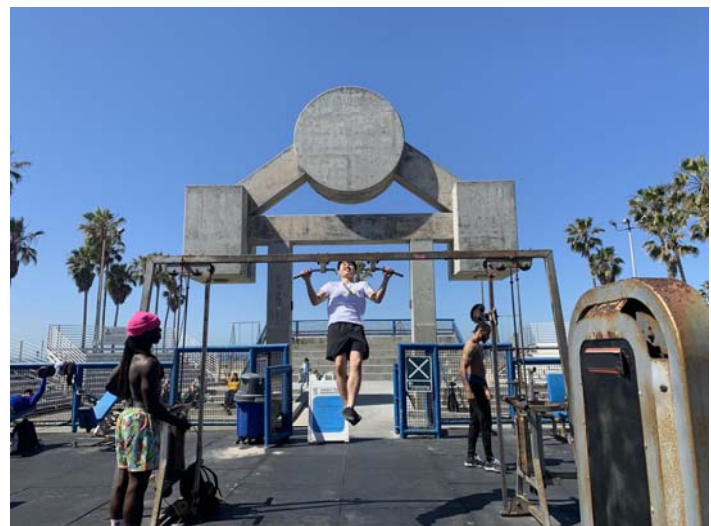
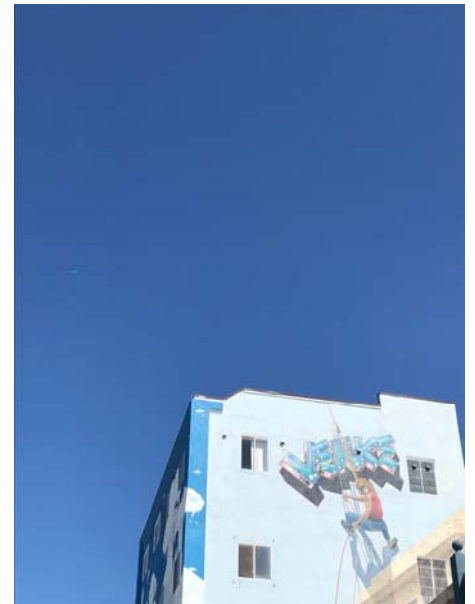
Before visiting Venice Beach we had a preconceived idea that it would be developed to suit tourists, a amalgamation of surfing, skating and gym culture. Lined with hippie shops and eclectic people, a hub of those rejected by society.

After visiting Venice it is clear that it is a place to be yourself and live an alternative lifestyle; this holds foundations with the counterculture and Beatniks who resided here in the 1960s and 70s.

What was interesting about Venice Beach, is that the preconceived 'bohemian culture' seemed to be more of a front, this was especially prevalent at the world-renowned 'Muscle Beach'. From talking to the pedestrians on the seafront, I gathered that many of the people making use of the beach were not locals but leechers, utilising it's quirky nature to perpetuate their own lost feelings of individuality. At Muscle Beach, we spoke to a man from Philadelphia; his shirt was off, sweat dripping. This image seemed to evoke feelings of a man trying to fit in to the testosterone fueled mould of the classic 'Arnie' look of Muscle Beach, however, after speaking to him briefly it became apparent that this was not necessarily the case. He told us that he had moved from Philadelphia to Venice Beach in 2016 because his own area did not let him express his true character, he was friendly, engaging, and happy to speak with us; in fact, he approached us in the first place. Philadelphia was, to him, a restrictive environment that did not allow him to outsource his free-spirited image. However, coming to Venice Beach, the people were welcoming and embracing of people from different areas and cultures. We asked him whether there was any notions of narcissism and pressure to look like a steroid using, fake tanned, oiled-up bodybuilder (which seems to be the general perception of men working out at Muscle Beach), to which he replied "*no way man, not at all*". He went on to explain that his close friend was 'one of the biggest men on Muscle Beach', but he spent a lot of his time helping young people looking to get into weight training fulfil their dreams of lifting huge weights and looking big.

After chatting to Amir, we concluded that although it may seem like the gym-rats pumping iron at Muscle Beach are conceited and self-loving, they are in fact just regular gym goers, the only difference is that they don't mind people watching, and they love the way it encourages tourists to come and appreciate Venice in its entirety.

However, after speaking to a woman working in 'sneakers n stuff', it became apparent there seemed to be an 'us and them' mentality between those who live within Venice and those



who simply work there. She knew very little about the area exclaiming 'I don't much, I just come to work here', showing almost a completely disinterest in getting to know the area/community around her. She informed me to talk to one of the locals alluding to the idea that we should just look for a 'weirdo'. This brought back the idea of people being in Venice to pose, becoming part of the artsy society that they've longed to be considered within, perhaps attempting an escape of the mundane monotony that has become their day-to-day city lives.

With the counterculture becoming a dominant hegemony in Venice, Los Angeles, the arrival of 'chain' brands such as 'Sneakers'n'Stuff' stand in stark contrast with the buskers and vendors marketing homemade wares such as a couple of Mexican migrants selling copper decorations.

Curiously, the lack of customers engaging with such stands and the popularity of larger stores, such as, 'Sneakers'n'Stuff' contrasts with the ethos of Venice beach portrayed in the media as an individualistic and Bohemian community. Following discussions with local business owners further into the town, away from the main beach, it became clear that local businesses are not the majority in Venice beach, in fact locals are considered 'too' bohemian or strange, to work with, many shop owners and workers travelled from Downtown Los Angeles and served largely tourists seeking the Venice Beach 'experience'.



