

Downtown Center Business Improvement District

INNOVATION

When the pandemic necessitated a new approach to conducting our popular in-person tours of downtown Los Angeles and its iconic properties and projects, we embraced the opportunity to create a tool that delivers both an immersive experience and one that could reach target audiences well beyond our Southern California neighbors. In a classic case of innovation in response to the crisis, the solution to the immediate challenge turned out to have upside potential well beyond our initial objectives.

The purpose of the project was to enable the DCBID to continue promoting the downtown Los Angeles market and its top properties and projects to investors, developers, and prospective commercial and residential tenants in the face of COVID-19 restrictions on in-person gatherings.

The desired outcome was to a) maintain investor, developer, broker, and tenant interest in the DTLA market during the pandemic, b) counter negative narratives about the future of urban centers, and c) lay the groundwork for recovery and revitalization post-pandemic. The intended audience was investors, developers, and other real estate professionals, as well as prospective commercial and residential tenants, the media, and the general public.

This was a unique approach to a critical challenge – utilizing technology not only to enable tours during the pandemic but greatly enhancing the reach and capabilities of our tours post-pandemic. The main sustainable component of our virtual tours is that they eliminate the need for a tour bus or travel of any sort to attend the tours.

OUTCOME

The DTLA Virtual Tour platform not only enabled us to restart our tour program but extended its reach and enhanced its capabilities far beyond what is possible with a traditional tour. Not only can we do tours for people anywhere in the world, at any time, but we also are not constrained by the physical limits of a bus in terms of attendance, site lines, even street traffic. We can communicate significantly more information and offer visual and geographic context that provides valuable insight for our audiences.

The virtual tour platform offers an enhanced experience for general users as well as prospective investors and potential tenants, providing significant value for a range of stakeholders, including property owners and local businesses. For the DCBID, it solved the immediate problem of conducting tours and promoting the district in the face of COVID-19 restrictions, but it was also a long-term strategic investment in a tangible asset, with an indefinite life span. The platform is easy to update and customize, without significant maintenance expenses, and thus will be a valuable tool for years to come. In terms of immediate impact, registration for our inaugural tour was over 250 people: five times the 50-person capacity of our bus tours. Since then, we have had hundreds of visits to the tour page, and that is for the V.1.0 tour without significant promotion, so our expectation is that the platform will have exponentially more reach and impact than we could have ever had with our traditional tours.

EXECUTION

Development of the Virtual Tour platform took approximately six months from inception to launch. The project was conceived and executed by our Economic Development and Marketing teams, with technical development and content production by our creative agency – Flux Branding. Initially conceived as an immediate response to critical challenges presented by the pandemic, it quickly became evident that the project presented valuable opportunities well beyond temporarily replacing our bus tours. As such, the value of the investment and the scope of the project expanded from the initial concept.

We realized early in the process that the quality of the imagery – the drone footage, panoramic photography, and renderings – were key to the user experience, so we put a premium on their production and presentation quality. Because the immersive quality was so critical, we designed elements such as navigation and information to be as unobtrusive as possible, while still being intuitive to use. The end product and experience were very well-received by our target audience and will be a valuable tool for the DCBID for years to come. It took approximately 20% longer than we planned, and was about 20% over-budget, but was well worth the time, effort, and cost!

REPRESENTATION

While the general public was not involved in the production of this project, our virtual tours will be significantly more accessible than our bus tours, as they are free, you do not need to travel to attend them, nor are they limited by attendance or schedule. There is potential for these free, virtual tours to be experienced by a wide-ranging audience of those interested in downtown Los Angeles.

REPLICATION

This project was a partnership with our local downtown talent. Urban place management organizations have relationships with their downtown businesses, creatives, tech-hubs, artists, and firms. We recommend tapping into that local talent. We connected with a local branding and web firm and a local real-estate photographer to help make this platform a reality. They are dedicated to and know the downtown area, so their passion was just as rich as ours. While we created a custom product, the product itself is replicable by using the same ingredients: development tracking data (collected over time, in-house), fostering relationships with downtown stakeholders, and hiring or partnering with local talent to create a platform. We also connected with developers to make sure we had the latest renderings, photography, information, and links to their own virtual tours. Because this was a somewhat pioneering effort, we had to learn as we went, meaning it could probably be done more simply by others, learning from our experience.

Upcoming tours on the DTLA Virtual platform will incorporate new projects and venues, along with existing office, residential, and hospitality properties. The platform is an important asset for the DCBID, providing evergreen content and marketing for the BID and Downtown.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

While the basic concept of a virtual tour was fairly simple, the devil and the delight were in the details. Some of it was a matter of trial and error on how certain elements or functions worked, others were the product of “aha” insights. Critical to the success of the project were the seemingly contradictory, but actually complementary, approaches of grounding ourselves in the core objectives and experience of our traditional tours while freeing ourselves to think outside the bus for what a virtual tour could be. Having a competent, agile, and committed creative partner was key, as we had to pivot our approach often during the development process. Perhaps the most important overall insight we had, was to understand that the essence of the experience was in the high-def 360-degree panoramic images because they give the user an immersive sense of actually being in the place, which was one of our key goals and thus became our north star in terms of design and functionality decisions. Because this was a somewhat pioneering effort, we had to learn as we went, meaning it could probably be done more simply by others, learning from our experience.