

December 31, 2020

Preserve: Perhaps

Anthony Carfello



Esther McCoy, the chronicler of Southern California modernism, once described a first meeting between the architect César Pelli and Pauline Schindler, the "petulant mistress of the famous Kings Road house," following a lecture at SCI-Arc in the mid-1970s.¹ Upon introduction, Schindler began a rebuke of Pelli's recently completed Pacific Design Center (PDC) building, already then known locally as the "blue bombshell" or "blue whale." She complained about the 750,000-square-foot showroom complex being entirely out of scale with the abutting low-rise West Hollywood area. Pelli conceded the point, but added the fait accompli that scales were destined to transform—i.e., grow rapidly—as the cost of land rises.

By that point in time, McCoy and Schindler both were intimately familiar with "scale generator[s] rather than ... follower[s]"—to borrow McCoy's description of the PDC in *Progressive Architect*²—and the declarations of "inevitability" that follow once the forces of financial speculation push such scale shifts ahead and set new definitions for highest and best use.

Down Melrose Avenue to the east, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) had owned the architect Irving Gill's Walter L. Dodge House on North Kings Road from 1939–67. Completed in 1916 and considered by scholars to be a crucial link between Mission Revival and the West Coast's take on the International Style, Gill's masterpiece had been turned into a historical document of the West Hollywood of yesteryear in just two decades—much like Schindler's own house to the south—due to L.A. County's population and development boom of the 1920s. Environments designed for the outskirts of downtown quickly had been swallowed into sprawl. A failed plan to convert the Dodge House—a concrete, proto-modern mansion—into a high school was followed by two decades of intermittent and half-hearted uses of the publicly owned edifice. Concurrent with a 1964 zoning change on Kings Road from single-family to multi-family, LAUSD deemed the suddenly exponentially more valuable than before property to be surplus and put it up for sale, giving rise to one of the area's first modern preservation initiatives.³

Even though the Dodge House represented the first of North Kings Road's artistic "residents"—followed by the authors Theodore Dreiser and Aldous Huxley, Josef van der Kaar's Rootenberg House, and the performers and activists contributing to the avant-garde scene cultivated by Schindler—it was clear that preservation was a tall order. Nevertheless, the dwelling's reputation was revived and its place in history fortified via McCoy's spearheading of the Citizens' Committee to Save the Dodge House, rallying for support throughout the mid- to late-1960s with a wide-reaching letter-writing and outreach campaign, including a film she produced in 1965 to raise awareness.⁴ Schindler contributed to the effort, too, alongside the likes of the architectural historian Lewis Mumford, the Museum of Modern Art curator Ludwig Glaeser, the prolific Southland bank designer Kurt Meyer, and the default modernist laureate of L.A., Richard Neutra, who warned that anything other than preservation of the Dodge House would "become an epic and international scandal."⁵

Following the duplicitous 1950s in Los Angeles, which saw the urban removal of Bunker Hill and the swindling of the Chavez Ravine neighborhoods of La Loma, Palo Verde, and Bishop, few thinking Angelenos could still harbor illusions that demolitions of houses for subsequent developments in increasingly costly sections of the region implied any benefits for working-class communities. In line with the original idea of using the Kings Road structure for education, there was enough square footage in the Dodge House to

accommodate several potential activities, though no prospective venture with cash in hand sought anything other than demolition and market-rate apartments until financier Bart Lytton took possession in 1967. Known for replacing the Garden of Allah hotel on the Sunset Strip with Kurt Meyer's zigzag-roofed Lytton Savings, the bank baron proposed to preserve the house while surrounding it with dozens of residential units. Those plans were scrapped as Lytton went bankrupt. The deed was passed to the Torrance, CA-based Riviera Management Company, who maintained the preordained scale shift and swiftly demonstrated that the Dodge House was no longer "useful" by bulldozing it early one rainy morning in February 1970.⁶

In her eulogy for Gill's creation, Ada Louise Huxtable wrote in the *New York Times* that the demolition was indicative of the state of American real estate, "a profession which finds itself, in its growing battles with the public conscience, increasingly without respect or credence." Underlining the motivation for altering scales in the built environment for any readers needing the extra hint, she included the brief afterword: "Who cares, with a pocket full of money?" The privately owned apartments that supplanted the Kings Road landmark opened in 1973, every bit as lucrative as intended. In 1984, the City of West Hollywood was incorporated, partly, in recognition of tenants' rights and the importance of controlling rents—the 194 units were converted to luxury condominiums⁷ soon thereafter, further changing the terms for profit.

