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Los Angeles Modern: City of Tomorrow

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Los Angeles Modern

CITY OF TOMORROW



Los Angeles Modern: City of Tomorrow is part of the Modern Module program, a two-year endeavor in four cities, aimed at building public support for and engaging in discussions focused on the study and protection of America's modern architectural resources. This series of events and publications is coordinated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Modernism + Recent Past Program and funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Henry Luce Foundation. The Los Angeles Modern event was presented in partnership with the National Trust's Western Office, the Los Angeles Conservancy, and the Los Angeles Conservancy's Modern Committee.

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OCTOBER 2010

Modernism + Recent Past Program

Significant sites come in all shapes and sizes, and from all eras of American history. The architectural and cultural resources of the Modern movement and the recent past are an important chapter in our national story, encompassing innovative ideas in architecture and planning, as well as places that demonstrate the influence and impact of the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and urban renewal. Day by day, however, a steady campaign of demolition is eroding the physical fabric of the recent past, with little consideration of its community importance, design significance, or role in creating a sustainable future.

To address what many consider to be a growing crisis, the National Trust for Historic Preservation inaugurated its Modernism + Recent Past Program, also known as TrustModern, in 2009. Headquartered at the Western Office of the National Trust in San Francisco, TrustModern seeks to reacquaint Americans with their living history by reframing public perceptions about Modern and recent past architecture; creating stronger federal, state, and local policies to protect these sites; promoting contextual studies; and fostering an action network of individuals and organizations interested in resource preservation and rehabilitation. The National Trust is also breaking ground in the conservation of Modern architecture at its own sites, including two of the most significant residential designs in the US: the Philip Johnson Glass House (1949) in New Canaan, CT, and Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (1951) in Plano, IL.

Preserving our "familiar past" is a complex and sometimes controversial undertaking. Thoughtful conservation of the built environment, however, not only informs our collective history, but provides innovative opportunities for planning and stewarding our landscapes. The National Trust is working to lead on this issue and moves forward with the firm conviction that these places matter. We welcome you to join us in this conversation.



Los Angeles' Modern Legacy

Flying into Los Angeles International Airport, there is no question that you have arrived in a truly modern city. The Theme Building at LAX, one of the most recognizable structures in the world, introduces Los Angeles in one bold, Space-Age metaphor. But there is much more to see in this twentieth-century metropolis.

Los Angeles began as an outpost for Spanish explorers and missionaries, but began to emerge as the modern metropolis it would become in the 1920s with the rise of the American film industry. The luminous light, mild climate and unique topography of Los Angeles proved an ideal location for making movie dreams come true. Against this backdrop, architects pursued their own dreams designing buildings that embodied the Western spirit of innovation. Architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Irving Gill signaled a break from traditional building methods, and European architectural masters Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra soon followed with radical engineering concepts. By the 1930s, Los Angeles hosted a proliferation of architectural styles, ranging from the aerodynamic thrust of Streamline Moderne to the linearity of the International Style to the exuberance of Hollywood-inspired fantasy structures.

As World War II came to a close, America's increasing prosperity and promise for the future shaped the still-emerging Los Angeles landscape. A flood of returning GIs, the availability of abundant land, and new suburban planning principles ignited an unprecedented period of growth that fueled major industries such as aerospace, manufacturing, and homebuilding. An exponential increase in private automobile ownership expanded the limits of the city, soon to be populated with new families needing schools, libraries, and playgrounds. From the South Bay to the San Fernando Valley, plans were underway to fulfill the dream of living the modern way in the City of Tomorrow.

