

Forbes

Is Abbot Kinney Still The “Coolest Block In America?”

Spencer Elliott Contributor

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Sep 4, 2024,10:00am EDT



From its spirited West Coast bohemian roots, Abbot Kinney Boulevard has evolved into a hub for upscale boutiques, galleries and restaurants. Nic Adler

In the face of persistent setbacks—financial troubles, excessive red tape and the death of his business partner—that threatened to extinguish his dream of building a cultural capital in California, the millionaire mastermind behind the “Venice of America,” Abbot Kinney, remained optimistic.

“I shall still make [Venice] a success,” he professed in a 1907 interview with the Los Angeles Times. “I haven’t a doubt of that. Of course, it just won’t be on the original lines.”

In the years following Kinney’s death in 1920, Venice would go to rack and ruin. Most of the canals were paved over. Homes were neglected. Rent prices plummeted. By the 1950s, it would be labeled the “Slum by the Sea.” Would Kinney’s legacy amount to nothing more than a mural at the post office?

But then the Beatniks arrived. Lured by cheap housing, counterculture artists flocked to the quiet beach town, filling coffee shops with poetry and turning bungalows into rehearsal spaces (the Doors famously formed in one of these groovy shacks). This free-loving spirit would change Venice’s reputation from slum to bohemian hangout, and as history has shown, when artists move in, wealth soon follows.

THE RELAXED RISE OF ABBOT KINNEY BOULEVARD

Well-to-do homebuyers began dipping their toes in the Venice market around the early 1980s, and in the following decade, their presence would bring back investment. Signs of Kinney’s original vision began to reappear. The Venice Canals were renovated and reopened, attractions were added to the Venice Beach Boardwalk and, in 1990, West Washington Boulevard was renamed Abbot Kinney Boulevard, a street that GQ would eventually deem “the coolest block in America.” A street that would become a symbol of Venice’s revitalization.

At the time of its renaming, Abbot Kinney Blvd was already hip. Locals made up most of the foot traffic for its collection of boutique bakeries and delis and little shops selling crystals, second-hand books and incense. Artist studios and galleries occupied much of the street, including Ed Ruscha’s printshop. Enter Google, who in 2005 set up headquarters one street over and began Venice’s induction into Silicon Beach. Many worried that big tech would transform the area into a commercialized wasteland. But Abbot Kinney Blvd held firm to its laid-back vibe. The street stayed Starbucks-free. That said, its artsy coffee shops were beginning to serve up \$5 Americanos.

Today, Abbot Kinney has joined the ranks of Los Angeles’ most iconic streets, with restaurants and shopping that rival other hubs like Rodeo Drive and Melrose Avenue. On any given day, the mile-long stretch of road is abuzz with visitors from all over the globe who spend an entire afternoon rooting through the eclectic wares offered along the sun-dappled sidewalk. While the past few years have certainly seen the street evolve towards the upscale, the community is still known for its bohemian spirit. Think \$200 Birkenstocks.



Many homes in Venice date back to the early 20th century. Some, like this \$2 million beachside abode, have maintained their original charm. Hilton & Hyland

A RENOVATED CLASSIC STAYS TRUE TO ITS ROOTS

The same could be said of the homes that surround the famous street. Halfway between the boulevard and the beach—only a few blocks—one such historic home is an apt example of how much of the neighborhood’s essence has been preserved. Built in 1912, during Kinney’s era of presumed optimism, the two-bedroom home is a classic SoCal beach house. Sky-blue siding wraps around the facade of its low-pitched craftsman structure. A small porch stands at the front, where two doors reveal the home’s former life as a duplex. Gated parking for three cars has freed up the garage to be used as an ADU or an art studio.

Like its hometown, the residence received renovations in the mid-1980s. The remodel was designed by renowned Los Angeles architect Frederick Fisher, who worked in Frank Gehry’s practice and is perhaps best known by locals for his redevelopment of the Annenberg Community Beach House in Santa Monica. Fisher’s touch was light. The home’s chill character can still be found in exposed beam ceilings, French doors and circular windows. The majority of the updates involved removing redundancies and brightening the interior, including the addition of skylights and the shortening of walls. The result is living spaces that exude a sunny California vibe.



Arguably, the most significant change to the property since its renovation is its price. Listed for \$2 million by Paul Salazar of Hilton & Hyland, 216 Westminster Avenue was purchased in 1984 for just \$135,000. So goes the story for much of Venice's real estate. All these years later, we fickle fools have finally found the value of Abbot Kinney's vision, and we can't turn away.

Though Kinney's predictions for Venice's success ultimately came true, the visionary wasn't always right. At the closing of his 1907 interview, Kinney was asked why he hadn't named the town after himself. He replied: "There were some pharaohs in Egypt who spent their lives building pyramids...and people even forgot how to read the language in which their achievements were written. What do you think the chances are for my being remembered?" Time has proven him wrong.

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