A small memorial relief and plaque in Kings Road Park—the sliver of municipal space remaining from the land owned by the public school system for nearly thirty years—is the only lasting physical presence of the Dodge House since it became a "real estate investment," per Huxtable's caption for a photograph of the architecturally significant rubble. Dating from 2009 and produced by Brickstone Studios as a public art project, this low wall, similar to those marking archaeological sites of previous settlement, is all that is left to suggest that the location as it is was ever in question.⁸



The Dodge House as a landmark, top, as a real estate investment, below



Photos and caption from Ada Louise Huxtable, "Blue Monday in Los Angeles," *New York Times*, March 8, 1970, D23. Top: Walter L. Dodge House, Marvin Rand (c. 1930s) for Historic American Buildings Survey/Library of Congress; Bottom photo: Dodge House in the midst of demolition, photographer unknown (possibly Harvey Steinberg), 1970.

Everyone in the above recount is now dead and the stretch of Kings Road between Melrose Avenue and Santa Monica Boulevard that they knew is long gone, with one exception. Fresh memories of the Dodge House's dedicated defenders motivated Pauline Schindler to take charge of preventing her own influential home from becoming a pile of real estate investment after she passed away. Built in

1921–22 by her ex-husband, the Austrian émigré architect R.M. Schindler, and considered to be the first truly modern house, she anticipated that the unscrupulous specter of acquisition nonetheless would descend at the first opportunity. Simultaneous with the César Pelli tête-à-tête, she was laying the groundwork for preservation of the parcel so as to keep it available to the cultural producers who had frequented the location throughout her decades in residence. She succeeded (by way of the Friends of the Schindler House who took possession in 1980) and the dwelling since has *survived* multiple West Hollywood scale changes, never facing destruction or its own impending eviction.

The myth that cityscapes in the capitalist United States undergo drastic changes as part of "natural" cycles has an impressive lasting power regardless of how regularly and repeatedly it is proven to be a scam. Whether it be recent hyper-gentrification or midcentury urban renewal, one always finds someone standing to gain telling those who will lose that there is nothing to be done to counter the winds of change or sands of time or turning of the page, etc. Despite the explicitness of real estate turning cities into ceaseless (rigged) competitions, the expectation persists that the side with the lower odds will always just forfeit the game. Developers and investors continue to be surprised if not affronted when communities, especially ones contending with their own dismantling, tell

them that they would prefer not to have their contributions.

My interest in exploring whatever possibilities for spatial justice might be *extracted* from existing practices of historic preservation has been rooted in the fact that the campaigns and debates accompanying the "saving" of a building are one of far too few venues where the "build baby build" team occasionally can be seen on the defensive. As unambiguous challenges to a profit-driven status quo that does not care about anyone's alienation from familiar environments, organized preservation efforts actually prompt direct, public conversations in ways that feel increasingly harder to come by in the era of hedge fund landlords, shell companies, and LLCs. While the cheaters frequently prevail, the underdogs have notched enough victories—and taken control of enough narratives—that there is *perhaps* an underutilized potential for historic preservation, as a concentrated undertaking, to pivot and become a useful contributor to today's perpetually growing housing defense and right to the city movements. Or at least the overlaps between the two endeavors have kept my mind open to the possibility.

Scholars and practitioners have encouraged a shift from the preservation of historic buildings to the preservation of places and spaces for some time, in part influenced by moving past the myopic tendencies that have made the discipline complicit with elitism and filled with barriers to entry, especially for BIPOC histories.⁹ Exacting standards of material

integrity have too often connected preservation in the popular imagination with historic districts full of property value obsessed NIMBY homeowners (the boogeyman nemesis of development sympathizers). Adjacent to that might be the impression of contemporary adaptive reuse, usually found rebranding commercial buildings to manufacture and sell suburban fantasies of bohemian life at the expense of bordering working-class neighborhoods. By and large, though, the approximately 15,000 historic house museums in the country¹⁰ comprise much of the public's interaction with preserved locations. Primarily privileging architectural masterpieces or the estates of deceased wealthy white people, these preservation organizations are brought to the same questions of relevance that many museums face: Whose stories are told, whose are ignored; can engagement last beyond the tourist's visit; what does the in-person experience offer that cannot be found elsewhere in the attention economy?

That said, a great deal of these extant notable buildings in the U.S. still enjoy their continued existence thanks to what is at its core an antagonism toward remorseless and ahistorical property development, albeit a fighting spirit that emerges from self-regard. Preserved structures persist due to a refusal to be deemed obsolete in a society where every square foot is subject to new and nonstop exploitation *and* an unwillingness to go on participating in the risks built into the market. More often than not, unfortunately, those adversarial foundations are consistently and quickly forgotten in favor of an egocentrism that

only emphasizes the specific historical moment represented. Certainly, this is fostered in large part by a project's sustainability planning and the ongoing fundraising needed for conservation—patrons, foundation representatives, and government officials need to be shown time and again why that place is important to insure against new hazards. At its worst, though, this leads many preservation organizations to exude an exclusionary air of "got mine, fuck you"—if it is not about *their* property's appreciation as a historical touchstone it is not about them. The real estate prospector who would dare threaten their site is seen as suspect and harmful, but a nearby building reckoning with doom barely elicits "thoughts and prayers." An even more common result of this inward focus is that a municipally or nationally sanctioned historical significance is conveniently utilized by those same developers who would have swung the wrecking ball if they could, but in lieu of demolition have adapted to advertising the proximity to a landmark as a way to inflate prices. This then makes it easier for the organization to solicit contributions, as they can point to their own recognition as a "cultural asset," leading the initial hostility to morph into an implied partnership.

