L.A. Confidential

Look past the la-la-land clichés—the traffic, the beach bunnies, the star maps—to find an urban cultural mecca. BY CELESTE MOURE

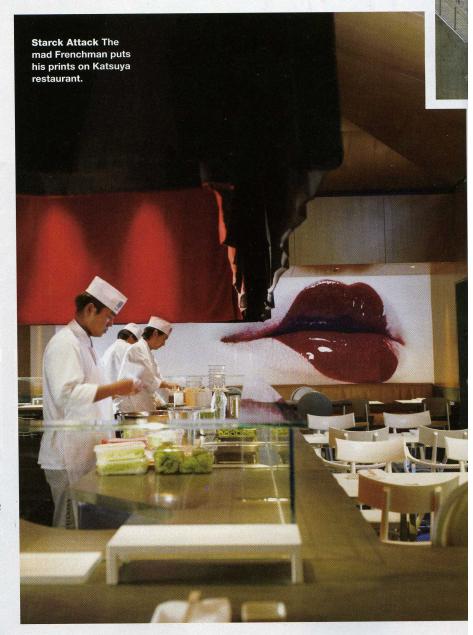
hose who dismiss L.A.
as a massive suburban
sprawl aren't looking
hard enough; it's a unique
collection of small towns,
each with a distinctive
character worth exploring. Thanks to its
taste for reinvention, this ever-changing
urban landscape is emerging as a vital,
metropolitan cultural capital.

Stay

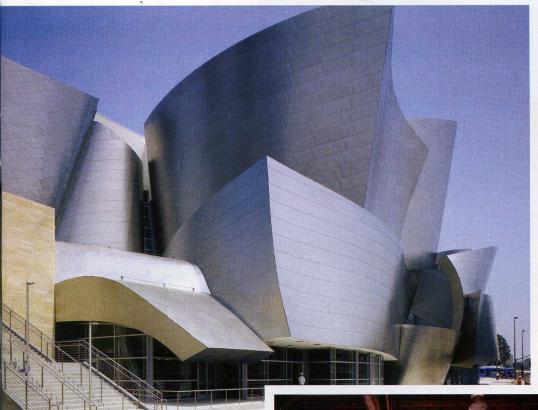
Shimmering sheer curtains, plush beds with tufted headboards and sleek modern lines accentuate the rooms at Santa Monica's **Huntley** (1111 2nd St., 310-394-5454, thehuntleyhotel.com), a beachside oasis where the walls in the all-white lobby feature paint-dipped piranhas, oversize leather sofas and delicate white orchids throughout.

Over in Beverly Hills, try Maison 140 (140 Lasky Dr., 310-281-4000, maison 140beverlyhills.com), a Kelly Wearstlerdesigned 43-room hotel where the Far East meets 1920s Paris. Inside are crystal chandeliers, lacquered panels and red-ink wallpaper; crimson plates hang as *objets d'art* on the ebony walls.

The newest addition to the hotel scene is **SLS** at Beverly Hills (465 S. La Cienega Blvd., 310-247-0400, starwoodhotels.com), where the 297 rooms feature luxe Italian furniture from Cassina, custom designed by Philippe Starck for the property (Guests who fall in love with them can purchase by special order). Inspired by 18th-century cabinets de curiosités, the









hotel features a "shop without walls" concept that flows throughout the public places; showcases hold a selection of objects from über-design store Moss.

Eat

Nancy Silverton (Campanile, La Brea Bakery) partners with Mario Batali to bring Angelenos the city's best pizza at Pizzeria Mozza (641 N Highland Ave., 323-297-0101, mozza-la.com). The dough is thin, light and airy and loaded with Cal-Ital toppings like squash blossoms, egg and speck.

Comme Ça (8479 Melrose Ave., 323-782-1178, commecarestaurant.com) is a casually glamorous West Hollywood brasserie from David Myers, chef/owner of the award-winning restaurant Sona. The main dining room is an all blackand-white affair, with Paris flea market finds scattered throughout. The menu focuses on well-executed classic dishes like moules frites and bouillabaisse, plus an excellent selection of cheeses.

The Hollywood resurgence is in full effect at Katsuya Hollywood (6300 Hollywood Blvd., 323-871-8777, sbe.com/katsuya), a sushi restaurant, also designed by Starck. Blown-up photos of geishas' pouty red lips and smoky eyelids create a seriously sexy atmosphere.



Design Explosion **Disney Concert Hall** (upper left), the SLS at **Beverly Hills (above)** and the Paul Smith boutique (left).

Play

In the last few years the stretch of Melrose Avenue west of Fairfax and east of La Cienega has become the destination for the design-savvy. Inside the hot-pink Paul Smith space (8221 Melrose Ave., 323-951-4800, paulsmith.co.uk) you'll find women's and men's fashions as well as quirky creations like wooden moose heads and Union Jack upholstered chairs. Jonathan Adler's West Coast outpost (8125 Melrose Ave., 323-658-8390, jonathanadler.com) is chock-full of retro throw pillows sitting beside lacquer nesting cubes and zebra rugs. The Prada store in Beverly Hills (343 N Rodeo Dr., 310-278-8661, prada.com) is worth a look for its Rem Koolhaas design.

If archi-tourism is high on the agenda, don't miss the Disney Concert Hall (111 S Grand Ave., 323-850-2000 laphil .com). Built by Frank Gehry and opened in 2003, it's the exclamation point that Los Angeles, and downtown in particular, needed. Down the street is the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels (555 W Temple St., olacathedral.org), a majestic adobe-hued concrete building designed by Jose Rafael Moneo that features a 50metre bell tower and a beautiful cloister garden full of young oak and sycamore trees. The new Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA (5905 Wilshire Blvd., 323-857-0098) is a playful masterpiece framed in steel beams painted tomato red and a scaffold of escalators and stairs that architect Renzo Piano calls "the spider"—a design reminiscent of his work at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. wl