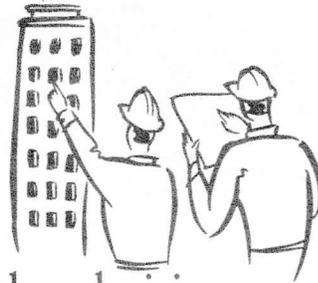


Preserving The Past



How passion and politics shape local cities

by Janet Aird

It was almost 30 years ago that neighbors awakened on a rainy Saturday morning to the sound of bulldozers tearing down the Neighborhood Church in Pasadena. The church fell without warning, to make way for the planned extension of the 710 freeway. Since then, generations of preservationists and residents have delayed the extension. They have saved not only the Rialto Theater and several dozen landmark houses, says Glen Duncan, chair of the South Pasadena Cultural Heritage Commission, but whole neighborhoods as well—at least temporarily.

“Nothing is safe in Los Angeles,” says Raymond Girvigian, FAIA, a preservation architect for more than 40 years. “Nothing can be taken for granted. These decisions [whether to demolish or to preserve historical buildings] are shaped by politics and demographics, seldom preservationists. The influence is beyond voters. You have to understand the politics of power and money.”

Sue Mossman, executive director of Pasadena Heritage, says that more than 20 years ago there was considerable economic pressure to develop Pasadena. The preservation movement began with the construction of Plaza Pasadena and the Parsons building and plans for high rises in the El Molino/Colorado Blvd. area.

“Residents and neighbors were outraged that the city would become a mini-Los Angeles without consideration for quality of life,” Mossman says. When developers proposed to bulldoze Old Town, residents and preservationists convinced civic leaders that the buildings could meet new needs.

Today, many local cities decide if a building is historic by examining such criteria as the quality of its architecture, its example of a particular style or its association with an influential person or event. “It’s crucial that they make the finding that

the building is significant,” says Mary Jo Winder, a planner with the Planning and Permit Department in Pasadena. “This ensures that there will be a delay, and they can look for ways to protect it.” Some buildings are relocated. The former Bullock’s in Pasadena will be hidden virtually from all sides by new construction, says Mossman, but at least it won’t be torn down.

In San Gabriel, a project to restore the Mission District involved the local government, school district and historical society as well as businesses, residents, community organizations and the Gabrielino Band of Mission Indians, says Mike Paules, city manager. With a preservationist on the design team, the mission and a number of other buildings were restored.

“Public opinion and the orientation of the city are important,” says Steve Baker of the Monrovia Historical Society. In Monrovia, property tax is reduced for owners who choose to register their historic home. The owners then can use the money they save to maintain and restore the house. “So far we haven’t had any problems with developers,” he adds, “but development is on the upswing again—and in an area that is already built up, whenever something new comes in, something old has to go.”

In Sierra Madre, homes are registered as historic without their owners’ consent. This has angered so many residents that a measure on the April ballot proposes to drop the designation for 29 properties.

Because Altadena has no local government, preservationists must work with various government agencies. Public efforts saved one historic building, says Steve Haussler, chair of Altadena Heritage. Residents are fighting a plan to expand another in the proposed Central Historic District.

“Historical preservation per se is not isolated,” says Girvigian. “It is part of our urban fabric. It is only through a coalition of groups that we can keep some humanity in our urban environment.” ♦