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# Los Angeles begins survey of historic buildings

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With Los Angeles' long-awaited citywide survey of structures well into the pilot stage, Katherine Harris wants to be sure that historians and planners know all about "the Onion," the domed North Hills hall of the 100-member Sepulveda Unitarian Universalist Society.

The building has a distinctive look as well as a history of social action. Back in 1970, when other venues balked, the Onion invited radical Chicago Seven lawyer William Kunstler to speak. He drew an overflow crowd of 5,000 who sat on the lawn and listened to him over loudspeakers.

Rich threads like this are exactly what preservationists and planners hope to unravel as they chronicle the 465-square-mile patchwork quilt that is Los Angeles.

In a city long derided for haphazard planning, a lack of appreciation for its own history and occasional dead-of-night demolitions, the survey aims to understand what remains on the ground, what has been lost and what might be worth saving from the wrecking ball.

"The idea is to inform future planning decisions," said Ken Bernstein, manager of the city Planning Department's Office of Historic Resources. "The survey data will help ensure that proposed land use changes will be less likely to adversely affect historic resources."

With 880,000 parcels, the sprawling metropolis poses a challenge for those who would attempt to chronicle the "built environment." But that is the goal of the Office of Historic Resources, in part with a $2.5-million matching grant from the Getty Foundation.

Harris was one of about 250 preservation-minded residents who gathered Saturday at the downtown Central Library to hear about the survey and learn how they can aid the effort by nominating hidden gems for special attention.

Since December, pilot surveys have been underway in the San Fernando Valley; along portions of Pico Boulevard and Vermont Avenue, two former streetcar corridors; and in Boyle Heights, an early suburb east of downtown Los Angeles.

In the East and West Valley, consultants are zeroing in on post-World War II suburbanization. One ranch-style tract house might seem like nothing special, but taken en masse these domiciles are emblematic of the city's burst of development from 1945 to 1965, Bernstein said.

Along Pico and Vermont, survey-takers are looking at smaller-scale commercial buildings that grew up around transit corridors.

Boyle Heights, meanwhile, has seen layer upon layer of demographic change over the last century, having served as a center of Jewish life in the 1920s and more recently as a predominantly Latino community.

Many sizable cities, including New York, Seattle, Chicago and Dallas, have spent decades creating knowledge banks about the history of their buildings. Los Angeles, by contrast, has never undertaken a systematic survey, even though the city's first preservation ordinance in 1962 called for such a study. The City Council has designated about 950 sites as historic-cultural monuments, and several neighborhoods have applied to become historic preservation overlay zones. But most of the city's structures have gone unstudied.

Kathryn Welch Howe, whom the Getty Conservation Institute commissioned nearly a decade ago to study the feasibility of a citywide survey, said the grass-roots effort around Los Angeles to preserve historic buildings shows this project is needed. "It was clear," she said, "that historic preservation was not just a passing nostalgic whim."

To see maps of the pilot survey areas, go to preservation.lacity.org/node/410