 COMMERCIAL

Commercial modern architecture in Los Angeles expressed cultural confidence in the future and swiftly changed in concert with popular American tastes. Architects moved easily from the spirit of Art Deco to the 1950s rise of rock-and-roll (most visible in the stacked layers of the Capitol Records Tower) to images of the Atomic Age, such as towering Apollo rockets and spiky Sputnik-style satellites. A style of commercial building affectionately called “Googie” was born here in the 1960s. Named for an eclectic John Lautner-designed coffee shop of the same name, “Googie” has since become synonymous with both LA and a larger vernacular aesthetic. Architects nationwide captured the exuberant spirit of the times and transformed the modern dining experience with dynamic shapes, a proliferation of neon, and a willingness to experiment with the structural and aesthetic limits of stone, brick, and concrete. Roadside establishments, catering to the car culture, set the tone for development



- Originally Harvey's Broiler, Downey; Paul Clayton, 1958. Illegally Demolished 2007.
Rebuilt as Bob's Big Boy Broiler, 2009.
- Randy's Donuts, Inglewood; Henry J. Goodwin, 1952.
- Cinerama Dome, Hollywood; Welton Becket & Associates, 1963.



Trailer

ORIGINAL
DOUBLE DECK
HAMBURGER

COFFEE SHOP



NO PARKING



patterns throughout the twentieth century. Now, vintage places such as Johnie's Broiler (nearly demolished but recently rebuilt) attract a new generation of enthusiasts.

Conversely, high-style Modernism rose as the preferred architectural statement for corporate businesses. Century City, an enormous multi-use private development, marked an important milestone in Los Angeles history and planning. Welton Becket and Associates created the master plan for this ultramodern "City Within a City." The central street—aply named Avenue of the Stars—became an elite address and featured a number of businesses that catered to high-end clientele. The luxurious Century Plaza Hotel, designed by Minoru Yamasaki, hosted visiting presidents and dignitaries from its opening in 1966, including a dinner party hosted by President Richard Nixon to welcome home the Apollo 11 astronauts after their historic moon landing in 1969. Downtown LA expanded its range of stylish



- Century Plaza Hotel, Century City; Minoru Yamasaki for Welton Becket and Associates, 1964-66.
- Crossroads Of The World, Hollywood; Robert V. Derrah, 1938.
- Capitol Records Tower, Hollywood; Welton Becket and Associates, Architects with Louis Naidorf, Barry Milofsky, 1956.
- Safari Inn Motor Hotel, Burbank; Architect Unknown, 1955.

