

Los Angeles



Photographs by Gregg Segal

| Article |

By Ed Leibowitz

DOWNTOWN 2.0: CEDD MOSES

How the nightlife king reinvented the way the city drinks

It's not as if Mark Verge hadn't gotten fair warning. "Never go into the bar business," his wife, Lani, had admonished him countless times. The Verges began their life together as high school sweethearts, and Mark had done well following Lani's advice. Together they had launched Westside Rentals, L.A.'s leading apartment-search service, which they're looking to expand to Las Vegas and other cities. Still, when a buddy brought him to Grand Avenue to take a peek at an old Irish bar called Casey's, Verge couldn't control himself.



It was the most amazing place he'd ever seen, and after much spousal lobbying, he pulled the trigger. "I buy this bar, and we do terrible," Verge says. "I'm the worst bar guy ever." Casey's was a ghost town, but not because the neighborhood was dead—far from it. Around the corner the Golden Gopher, a drunk tank and gang outpost a few years before, had been turned into a gritty though elegant space suitable for urban adventurers: raw brick and glass, downtown's rough edges visible but reassuringly smoothed out. The room was packed. Business was nearly as brisk three blocks away at Broadway Bar, a debonair cocktail lounge with soul and new wave DJs, a circular bar, and an immense bold blue neon sign.

Verge confessed his troubles to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, who told him he should really meet Cedd Moses. As CEO of 213 Ventures, Moses owned the Gopher and Broadway Bar and was about to launch a whiskey bar called Seven Grand. Verge took the suggestion and sought out the guy who had been beating him so badly. "I've got this bar, Casey's," he recalls saying to Moses, "and I'll be honest with you. You guys do great. I'm doing terrible." He sat down and told me everything I needed to know. It was unreal. He told me all his secrets." Moses's insights were sensible enough: *Try making Casey's the great Irish pub it was meant to be and not anything else. There aren't any shortcuts. You've got to give your customers quality, even if it's going to cost you money.* Soon, to Verge's relief, Moses bought into Casey's as a managing partner.

Moses's team put a ploughman's lunch on the menu, booked Irish musicians for the weekends, and gave Casey's a Dublin-worthy redesign. Casey's gross is up 75 percent from what it was before Moses stepped in, and Verge, far from exiting the bar business, has invested in two subsequent Moses projects—the Doheny, a private club by the Staples Center with a \$2,200 annual membership fee and perhaps the most elaborate cocktail menu on the West Coast, and the

100-year-old Coles P.E. Buffet, whose relaunch at 6th and Main streets in August signals Moses's expansion into restaurants.

Describing his partner, Verge borders on hero worship. At times he reminds you of Dennis Hopper raving about Marlon Brando's Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*. "Thank God I have Cedd," he says. "I wouldn't do this without him. It's a tough business, but with him, he makes it easy. He figures out the numbers and how to do it right. It's unreal. It's not like he's looking to make the last dollar or to make a buck here or there. He's into elevating Los Angeles."

When I first meet with Moses, he is sharply dressed in designer-grade Levi's, a white open-collared shirt, and a striped blazer. He's a giant and a wisp of a man—almost six and a half feet tall and rail thin, with a soft nasal voice that sounds like comedian Al Franken murmuring from half a mile away. At 48, Moses looks a good ten years younger. The way he diverts his eyes most of the time makes him seem boyish and shy, although he's neither. "We believe in building quality establishments with layers to them in great buildings that already have a lot of soul to them," he says without a trace of dramatic flair, "and in bringing out those features as much as possible."

The downtown residential boom was well under way when Moses opened the Golden Gopher in the summer of 2004, with turn-of-the-century office buildings being converted into living lofts at an astonishing clip. But save for the Standard Downtown's rooftop bar, which separated its beautiful people from the dicey streets by 12 stories and a phalanx of security guards, it was difficult to find a nightspot that wouldn't interest the vice squad. For visitors, an evening in L.A.'s Historic Core meant throwing back Bud Lights in a dive alongside regulars who tended to nod off on their bar stools. Al's Bar, the mainstay of the '80s music scene in the Arts District, was long gone, as was Gorky's, the bohemian hangout by the Flower District. On Broadway, the world's greatest row of prewar movie palaces was lit up only once a year, for the L.A. Conservancy's "Last Remaining Seats" series, where audiences from the suburbs came down to catch a classic amid the gilded decay.

