

# City to Consider Tougher Law on Historic Structures

■ **Architecture:** After years of weak enforcement, a remodeled preservation ordinance is under study.

By MILES CORWIN  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

At 8th and Hope streets, there once was an ornate Spanish Renaissance church designed by one of Southern California's most notable architects. Now there is a vast patch of concrete, an oil-stained parking lot advertising "Early Bird Parking."

In Eagle Rock, a mini-mall has replaced a classic 75-year-old brick office building that had been nominated as a historic landmark. On the Miracle Mile, a dirt lot, with a jagged pit in the center, has remained undeveloped for a decade where there once was a classic 1930s department store.

These are just a few of the

notable buildings demolished during the 1980s in Los Angeles—a city that has one of the worst preservation records in the nation, experts say. With a tiny preservation staff, one of the weakest ordinances in the country and a history of city government caving in to developers, Los Angeles has been left with relatively few protected structures.

But after years of delay, there are indications that the politics of historic preservation in Los Angeles may be changing. A tough preservation ordinance, modeled after laws in most other major cities, is expected to come before the City Council early next year. It would bar demolition unless own-  
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# PRESERVATION: Weak Oversight

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ers can show "economic hardship."

Under the current ordinance, drafted in 1962, Los Angeles officials can delay demolition of significant buildings for a year, but cannot stop it, even when the buildings are designated "cultural historic monuments." As a result, Los Angeles has lost more than 30 historic monuments in the last few decades, while San Francisco has not lost one to development.

"The L.A. ordinance has no teeth," said architect William Christopher, a former city planning commissioner. "The city goes hat in hand to the owner asking, 'What can we do to entice you to save this

building?' That's a lot different from other cities where the owners have to prove there is no alternative to tearing historic buildings down."

The new ordinance has been stalled in the city bureaucracy for six years, a delay that reflects the city's feeble record of preservation, said David Gebhard, a UC Santa Barbara professor of architectural history, who has written extensively about Los Angeles.

One reason for this, he said, is that developers and property owners have an inordinate amount of clout at City Hall. In many other cities, developers are just one of several influential business groups. But Los Angeles is a "developer-

driven city," he said, and the city's most powerful lobbying force.

Nearly 40% of the \$1.5 million spent by City Hall lobbyists from July through September came from real estate and developer interests, according to a recent study by the Ethics Commission. And there is growing pressure at City Hall to increase density in the city and build more affordable housing.

As a result, the fate of the proposed ordinance is uncertain. But Councilman Joel Wachs, who supports the new legislation, said neighborhood groups and preservation organizations have grown more powerful in recent years.

Los Angeles has had a few well-publicized successes in saving landmark buildings. But countless architectural treasures were destroyed in previous decades and many others are threatened. The conservancy has compiled a "critical issues list" of more than 30 landmark buildings it is trying to save.

It is not just landmark structures in Los Angeles that have been lost. So many buildings have been torn down—buildings that added character to neighborhoods, gave identity to streets or just gave pleasure to passers-by—that much of the city's architectural heritage has been lost. Art Deco office towers, grand movie palaces, homes designed by internationally known architects, as well as countless bungalow courts and Craftsman cottages, have fallen to the wrecker's ball.

In part, this is the result of a transient populace and "the phony myth of California," said Robert Winter, a history professor at Occidental College. "Many residents thought the only structures worth saving were missions and adobe buildings."

Los Angeles has been ridiculed for trying to preserve carwashes and coffee shops, but many people do not realize, Winter said, "that the city also has a rich architectural history."

"Los Angeles was very strong in the early modern period—the 1920s and 1930s—and there were many magnificent examples of Art Deco, Streamline Moderne, and all sorts of Mediterranean styles," said Winter, a former head of the city's Cultural Heritage Commission. "But because these buildings weren't hundreds of years old, they weren't valued and protected like the important buildings in other cities."

The demolition of about 20% of the distinctive 1930s apartment buildings in a Miracle Mile neighborhood is an example of what happens when a community is not protected. The Planning Commission last month attempted to preserve the neighborhood's character by proposing to lower density requirements in the neighborhood.

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## Lost Structures

*These are some of the officially designated historic cultural monuments in Los Angeles that were demolished during the 1980s:*





# PRESERVATION: L.A. to Consider Tougher Law

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But many residents say the proposal was too little, too late. About 50 small apartment houses—many designed with gables and towers, wood-beamed ceilings and hand-plastered walls—have been bulldozed in the last five years to make way for much larger, boxy apartment complexes.