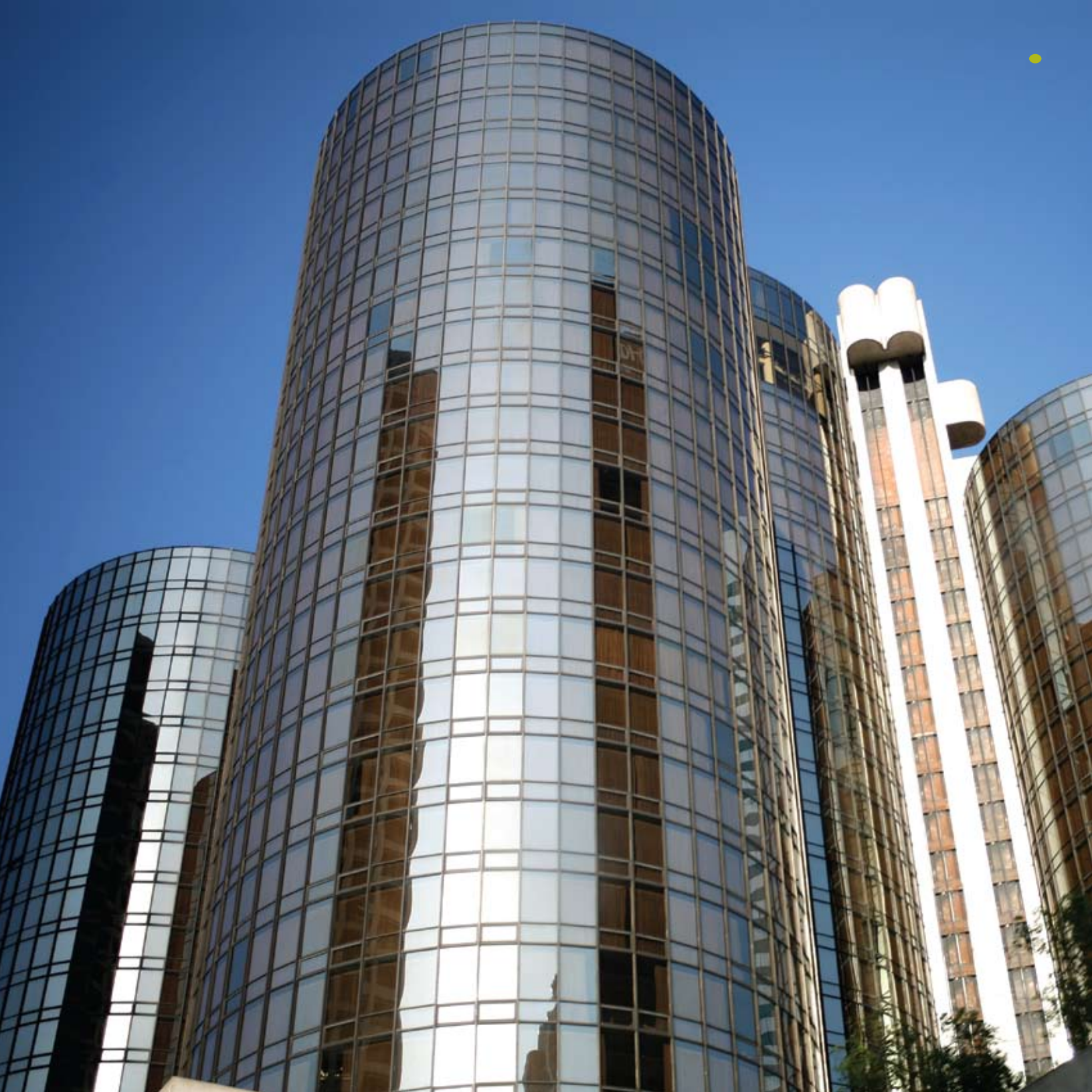
lodgings at the opening of the Bonaventure Hotel, an instant landmark noted for its sky-high indoor atrium and reflective façade.

In LA, however, even modest structures sought to incorporate stylistic flair. Artist and architect Millard Sheets designed a series of banks clad in travertine and embellished with sculptures, fountains, and exquisite mosaic murals depicting regional themes and local history. Sheets contributed to more than fifty “branch banks” in Southern California during this period, a practical new building type intended to extend commerce beyond the geographic limits of downtown.

Ultimately, it was the combined genius and inspiration of all these architects and designers, building upon the creative character of the region, that would secure Los Angeles’ reputation as a modern metropolis.



- Westin Bonaventure Hotel, Los Angeles; John Portman, 1974.
- Casa de Cadillac Auto Showroom, Sherman Oaks; Randall Duell, 1948.
- Former Home Savings and Loan, Encino; Millard Sheets, 1977.







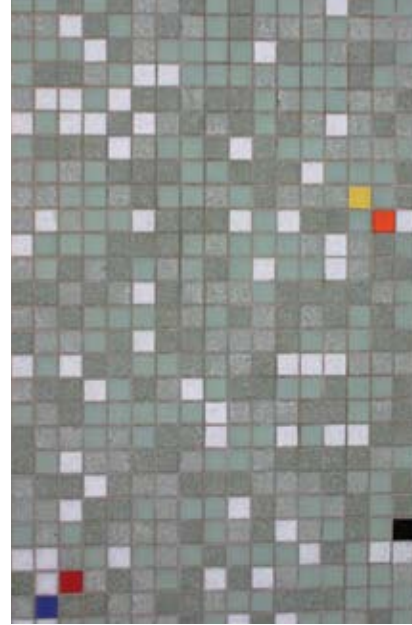
RESIDENTIAL

Modern home design promised to enhance the life of the American “nuclear family.” The look—and structure—of housing changed radically with the adoption of new building materials and increasingly automated methods of construction. Los Angeles led the way with innovative designs created by Richard Neutra, Irving Gill, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Rudolph Schindler that gained international prominence and recognition. Particularly noteworthy is Neutra’s 1927 Lovell Health House, one of the first International Style buildings in the US and constructed with a partially pre-fabricated steel frame.