Do successfully preserved locations such as those thousands of historic premises and house museums across the country instead owe something more to the communities around them? Absolutely. From greater commitment to protecting the legacies of marginalized Americans to more inclusive approaches that expand what is preserved, other models are needed to ensure that

preservation does not continue risking total insignificance by keeping too narrow a focus, and many practitioners are dedicated to the various forms that must take.¹¹ Here, I imagine that a common characteristic of the discipline of historic preservation, *refusal*, might be deployed for purposes of general anti-displacement along with classic heritage conservation.



Aerial view of the Kings Road House, 2014, digital video still from drone footage by Refik Anadol. © MAK Center.

Buildings once facing demolition, destruction, or dereliction carry on standing after broad outreach, outpourings of statements testifying to their importance for the fabric of the city, and multi-level coordinated pushback through formal and informal channels, making them the estranged cousins, so to say, of tenants associations, legacy business programs, and anti-gentrification organizers. Different addresses notwithstanding, preservation fights and anti-eviction protests are part of the same ecosystem of resistance to capitalistic domination of space. There can and should be an expectation that these more comfortable *survivors of real estate* pay it forward and engage habitually with those dedicated to similar struggles against being told by outsider investors that they

have overstayed their welcome in their own home. It is a choice between demanding equity or standing aloof to the rampant devastation that will only exacerbate as property predators descend upon violently vacated apartments, foreclosed houses, and boarded-up storefronts in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recently, architects, curators, designers, and preservationists launched an impressive and fast crusade to aid the Corita Art Center at Immaculate Heart High School in Hollywood in pressuring L.A.'s Cultural Heritage Commission to grant monument status¹² to the endangered building across the street that once housed the artist Sister Corita Kent's studio. Currently a dry cleaners, the former workshop was imperiled by plans for a new parking structure. Dozens upon dozens of impassioned enthusiasts called, emailed, and Zoomed, imploring for the protected designation and reminding the commission that only three percent of the city's landmarks are connected principally with women.¹³ It was a success, and the studio was saved. Three weeks earlier, it was local residents, housing activists, and the neighborhood institution Eastside Café who mobilized in order to reclaim a handful of the over one hundred empty houses owned by the California Department of Transportation in El Sereno. Homeless parents and children moved indoors for Thanksgiving. Within hours, these new tenants were brutalized and dragged back outdoors by a platoon of California Highway Patrol officers.¹⁴

I suggest that it should not be a false equivalency to ask why preservationists and preservation organizations could not be as involved with this action as they were with Sister Corita's former studio. Here, once again in Angeleno history, Latino families were being told that their time in the city had expired and that they do not make the decisions affecting their neighborhoods. It is akin to the kinds of external control over fate that motivate preservationists in much less life-and-death situations. The same participation methods as the Cultural Heritage Commission meetings were available for those who could not be present physically to vocalize their disapproval, from contacting the offices of Governor Newsom or Councilmember Kevin De León to signal boosting online and contributing donations (not to mention that the first highly publicized reclamations in El Sereno already had occurred in March,¹⁵ offering plenty of time for interaction before November). Yet this effort at the preservation of community attracted no historic preservationists or representatives of Historic-Cultural Monuments on the Eastside or elsewhere. Not even the fact that the area contains enough enduring examples of Southern California domestic vernacular architecture to comprise an entire historic district was enough to pique the interest of any antisocial, building-centric purists waiting on the sidelines to be convinced, demonstrating exactly the indifference inherent to the stereotype of the WASPy preservationist and the detached historic site.

It is possible to envision that the methods of advocating on behalf of Sister Corita's

studio could be applied elsewhere: this was efficient and vehement bottom-up organizing. Why should it not be directed to more radical ends to fit disastrous times? For example, the Downtown Crenshaw group in Leimert Park is working right now to purchase the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Mall, a streamline moderne shopping center that has been a nexus point for the district and the surrounding Black and Brown communities of South L.A. since the late 1940s. The organizers have successfully blocked pending sales of the neighborhood hub to the out-of-town, Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump-affiliated CIM Group and LIVWRK/DFH Partners while agitating for the beloved beacon to be turned over to a representative coalition of local investors. Classic preservation of place and heritage on one hand (undeterred by the 1980s-era additions to the complex); anti-displacement strategizing on the other.¹⁶

Even though Downtown Crenshaw is not a preservation entity per se, they are effectively achieving the relevance preservationists are seeking. Compare that with the Los Angeles Conservancy, a nonprofit dedicated exclusively to preservation. They set a well-meaning and pragmatic precedent this past year for preservationists to put their skills to work raising awareness of small businesses confronting the possibility of closure after decades of service. The stewards profiled plenty of establishments, no matter the integrity or renown of their buildings, and encouraged take-out orders to help keep numerous neighbors afloat. Nevertheless, the GoFundMe, Change.org, and cash mob models predate the emergencies of 2020

and have proven insufficient to date for discouraging the vultures from circling. The immediate resolutions help, but do not undo the systemic rot.

