



Left: The Los Angeles River Greenway Trail bike path passes under the bridge at Fletcher Drive in Frogtown. Below: A sculpture in artist Thomas Houseago's Frogtown studio.

FROGTOWN NOW

IT'S L.A.'S EVOLVING CREATIVE HUB
—AND A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

"I found it really peaceful—it was this beautiful industrial enclave that no one seemed to know was there."

—artist **Thomas Houseago**

Text by Steffie Nelson / Photography by Laura Hull

Turn onto the wrong street from Riverside Drive and you might never find it. You'll hit the 2 or the 5 freeway, or maybe wind up at a side entrance to Home Depot. But once you do enter this neighborhood of single-family homes and low industrial buildings, nestled along the curving, soft-bottom section of the L.A. River, you'll know that you're in a part of Los Angeles like no other—secret and self-contained, where the hum of industry is quieted by a blanket of tranquility that seems to emanate from the river. This is Frogtown. The name comes from the frogs that used to emerge from the grassy banks, and it was later adopted by local gangs that gave the area a dangerous edge and kept most except locals and intrepid artists away. But things have changed over the past few years—dramatically in the last year alone—and a genuinely thriving creative community has blossomed.

The musician Mia Doi Todd is a rare breed: a native Angeleno who is also a Frogtown local. She describes the walk between her mother's house in Silver Lake and the Frogtown art studio of her father, the sculptor Michael Todd, as "the thoroughfare of my life." She recalls the delicious smells wafting from the bakeries that once dotted the area, including Van de Kamp's, Dolly Madison and Hostess, which employed 500 people at its height. Today the Twinkies have been replaced by Eames-style chairs (the furniture manufacturer Modernica bought the Hostess Brands bakery in 2014), and Doi Todd is a part owner of Zebulon, a bar and music venue that relocated from Brooklyn and opened in another former bakery on Fletcher Drive last May.

When Zebulon's founders—brothers Jef and Joe Soubiran and Guillaume Blestel—began looking for a home in Los Angeles, the bakery-turned-CD warehouse's bowstring-truss roof offered perfect acoustics for live music. The location—beside the freeway with no residential neighbors, just around the corner from the popular taco spot Salazar—was ideal, and the involvement of Doi Todd and her musician husband Jesse Peterson eased the neighborhood-council approval process. A smaller front space made a cozy cafe setting, and Joe Soubiran brought the original 1930s wooden bar out of storage in Brooklyn and shipped it across the country. Since its opening, Zebulon has hosted everyone from Grizzly Bear to Seun Kuti (son of Fela) to Questlove to Cat Power, who in January performed for the Art Los Angeles Contemporary art fair opening party. With its eclectic international crowd, Zebulon serves as both a physical and cultural anchor for the quickly evolving community.

Of course, artists and cultural happenings have been part of the fabric of Frogtown for decades. The author and activist Lewis MacAdams founded Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) in 1986 with the intention of making it an ecologically sound recreational space—something that is now closer than ever, with kayaks rentals and the Los Angeles River Greenway Trail bike path, which will extend to San Pedro by 2023. The Frogtown Art Walk, which takes place in September, has been inviting the public into artists' studios since 2006, and Julia Meltzer's Clockshop has been organizing talks and literary events by the river and in the Elysian space she runs with her partner since 2004.



Houseago (*this page*) works on large-scale sculptures (*left*), paintings and ceramics in his separate studio spaces, where he also regularly hosts school groups.



Clare Vivier (*above*), founder of the apparel, handbag and accessories brand Clare V., opened her Frogtown headquarters last May. "It's such an unusual place for L.A., and everyone feels it when they come here," she says.

Top and right: Clare V.'s business offices, design studio and warehouse are housed in a renovated 1920s industrial complex. *Top right:* A Clare V. bag sports a signature French phrase.



“For there to be breweries and coffee houses and fancy restaurants—we never saw it coming.”

—Karl Kruegermann



Above: Spoke Bicycle Cafe, right on the bike path, offers a menu by Laura Parsley-Gonzales.



Right: Musicians Mia Doi Todd and Jesse Paterson helped to open Zebulon, a bar and music venue that relocated from Brooklyn last May.

Below: The Mexican restaurant Salazar opened in a former auto-repair shop in 2016.



Artist and designer Kelly Lamb (above) converted a former plumbing company building into a showroom (top), offices and a work studio two years ago.

