

MARY
McNAMARA

*If you bill
it, they
will come*

THE sign says "Gallery Row," but it still looks pretty much like Spring Street — not too much traffic, foot or vehicle, even at rush hour. On weekdays, the sidewalk does something less than teem with lawyers, reporters and panhandlers, with secretaries and postal workers and the occasional actual resident with his Jack Russell terrier. No black berets, no clove cigarettes, no really thin girls wearing leather jackets with six-dozen zippers.

The blocks of Main and Spring streets that lie between 2nd and 9th streets downtown are home to many things — the Ronald Reagan State Building, several loft apartment buildings and a couple of nice bistros — but SoHo it ain't. Yet according to the motion made in July by City Councilwoman Jan Perry that resulted in the new "row," there are "numerous galleries located here . . . [that] are becoming common destinations for Los Angeles residents and tourists."

Who says this isn't the city of dreams?

There are, in fact, galleries in the area — Gallery B35, Gallery 727, Bank Zone 9 and Inshallah — but even if they stood side by side, which they do not, it would be one heck of a short row. But "Gallery Demi-Row" doesn't have the quite same ring, and the purpose of the new signs is to be blatantly inspirational rather than factual.

"It's an initiative," says playwright Nic Cha Kim, a member of the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council's Arts, Aesthetics and Culture Committee, which pushed for the signs. "We're trying to get people to come together and be sincere about downtown — we want more galleries, yoga rooms, theaters, darkrooms, anything that's art-oriented. There should be an arts district downtown rather than in NoHo or J-town."

Los Angeles in a nutshell. Say it's true and it will be true. Put up the Hollywoodland sign first, build the dang houses later. Buy the car and the lifestyle will follow. Of course you're an actor-director-screenwriter; no pesky little actuarial day job should get in the way of your *identity*.

J-town, by the way, is Japan Town or Little Tokyo, which, strangely enough, many people consider part of downtown, as it is about five blocks away from "Gallery Row." But Little Tokyo has had its own sign for years now, as have the Fashion District, the Toy District and Historic Downtown. The Old Bank District will undoubtedly be next.

"Everyone else had signs," says Cha Kim. "We had to have a sign."

He's right — the white-on-delphinium "Gallery Row" signs

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Quest for identity is a sign of the times

[McNamara, from Page E1] are just the latest buds in a general blooming throughout the L.A. area as communities, neighborhoods and businesses all clamor for a sign of their own.

"Little Armenia, Historic Filipino Town, Little Ethiopia, Wilshire Vista, Beverlywood," recites John Fisher when asked to name some of the signs the Department of Transportation, where he is assistant general manager, has put up in the last year or two.

Fisher has been with the department for 30 years, and while he's not the sort of guy to use the words "hip" or "trendy," he says that in the last few years, those little blue signs have become as sought after, and numerous, as the stars on Hollywood Boulevard.

As if Los Angeles didn't have enough neighborhoods, or signs, as it is.

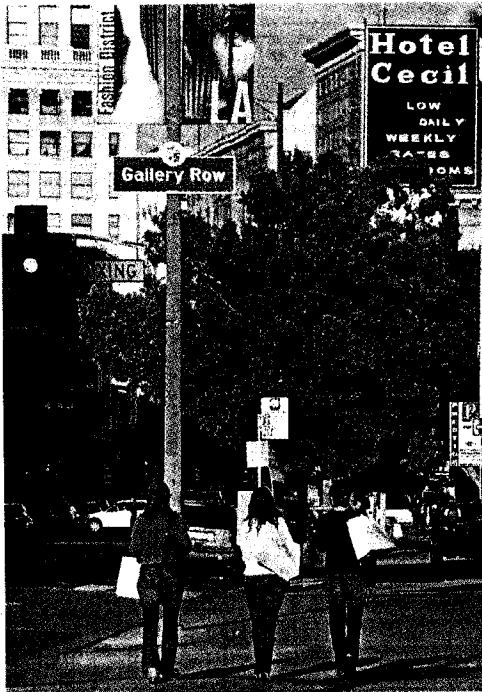
THE process of renaming your particular patch of dirt is alarmingly simple. In most cases, proposals for neighborhood designation and "honorary signs" are approved by the Los Angeles City Council without comment — until people traveling familiar roads start asking themselves how something like Historic Filipino Town could have sprung up seemingly overnight.

"It's part of an effort for communities to carve out an identity from a larger neighborhood," Fisher says of the signs. "And it's also a way to show the neighborhood's aspiration — you call it an art district and hope to fulfill that destiny."

Other cities wait for centuries to pass before identifying their historic or ethnic districts with something as crass as a sign; here, we simply don't have that kind of time.

And who wants to live in the uninspired "Mid-City" when they could live in the much posher sounding "Wilshire Vista"? Why allow a "Skid Row" when you can have an "Old Bank District"?

Cynics would say we are obsessed with image — if our ZIP Code doesn't quite make the



LORI SHEPLER/Los Angeles Times

NEIGHBORHOOD IDENTITY: A sign on Main Street in downtown Los Angeles dubs the area "Gallery Row."

status cut, we'll take it out in blue signage. But there is a certain childlike charm about the way we do things here, that wide-eyed brash innocence that got so many folks in trouble in the tales of Henry James.

Conventional wisdom has it that the essence of America still dwells in the Midwest, but there are quite a few arguments that it's actually renting in Mid-Wilshire, waiting for the market to settle down.

After all, this country was settled by folks who would build one wooden fort and a fire pit and call it a colony, by people who could look at a communal privy and a saloon and name it "Silver City" without batting an eye. With that kind of precedent,

"Gallery Row" will be the next SoHo in no time flat. (Which means we've got about 17 minutes before the galleries move out and Banana Republic moves in.)

Or, as Fisher believes, the quest for signs could have more to do with the need for internal navigation than external image.

"When my grandmother lived here," he says, "there were still open fields between neighborhoods. So you knew when you were leaving one place and entering another."

Now it's harder — boundaries blur and sometimes disappear. But people still want to know where they are.

Even if the *where* isn't quite there yet.