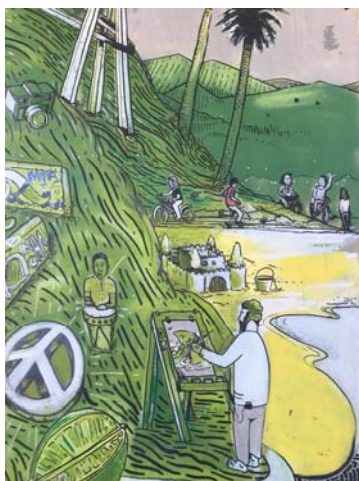
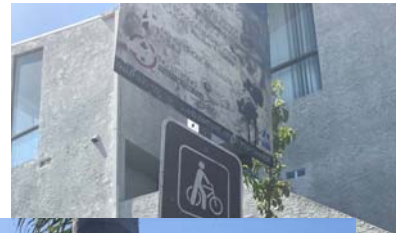
'General Admission', located Eastwards, around ten minutes walk from the seafront. Upon entry, it was immediately apparent that this was a trendy shop, we were offered a craft beer as we walked in and electronic jazz music faded pleasantly into the background. The store seemed to primarily sell very expensive high brow streetwear, with prices ranging from around \$50

to \$350. After speaking with the store owner, it was clear that street vendors are becoming less successful as house prices around Venice Beach rise and wealthier people start to infiltrate the area, looking for high-end goods. The store owner explained that he was not embarrassed about the fact that the clothes he sold were pretty pricey, but that he was simply catering to the market. He told us that the shop had only opened 6 months ago, but was doing extremely well due to tourists and the upper-echelon of people that were constantly visiting. This was interesting to us as it coincided with what we had seen before, Venice Beach (in a similar way to Brighton) has indeed become a hub of trendy and pricey shops and eateries, with rich people visiting to 'leech' off the individualistic nature of Venice.

Within the local media examples of conflict between residents and tourists can be seen with new articles focusing on issues of scooters. The scooters are often left by visitors or used by visitors within the area of Venice and specifically down by the beach. The scooters may not only be viewed as a nuisance for residents due to them being left around, however it could reflect a deeper issue of the changing landscape of Venice specifically towards the beach.

Increased number of visitors attracted to the area affect the landscape with the shops and facilities available. The area of the boardwalk, on the edge of the beach, seemed to be more designed for tourists rather than the artist hub the area is advertised as. (<https://ktla.com/2018/08/10/fed-up-westside-residents-are-vandalizing-pay-per-mile-scooters-by-setting-them-on-fire-smearing-them-with-feces/>).

We saw signs around for a campaign called 'Stop the Monster' especially around the more wealthy canal area, when looking it up we found the campaign is aiming to stop the Reese Davidson development/community project being gone ahead with - a large apartment complex which would provide affordable housing in the southern end of Venice Beach near the canals. Whilst it is telling that the neighbourhood has been able to mobilise to create a movement against the development due to it not having involved the existing community enough in decisions, the movements motives are questionable - upon reflection, the 'monster' they are referring to is a community they would rather not have amongst them which according to the Venice Community Housing website would consist of 50% formerly homeless residents, 25% low income artists and 25% low income families - this is contrary to the residents in this part of Venice Beach near the canals now where the lowest prices appeared to be \$900,000. Whilst this went against my first conceptions of Venice Beach as an accepting and free place, it is clear it has in some ways carried on the ways of the beatnik cultures, which were essentially middle class young people perpetuating boundaries of social capital - the fact the Reese Davidson Development specifically targets low income artists shows that this is a problem still. We also saw existing affordable housing called 'One Venice, built in the 1980:', which claimed on the sign to provide equal housing opportunities under the LA Housing and Urban Development Programme, it would be interesting to see how the neighbourhood reacted to this when it was introduced.



The graffiti in Venice especially along the Ocean-Front seems planned and controlled, considered 'murals' rather than graffiti. This fits in with the larger scale artistic and free atmosphere of the area, rather than it being seen as a criminal act.

Furthermore, the Abbott Kinney mural showcases how well renowned and respected he is within the area; the locals of this area are clearly proud of their heritage. In terms of the architecture, all the houses are different and unique reflecting the culture of the area.

A plethora of colours, smells and people flooded our senses as we stepped on to Venice Beach. The tranquil neighbourhoods in Venice are in stark juxtaposition with the bustling activities primarily seen along the beachside. Buskers, vendors and “mixtape” sellers desperately trying to outdo one another to make ends meet, putting tourists’ heads on a constant swivel.

The various neighbourhoods in Venice demonstrate the cohesion, or the lack thereof, between communities of different social classes and races. Residents of the Canals could be described as bohemians, the middle-upper class who indulge in “high-culture”, whereas the beachside engenders a rastafarian feeling, amplified by the various hipsters and forms of self expression through streetwear and body art.

Most of the houses we’ve seen were either the ones along the beachside or the ones by the canals. However, places like Oakwood, and Rose Avenue house a community of African Americans and homeless people. A 40 year-old African-

American man playing basketball mentioned that Santa Monica is “quite a white place”, confirming our observations from walking through Venice. Historically, up until the 1960s, discrimination and restrictive real estate laws prevented African-Americans from buying property or using some public amenities. Historic sites of African-American leisure activity have become less obvious as racial segregation faded over time. Venice Beach is indeed an important focal point for tourism development and the congregation of hipsters and bohemians. But it is also a space for people to express their resistance against hegemonic cultures.

By Jamie, David, Laurence, Annie, Ella, KJ and Megan

