



# CONSERVATIVE ACTIVIST

**LA-based architecture preservationist John English sells people on the idea that buildings are worth protecting.**

*Text* Katya Tylevich



THE 1958 HOLIDAY BOWL ON CRENSHAW BOULEVARD IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, WAS DESIGNED BY ARMET & DAVIS ARCHITECTS. THE REMAINS OF THE BUILDING HOUSE A STARBUCKS. PHOTO DEAN CHENG

I once watched a documentary on Frank Lloyd Wright, which explained that FLW was a bad father to his children because he regarded his architecture as his real progeny. Maybe FLW wasn't all wrong. I mean, raise your hand if you'd bulldoze a toddler. If more people personified modern architecture, perhaps the world would be spared so many teardowns and unfortunate remodels. Los Angeles (cough, cough), that comment is aimed in your direction.

Following FLW's logic, we might regard significant works of modern architecture in LA as celebrity teens: good-looking and gifted, but very often train wrecks. Such architecture is prone to plastic surgery ('I look nothing like I used to!'), feelings of alienation ('If I'm so special, why won't anybody buy me and/or invest in my upkeep?'), bankruptcy (see previous parenthesized comments) and premature death. To the rescue? LA's architecture preservationists, the high-profile intervention counsellors in this already overstretched analogy.

Media savvy and up in arms, LA's preservationists are famous for throwing themselves in front of structures in peril – and some are actually celebrities (Diane Keaton, for one), while others are quoted so often on the nightly news and in the newspapers they might as well be. But I'm curious to hear what the preservationists say with the loudspeakers off. It's not all Schindler sit-ins and shaking fists at developers,

is it? Do preservationists ever shake fists at each other? What is the atmosphere of preservationism in Los Angeles at present, and is it just me or has 'preservationism' become more à la mode? What do the veterans have to say on the subject? John English, whom I meet in a café in Pasadena, would know. What his eyes have seen in over two decades of architecture preservation . . .

I think it's safe to call English outspoken: he's been quoted on matters of architectural controversy in the *L.A. Times*, *The New York Times* and *National Geographic*, among others. He's stood undeterred in the face of wrecking balls. He's also the kind of bold stalwart who begins sentences with 'This might sound a little audacious, but . . .'

Go on . . .

#### How did you hit LA's preservationist scene?

I don't have an academic background in architecture. I got involved in all this as a volunteer. In fact, it all began with one case, trying to save a bowling alley – the Holiday Bowl. A piece of it is still there, now a Starbucks. Can you imagine anything more absurd or upsetting? The Holiday Bowl was a classic Googie bowling alley from 1958 in the Crenshaw District. Though not the best example of Googie, it had a thick layer of cultural significance. The post-war bowling alley, especially in this country, is

immensely important. We don't have a lot of public spaces in Los Angeles, so we tried to save at least one. We were up against big politics, big developers and big money, and it's a testament to everyone involved that we lasted for three and a half years. I didn't expect it to go on that long, but next thing I knew I was meeting city officials, developers, potential buyers; I was going to city hall, organizing people in the community, writing press releases, talking to the press, and this was going on for three or four days a week. At one point I said, 'This feels like a job. Either I have to stop doing this because I'm not really paying the rent, or I have to see whether I can make a living off of it.' Now I'm a consultant. People think I restore old houses, but I don't. We survey large areas and ask: what's out there? We look at hundreds and hundreds of buildings and try to determine which ones are significant.

#### Isn't architectural 'significance' kind of a subjective matter?

Well, for projects funded by the federal government, we use criteria issued by the National Register of Historic Places. A home is eligible for its architecture, for an important event that happened there, for a significant person associated with it. Look, the real issue here is whether future generations are going to be able to experience these buildings and learn from them. The bottom line is, I got involved in all this because I simply got too frustrated watching things disappear. I got too angry driving around this city and seeing it being demolished.

The problem in Los Angeles is that real estate is just worth too much, and there's too much money involved. Developers want to build what they want to build, and the city wants their tax money. I have sat in meetings and hearings where we're supposed to be talking about the significance of a building, and instead we're talking about whether the sound in the Cinerama Dome is technically good. Developers hire people to speak on their behalf. It's a strange game. A lot of it comes down to money. And some people have a problem trying to preserve things that were built after they were born. Other people dismiss LA as a fabricated landscape. But is it really more fabricated than New York or any other place? So much of the last 20 years for me has been about trying to sell people on the idea that our buildings are important. That we have to protect them.