In the last four years Moses has created an entire bar district from downtown's shambles. The renaissance has gone well beyond his own properties. Seemingly every week some old dive gets its hipster makeover and a brand-new lounge opens with a flourish of red damask and Laker-streaming plasma. With more than three dozen bars and clubs, downtown has become a major nightlife destination, attracting everyone from locals to curious Westsiders to Valley club kids to Echo Park aesthetes.

Hollywood underwent a similar transformation in 2000. The historic, forsaken neighborhood was refashioned into a thriving late-night scene, with movie stars and models storming hot spots that have a way of getting lukewarm in a hurry. Bar culture downtown, to the extent Moses has shaped it, is the antithesis of Hollywood's. At Broadway Bar, Seven Grand, and the Golden Gopher he has imposed an open-door policy, with no guest lists or velvet ropes. Any old shlub would feel welcome. In Hollywood, Moses says, "A lot of concepts tend to be 'Get that major flash bang.' They go for that whole crowd that we really don't want—the celebantes and those actresses that are barely of age, or not of age, who don't want to pay for drinks. The target is to get those people, build up a temporary place, just a drywall box, then get into the headlines somehow and get people in who want to be there because Paris Hilton's there, and unfortunately that allows them to make a lot of money in a short period of time, but then it's over, because Paris Hilton's moved on to the next flashy place." At the Doheny, Moses's only bar with a velvet rope, he says he's established a "no celebante" rule, forgoing the kind of publicity that is Hollywood's lifeblood.

Moses intends to expand this egalitarian vision into other fields downtown—more restaurants, a concert venue, a boutique hotel. It's a bold plan, but as he explains his underlying philosophy, Moses can sometimes come off like he's memorized fragments from the latest annual report of the International House of Pancakes. "Have a great quality product and service," he tells me, "and reasonable prices." He lets out a laugh, and it is then that I get a glimpse of the Cedd Moses whom Verge and his friends and associates talk about. "That sounds not too original," Moses says, "but it's unbelievable—the places that actually give you crappy service and a crappy product and overcharge for it, and they don't

understand why they're not around later, you know?" The mordant wit surfaces ever so briefly, then is gone, as Moses stares off into the distance and drifts back into silence.

Eyes open, mouth shut. For Moses, the die was cast early.

"Cedd's got a built-in focus," says his mother, Avilda. "Even as a baby, he had this kind of superawareness of things around him."

There was plenty worth seeing. His father, Ed Moses, was part of the first generation of great contemporary L.A. artists, a circle that included Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha, and Craig Kauffman. The family living room was a salon through which painters and sculptors, Buddhist monks and intellectuals flowed.

Cedd demonstrated an exceptional gift for math. While still in grade school, he was already using that ability to make money. In the haze of his parents' bohemian lifestyle—artistic passion, Eastern spirituality, and pot—Cedd set out to be a capitalist in miniature. "I think he got a wallet when he was about five or six years old," says Andy Moses, Cedd's younger brother, now a painter like his father. "The denominations got bigger when he got older, but it was always packed with bills."

At age eight Cedd became a dealer in rare cars. He snapped up the hardest-to-get Hot Wheels models as soon as they arrived at local toy stores and resold them at a premium. With the proceeds he would take younger children to the movies. He built fun houses in back of the family home in Venice, where he staged concerts and contests and athletic competitions among the neighborhood kids. "He had to be the organizer," says his brother, "and he was good at it. He wasn't interested in just playing on an equal footing."

Cedd's father noticed an entrepreneurial streak in him that was alien to the family. "On his 12th birthday he wanted to go to the track," Ed Moses says, "and we took him, never realizing what we'd opened up. Then he hitchhiked to tracks all over. He became the incredible handicapper." Every evening Cedd would subject the *Daily Racing Form* to quantitative analysis. "It's all about when horses are going to peak based on past performance, workout patterns, and the trainers," he says. "It's long-term odds."

As he entered high school at Santa Monica's Crossroads, Moses diversified. He launched Bee Industries, a skateboard manufacturing company, with his brother and Daniel Loeb, who would go on to become a major hedge fund manager in Manhattan. Moses had begun playing the stock market after his grandmother had given him 100 shares of Marriott. Instead of saving it for his education, he went to the library and emerged convinced that the economy was headed for adownturn and that Mattel, the maker of Hot Wheels, was vulnerable. So he unloaded his Marriott position and got his mother to open a trading account in order to sell short on Mattel. Moses continued to bet on horses while he studied engineering at UCLA, netting \$300,000 in three years, and invested his winnings in stocks. By the time he took an entry-level job at Baraban Securities in the Valley, he was a seasoned player.

