

# Author John O'Kane Chronicles the Decline of Venice's Bohemian Lifestyle



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By Channing Sargent

John O'Kane sits with a small cup of coffee near the front door of Rose Café and Market. It's a busy Tuesday morning and every table is occupied with patrons, the majority of whom appear to be under the age of 35. Each is accompanied with a laptop or a smartphone.

"With this thing people call Silicon Beach, where you have young people moving in to take jobs in the tech industry, they've got lots of money, they're looking for a certain kind of lifestyle, but you know, they're bohemian, too," O'Kane says. He traces the rim of his coffee cup with his forefinger. "Old school bohemianism is a religious thing. It's about anti-consumer, liberation theology stuff. This new crowd, that's not them. But, they may agree with those concepts, even if they don't live by them."

John O'Kane moved to Venice in 1985, and recently published a book titled *Venice, CA: A City State of Mind*, a journalistic chronicle of Venice's bohemian community and its changing nature. Yet he steers clear of making condemnations about the wealthy or upwardly-mobile people making Venice their home. Having money isn't necessarily a bad thing, he says. It's when people use their money solely for personal gain that things go wrong. He pulls his coffee cup close to him, and leans over it.

"Most of the crime in Venice is related to gang activity, but there's white collar crime, too. When grandma gets evicted, that's crime," he says, recounting stories of the '90s when real estate moguls and land developers started buying up properties and evicting tenants. "It was like gentrification on steroids."

O'Kane's passion for Venice, and his knowledge of its history, which is the result of the ten years of research he did for his book, are evident as he waxes without pause about the cultural nuances and class distinctions of the

city's gentrification. Tall and thin, wearing a black and blue striped cotton button down, khaki cotton slacks and sport sandals, he possesses the casual, wind-swept look of a person who has spent many years at the beach.

"In the old days, you could walk around and knock on your neighbor's doors, borrow some coffee from them. Today, you wouldn't call Venice a gated community, but it does exhibit aspects of a gated community. People want to enclose themselves," he says, speaking of the tall hedges and bougainvillea-laced concrete walls wealthy homeowners erect around their homes.

As he speaks, the door behind him opens and actress Embeth Davidtz from the television shows *Californication* and *Mad Men* glides up to two friends, greeting them with cheek-to-cheek kisses before they all sit at a table near the front windows for brunch. O'Kane does not notice them, as he explains that the impulse toward enclosure is related to crime. "Crime's always been bad here, but it seems to have gone up lately," he says, mentioning a recent boardwalk stabbing. "Property owners love to blame the crime on the homeless population, but it's usually related to gangs."

Behind Abbot Kinney, in what O'Kane refers to as the Oakwood corridor, gangs have long been prevalent. While gang activity controls the back alleys and side streets, real estate moguls control the major thoroughfares. Abbot Kinney Blvd., which used to be an extension of West Washington Boulevard until it was renamed in 1990, was once a middle class business corridor, of a few unassuming cafes and mom-and-pop shops catering to what O'Kane calls, "ordinary people needs." In 2013, *GQ* magazine named Abbot Kinney, now lined with luxury boutiques and fancy restaurants, the "coolest block in America."

"The old bohemia is disappearing," O'Kane says. He was inspired to write the book as a way of getting the bohemian history down before it disappears altogether. But in doing research for the book, he witnessed first-hand some of the symptoms of the decline of old Venice. "The bohemian community is based on a family spirit, a co-op philosophy," he says, but some of the old timers were defensive toward him as he started interviewing them about their history with and relationship to the city. "It's ironic when people within the alternative community, who push a philosophy of spirit, are at odds with each other, and don't talk to each other. A major aspect of gentrification is ownership of property, but there was this mentality in parts of the bohemian community about ownership of info."

O'Kane sips the last of his coffee. "There's an inability of survival there," he says. Many of the old cadre have either died or left. Therefore, along with the economic changes occurring in Venice comes diminishing numbers in the alternative community, which means less political power to resist incoming forces. As he writes on page 3 of his book, "As the times have changed, the pressures to go with the flow have increased, leaving fewer survivors, and they're forced to reside in society's cracks. Many keep the faith, but many others get lost in the crack. Some navigate between the two, doing the best they can."

O'Kane turns to look out the window behind him. "Pretty soon Rose Avenue will be just like Abbot Kinney," he says. "And I don't know, maybe it should."

"Venice has always been creative community," he continues, "but can the rich and poor co-exist, I don't know. But I think so. When people come here, no matter their class or position, something happens to them. There's a spirit here that transforms people."

Outside, a thick marine layer hangs low over the boardwalk. O'Kane walks down Rose Avenue toward the beach, stepping over litter and around a small group of dread-locked transient kids sitting against a parking lot fence. A discarded newspaper on the sidewalk bears a headline that reads, "Monstrosity Hotel Proposed Across From Westminster School." A disheveled, sunburned couple pass a joint in the front seats of a white Toyota Camry speckled with bird droppings, while an elderly man dozes in the backseat.

O'Kane wanders toward the boardwalk, to view the sites of the South Beach Café, and Venice West Café, former beat havens for the likes of Allen Ginsburg, Jim Morrison, Jack Kerouac, and their disciples. The Venice Ale House and upscale eatery Piccolo Ristorante now occupy each site, respectively.

"When I moved here, there were no fancy restaurants," O'Kane says. "But times have changed, and they're cool, too," he says, shrugging his shoulders.