#### But LA's many Neutra, Schindler and Lautner connoisseurs seem sold on the idea already.

Yes, now people would die – or pay a lot per square foot – to have a Schindler or a Neutra, but 20 years ago they would have torn down the same houses. No one cared. No one wanted them. I should say that 20 years ago advocacy was much harder. We were out in the wilderness trying to promote our ideas. There was an explosion in the appreciation of post-war modernism in the late '90s, when the high-art establishment recognized it. Finally, people saw

THE 1953 MCDONALD'S RESTAURANT ON LAKEWOOD BOULEVARD IN DOWNEY, CALIFORNIA, WAS THE THIRD FRANCHISED MCDONALD'S BUILT AND IS THE OLDEST SURVIVING MCDONALD'S. PHOTO SUSAN REEP



## 'I GOT INVOLVED IN PRESERVATION BECAUSE I SIMPLY GOT TOO FRUSTRATED WATCHING THINGS DISAPPEAR'

– John English –

the importance of the Case Study Program, and there was a resurgence of interest in Neutra, then Schindler.

But what about the commercial buildings we try to preserve? People seem interested only in single-family residential units, because you can't collect commercial buildings. Maybe you can't own commercial spaces, but you do live in them; you spend your day-to-day life in them. These buildings are part of our collective heritage; they're ours. The problem is that everyone looks at them as private property. When people hear about these buildings closing, they come out for the last week, celebrate and talk about how sad it is – but that's it.

#### Do you always see eye to eye with other people working in preservation?

There are the people we call 'guns for hire': consultants who show up working for the developer. There are some, whom I won't name, who went to the dark side for phenomenal amounts of money. But among most of the people I work with, the disagreements that do occur are usually healthy. We're very proactive. We're not just academics; we're architects, graphic designers, artists, musicians. We go out there and do fun things, but we are really, really serious. We've learned a lot. We know how to write letters and press releases; we've staged protests.

#### What does an architecture protest look like?

One really famous protest was at the oldest and most original McDonald's in the world, hands down. I don't care for McDonald's on so many levels I cannot tell you – but how significant is that? And they wanted to tear it down. We were dealing with a giant, but we kept at it. We had two protests. The first was very 'small town, middle America': we went out with our signs and cheerleaders, people from the community and city. Then six months later, because nobody had listened to us, we changed our tactics and had a rally. This is where some people got uncomfortable, because a lot of preservationists are very conservative. But we're activists. We had a mock funeral – a McFuneral. We did some street theatre. We had a coffin with golden arches on it, people in black armbands carrying the coffin, and I dressed as Ronald McDonald. I had to come up with my own outfit, which was ridiculous. I looked like a bad clown. There were television cameras, somebody putting a microphone in my face from NPR or BBC or something, and I kept thinking: this is too weird. Fortunately, the city eventually came around. That McDonald's reopened to big fanfare, a big black-tie party with champagne.

#### What other strategies do you use?

We're creative; we use a lot of different tactics,

including working with owners to find sensitive buyers. You know, sometimes dealing with the threat of outright demolition is easier. There's a multi-tiered watchdog approach. If someone threatens to demolish a Lautner or a Neutra, the world is on them within hours. And the Modern Committee [a volunteer branch of the Los Angeles Conservancy dedicated to protecting modern architecture] is amazing; they find out about these things quickly and go viral right away. The real danger comes when someone says, 'Oh, I'm just going to do a little work here.' Then you go by later and think: what happened?

#### But owners of significant modern homes often argue for having their cake and eating it, too – they want to 'upgrade' such buildings to current standards of comfort.

That's a problem that's developed out of this whole resurgence of interest in modernism. It's really frustrating. But, you know, I'm going to go on record and say something that might sound a little audacious: for better or worse, we are responsible for much of this resurgence. It's happened over the last 12 to 15 years. We were out there before anyone really cared. We were pushing, trying to get the word out. Next thing you know, modernism takes off. And generally that's for the better, if it protects anything. «