"When I started working in the securities business, I had a boss," Moses says. "I was kind of his boy. I had to get his cigars every morning. I'd get there at five in the morning, and he'd send me down to this liquor store so I could get his White Owl cigars—he smoked crappy cigars and he'd always shortchange me. Within a couple of years I was the top person in this whole firm and could pretty much send him for my cigars, which was not my approach, but that was the twist there. It was pretty funny, from being his boy to having control of the whole firm, because I did about 70 percent of the business even though there were a thousand brokers working for that firm."

In 1989, Moses went off on his own, launching Portfolio Advisory Services. Two years later he won a nationwide investors competition, with a 1,400 percent return on stocks and options trading. By 1994, he was managing \$350 million and was able to fund several side projects. As a partner in Iridescence Records, he released an early Sonic Youth single and the first solo EP by Public Image Ltd. guitarist Keith Levene, which features a track called "Cedd Moses (Not

Walsh).” Moses produced concerts, invested in a friend’s bookstore, and bought some racehorses.

One of those thoroughbreds, Liquid Kitty, became the namesake of his first nightlife venture, a Westside martini lounge he opened in 1996 with a couple of friends. To conceive it, he hired Ricki Kline, a veteran club designer who had remodeled Ed Moses’s studio years before. Stylish but easygoing, the bar sat on a bland stretch of Pico. Only Liquid Kitty’s signature drink—a martini served with an unfiltered Camel cigarette—had an attitude. The nightspot, which Moses has since sold, turned a profit and gave him satisfactions he couldn’t get from managing money. “Investing was something I was good at and enjoyed initially,” he says. “But it disconnected me from people. Hospitality bridged that.”

Though Moses was already an established stock trader in the era of Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky, it was the excesses of the late ’90s, he says, that compelled him to withdraw from the profession. “I saw so much greed, so many people leaving their jobs to invest in tech stocks. There’s a great book called *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* that talks about some of the delusional periods throughout history—greed and excess and how it always ends.” From his office on Bunker Hill, Moses gazed east and recognized a business opportunity where nobody else seemed to see one, in the derelict buildings on Spring and Main streets and Grand Avenue. He became convinced when he heard the gospel from Tom Gilmore, the charismatic ex-New Yorker who pioneered the first successful residential loft development in the city’s Historic Core.

Avilda Moses remembers getting an almost giddy call from her son one night. “He was so excited,” she says. “He had heard this Tom Gilmore, who gave a talk on his vision for downtown. He got it immediately. He had been looking for something to do, maybe something like that, for a while, but when he heard Tom he was totally on board.” Downtown east of Bunker Hill was decrepit, but Moses’s decision to invest was no leap of faith. The city’s adaptive reuse ordinance had recently been passed, making possible the area’s transformation into a residential neighborhood. Lenders weren’t yet swayed, but property was laughably cheap and Moses had his own capital. With Gilmore he bought a share of the former El Dorado Hotel on Spring Street in 1999 for 30¢ a square foot. He purchased the Golden Gopher’s liquor license for \$20,000 and leased the bar and the hotel above it for 40¢ a foot for two decades. The Brock Building, the former jewelry emporium that serves as his headquarters and houses Seven Grand, required extensive renovation, but his rent for the whole 25,000-square-foot space is \$1,600 a month until 2020.

As a money manager, Moses was known for rarely investing in a company if he couldn’t liquidate his entire position in a day. The returns for 213 are considerable—Moses estimates his firm will gross about \$10 million this year and perhaps double that in the next few years. Nevertheless, they represent a fraction of what he once made picking stocks and buying options. For his downtown ventures, he’s sacrificed mobility and short-term profit for permanence. He won’t open a bar unless he has at least a 20-year lease or owns the space outright. Unlike Hollywood’s nightlife operators, he’s making a longterm buy.

To say that Moses is one of those people who don’t like talking about their personal life would be too mild. He’s temperamentally opposed to it. When prodded, he’ll concede some basic facts— he’s married; his wife owns a jewelry business on Melrose Avenue; he resides in Hancock Park; yes, he’d like to live downtown, if not for his kids. But that’s about the extent of what he’s prepared to offer. Besides, what is there to tell? “I feel a little uncomfortable about stories about myself,” Moses says. “I feel like I’m not particularly different. I mean, everyone’s got interesting stories about themselves.” He’s only slightly less hesitant when speaking about himself as a business leader. The attention grates on him whenever local publications like the *Downtown News* lionize him. “Sometimes these pieces come out, and they have these snippets like ‘Cedd Moses, the prince of downtown, the maven of downtown,’” he says. “It’s only my name. It’s elevating me when I feel it’s my team who’s doing most of the work.”