The expansion of young families in LA after World War II brought on a dramatic housing shortage that called for inventive planning for a burgeoning population. That demand inspired John Entenza, then-editor of Arts + Architecture magazine to propose the “Case Study House Program.” He challenged a slate of architects to design thirty-six experimental prototype homes. These architects, and others of the time, such as Ray Kappe, Pierre Koenig, and



- Lovell Health House, Los Angeles; Richard Neutra, 1929.
- Ennis House, Los Angeles; Frank Lloyd Wright, 1924.
- Gehry House, Santa Monica; Frank Gehry, 1978.



An often under-appreciated LA building type is the vernacular apartment building, sometimes referred to as a “dingbat” or stucco box. Functional and basic, these small-scale apartment complexes were enhanced with the full Hollywood treatment: evocative names suggesting fantasy lands like “Shangri-La” or Polynesian paradises like “Kona Pali,” lighted starburst decorations, and on-site gardens or swimming pools. Cars were kept conveniently off-street under the elevated living areas—a vernacular interpretation of Modernist principles developed by Le Corbusier in his 1928 Villa Savoye residence in France.





Gregory Ain, experimented with innovative materials like fiberglass, laminates, and plastics to change the character of residential life. The idea of “house” was further deconstructed with the elimination of many interior walls and an indoor-outdoor integration assisted by the widespread adoption of sliding glass doors and the rise of the patio culture.

The architectural tract homes of architects Palmer and Krisel and Edward Fickett, along with those of notable builder Joseph Eichler, brought “Modernism to the masses.” Thousands of pattern homes rose in the new frontier of the San Fernando Valley as the city experienced increased suburban decentralization. Modern design ideas influenced the development of the vernacular “ranch” home as a new model of modern family life, and acknowledgment of the growing prominence of the automobile resulted in carports and garages being incorporated into the body of the house.



● Living Conditioned Home, Northridge; Palmer and Krisel, 1957.

● Case Study House No. 21 (Bailey House), Los Angeles; Pierre Koenig, 1958.

● Balboa Highlands Eichler Tract, Granada Hills; A. Quincy Jones, Claude Oakland, Frederick Emmons, 1964.








The architectural heart of our communities is made up of the everyday buildings that surround us: our libraries, post offices, schools, city halls, and fire stations. Modern civic buildings offer the public an opportunity to directly experience some of the country's best architectural design, as well as define its sense of self. A community's pride in its past and aspirations for the future are apparent in the designs it commissions, such as the Music Center of Los Angeles County, a LA multi-use arts complex constructed as the result of an unprecedented public-private partnership. Studying these works as we go about our daily routine can offer clues about the cultural and technological evolution of the modern city.

As in many parts of the nation, civic development in mid and late twentieth-century Los Angeles was not without controversy. Chavez Ravine, a neighborhood of Mexican Americans near downtown LA, was originally slated for a new public housing complex. Plans changed, the housing was scrapped, and the residents were evicted. On the site rose Dodger Stadium,



-  Department of Water and Power Building, Los Angeles; A.C. Martin Partners, 1965.
-  Cerritos College Gymnasium Building, Cerritos; Kistner, Wright & Wright, 1961.
-  Dodger Stadium, Los Angeles; Captain Emil Praeger, U.S.N., in consultation with former Dodgers team owner Walter O'Malley, 1962.



a 1962 concrete amphitheater seating 56,000 people, and now one of the oldest baseball stadiums in the US. Crowds sit sheltered from the sun under folded plate canopies at center field, watching for score updates on the chevron-shaped scoreboard.