Right: A totem-like ceramic fountain tower in Lamb's outdoor workspace. “To have this creative hub is so exciting,” she says. “I feel really lucky to be part of it.”



Artists like Shepard Fairey; Mark Grotjahn and Jennifer Guidi; Amy Adler; and Thomas Houseago discovered this longtime maker community's wealth of disused industrial spaces years back, and while all keep low profiles, Houseago's was raised considerably when he invited a post-breakup Brad Pitt to try some art therapy at his complex last year. (Word on the street says that Pitt has been looking to buy in the neighborhood.) For Houseago, a multimedia practitioner who bought the first of his four buildings in 2008, it was when collectors could suddenly find his studio that he realized his secluded haven had become a destination. “It used to be they'd be an hour late,” says the transplanted Leeds native. “Now they'll be like, ‘Oh, I had lunch at Salazar, it was excellent.’”

Houseago's acquisitions had nothing to do with speculation and everything to do with specs: He needed access, space, height, light and no noise restrictions. “I had no preconceptions,” he says. “I just found it really peaceful that the river ran through it and that it was this beautiful industrial enclave that no one seemed to know was there.” He has separate studios for painting, ceramics and his newest work: massive totems carved from redwood (ethically sourced, he is quick to note). A walled outdoor lot holds the monolithic white plaster sculpture that will eventually be cast in ash stone and donated to LACMA as an interactive artwork. “The piece has required a total dedication of time, energy and resources, but it's a labor of love for L.A.,” he admits. “I have a strong belief that as artists we have a duty to try and make the world more interesting, weird and complex.”

Along with the creative possibilities that this space affords him, Houseago has also begun to realize his own role in the changing DNA (and rents) of the neighborhood. He has taken it upon himself to help younger artists—offering them work space or simply inviting them to lunch and making introductions to other artists. He also has an ongoing partnership with the Underground Museum and regularly hosts school groups. Houseago dismisses suggestions from developers that he would be wise to sell. “That's what investors do,” he says with a shudder. “It was never an investment for me. My work is here—this is how I survive, this is how I live.”

For Karl Kruegermann, president of Kruegermann Pickles and Sauerkraut, the changing neighborhood and skyrocketing value of real estate is an even more mixed bag. The Kruegermann family has been manufacturing traditional pickles and sauerkraut on Gilroy Street in Frogtown since they emigrated from Germany in 1961. Carl grew up working in the factory and remembers many sides of the neighborhood, from the frogs he couldn't help but ride over with his bike as a kid to the people he knew who were killed by the Frogtown gang. “But what's happened now,” he says, “for there to be breweries and coffee houses and fancy restaurants—we never saw it coming.”

Over time, his family bought seven buildings on the block, because they were told it was a smart investment. “And we struggled to do it, even though it was peanuts compared to what you would pay today,” he says. Now he finds himself running a family business that might be worth more money as a rental property. “Which is kind of sad,” he notes. Still, he is excited by the new energy brought by his tenants—who include the French artist Claire Tabouret and the design and branding company Oh Joy!—and pleased that the name “Frogtown” has shed its negative associations.

The artist and designer Kelly Lamb is also one of Kruegermann's tenants, and she says the changing feel of the neighborhood made it desirable for her, as a female entrepreneur, to move there—not to mention its convenience to so many other neighborhoods, from Los Feliz to Atwater Village to Downtown. “To have this creative hub—which seems to be what Frogtown is becoming—is so exciting,” says Lamb. “I feel really lucky to be part of it.” Two years ago Lamb converted a former plumbing company inhabited by round-the-clock guard dogs into a showroom, offices and a work studio with two kilns. In this short period, she says, “rents have doubled.” Here, she and a small team develop new pieces like the fused-glass light fixtures and totemic ceramic sculptures she has been experimenting with lately, and make the glazed geodesic planters that are her calling card. When she fabricates off-site, she tries to keep it local. “When I do lighting, my electrician is down the block,” she says. After work, you might find her stopping by Zebulon or Salazar, where she's partial to the margaritas on tap.



Artist and designer David Wiseman (right) is working with his brother, Ari Wiseman, to renovate his 30,000-square-foot Frog-town studio (below), which will house work spaces, a gallery and gardens featuring plants that relate to Wiseman's work.

Opposite above: Chef Peter Lemos and his wife, Laura, opened the sandwich shop Wax Paper in 2015. Opposite below: A freewheeling rider on the Frogtown bike path.

