

Unsung treasures of Los Angeles

BY ERIC NOLAND, Travel Editor



IF YOU GO

ARCHITECTURE: In addition to looking at the midcentury modern architecture of Silver Lake, Architecture Tours L.A. explores the five other neighborhoods: downtown, Hancock Park/Miracle Mile, Hollywood, Pasadena and West Hollywood/Beverly Hills. Each tour costs \$65 per person and is 2 to 2 1/2 hours in length. A tour of Frank Gehry's work, about twice as long, costs \$88. Tours are scheduled according to demand, and reservations are required. www.architecturetoursla.com: (323) 464-7868.

The El Rey Theatre preened gloriously in pink, yellow, green, blue and red. A Buddha laughed so hard that he slapped his thighs. A single word atop a 1920s apartment building "Asbury" evoked the shadowy fiction of Raymond Chandler.

As our open-top, double-decker bus careened through the streets of Los Angeles and Hollywood, these vintage neon signs spelled out many things but mostly told the tale of a city. With all its quirks.

As we approached one site, playful guide Eric Lynxwiler announced over his bullhorn, "Off to the left, decorated in Laker colors ... it's the heart of Jesus Christ!" And, by golly, it was, a purple-and-gold neon contrivance glowing atop the Holy Superet Light Church.

When your out-of-town guests descend on you this summer, urge them to skip the standard bus tour of Hollywood and the "stars' homes." Join them instead on the Neon Cruise, offered by the Museum of Neon Art, and learn how the city's famously disjointed neighborhoods are actually linked by colorful glass tubing bent into unusual shapes.

L.A.'s vintage neon signs once guided airplanes, trumpeted vaudeville shows, enticed department store shoppers, told the time and, of course, identified where a guy could get a cocktail.

The tour is one of the diamonds in Los Angeles' tourist rough. Other commendable offerings include a survey of midcentury modern homes in Silver Lake with Architecture Tours L.A., and a glimpse behind closed doors on a Hollywood walking tour with Red Line Tours.

The Neon Cruise transcends the signs themselves, which began to appear in Los Angeles in the 1920s and enjoyed a heyday into the 1950s. This is a look at the city through them and it is irreverent and ribald.

Lynxwiler, who possesses a degree in urban anthropology from UCLA, cited the impressive restoration of the neon at the Mayan Theatre, then noted that the 1927 movie palace was for a time a porno theater next door to a church before becoming a nightclub. In the glow of the neon sign at the original Tommy's hamburger stand, he said, "Did they always remember the possessive apostrophe? No! But we love them anyway." While indicating the garish sign of the Cuchi-Cuchi Restaurant, he intoned, "Just because it's neon doesn't mean we have to like it, and that building is exemplary."

A seat on the second deck of this open-air bus provides a perspective on the city that residents and visitors alike rarely get the architectural flourishes of the Broadway theater district, for example, without the scuzz of street level, and Hollywood Boulevard at eye level with the flashy marquee. The three-hour tour covers a lot

of territory: downtown (including Skid Row), Chinatown, Hollywood, Fairfax, Hancock Park and Wilshire Boulevard's Miracle Mile.

While in Hollywood, Lynxwiler had fun sounding out some of the more troubled neon signs, some missing a letter or two, some many more: "Hilly ... he Knickerbocker ... od wood."

This perhaps best illustrates why neon fell out of favor in the mid-20th century, to be replaced with the backlit plastic signs that so rankle purists. Neon is obviously a headache to maintain, and nothing is more cheesy for a business than to have one unfortunate letter missing from its sign.

On our trip, tour organizers lamented that the rooftop signs for the Orpheum and the Royale Wilshire were not lit at all, and that the neon baker on the side of Canter's deli had gone on the fritz just days earlier.

The museum and a restoration group scramble to rescue and restore the city's vintage neon, but it is a money-intensive enterprise. Hope never seems to flag, though.

"There's a radio tower on top of the Pacific Theatre," Lynxwiler said as we gazed up at a dark roof. "Some day it will be lit again."



Home tour

The house designs were revolutionary for their time: spare boxes with flat roofs, glass walls instead of windows, and liberal use of steel and concrete rather than the more conventional building materials of wood and stucco.

But a half-century ago, architects such as Richard Neutra, John Lautner and Rudolf Schindler were bored with the proliferation of Spanish haciendas and English Tudor cottages in Los Angeles. They explored design elements that embodied the futuristic sleekness of the Space Age and were better suited to the temperate climes and leisurely lifestyle of Southern California.

Silver Lake, a neighborhood that tumbles over hills and canyons between downtown and Hollywood, was their canvas.

"There were very forward-thinking people living here, and they were receptive to what (the architects) were doing," said Laura Massino, an architectural historian who conducts a tour here. "These were radical ideas."

Massino's 2 1/2-hour van tour isn't cheap \$65 per person but it is sure to appeal to people intrigued by midcentury modern architecture and the heady, prosperous era that helped inspire it following World War II. The tour is one of six different neighborhoods explored in her Architecture Tours L.A.