Might there be a more holistic approach for transferring preservation's fundamental refusal of removal to more diverse related causes? A "solidarity preservation" might see historic preservation destinations becoming resource centers and info shops, offering trainings and courses in navigating governmental and legal systems, playing host to grassroots organizers' fundraising events, serving to connect those entangled in different battles in different areas, conducting teach-ins about land use law, and on the whole *serving*—i.e., solidarity, not charity nor hierarchy, and definitely not an individual's project—to equip people with more of the tools and network needed to combat erasure.¹⁷ While communities in crisis are already providing this for themselves, à la Downtown Crenshaw and tenants unions, preservation has strategy and experience to contribute, especially when it comes to myriad forms of agitprop expressing how the problems around one building are the problems of the entire city.

Such repurposing is a necessity for preservation's own survival, but be aware that such a dreamy reorientation would only be possible if preserved locations embrace and become steeped in the spirit of dissent that has enabled their present. Imagine visiting the mall thirty years after Downtown Crenshaw successfully purchases it and not finding any reference to or hearing any mention of the struggle that kept the center community-oriented—

that is analogous to the experience at too many preserved points of interest, especially those regularly welcoming a public. What this does is perpetually undercut the fact of open conflict with real estate speculation that has been inseparable from the practice of historic preservation in the United States since even before the loss of New York's Penn Station in 1963. In turn, the dastardly developers are able to treat each preservation initiative as a one-off inconvenience rather than an existential menace that could proliferate—even though every successfully saved place is a denial and denunciation of their business. Any unionist would recognize the scenario: organizing with other sectors, preservation could contribute to a formidable bloc, but alone it is easily neutralized. If the losses of 2020 cannot inspire preservation to remember where it came from, then the next attempts to champion a prized piece of history will be disregarded, even more so than they are now, by those devoted to extinguishing other growing threats.

This proposition stems from a missed opportunity for solidarity.

Pauline Schindler's former home on Kings Road in West Hollywood was restored throughout the 1980s to return the redwood, glass, and concrete residence to its condition upon completion in June 1922. The house's flattening of traditional hierarchies, slab-tilt construction technique, open floor plan, and elimination of the

distinction between indoor and outdoor space introduced an entirely new vocabulary to regional architecture, though its design was also heavily influenced by the activity that would come to define the site. A "cooperative dwelling for two young couples," the Kings Road House would become a center for radical political organizing and arts throughout the 1920s, frequented by avant-garde composers and performers alongside activists and attorneys for progressive causes. More than anything, it was a headquarters for the spirit of experimentation intrinsic to modern architecture, music, and their overlaps with leftist thought.¹⁸

A partnership with the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts (Museum für angewandte Kunst [MAK]) launched the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in 1994, which presents dozens of exhibitions and events in and around the house each year. From 2009 to 2019, my job was to produce them. While the MAK Center program has been dedicated to the same unconventional exploration that defined the half-acre lot in the 1920s, in terms of art and architecture, the actual house's preservation is quite standard. A knowledgeable team of conservators—the Friends of the Schindler House—continually maintain and rehabilitate the structure in minute detail, as funding permits, with the intention of keeping things as they once were even though the parcel now sits in the middle of a condo canyon.



Kings Road House, 2014. Photo by Joshua White. © MAK Center.

Conventions notwithstanding, the MAK Center actively has tried to disassociate from the notion of the historic house museum, precisely because of the standoffish navel-gazing tendencies observed in too many such organizations across the country. The goal has been that Schindler's house holds on as a place in the world of today for connecting with contemporary concepts and conflicts, not a time capsule with docents in period dress. Program participants have discussed everything from photography to migration stories to critical theory to social and spatial practices to prison abolition to the rebuilding of the Fukushima area after the Tōhoku tsunami to countless other topics including, discernibly, modernist architecture around the world.¹⁹

The program has "thought globally," if you will, but looking back I ruminate on the ways it has "acted locally." While many of the projects and topics have originated from various contemporary art and architecture discourses that naturally overlap with Angelenos' concerns, there indeed have been efforts to relate the historic place with immediate community dialogues. In 2003, the MAK Center openly criticized the plans for Lorcan O'Herlihy

Architects' Habitat 825 next door, luxury condominiums masquerading as progressive solutions for a densifying city. *How Many Billboards? Art In Stead* in 2010 joined Kings Road with twenty-one different zones around central L.A., in part to highlight the dominance of advertising in the built environment. The 2011 exhibition *Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of American Modernist Architecture and Design* told the exact story above about the demolition of the Dodge House and its ripple effects for preservation on the street and in the region.