It's no coincidence that Salazar is the name on everyone's lips, as it seems to have marked the Frogtown tipping point. Since opening in a former auto-repair shop in 2016 with a simple tacos-and-tequila menu and a clashing, dated HTML website that is such an eyesore it could only be tongue-in-cheek (it is), the family-friendly outdoor spot routinely has hour-long waits. Alternatively, Spoke Bicycle Cafe, which opened in 2015 as a coffee stand and tune-up pop-up right off the bike path, began serving a full menu by chef Laura Parsley-Gonzales, from the Highland Park vegetarian hub Kitchen Mouse, last spring. Some of their custom wooden tables have built-in slots for easy bike parking.

It was in fact the bike path that led the chic local handbag, apparel and accessories brand Clare V. to its new riverside home. The company's design director and visual merchandiser, Greta Heichemer, was out cycling when she noticed a "for lease" sign in a renovated 1920s complex on Newell Street. "I thought it was too good to be true, because it was a dream space for me," says company founder Clare Vivier. She was vaguely familiar with Frogtown through friends like the textile artist Tanya Aguiniga, who is in the neighborhood, but Vivier didn't need any convincing. "It's such an unusual place for L.A., and everyone feels it



when they come here." Clare V. set up shop last May in a 7,000-square-foot space that houses their business offices, design studio and a warehouse stacked with colorful hides of leather, spools of cord and ribbon, and bins stuffed with sweatshirts and tees splashed with the cute French phrases that are the brand's signature.

After opening her seventh store in San Francisco last June, Vivier is keeping her focus local this spring, with a TOMS shoes collaboration to benefit L.A. women's homeless shelters. Frogtown allows her the freedom to work and create while staying engaged with a community. Her neighbors in the mixed-use development include La Colombe Cafe and Roastery and Lucas Hair Salon, and the "very social" Vivier is already anticipating neighborhood soirees. "We have this path linking us all," she notes. "I think it would be really fun to have a roving party."

Vivier cites the developers' commitment to the artist and maker community as another reason she was immediately sold on Frogtown. But even Rick Cortez, a part owner of the Newell complex, whose architectural firm RAC designed and built the airy industrial spaces, has come up against the inevitabilities of gentrification. Cortez tried to "fight the typical trend cycle" by advocating for a Q conditions overlay that would keep buildings low and zoned for industrial use adjacent to the river. "I thought that was the best and highest use," he says, describing his vision of a "makers' corridor." In the end, height restrictions were passed, but as Cortez watches residential units go up beside his business, he knows his days are numbered. Still, he's philosophical. "There's no cabal, it's just what happens. And for all the complaining we do about the gentrification, this is like the last area to get hit." While he can, Cortez plans to enjoy his time on the "hidden little island" he helped to build.

It's precisely this remoteness and proximity to nature that drew the artist and designer David Wiseman to Frogtown. At the 30,000-square-foot Blake Avenue studio he is opening with his brother Ari, who left his position as deputy director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in New York for this venture, leafy trees extend over the wall from the bike path, and the sounds of the river are audible from the parking lot. "It's quite unusual for an artist's studio in L.A. to have this connection to nature," Ari observes. "It's not like David had to move off to Ojai like Beatrice Wood."

Currently under construction and scheduled to open this summer, Wiseman Studios will have separate work spaces and a gallery, plus gardens featuring species related to David's work. All of his exquisitely detailed creations are inspired by the natural world, from delicate branch-and-blossom chandeliers and ceiling installations to a standing screen with abstracted organic patterns to a single cast-bronze pomegranate, seed pod or bird. In this unique environment, he will be able to share his process and his finished works in a manner that can't be accomplished in a typical art studio or gallery. "There's so much interaction and dialogue that needs to happen outside of the context of a gallery," says David. "Collectors who are commissioning a major work find their way to my studio and we can talk about different patinas or casting techniques, and that really informs the end result, having that direct dialogue with the artist. This is a place where we hope to introduce a wider public to my work, but also to the process."

David Wiseman also believes the new Frogtown location will fuel his creative process in ways he has yet to identify. "So much of the work happens foraging and meandering and seeing what kind of seed pod the tree makes in spring versus fall," he says. "I want this to be a little microcosm of what's inspired all of this. There's already a raccoon family that lives here," he continues, eyes lighting up. "I hope they stay." ●

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ARTIST THOMAS HOUSEAGO
IN HIS FROGTOWN STUDIO