

Old Buildings Getting New Lease on Life

By SAM HALL KAPLAN,
Times Urban Design Critic

The start of National Preservation Week today—coinciding with Mother's Day—is perhaps not a coincidence. Like mom and apple pie, landmark preservation has become a revered American institution in the last few years.

Prompted by a growing appreciation of the nation's rich architectural heritage, and fueled by liberal

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tax incentives for historic rehabilitation, preservation has become a major redevelopment resource and political force in an increasing number of towns and cities across the country.

In Los Angeles and Pasadena, the preservationist community has grown from a handful of concerned citizens just five years ago, to an estimated core of about 5,000 persons. Their influence extends way beyond their numbers and the boundaries of the cities.

Working through such groups as the Los Angeles Conservancy, Hollywood Heritage and Pasadena Heritage, preservationists have raised the collective public consciousness to the value of protecting remnants of the region's past to enrich its future. It is a continuing struggle that has had some notable successes, thanks in part to the support of the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission, one of the city's more enlightened boards, and a progressive city administration in Pasadena.

The successes include the recent reopening in the mid-Wilshire district of the Art Deco-adorned Wilshire Theater, and the relocation and rehabilitation in Pasadena of historic Gartz Court as an attrac-

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tive residential enclave.

And in Hollywood, the distinctive Roosevelt Hotel is in the throes of renovation, while downtown the landmark Central Library at long last appears to have been spared, and will be restored and expanded as part of a major redevelopment plan.

A wide variety of other landmark buildings also have received new leases on life as sentiment in the cities has shifted away from demolishing structures that have outlived their intended uses, to seeing how they can be saved by being adapted to new uses.

These include, among many, the old Theater Mart on North Vermont Avenue, persevering as the Greater Los Angeles Press Club; a Pacific Electric Railway facility on Sunset Boulevard, as an architectural studio; a telephone building downtown, as senior citizen housing, and the former Mt. Lowe power substation in Altadena, as a realty office, to name just a few.

New Leases on Life

Getting new leases on life at present is the imposing Security Bank Building on Spring Street, which is being converted into a theater center, and the marvelous Moderne Pan Pacific Auditorium, into a hotel, cinema and commercial complex.

Meanwhile, across the city, an increasing number of residents are discovering the architectural heritage of their neighborhoods, if not just the ambiance and value that pleasant streetscapes and trees lend their properties, and are rallying to protect them from avaricious speculators, mercenary developers and insensitive city officials.

Battlegrounds over the years have included North University Park and the West Adams area, Carthay Circle and the Miracle Mile, Carroll Avenue, Wilton Place, Lincoln Heights and Hollywood, as well as Pasadena's Villa Parke, Madison-Oakland and South Marenco neighborhoods. A few of the battles have been successful, some are continuing, while new ones are sprouting up in other neighborhoods.

Celebrate, Mourn

"There is much to celebrate during this Preservation Week, but also some things to mourn and others to be concerned with," said Ruthann Lehrer, executive director of the Conservancy. Her comments were echoed by Claire Bogaard of Pasadena Heritage, which together with the Conservancy, has won national praise for its varied preservation efforts.

The list of buildings that were demolished despite the efforts of preservationists is long. They are mourned not only for their lost architecture but for the sense of place and history they had offered the city.

Among the many mourned are the First Methodist Church downtown, a richly ornamented Renaissance Revival structure until it was demolished a few years ago by the congregation and sold to the Southern California Gas Co. next door. It is now an ugly raw parking lot. **Roadblocks Exist**

On the local level, Lehrer added that preservation efforts were being hurt by the city's bureaucracy.

"Los Angeles does not make it easy for developers restoring historic buildings," she said. "The issues of code compliance and lack of coordination of different departments have created a negative environment for potential developers interested in preservation."

Lehrer noted that there seems to be much more cooperation between city officials and preservationists in Pasadena than in Los Angeles. Among other things, Pasadena has an urban conservation section in its planning department to work with neighborhoods in developing preservation programs. The effort in the Los Angeles City Planning Department has been sporadic, at best, dependent on individual planners.

Commenting on Pasadena's efforts, Bogaard noted with pride that "in recent years the city has looked to our association for assistance." She added that "the city sees preservation as a positive force, growing out of the neighborhoods—something that can lend a neighborhood a sense of place and pride and make the city a better place to live."

The comment seemed a fitting preface to National Preservation Week.