An L.A. bar impresario isn't supposed to be this way. You expect Moses to grab at your lapels, to regale you with big concepts, to be an indefatigable salesperson whose ultimate product is himself. Moses's enthusiasm is never in danger of running away with him. The few explanations he gives tend to be terse and unadorned. This, it turns out, can be an advantage in a field where everyone else has such a burning need to hear the sound of their own voice. Sharon Rivas, Moses's vice president of operations and his first employee, has seen how Moses uses reticence as a negotiating tool. "He'll say what he means to say and then stays quiet," she says, "where I think most people are made really uncomfortable by silence. One thing I learned from him at the beginning is that if given the opportunity, just because they're so uncomfortable with silence, they'll almost start backpedaling. He's very patient, so basically he will sit there as long as he needs to get what he wants."

Moses's silence has served him well when negotiating with outsiders, but it used to drive Marc Smith, his original partner at 213, a little nuts. "We would have our blowouts," says Smith, who had previously opened Hollywood's Burgundy Room and Three Clubs, "because he'd try to be the big 900-pound gorilla in the room—you know, quiet—and I would prod him until he couldn't take it anymore. Then we cleared the room and we'd fight." Soon after they opened the Gopher together, Smith and Moses found themselves at odds over what to do next. Moses wanted to build a network of solid neighborhood bars; Smith thought they should follow up with a whopper. Moses procured the liquor license for the massive basement of developer Andrew Meieran's Higgins Building at 2nd and Main streets but wound up abandoning the project. Today it is the Edison—a flapper's fever dream of a nightclub that incorporates the Higgins's antique boilers into its design. The Edison fills to capacity on weekends, and velvet ropes hold the club kids at bay. "I think it was a really bitchin' project, really beautiful and significant and big," Smith says. "He was worried about its size. We had a different vision." Smith parted with 213 to complete the Edison with Meieran.

"It was too bad to have such a great friend leave our company," Moses says, "but maybe it helped us stay good friends." Even so, Smith has doubts about his former partner's business plan. He believes the downtown market has become too congested and that Moses's bars might be siphoning customers from one another. When he hears about Moses's "no celebutante" policy at the Doheny, Smith can't let it pass. "That is such horseshit from Cedd," Smith says. "He would die if Paris Hilton came to his bar. It would blow the Doheny right out the door. It would blow it up so big. To cater to the 'candle that burns the brightest burns the shortest' sort of crowd is a kind of business suicide. You don't want to be a dick to everybody, flash out, and go away. But it's a hypocritical stance to say you wouldn't want a celebrity or two. That's ridiculous. It's ridiculous. You don't kiss their ass, but you certainly don't shove them out the door."

Since dissolving his partnership with Smith, Moses has become the sole owner of 213. He's shown a talent for picking employees as deftly as he once picked stocks. Though lacking the capacity to flatter, he has made his subordinates feel personally invested in his company. To orchestrate his cocktail menus, he's hired Vincenzo Marianella, formerly the bar director at Providence, and Eric Alperin, who worked with Mario Batali—accompanying them on fact-finding missions to bars in other states and giving them a freedom they'd be hard-pressed to get elsewhere. "What we're doing is trying to create actual hospitality in L.A.," Moses says. "We're not hiring actors or wanna-be actors. We want them to own it—like, 'I'm a bartender, and I want to take pride in being a great bartender'—which you find in other cities." Ricki Kline, 213's barrel-chested, Brooklyn-raised designer, has conceived some of L.A.'s most imaginative bars and restaurants, from North to Daddy's to Swingers. He's found Moses to be a collaborator as much as a CEO. "As far as I'm concerned, our feelings of building a community here—they are not bullshit to hide another agenda," Kline says.

"We're trying to create a culture of people who are really passionate about what they're doing," Moses tells me. I've sensed that passion while watching the bartenders work at Seven Grand and Broadway Bar, and in conversations with Moses's employees—but characteristically, not from Moses himself. There's no portal about to swing open, revealing the emotions that drive him. Even those who've gotten much closer to him must make do with metaphor. Moses's former

colleague Meieran likens him to “the Wizard of Oz behind the curtains, pulling all the levers.” His friend Justin Goldberg, an Internet music entrepreneur, reaches further, comparing Moses to Willy Wonka, to the Great Gatsby, to the heroes of *Revenge of the Nerds*, before concluding, “He’s really like the Keanu Reeves of impresarios. He’s so *not* what he’s supposed to be that he’s a thing unto himself.”

