

Venice Turns 100, but Not Without a Fight

The centennial was seen as a way to unite the community's disparate elements. Instead, multiple fetes are planned.

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Built on a whim by a fantastical dreamer, Venice turns 100 on July 4 — minus its original canals but with its pop-cultural zest intact.

A summer-long celebration will kick off near the boardwalk Saturday with an amped-up Carnevale featuring costumed revelers, music and abstract showpieces from Venice's crowded stable of resident artists.

Given the coastal community's dynamic beginnings and chaotic history — a mere 50 years ago, the place was called "the sewer by the sea" — it won't come as a surprise that the celebration has engendered controversy.

What is surprising is that Venetian activists, notorious for not playing well with others, managed to pull together to light the birthday candles.

One could say that the Venice centennial committee has accomplished its task in spite of itself. So varied were panel members' visions and so contentious their dealings that some participants dropped out to organize their own events or just plain dropped out.

"Venice is a community made up of severe individuals," said Tom Wright, an actor who, with little help from the centennial panel, has co-planned a July 9 surfing contest at the Venice breakwater. "When you have a community of severe individuals ... it's extremely hard to find a middle ground."

Or, as locals are fond of saying: When you have three Venetians in a room, you will get five opinions.

Just imagine what it must have been like at that first centennial-planning meeting a year ago when 30 or so strong-minded Venice residents sat around the table.

At the time, Venice was in the midst of a raucous battle over how best to preserve the diverse community's quirky, artsy character. Tourists know Venice mostly for its eclectic boardwalk. But it is also a neighborhood of million-dollar homes, celebrities, artists, a healthy population of black and Latino families, and street people. Venice has long struggled to figure out how to meld all its disparate elements.

On one side of the fight was a group of self-proclaimed progressives who had gained control of the Grassroots Venice Neighborhood Council with an ambitious agenda: Stop

gentrification, build more low-income housing and help the homeless.

On the other side were residents who believed that a radical fringe was opening its arms to indigents and their vehicles, exacerbating parking and sanitation problems in the congested area.

Sandy Kievman, a field deputy for Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski, whose district includes Venice, thought the opponents could find some rare common ground on a centennial planning committee.

"When I pulled it together, it was supposed to be a way of healing what was going on in the community," Kievman said. "It didn't turn out that way."

One group envisioned a truly local celebration focusing on the history of Venice and its people. Others pictured a world-class happening, with grand events such as a concert that would feature Santana, Eric Clapton and Bonnie Raitt.

According to participants, committee co-chairman David Buchanan, an advertising man and promoter with Marina Media Group, promised big things. A marketing packet touted plans for outdoor theater, a music festival honoring the late dancer and actor Gregory Hines and a re-creation of the electric "VENICE" sign that once stretched across Windward Avenue. (Neither the play nor the music festival came to pass, and volunteers are still attempting to raise money for the sign.)

National sponsors were invited to contribute at levels as high as \$250,000. Not one did. Some corporate sponsors offered a few thousand dollars; others have provided bottled water and other refreshments for events. (To date, the committee has raised a total of about \$75,000, according to recent financial statements.)

Buchanan acknowledged in an interview that, given the short planning window, "we don't know whether that was ever realistic" to raise significant amounts from corporate sponsors. To some extent, the committee decided to piggyback on other regular events, such as the Carnevale.

A planned three-day event at Muscle Beach has been pared down to one, and, even though a swimsuit competition is advertised in the centennial brochure, women will not be parading in bikinis.

That contest was nixed by Kievman and other women on the committee.

Some panelists resented other Buchanan ideas. After learning that Las Vegas would also celebrate its centennial this year, he and others went to Sin City in August to attempt to arrange a fundraising show of works by Venice artists — in Las Vegas.

"I thought it was an exploitation of Venice artists," said Bonnie Cheeseman, who served a few months on the committee. "Why not have an art show here? I'm from Boston, and

I've been through centennials and bicentennials. Not once did we think of leaving town to celebrate our birthday."

Cheeseman resigned from the committee in October but has remained involved. She's helping to organize Saturday's Carnevale, the fourth annual event modeled on the carnivals of Venice, Italy. In honor of the centennial, it will run from noon to midnight instead of the usual 6 p.m. to midnight.

Controversy is nothing new to Venice. Skeptics laughed a century ago when New Jersey-born Abbot Kinney set out to create a renaissance town of the West, modeled on Venice, Italy, in a lagoon south of Santa Monica. It was soon dubbed "Kinney's Folly."

Sensing a golden real estate play, the tobacco maven had the last chuckle, mapping out a Venice-of-America housing development and dredging a system of canals. Kinney, who was educated in Europe and spoke several languages, envisioned intellectual gatherings called Chautauquas, plays, readings and lectures for Midwesterners who would move by the thousands to escape brutal winters.

Lured by cheap train fares, folks from Iowa and Indiana did come to Kinney's Venice. But they didn't want Chautauquas. They wanted camel rides.

Kinney obliged, providing entertainment of all sorts, including a saltwater plunge, a pier and a huge auditorium. Visitors could tour the resort by miniature steam railroad or gondola.

Kinney died in 1920. By the mid-1920s, the city of Venice was broke and was annexed to Los Angeles. Kinney's original canals were paved over. (The canals that exist today were built on land owned by the Los Angeles Pacific Railroad; residents could not afford to fill them in.)

Through economic and social upheaval, Venice has emerged, as in Kinney's day, as a heady mix of culture and carnival. All that will be on display throughout the centennial celebration.

Among other events will be a centennial parade Sunday (featuring, as in the 1930s, giant papier-mâché masks), art exhibits and performances, a picnic and an exhibition baseball game with the Venice Tigers (for a minor league team that once called Venice home).

True to form, however, the celebration remains a divided front.

Suzanne Thompson, an activist who was booted off the centennial committee, has helped plan a Venice People's Centennial Celebration, called "Divas of Venice." Scheduled for several dates in August, it will feature female artists performing music, poetry and readings.

"It was nothing but a huge mess in terms of organizing this thing," said Jim Hubbard, a

nine-year resident who helped plan for the centennial a July 8-10 exhibition of artwork by Venice youth on the Venice Pier, the first art exhibit ever on the storied fishing pier. "I will advise my great-great-grandchildren not to be part of organizing the next centennial."