

What We Almost Lost

By Richard Stanley

Recently, I held an open house on Prestwick Drive. As with most homes in the Los Feliz hills, it has a sweeping view—in this case, a view of Glendale and the mountains to the north and of Griffith Park, farther west. These days, though, the view of the park is not what it used to be. Beyond the tiled rooftops of vintage Spanish Revival and Mediterranean style homes lies the charred, scorched landscape more often found after a great war. For the flora and fauna in 25 percent of the park, the May fire was a catastrophe. They lost habitat and lives. For us, we survived shaken and sobered by what might have been, if not for the miracle performed by our fire and emergency personnel, who stopped an incipient catastrophe at our doorsteps.

Later, at a Los Feliz Improvement Association meeting, Jay Platt, of the Los Angeles Conservancy, reviewed a list of architectural jewels in our neighborhood that survived the fire. The roll of city Historic and Cultural Monuments in Los Feliz is impressive and ever-growing, from Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis House to Modern masterpieces such as Richard Neutra's Lovell House and a more-recently-designated Ed Fickett-designed home. The latter two are both on one small section of Dundee Drive that leads directly to the edge of Griffith Park.

His presentation called to mind a visit to Oakland I made about eight years ago, a few years after that city's catastrophic fire. Gone were the oak-canopied streets and Julia Morgan-designed Craftsman homes that defined Oakland and California living a century ago. To my shock, what I found instead was an odd collection of giant, cheaply-built, stucco boxes on tree-less streets. Passing from "old" Oakland to "new" Oakland was a trip through the looking glass. The only thing that neighborhood shared anymore was a zip code.

Our recent fire in the park reminded me that, unlike the park itself, which will grow anew into familiar chaparral, historic neighborhoods like Oakland's—and like Los Feliz—once gone, are gone forever. A newly-rebuilt Los Feliz will not be the Los Feliz we now love. That we continue to support the work of our fire, emergency and park personnel is a given, but the loss of our neighborhood can occur in ways other than by catastrophic fire. We must be watchful in other ways.

Catastrophes occur slowly, too. Just as books printed on acidic paper succumb to the "quiet fire" of oxidation, so too, can a neighborhood like Los Feliz quietly disappear, bit by bit. Los Feliz is far more than a collection of architectural jewels on a city list. The context of Los Feliz is its own treasure. I passed a house undergoing a major remodel recently. It looked to be about the median age of a home in Los Feliz—70 years old. At the time, it was torn down to the studs. Will

this house fit its context better when the “remodel” is complete? Will the owner turn it into a McMansion? Will the neighboring homes lose views, light, air circulation—and value? No one will know until it’s too late to change the final result. By then, will Los Feliz have lost a bit of its “Los Feliz-ness”?

There are ways to protect Los Feliz from incremental catastrophe. We should support Councilman Labonge in his effort to pass city ordinances that ban “McMansions”. These monster houses are already chewing away at the fabric of Los Feliz and dragging down surrounding property values.

We should also support organizations such as the Los Feliz Improvement Association and the Greater Griffith Park Neighborhood Council in their efforts to review new developments’ effects upon the existing neighborhood context. In addition, several years ago, the city government chose Larchmont Village, Windsor Square, Hancock Park and Los Feliz to study as potential Historic Preservation Overlay Zones (HPOZs). To date, all the study areas have become HPOZs, save Los Feliz. In Los Angeles, an HPOZ is the ONLY way that a neighborhood can control directly the look of its future development. The argument in favor of HPOZs is simple: would you rather have you and your neighbors determine what gets built next door to you, or would you rather entrust the value of your property to a single owner or developer and the city Department of Building and Safety?

Los Feliz was lucky to emerge unscathed after the May fire. With a renewed appreciation of what we almost lost—and a sense of some urgency, we should take steps now to preserve the fabric of our unique and irreplaceable town-within-the-city. Once lost, we will never be able to replace our Los Feliz.

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