Yet the MAK Center never touched upon the unfair eviction in 2013 of Irv's Burgers one block north on Santa Monica Boulevard, which shuttered a neighborhood icon. Built circa 1946, the walk-up food stand once was one of hundreds of quick dining options found across the Southland in the pre-McDonald's era. First operating as Queen's Burgers, the prototypical roadside shack was taken over by Irv Gendis in 1970 and then operated by the much-adored Susan Hong since 2000, withstanding waves of neighborhood change to end up one of the last Route 66—era businesses on this stretch of the Mother Road.

Queen's was a hangout for the likes of John Cassavetes and Shelley Winters in the 1950s, and then—because of its late hours and proximity to venues and the Sunset Strip—became a fixture of the overall L.A. music scene of the 1960s and '70s, counting Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Jimi Hendrix as regulars. It was so much a quintessential American burger joint that it made the

perfect visual accompaniment to Linda Ronstadt's 1978 album *Living in the USA*, showing the "first lady of rock" at Irv's counter as dusk falls over the busy West Hollywood streets.



Linda Ronstadt, *Living in the USA* album, inside sleeve, 1978.

Celebrity aside, the structure serving as home to Queen's/Irv's was nondescript until similar ones started to vanish. The architect is unknown and its style is simply North American mid-twentieth century commercial. But as the City of West Hollywood, which was incorporated in 1984 as a haven for LGBTQ+ and Russian Jewish communities of renters, became a primarily white and wealthy one in the 2000s, where the majority now earn over \$100,000 annually²⁰ and therefore can absorb the loss of cheap eateries, Irv's was threatened with exactly the kind of dispossession that accompanies gentrification elsewhere.

In 2005, when the owner wanted to demolish the structure and erect a Peet's Coffee, Irv's became a typical preservation cause célèbre, with the "Burger Brigade" campaigning on behalf of both the business and the building, lobbying the city to declare 8289 Santa Monica Boulevard a Local Cultural Resource and preventing destruction to the furthest extent usually to be had in Los Angeles County (by way of

complicating the demolition permission process). MAK Center played no part.

The city agreed to preserve the building; the business was left to fend for itself. Once Irv's was deemed stable, however, the battle against avarice turned to congratulatory measures like installing historical markers and framing the burger stand as a kind of archival document rather than an innocent victim of real estate. As is common with commercial investment properties in changing areas, the owners—The Standard Oil Investment Group (at the time headed by the fashion designer Marc Bohbot)—would not offer Irv's a long-term lease. Unsurprisingly, in 2013, Hong received a 67% rent increase and the individual David vs. individual Goliath narrative was reborn rather than any wider querying about who has the right to stay in West Hollywood and who does not.²¹

Advocates pointed to Irv's many links to Hollywood history and American mythos while others claimed that the "eyesore" was an unnecessary burden on the property owners and their ability to fill the adjacent parking lot with a new beach-themed (sand included) restaurant. A street emphasizing consumption and tourism was no longer accommodating to a utilitarian operation. Another scale shift had occurred, a new version of the same omnipotent economic presence that MAK Center and the Kings Road House and hundreds of blocks around the county know all too well.

Irv's was kicked out and the Beach Nation bistro repurposed its remains as part of its kitchen before closing just three years later.

Today, the landmark is part of a restaurant called Conservatory. While the same historic preservation marker as the one in front of Pauline Schindler's house sits outside, the diner's corpse is given the *Weekend at Bernie's* treatment and used as a cafe.



The possible expansion of focus for historic preservation sites that was sketched above—with the already preserved redeploying resources to the yet to be saved—is informed unmistakably by the ways in which the MAK Center program could have performed during this exact displacement but did not. In retrospect, I wish we had. The organizational experience, audience, and network were all there to share in camaraderie with Irv's as a co-equal historic part of the urban fabric that was being cut away and discarded before our eyes.



Irv's Burgers as a landmark, top, as a real estate investment, below.



Top: Conservatory, 2020. Photo by Anthony Carfello;
Bottom: Signage designating two City of West Hollywood Local Culture Resources.



Exiled from its home of over six decades, Irv's reopened in a newer storefront space down the road at the corner of North Laurel Avenue, hanging on for a few more years until closing permanently in November 2018.