Silver Lake emerged at a time when builders did not shave off hillsides and carve out pads, so the homes cling to steep slopes, and the narrow roads twist and turn with the natural contours of the land.

Massino, who earned a master's degree in architectural history at California State University, Los Angeles, knows her stuff and conveys it well.

For Lautner's Silver Top, a ridgetop home begun in 1957, we were first driven to the far side of Silver Lake Reservoir, so we could take in the building's design traits from a distance a geometrically curved concrete roof with exterior supports, and glass that hung from it to form a see-through wall that required no posts.

We later drove past the home, but this first view did much more to establish perspective.

One intriguing aspect of Silver Lake's midcentury architecture was its minimal square footage heresy in

today's era of sprawling living spaces. But the architects were liberal in their use of patios and deep roof overhangs, and blurred the line between inside and out with sliding glass doors, thus luring inhabitants outside and providing a sense of a much larger living area.

We parked the van and got out to walk around the ``Neutra Colony," an enclave of 10 buildings designed by a master of the form, Richard Neutra. One of the homes possesses a signature element glass walls that form a corner of the building as well as spider-leg roof supports.

You'll surely yearn to enter one of these creations for a closer look at how all the design pieces come together, but the homes are all occupied, so you'll have to be content with observing from the street or the sidewalk. Also, the current penchant for privacy will have you peering around walls, over hedges and through bamboo thickets frustrating, because the homes were originally intended to have a more open view.

Massino pointed out some new homes tastefully built in tribute to the architecture. ``I call it neomodernist," she said, chuckling at the irony of the term. ``This is now a revival style. But it usually takes us 50 years as a people to look back and see that there was something important going on."



Inside peek

You can see a lot of Hollywood from the sidewalk the terrazzo stars of celebrities great and, uh, not so great on the Walk of Fame (Jim Gray?); the movie star footprints, handprints, nose prints and gun prints at Grauman's Chinese Theatre ... that scary guy over there in the Rambo getup, hanging out with Marilyn.

A visit to Tinseltown can be greatly enhanced, however, with some well-informed commentary and an occasional glimpse behind closed doors.

Red Line Tours delivers both in its ``Hollywood Behind the Scenes" walking tour, which concentrates on two blocks of Hollywood Boulevard on either side of Highland Avenue a target-rich environment.

``We felt there was a huge gap in the market," co-founder Philip Ferentinos said of the guided stroll, launched six years ago. ``There are a lot of bus tours, but how much do you see on a bus? ... We had to overcome this nobody-walks-in-L.A. idea."

Our tour group set out on a Saturday morning with Mike ``The Poet" Sonksen, a third-generation Angeleno and UCLA alumnus. We immediately ducked in off the street.

The group was led up a staircase at the Stella Adler Academy of Acting, to a hallway hung with photos of the acting school's glittery alumni among them Marlon Brando, Robert De Niro, Richard Dreyfuss and Cloris Leachman. (The Adler was founded in New York, however, and has only had an outlet at this location since 1993).

The building has a rich history. It was a private club in the 1920s and early '30s significant, because that was the era of Prohibition. A tiny, windowless room was used as a speakeasy, and it has been restored to its secretive glory of yesteryear, with dark, ornate wood paneling and a bar in one corner.

``The reason it's so small is because it wasn't supposed to be here," Sonksen said as we crowded in and huddled in the dim light. ``You were supposed to speak easy so the cops wouldn't come. And that bookcase used to swing up to reveal an escape route; it's sealed up now. But the police never came, because the mayor was a member."

Another inside glimpse was provided at the thoroughly restored El Capitan Theatre. Red Line is allowed to bring its tour groups inside the 1926 Churrigueresque landmark at times when movies aren't playing, so be sure to ask for one of these tours when you make your reservation.

As we filed through the balcony, marveling at the elaborate decor that used to be commonplace in movie palaces, an organist played ``When You Wish Upon a Star" on the house's 37-rank Wurlitzer pipe organ. The

second-floor lobby also has some fascinating archival photos of early Hollywood.

Getting behind some of the scenes can be an iffy proposition even for this tour company. Sonksen was reduced to tapping on locked doors at Grauman's lavish Egyptian Theatre in hopes that someone from American Cinematheque was at home (no such luck). And although the tour's Web site says it also takes in the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel ballroom, where the first Academy Awards were held, renovations at the hotel are currently precluding that peek.

The tour was exceptional for the veracity of Sonksen's commentary and his obvious passion for delivering it qualities not often found in walking tour guides. In fact, the scheduled one-hour tour (\$20 for adults) stretched to 80 minutes precisely because of his enthusiasm, exemplified by his recitation of one of his rap-cadence poems at the Hollywood & Highland Center.

Another asset is Red Line's audio system, whereby tour guests wear an electronic receiver and headphones and listen as the guide speaks into a headset microphone. This can be invaluable given the traffic din and human crush of Hollywood Boulevard, and eliminates the imperative to be constantly at the guide's elbow.