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## THE RISE AND FALL (AND RISE AGAIN?) OF L.A.'S FAMED ROBERTSON BOULEVARD

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The story of how one street went from a highly trafficked celebrity hot spot, to a desolate stretch of "for lease" signs, to what now looks like the beginning of a revival.

When it comes to famous Los Angeles retail streets, Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills is probably the first one that comes to mind. Like New York's storied Fifth Avenue, it will always be associated with a certain unattainable, old-school luxury (and with Julia Roberts shaming a sales associate with [that unforgettable line](#) in "Pretty Woman"). But elsewhere, retail ebbs and flows, and for a time in the mid-aughts, Robertson Boulevard was an even bigger celebrity scene — think [Paris Hilton](#), [Nicole Richie](#), [Lindsay Lohan](#) and [Britney Spears](#), who came to the street regularly [to shop Kitson's](#) selection of then-desirable designer jeans, Juicy track suits, graphic tees and trucker hats, as well as a number of other nearby boutiques, and eat at The Ivy, with the guarantee that they'd be photographed by the hordes of paparazzi trolling the area. It was something of a stepping stone for [the Kardashians](#), back when they'd venture outside their Calabasas compounds just about any time an opportunity to be photographed presented itself.

"Those pictures helped make a lot of celebrities bigger; Paris Hilton [going to] Robertson made her bigger," explains Jay Luchs, a L.A. commercial real estate magnate whose name became ubiquitous on Robertson as his (and others') "for lease" signs began replacing brand names along the street several years ago. In a way, it was then and there that the era of the influencer began to take shape, with celebrities deliberately — and, in some cases, desperately — getting their photos taken to raise their profiles and get brand deals with the likes of Kitson.

This helped turn Robertson into a veritable tourist destination. "The amazing shopping was [there]," remembers Felicia Alexander, co-founder of BoxUnion, a trendy boxing gym. "Anytime people visited from out of town, you definitely wanted to take them to Robertson."

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"I think Robertson was almost [before its time]," posits Luchs, referring to today's [influencer-driven](#) retail [landscape](#). In a few short years, Robertson went from being the hottest street in L.A. retail, with packed sidewalks and lines of people waiting to shop at Kitson or get into the Ivy after an afternoon of retail therapy, to having more vacant storefronts than leased ones. According to Luchs, stores began closing their doors in the late aughts, after the 2008 recession, which also coincided with a writers' strike in Hollywood. "Probably every street in the country took a couple years to come back, and while other streets evolved during the initial comeback in 2011 and 2012, Robertson really didn't," he says, adding that perhaps the street "was being looked at as 'teeny bopper land' at that point, not sophisticated anymore, and Melrose started taking the sophistication." Rents had also skyrocketed after big-name brands like Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, Tory Burch, Dolce & Gabbana and Michael Kors (none of whom remain in the area) opened up shop. With high rents and post-recession, post-Amazon low foot traffic, many tenants couldn't justify staying there.

"I think we all knew Robertson at one time as the *hottest* street," says Randi Wood, owner of Entre Nous, a luxury [vintage](#) retail and rental boutique on Robertson frequented by Hollywood stylists. "Having that reputation and draw, landlords were able to charge high lease rates and businesses were able to justify [the cost]. With the downfall of the economy 10 years ago, sales plummeted and companies were not able to keep up with their overhead. If landlords were not willing to negotiate once leases came up for renewal, businesses had no choice but to move or shut down."

Kitson stuck it out [until 2015](#), though it's since returned to the street — first as Kitross and now as Kitson. A few tenants held out and remain on the street to this day, including Chanel, The Ivy, Curve and Intermix; others took risks and opened up shop there for the first time, like All Saints and The Kooples. But as vacancies on Robertson increased, other retail stretches in L.A. began gaining more traction and attracting more brands. For anyone looking to set up shop in L.A., [Melrose Place](#), Melrose Avenue, the [Arts District of Downtown Los Angeles](#), Abbot Kinney in Venice Beach, or one of the city's many [indoor and outdoor malls](#), would be among their first stops. Robertson? Not so much.

When I [moved to Los Angeles](#) at the beginning of 2017, I ended up in an apartment right around the corner from what was once the busiest stretch of Robertson. However, what I saw upon my arrival was, in a word, depressing. I watched as businesses opened and then closed within a matter of weeks. An ex-New Yorker with no car, I was often the only person traversing the street on foot. But ongoing construction on Robertson Plaza, a large office and retail development formerly occupied by the popular Newsroom Cafe, provided a glimmer of hope. Maybe something cool *would* open there and bring the street back to life.