The Southern California climate allowed a whole new approach for designing the centerpiece of many communities: its schools. Classroom boundaries blurred as schools became mini-campuses, with a proliferation of outdoor spaces and the elimination of interior hallways. One of the most high-tech school campus designs in Los Angeles came out of the firm of Kistner, Wright and Wright. Cerritos Junior College mixes low-slung rectangular department buildings highlighted with colorful mosaic panels and a gymnasium with an undulating roofline. In nearby Norwalk, the same architectural firm designed a circular city hall pavilion that is a space age “building within a building.”



- Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, Santa Monica; Welton Becket & Associates, 1958.
- Norwalk County Building, Norwalk; Kistner, Wright and Wright, 1968.
- Mark Taper Forum, Music Center of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles; Welton Becket and Associates, 1967.

What would a community be without a park, a playground, a gathering place? Diversity and experimentation define modern Los Angeles landscapes, as does a notable folk-art character that developed as different cultural groups influenced regional aesthetics.

Landscape architects such as Thomas Church, Ralph Cornell, Garrett Eckbo, and Ruth Shellhorn combined familiar materials with unconventional layouts, “bringing the outdoors in” by using walls of glass and organic forms. Fantasy and folk landscapes like the concrete La Laguna de San Gabriel Playground, created by Mexican artist Benjamin Dominguez, and the iconic steel Watts Towers, designed and built by Italian immigrant Simon Rodia, enrich the cultural landscape of Los Angeles with the creativity of artists skilled in a range of media.



- Watts Towers, Los Angeles; Simon Rodia, 1921-54.
- La Laguna de San Gabriel Playground, San Gabriel; Benjamin Dominguez, 1964.
- Del Amo Financial Center, Del Amo; Victor Gruen Associates, 1969.





The mid twentieth century saw a movement away from traditional forms for houses of worship in favor of innovative designs and materials that expressed spirituality in dramatic new ways. Abstract images, acute angles, and pillars rendered in concrete replaced the stone columns and flying buttresses of the past. Modern architects manipulated light and space to create soaring interior spaces and striking exterior silhouettes, attracting new congregations and reflecting changes in the American religious experience. This new type of sacred space proliferated in the suburbs and along the borders of the city, with a remarkable collection of examples visible throughout LA.

In an innovative extension of his father Frank Lloyd Wright's aesthetic, architect Lloyd Wright designed a jewel-like, glass building on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Wayfarer's Chapel, tucked within a grove of redwood trees, utilizes modern materials and design principles to connect worshippers with God's creation. Unique in its transparency and open



- Wayfarer's Chapel, Rancho Palos Verdes; Lloyd Wright, 1951.
- Memorial Chapel at Rose Hills Memorial Park, Whittier; A.C. Martin and Associates, 1964.
- First United Methodist Church of Glendale, Glendale; Flewelling and Moody, 1961.

geometry, the chapel design was included in a 1952 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. For over sixty years, visitors have been coming from all over the world to experience “The Glass Church.”

In neighboring Orange County, Pastor Robert Schuller did more than bring the outdoors into his church. He went a step further and brought the church outdoors while acknowledging the unique Southern California auto-centric proclivity. His Garden Grove Community Church, designed by Richard Neutra in 1955, welcomed parishioners to stay in their cars and listen to the pastor through drive-in speakers. Neutra later worked with his architect son, Dion, to create the adjoining Tower of Hope. It was here that the charismatic pastor reportedly “fell in love with the sky” and began to lay the groundwork for the magnificent adjacent Crystal Cathedral, one of the nation’s first “mega-churches,” designed by Philip Johnson and John Burgee.



● Riviera Methodist Church, Redondo Beach; Richard Neutra with Robert E. Alexander, 1958.

● Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove; Philip Johnson with John Burgee, 1980.

FACING PAGE Sinai Temple of Los Angeles, Westwood Village; Sidney Eisenshtat, 1960.

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