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Playing Politics With a Landmark

If you ever wonder why certain stretches of Los Angeles look so alien—why sympathetic landmarks are demolished and why tacky developments are allowed—consider the saga of a historic Hollywood bungalow complex.

It was just a few months ago that the City Council, at the request of then-Councilwoman Peggy Stevenson, declared the 13-unit complex at Highland and Camrose avenues a historic-cultural monument. And it followed that action up with a no-nonsense, one-year building moratorium, specifically focused on the Highland and Cahuenga area.

A question was raised at the time whether the complex was of sufficient historic interest to warrant the designation. I agreed with an impressive list of architectural historians and felt it did. (Because the demolition of landmarks is irreversible, and the city's architectural heritage so frail, if one errs it should be on the side of preservation.)

There also was a question whether the designation and the subsequent moratorium were approved, not because of their merits, but simply to help Stevenson win neighborhood support in her unsuccessful reelection campaign against Michael Woo.

Whatever the motivation, the fact is that the council voted for the designation and the moratorium. The council, in effect, gave its word to support the preservation effort, if only for six months, and the building moratorium there for one year.

However, the situation changed when Woo defeated Stevenson. With the lame-duck Stevenson absenting herself (so much for her abiding commitment to neighborhoods), the council on her last day in office reversed itself and granted an exemption to the moratorium to the owner of the bungalow complex.

The action was a clear message to the owner, the Jan Development Co., to ignore the landmark designation and the moratorium and to move ahead on plans for a 180-unit apartment house on the site. Within weeks the company was seeking approval of demolition permits.

From a broader perspective, the council's action also was so blatantly political, and handled in such a questionable manner, that it raises issues that go far beyond the fate of the threatened landmark.

These issues include the integrity of the city's cultural heritage ordinance and the character of the City Council. They have been sullied by the affair, prompting a harder look at how the council reviews planning and preservation issues.

The council seems to have forgotten very quickly that the idea behind the designation—and the cultural heritage ordinance itself—was to give the tenants, the owner, the city and, perhaps other interested groups, time to explore the possibility of preserving the fragile housing complex.

Critical to the process is the element of good faith, which, in this case, seems to have been missing. At least that is the way the situation appears judging from the subsequent actions of Jan Development, which

ignores calls, tenants claim, to meet and discuss how the complex might be saved, if not simply maintained in compliance with basic health, safety and building codes.

Instead, the Beverly Hills-based company headed by Jan Czucker apparently was making other phone calls as it lined up support for its request for an exemption.

And who else should Jan Development turn to but Councilman Arthur K. Snyder. Hollywood may be far from Snyder's district, but if there is a developer who needs help, Snyder has been known to extend his concerns beyond council lines, as he has in the past to call developers for campaign contributions.

Following allegations last year that he had sexually abused his daughter, Snyder did announce that he would resign from the council. However, he now says he is reconsidering his decision to resign and just may run again. If so, he will need a well-funded campaign chest.

Exactly how Snyder came out of the woodwork to be appointed a substitute for the absent Robert Farrell as a member of the influential Planning and Environment Committee on the day the exemption was heard is not clear, thanks in part to Council President Pat Russell. She did not return phone inquiries, though her staff did note that she was absent the day of the vote. How convenient.

Acting that day as council president, Joan Milke Flores, in a rare legislative move, appointed Snyder to the committee. The other members of the committee are Howard Finn, chairman, and John Ferraro. But before the exemption could be heard—it was the last item on a long agenda—Finn had to hurry off to a previous commitment. With Ferraro ducking in and out of the hearing, Snyder assumed the position of acting chairman.

According to persons who were there, Snyder was very sympathetic to the representative of Jan Development Co. while all but ignoring the opposition. A subsequent reading of the committee report submitted to the council by Snyder, and the letter to the council by the company requesting the exemption, indicates a number of similar discrepancies.

These include statements that the moratorium was never intended to include the landmark property, when in fact it was the centerpiece of the action. Also misrepresented to the council was the cost of the property. According to the committee report, the developer said in a plea of hardship that the property was purchased for about \$2 million. The figure on the registered trust deed is \$1,040,000.

The Highland-Camrose affair has to be one of the more ignominious in the council's history, going beyond a simple question of whether a particular bungalow court is worthy of landmark status or whether indeed it can be saved.

But of course, what the council has done it can undo. At stake is the council's integrity, or what is left of it.