The realization in hindsight has been that MAK Center was not seeing itself and its origins in the burger shack. In somewhat literal terms, the architect and author

Charles Moore had described the Kings Road House as "a *real* shanty" in his 1984 guide to L.A., but the kinship of two gathering places safeguarding their rightful territories as living history should have been undeniable. I reckon that the airs of being a "masterpiece" could have caused the same nearsightedness as the typical historic house museum in the case of some of the more conservative preservationists in the Schindler orbit, but those directing MAK Center program activities customarily steered clear of insularity.²²

Locations are contextual: as the geographer Doreen Massey writes, their definition "does not have to be through simple counterposition to the outside; it can come, in part, precisely through the particularity of linkage to that 'outside' which is therefore itself part of what constitutes the place."²³ At many times before the food feud, there had been no trouble understanding the MAK Center's office as also being determined and interpreted by way of other spaces. Preserved houses in L.A. by modernist peers Richard Neutra, John Lautner, Gregory Ain, and others were highlighted annually; connection with central Europe was built into the institution's administration; off-site projects by collaborating artists intertwined the Kings Road House with myriad other addresses; and the organization owns two other R.M. Schindler–designed buildings in two other neighborhoods. Rapport with Irv's—as people affirming place, not only the structure at 8289 Santa Monica Boulevard—no doubt would have been reasonable.



Pacific Design Center and Hugo's Plating, 1997. Photo by Patrick Downs/*Los Angeles Times* via Getty Images.

Maybe the program and conservation simply had gone too long enjoying the privilege of not *needing* to understand itself as also being a defensive project against financial scale shifts. Another shack/shanty that was still close at hand in West Hollywood when the MAK Center began—Hugo's Plating Company—spent a quarter century in exactly that need, living a both/and existence of being a business with a specific purpose and a representation of the past being present. A metal-plating shop for reconditioning home fixtures, Hugo's inhabited an aging cottage that already had spent over fifty years on a 1,750-square-foot lot on Melrose Avenue next to a former railroad switching yard by the time agents of the forthcoming Pacific Design Center (by César Pelli) tried to purchase it. Archetypal holdouts and thus also a default preservationists (for a stretch of time at least), owners Emma and Otilia Diaz remained steadfast for twenty-five years in their refusal to consider selling, no matter how much the upscale development offered. The massive merchandise mart was built anyway, with a horseshoe rampart of

tall Ficus plants to hide the supposed blight from the eyes of its chic customers.²⁴



Day in and day out, proprietor Hugo Castaneda could be found out front or among the "vats of heated nickel, brass and copper that bubble[d] away"²⁵ in the shadow of the sleek blue whale taunting from above and in the wake of the changing scale that Pelli foretold.



Hugo and the Blue Whale, c. 1988–89, video still.

"It's getting to a point where you're seeing nothing but concrete and glass ... and all the little people are just getting pushed out. Where do they go?" asks one

of the interviewees in David Bret Egan's *Hugo and the Blue Whale*, a twelve-minute vox pop-style student documentary aired in 1990 as part of PBS's *POV* series that collected reflections on the relationship between Hugo's and the PDC.²⁶ Subjects addressed the changes illustrated by each, and opinions differed as to which building was the actual eyesore.

In 1997, Castaneda was forced into retirement after the Diaz sisters raised the rent and then quickly sold the thirty-five-foot-long property to the PDC. It was instantly demolished. For a period, though, a physical space representing an era in the history of West Hollywood stayed put—the next generation could see it, whether to appreciate or disparage—just like the Kings Road House, just like Irv's Burgers. But now even more like the Dodge House, as only articles, photos, and a short film remain.

Perhaps with the sensibility of mutual support recommended—being sisters in arms with neighbors needing to stay conscious of their potential displacement—more guidebook editors would see it as absurd to list the Kings Road House and PDC as being architectural allies only because both fall within the relatively tiny 1.89 square miles of West Hollywood. Along with most other preserved locations around the U.S., Schindler's house is open for visits only because it had the support needed in order to make itself useless to real estate. The real kindred spirits are those at risk of disappearance. Continuity comes with an obligation to rally for those bracing the scale shifts ahead with less secure footing. There are many Irv's Burgers in our midst.

