

LOS ANGELES BUSINESS JOURNAL

Shopping Shuffle

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For years, L.A.'s retail hotspots have been known to shoppers around the globe.

West Hollywood's Robertson Boulevard was the edgy home of young designers. Homey Melrose Place was an antique mecca. And Larchmont was what passes for quaint in Los Angeles.

Attention, shoppers: There's some heavy roadwork going on.

Deep-pocketed corporate interests have been swarming L.A.'s trendy retail neighborhoods, driving commercial rents to double what they were a year ago on Robertson and Melrose Place. The rental land rush has become so intense that several small retailers have sold their leases, sometimes for hundreds of thousands of dollars and usually to big chains.

Jay Luchs, a retail specialist at CB Richard Ellis Group Inc. said this "key money" frenzy is unlike anything he's seen.

"Robertson Boulevard has become so popular around the country and the world that it's caught the attention of retailers," he said. "There are only so many tenants on two blocks and only so many leases coming up, so you do whatever you can to get space."

The hot portions of the shopping streets are only a few blocks long, so the influx of corporate chain stores is changing the ambience of the neighborhoods. And not everyone's happy with the changes.

Chan Luu, a well-known clothing and jewelry designer, says that things just aren't the same near her Robertson Boulevard boutique.

"It became very young, very jean and T-shirt oriented."

For Luu, whose international label is sold in Neiman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman, Robertson was losing its refined appeal and so she sold the remainder of her lease to Coach Inc. for about \$350,000.

"If you have over a year on your lease, you can get a few hundred thousand dollars," said Chuck Dembo of Dembo & Associates.

Lisa Kline, who owns men's, women's and children's boutiques on Robertson, said her rent doubled, from \$10 to \$20 per square foot last year.

She bought a lease a year ago to open a men's boutique. She paid \$100,000, a bargain it turns out.