"As these distinctive neighborhoods are destroyed . . . Los Angeles begins to look more and more like a faceless, amorphous blob," said architect Leslie Heumann. "We're becoming a city of giant shopping malls, connected by freeways and dotted by huge, faceless apartment complexes."

Only about 1,800 structures in Los Angeles have been given some protection. Much smaller cities such as Phoenix and Columbus, Ohio, have more than 5,000 protected buildings and San Francisco has more than 15,000.

The proposed ordinance is a step in the right direction, Winter said, but even if it is passed, Los Angeles will still lag behind most other cities in its ability to preserve architecture.

Los Angeles has a full-time preservation staff of two—both secretaries. New York has more than 75 staff members and Chicago has a staff of about 15. Even Pasadena, a city with one-twenty-sixth the population of Los Angeles, has a full-time staff of five, which includes planners and architects.

"When Pasadena, for God's sake, has more staff than the city of Los Angeles, you know something's wrong," said Teresa Grimes of the Los Angeles Conservancy, a private preservation organization. "I can't think of another big city in the country that devotes less resources to preservation."



Los Angeles Times

Amarjit Marwah heads the Los Angeles Heritage Commission.

The city's two full-time employees and three part-timers aid the Los Angeles Heritage Commission, a group of mayoral appointees that evaluates buildings nominated as city monuments. In addition to the small support staff, the commission is hamstrung by a small budget and lack of authority.

Unlike many other cities, the Los Angeles commission cannot designate historic landmarks or even nominate buildings for con-

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sideration. The group only can consider buildings for preservation that have been nominated by others, before passing on its recommendation to the City Council.

While many cities require that professionals such as architects, designers and planners be appointed to the commission, in Los Angeles there are no requirements. The current commission is headed by Amarjit Marwah, a dentist and one of Mayor Tom Bradley's top campaign contributors.

The others on the commission are a doctor, an attorney, an administrator for the Southern California Gas Co. and an architect.

The city's blasé attitude toward preservation is reflected in some of the individuals the mayor has appointed. Roosevelt Grier, a former defensive tackle for the Los Angeles Rams, served on the commission in the early 1970s. Several former commissioners said Grier expressed little interest in preservation and attended only one meeting.

Under the proposed ordinance, membership on the commission will grow to seven, with the majority of the positions designated for architects, planners and other such professionals. Members also will be able to nominate sites for landmark status.

Preservation in Los Angeles is made even more difficult because nobody knows how many significant buildings there are in the city. Most other cities completed architectural surveys decades ago, but in Los Angeles, only about 20% of the city's buildings have been studied.

The city launched an architectural survey in 1981 after it received a federal grant, but soon ran out of money, said Jay Oren, an architect with the city's Cultural Affairs Department. Now, Los Angeles is slowly being surveyed on a "piecemeal basis" by neighborhood groups.

"Because nobody has a complete listing of historic buildings . . . we're always forced to come in at the last minute and stage 11th-hour appeals," he said.

To prevent these last-ditch efforts, preservationists call for an aggressive program that would preserve blocks and neighborhoods. But in Los Angeles, it is very difficult to set up historic preservation areas because the city legislation is "cumbersome and outdated" and there is little City Hall support, said David Cameron, a preservation consultant who is on the county Landmarks Commission.

Private conservation efforts also have lagged behind other cities. The Los Angeles Conservancy was founded only 13 years ago. But its membership and political power have steadily increased and the group has pushed to save a number of significant structures.

Still, too many significant buildings have been lost and too many have insufficient protection, preservationists say.

Designated historic landmark buildings that are now threatened, according to the conservancy, include the 1912 Southwest Museum, one of the first Spanish Colonial Revival buildings in Los Angeles; the 1914 Herald Examiner building, designed by renowned architect Julia Morgan; three classic movie palaces on Broadway—the 1910 Arcade and Cameo Theaters and the 1931 Roxy; 1916 Highland-Camrose Bungalow Village, and a series of California Craftsman and other distinctive bungalows clustered on a hillside.

"In most other cities, these buildings would be treasured . . . it would be unthinkable to even discuss tearing them down," said Grimes. "But in L.A., nobody knows how long they'll be left standing."