1. Esther McCoy, "The Blue Bombshell: Pacific Design Center," in *Piecing Together Los Angeles: An Esther McCoy Reader*, ed. Susan Morgan (Valencia, CA: East of Borneo Books, 2012), 287–91.
2. Esther McCoy, "The Blue Bombshell," *Progressive Architecture*, vol. 62, no. 10 (October 1976): 78–83.
3. For more about the Dodge House up until the early 1960s, see: "Walter Luther Dodge House, 950 North Kings Road, West Hollywood District, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, CA," Historic American Buildings Survey/Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ca0221/>; Esther McCoy, *Five California Architects* (New York: Reinhold, 1960); Ada Louise Huxtable, "Blue Monday in Los Angeles," *New York Times*, March 8, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/03/08/archives/architecture-blue-monday-in-los-angeles.html>; and, Jeffrey Head, "Dodge House in West Hollywood: All that's left is the architect's genius and a cautionary tale," *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 2011, <https://www.latimes.com/home/la-hm-dodge-house-20110716-story.html>.
4. Susan Morgan, "Irving Gill's Dodge House: a legacy of beauty and invention," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (blog), January 13, 2012, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/blog/2012/01/irving-gill%E2%80%99s-dodge-house-legacy-of-beauty-and-invention>.
5. Head, "Dodge House," *Los Angeles Times*.
6. Huxtable, "Blue Monday," *New York Times*. For a first-hand account, see "The Demise of the Dodge House" in *Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of American Modernist Architecture and Design*, eds. Kimberli Meyer and Susan Morgan (Nürnberg: Verlag für modern Kunst, 2011). This supplement to the catalog for the titular exhibition documents McCoy's preservation campaign work in detail.
7. Today known as the Courtyards of West Hollywood.
8. Anything I am able to write about Esther McCoy or the fight to save the Dodge House is thanks to the research and writing of Susan Morgan, who joined Kimberli Meyer, the former director of the MAK Center for Art and Architecture to whom I am also indebted, in curating the exhibition *Sympathetic Seeing: Esther McCoy and the Heart of*

American Modernist Architecture and Design at the Schindler House in 2011–12. I was fortunate to assist in producing the show and the aforementioned catalog.

9. For initial examples, see: Erica Avrami, ed., *Preservation and Social Inclusion* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2020), <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/books/reader/503-preservation-and-social-inclusion#reader-anchor-26>; Max Page, *Why Preservation Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Marisa Brown, "Preservation's Existential Crisis," National Trust for Historic Preservation (blog), June 18, 2020, <https://forum.savingplaces.org/blogs/marisa-brown1/2020/06/18/preservations-existential-crisis>; and Ned Kaufman, "Historic Places and the Diversity Deficit in Heritage Conservation," *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Summer 2004): <https://www.nps.gov/crmjournal/summer2004/article3.html>.

10. A regularly used number, though slightly out-of-date. Certainly, it would be worth generating a new total following the COVID-19 pandemic. Stephanie K. Meeks, "House Museums: A 20th Century Paradigm," National Trust for Historic Preservation (blog), October 30, 2013, <https://savingplaces.org/press-center/media-resources/house-museums-a-20th-century-paradigm>; and "What To Do With These Old Houses," The Pew Charitable Trusts, April 30, 2008, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2008/04/30/what-to-do-with-these-old-houses-spring-2008-trust-magazine-briefing>.

11. For initial examples, see: Kerri Young, "Building a More Inclusive Preservation Movement," *Heritage News*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.sfheritage.org/features/building-a-more-inclusive-preservation-movement/>; Dismantle Preservation Virtual Unconference by Sarah Marson, July 8, 2020, <https://www.sarahmarsom.com/news/2020/7/8/dismantle-preservation-virtual-unconference>; "Historic Preservation Commission Resolution No. 1127," San Francisco Planning Department, July 15, 2020, https://sfplanning.org/sites/default/files/documents/admin/R-1127_HPC_Equity_Resolution.pdf.

12. The governmental designation for "preserved" in the City of Los Angeles is inclusion on the list of Historic-Cultural Monuments.

13. "Sister Mary Corita Studio," Los Angeles Conservancy, accessed December 2020, <https://www.laconservancy.org/issues/sister-mary-corita-studio>.

14. Elina Shatkin, "CHP Removes Activists From Empty El Sereno Homes Owned By Caltrans," *LAist*, November 26, 2020, https://laist.com/2020/11/26/chp_removes_activists_from_empty_el_sereno_homes_owned_by_caltrans.php.

15. Sarah Jaffe, "Reclaim Our Homes," *Dissent*, March 20, 2020, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/reclaim-our-homes.

16. For more on Downtown Crenshaw, see: Erin Aubry Kaplan, "Black Empowerment Outside the Headlines," *New York Times*, November 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/08/opinion/crenshaw-la-black-redevelopment.html>; Jason Lewis, "Battle for the Crenshaw Mall continues," *Los Angeles Standard*, December 8, 2020, <https://lastandardnewspaper.com/index.php/business/934-battle-for-the-crenshaw-mall-continues.html>; Jack Ross, "A Jared Kushner-Connected Company Is Buying an L.A. Mall," *Capital and Main*, November 20, 2020, <https://capitalandmain.com/jared-kushner-connected-company-is-buying-a-los-angeles-mall-1120>; and, "Black Community Thwarts Second Attempt by Trump-Kushner Connected Developer to Buy the Crenshaw Mall," *Culver City Observer*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.culvercityobserver.com/story/2020/12/17/news/black-community-thwarts-second-attempt-by-trump-kushner-connected-developer-to-buy-the-crenshaw-mall/9592.html>.