I’d come across Goldberg after my final lunch with Moses. As usual, the session was all long pauses, which didn’t seem to bother him. So I was surprised when he followed up with an e-mail: “I’m a little concerned that my humor and emotion might not be coming out in an interview setting with you.” He offered Goldberg as someone who could articulate what it might be like to know him better, and Goldberg does indeed find Moses to be “a very warm guy,” with a dry wit and an unexpected wild side. He’s also come to know his eccentricities. “The way his brain works,” Goldberg says, “is very different from the normal person’s. Being engaged in social conversation—I think he approaches it almost backwards. As topics come up, he doesn’t make any effort to make you feel comfortable, and I think that’s key. There’s a certain thing that people have when they first meet each other, where they want to ingratiate themselves and make the other person feel comfortable—to show that you are putting forth some sort of energy to connect. Cedd doesn’t have that. He’s missing that gene.”

Moses remembers the first time he went to Coles P.E. Buffet in the old Pacific Electric building, about 16 years ago. “It was really a William Burroughs-type experience,” he says. “It was kind of run-down, but I fell in love with the place. There was, like, a prostitute at the bar, a guy sitting next to her eating a sandwich, and an exterminator spraying bug spray throughout the place, you know?”

Next month, after a massive overhaul by Kline, Coles will reopen under the 213 aegis. Both Coles and its archrival, Philippe the Original, near Union Station, claim to have invented the French dip in the early 1900s. During the past 30 years, however, the argument became moot, as the crowds at Philippe’s burgeoned and Coles sank into the squalor of L.A.’s all-but-abandoned Main Street. Moses has reintroduced the idea of a friendly competition between Coles and Philippe’s, but it’s clear he means to clean Philippe’s clock, with house-made single-barrel bourbon and violet mustards, prepared horseradish, sliced-to-order meats, wild-game French dip specials, garlic rapini, and Yorkshire pudding—all developed by consulting chef Neal Fraser of Grace. Bar chef Eric Alperin is overseeing a cocktail selection of sours and fizzes inspired by Coles’s own post-Prohibition celebration menu.

Moses plans to broaden his presence in the downtown restaurant business beyond Coles. He’s got some locations locked up—the former Clifton’s Silver Spoon Cafeteria, on the ground floor of his headquarters, and the art nouveau lobby of the El Dorado. “L.A. has struggled as a great city for restaurants,” Moses says. “There are great restaurants, but it doesn’t have a community of restaurants on every corner that are great. Downtown is the only part of the city that can support big lunch, big after-work happy hour, big dinner, big late night in terms of food in the whole city. There’s half a million people who work down here, and there’s probably going to be hundreds of thousands of people living down here within about ten years, so it’s going to pick up momentum. L.A. is going to have that center, that huge restaurant community, where you walk from spot to spot. That’s our vision anyway.”

With his friend Mitchell Frank, the owner of Spaceland, he’s shopping for a downtown concert venue. He’s a trustee of a commission called Bringing Back Broadway and plans to make a personal investment in the street’s revival. “There’s a lot of potential there, a lot of opportunity there during the next decade for live music, restaurants, and bars. So we’re going to be taking a big stake in that turnaround.” He’s also interested in opening a boutique hotel and developing affordable, creative office space.

So in the not-too-distant future, having put in a long day’s work at an Internet start-up in a Cedd Moses downtown loft, a young professional might decide to grab an early meal at a Cedd Moses downtown restaurant, groove to an indie band at a Cedd Moses downtown music hall, drift from one Cedd Moses downtown watering hole to another Cedd Moses downtown watering hole, and

too tired or buzzed to drive back home to Santa Monica, splurge for a night's sleep at a Cedd Moses downtown hotel. Of course, the name Cedd Moses may not once occur to her during those many hours. She may not experience Moses as a brand name or even a lingering presence. Nevertheless, his will be the unseen hand painting the landscape in which she works, plays, aspires.

In the creative ferment of his family, Moses was always a bit out of place. He wasn't a painter; he was the numbers guy, the quiet organizer, the entrepreneur. But perhaps those talents were leading him into the same territory explored by his father and his artist brother and the giants who haunted his childhood home. "I guess Andy Warhol said that business is the ultimate art form," Moses says. "Basically I think of business in terms of—I put the math together in my head and pencil out whether the project's going to work. But I do kind of feel like businesses are living organisms that are a creative outlet, if you think of actually trying to create something innovative and unique." In downtown Los Angeles, Cedd Moses has finally found his canvas.

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