Something did: Blue Bottle. Many consider the mere presence of one of the coffee chain's locations to be a harbinger of cool (and, in many cases, gentrification). There's also now a newly expanded [MedMen](#), arguably L.A.'s preeminent cannabis chain; The Henry, a casual restaurant with a bar and ample outdoor seating; a high-end cocktail bar; a trendy boxing gym; a Pilates studio and a luxury vintage retailer. A bit further north, New York's Cha Cha Matcha opened its first L.A. location. Alone, none of these necessarily indicate a neighborhood on the rise; together, it's hard not to feel like the area is finally on the upswing.

Getting those tenants on board probably took some convincing, though. "They weren't just showing up," explains Luchs, who says he's done about 40 leases on Robertson, representing both landlords and tenants. "We had to really discuss the street and why longterm it's a good move, because short term — the next two-to-three years — there's no guarantee."

"Robertson was not immediately on my radar since at the time — fall 2017 — it was pretty quiet," admits Wood. "But after looking in and around Melrose Place and Beverly Hills, which was extremely expensive, and then talking to the real estate community, it seemed like I should at least take it into consideration. Everyone was convinced it was on the beginning of an upswing and there was a lot of value to be had by entering into a lease at the moment. After looking at a few spaces, I was able to negotiate a lease that I was happy with." While business was slow in the beginning, it's begun to pick up as more businesses have opened up on the street. "I am optimistic that will continue," she says.

"My business partner and I have lived in L.A. for a long time and have a nostalgic appreciation for Robertson, and what we really like about that specific location is the ability to pull from both West Hollywood and Beverly Hills," says Alexander of her decision to open BoxUnion's second location in Robertson Plaza (alongside Blue Bottle and The Henry). She says that while Robertson is less of a destination than it was in its heyday, it does draw a local crowd — many of whom work at Cedars Sinai Hospital, located just around the corner.

Along with Blue Bottle, [James Perse](#) is seen as another harbinger of the street's future, even though the 11,000-square-foot space he's leasing for a flagship home store, which sat vacant for three years after Ralph Lauren left it, has yet to open its doors. "I think it's sad what's happened on Robertson," [Perse told WWD](#) last May. "How can we help refresh the landscape a little? Create a sense of place? I was interested in this building as a way to kick-start that revival, and also because it's a great space with proximity to the West Hollywood Design District."

Luchs tells me that the space now occupied by All Saints is coming available and some "pretty cool brands" are asking him about it. "I think James Perse is one of the reasons why," he says. "People are taking notice: If it's good enough for James Perse, it's good enough for us."

Another sign that Robertson has a future is simply the fact that people are *still* talking about it. Any time I meet a colleague for coffee at Blue Bottle or mention where I live, it becomes a discussion. "Everyone in a weird way is rooting it on," observes Luchs. "You don't make comments about streets you don't care about, and everyone has something to say about it." He says a few more brands need to "take a leap of faith and know that the traffic will show up when the right brands come back." Though, "right brands" is an important distinction. Unlike [a mall](#), a street can't be curated by one person to ensure the right mix of businesses. "We're at a scary place; we only have so much space and you can screw it up by signing the wrong tenants, and it has all different landlords," explains Luchs.

New York's [Bleecker Street](#), which experienced [a similar roller coaster-like trajectory](#), overcame this issue with the help of Brookfield Properties, which bought several buildings and curated a group of likeminded, often digitally native startup brands to revive the area.

Even if and when cool brands do begin to set up shop, this will never be the Robertson of the early aughts, in part because everything about retail has fundamentally changed since then. It isn't as celebrity-driven, and it takes much more for a retail concept to succeed now that just about everything can be purchased online, whether it's proximity to food, Instagrammability, a luxurious experience or simply possessing that rare "cool" factor. "There are still brands out there in the world — say Kith and Supreme for the sake of conversation — that are almost entertainment to go into," says Luchs. "The only hope we have is to keep mixing in staleness with restaurants and people and fitness and the Kith-type brands and experiential. If we can do that, we're gonna be okay."

And if noted international influencer Paris Hilton shows up for a day of shopping with her tiny Chihuahua in tow, that certainly can't hurt, either.

*Homepage/top photo: Paris Hilton surrounded by paparazzi outside Kitson in 2007. Photo: Jean Baptiste Lacroix/WireImage*

*Note: This article has been updated to reflect that Kitson is back on Robertson Blvd. with its original name.*

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