17. Some case studies that encourage the viability of such suggestions might include the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space in New York's Alphabet City, an 1872 tenement building squatted and preserved by punks and activists since 1989 that now plays host to exhibition, event, and education programming from a storefront on Avenue C; the forthcoming National Public Housing Museum in Chicago's Little Italy, which aims to convert the single remaining structure of the thirty-two-building Jane Addams Homes—New Deal-era homes demolished as part of the Chicago Housing

Authority's notorious Plan for Transformation—into an oral history archive and center for housing as a human right (in part to advocate for more public housing and speak out against the kind of dispossession it represents). The overlap with certain social practice art operations having a preservation angle, such as Project Row Houses in Houston, raises questions as well about commitment and responsibility to surrounding communities. Nevertheless, the suggestion is organizational in scope rather than a change in focus being subcontracted through intermittent art projects.

18. "Notable residents, guests, and visitors of the Kings Road avant-garde scene were composer John Cage; photographer Edward Weston and model Betty Katz Kopelanoff; dancer John Bovingdon; art dealer and historian Galka Scheyer; screenwriter Dudley Nichols; actress Mary McLaren; Arthur Rankin and his wife Ruth; attorney Percy Solotoy and social worker Sonia Solotoy; attorney Edward Mosk and his wife Fern; actor and occultist Samson de Brier; progressive activist Barbara Chevalier; dancer/choreographer Katherine Dunham; and Maurice Brown, founder of the Little Theater in Chicago," not to mention Richard and Dione Neutra; see MAK Center visitor guide, 2016. For more about the Kings Road House social scene, see Robert Sweeney, "Life at Kings Road," in *The Architecture of R.M. Schindler* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001); for architectural history see Kathryn Smith, *Schindler House* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001) and Robert Sweeney and Judith Sheine, *Schindler, Kings Road, and Southern California Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

19. See previous MAK Center programs, <https://makcenter.org/past-programming/>.

20. "Demographics," City of West Hollywood, accessed December 2020, <https://www.weho.org/business/interactive-data-tools/demographics>.

21. For more about the eviction of Irv's Burgers, see: "WEHO Burger Stand Saved from Peetniks," *Curbed L.A.*, September 22, 2005, <https://la.curbed.com/2005/9/22/10612292/weho-burger-sta>; Irv's Burgers campaign website; Dan Watson, "Councilmember Prang: Irv's Burger Situation 'Really Frustrating,'" *WEHO Ville*, June 20, 2013,

<https://www.wehoville.com/2013/06/20/councilmember-prang-irvs-burger-situation-really-frustrating/>; Bob Pool and Hailey Branson-Potts, "Longtime West Hollywood burger joint is in a pickle and must close," *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 2013, <https://www.latimes.com/local/la-xpm-2013-oct-30-la-me-irvs-burgers-20131030-story.html>; Edward Folven, "Burger stand bounces back in West Hollywood," *Beverly Press*, January 9, 2014, <https://beverlypress.com/2014/01/burger-stand-bounces-back-in-west%E2%80%88hollywood/>; Daniel Hernandez, "The Last Burgers at Irv's," *L.A. Taco*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.lataco.com/last-burgers-irvs-classic-hamburger-shack-shutting-down/>; Matthew Kang, "A Heartbreaking Photo of Irv's Burgers on Its Last Day," *Eater L.A.*, November 26, 2018, <https://la.eater.com/2018/11/26/18113350/irvs-burgers-last-photo-west-hollywood-closed-mama-hong>.

22. Myself included, along with critical and thoughtful colleagues that I hold in high esteem. The MAK Center team was not one to shy away from difficult conversations. Looking back on my time at the Kings Road House, it is a challenge to identify subjects that were *not* tackled in one form or another in the program—the exercise of power over space chief among them. Accordingly, as closures abound in 2020, I have continued to think back about this distinct blank in our discourse and activity that was the fate of Irv's Burgers one block away.

23. Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place," *Marxism Today* (June 1991): 29.

24. For more about Hugo's Plating see Bob Pool, "For Sale, 25 Years Later: Owners of Cottage Spurned Design Center's Offers; Now the 'Blue Whale' May Not Bite," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 1997, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-06-13-me-3082-story.html>; "Design Center's \$450,000 Shack Shock," *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 1998; and, Bob Bishop, "A Look Back: The Shack with a Swanky Address," *WEHO Ville*, May 28, 2018, <https://www.wehoville.com/2018/05/28/look-back-shack-swanky-address/>.

25. Pool, "For Sale," *Los Angeles Times*.

26. Julie Wheelock, "Homework Project That Became PBS Documentary: Movie: UCLA film

student's 'Hugo and the Blue Whale' will air tonight on Channel 28," *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-12-21-ca-7042-story.html>.

GEORGIA