



"Throuple," Or, Our Relationship With A House

By Scott Franklin

We sat in what was Amy's Patio Café, what became Side Pie, and what is now a flat area of tan soil and hydroseed. An open house was about to begin. But the house was ours if we wanted it. The contract was open on my phone, laying on the table next to the waffles. A single tap would execute upon a dream, and a questionable commitment.

They held the open house anyway. Interested parties from all over the country stomped through, at least it felt like stomping - because it was our house now. We sat in the middle of the house, listening to their plans to blow out this and add that, criticizing Lloyd Wright's decisions. The house winced and we grimaced as they trampled through our newly purchased succulents in the garden. Not everyone appreciates a different way of doing things. We did.

The move in was a negotiation. But not with the seller, or one another, but with the house. It rejected much of what we arrived with. It was fussier than we expected. Did we own the house, or was it the other way around? We were not two anymore, but three.

Six months later, the house was restored, furnished, happy. We now understood the house, loving it for who it was, respecting its cracks and fissures as evidence of time. We did not buy a house - we assumed a project. We did not own the house - we were its stewards. We did not always see eye to eye with it - making our own decisions and deferring to its history on others. We were proud of our open-mindedness and dedication to a piece of art that represented a shift in modern architecture.

But there was this one original wall. Like an itch that we weren't supposed to scratch. Why was it there? To enclose the kitchen and it keep the smoke from our potstickers from invading the redwood open beam ceiling? We talked about removing it quietly, as if the house could hear us. But what would our architect friends say? Would the house ever forgive us for violating its trust? What would Lloyd Wright think?

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Altadena Heritage has always been proud of its Newsletter. We aim for it to be something members receive, read, and hold onto with glee. But what to do when the editor who got it there, Mark Goldschmidt, passes the baton? And what to do when, next, Altadena burns?

You let Altadenans say what they have to say, that is what. And that is what you have in your hands. Will Newsletters to come be the topical, immersive dives our members have come to expect? We believe so. But with hearts that Victoria Knapp described on January 7, 2026 as "open but still broken," it's reflection that feels most right. Readers, thank you.

An Ode to Our House

By Jeremy Hunter

My wife Tomo and I took great pleasure in being the third stewards of Whitney Smith's Holmes House—and not just because we discovered a dead man's ashes secreted away (more on that later).

Built for Jackson and Evelyn Holmes in 1941, the house was unknown to scholars of Smith's work until we brought it to their attention. In 2021, it became LA County Historic Landmark #8, one of just three such landmarks in Altadena.

It wasn't large, ostentatious, or glamorous. It was created for a middle-class family who believed in the power of good design.

Smith was 29 when he built it. You could clearly see the imprint of his time with the unsung modernist Harwell Hamilton Harris, known for his "houses with good manners." Though Smith was still honing his powers, I was continually amazed by the sensitivity of his young mind.

The house was attuned to nature and fostered a quiet, direct awareness of it. In winter, light illuminated and warmed the interior. In summer, the sun stayed out. Full moon evenings were so luminous and otherworldly I half expected to see fairies dancing in the garden. This house brought the cosmos into daily life. It also cooled itself naturally. Convection kept the interior ten degrees cooler than outside. We'd find ourselves wearing sweaters indoors—only to discover it was actually a warm day on the other side of the wall. It was an "eco-house" before "eco-houses" existed.

Like Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, it was built on caissons to insulate it from seismic shifts. Yet, the house had the power to move you.

Strangely invisible from the street, the house confused many delivery drivers. A too-narrow driveway wound down to the main entry, nearly at the center of the lot. Chest-high camellias narrowed the path to the front door, and the house gently wrapped around you as you entered the low-ceilinged foyer. All this compression gave way to a glorious release: an unexpected wall of glass opening to a lush, green landscape that seemed to go on forever.

"You never really felt you were indoors," wrote architectural critic Greg Goldin in his tribute.

The house had a deep connection to Japan. My Japanese wife and I – I'm the great-grandson of a sumo wrestler – felt an immediate resonance. The Holmes' bonsai-pruned black pines formed an early residential Japanese modernist landscape in Southern California. Greg told us tour buses once stopped outside to admire them.



Each steward left their imprint on the house. Greg shared stories of the second owner, Richard Lees—a brilliant audiophile whose legendary sound system turned the house into a temple of sound. Visitors came from around the world to listen. Greg recalled a session with Japanese cartridge maker Yoshinori Mishima as "magical—no music has ever sounded better than at that particular moment."

The house drew people in and changed them. More than one person made an annual visit to stay at the house, sometimes for weeks. They'd later write us that conversations here were life-altering. That may be one of the house's greatest unseen legacies.

Speaking of the unseen. On our first night in the house, we heard a Morse code-like knocking. Eventually, we discovered a man's ashes. Evelyn's brother Richard had been hidden in the bathroom cupboard since 1964. Did it feel strange to him, a veteran of the Pacific War, to be taken care of by a Japanese family? We found his descendants and now he is interred at the Oregon National Cemetery.

Thanks to the Mills Act, we were able to maintain the house's original integrity. We never got to repaint the exterior its original dark green—the color that would've made it disappear entirely into the landscape.

So many people, too many to name, helped us achieve landmark status. It was a community effort and a community reward. I shared the story with Altadena Heritage.

Thank God we donated the original blueprints to the UCSB Art, Design, and Architecture Museum Archive—or they'd be gone too.

I deeply miss this place. It was the first time I ever truly felt at home on this earth. Tomo and I wanted to live here until we died. When our son was five, he pointed an index finger skyward and declared, "I want to live in this house *forever!*"

We weren't the first to feel that way: Evelyn Holmes lived in the house for more than 60 years before she died. Across eighty years, three families found what they needed in the same walls.

I'm heartbroken that we lost this jewel of cultural heritage. Holmes House, we dearly loved you. It was an honor to care for you. An honor to preserve the legacy of Whitney Smith. Thank you for being our treasured place. We'll carry your spirit into what comes next.

A Letter To My Home

By Carolyn Ash

Dear Home,

45 years. We were together 45 years. When we arrived, you were 42 years old. Who knew you were just at middle age? You were so sturdy. So cool. So right for us. You embraced us—Holly a young teen, Steve 3, Sarah a baby. You sheltered us as years passed, kids grew up, left home. You welcomed Sean and then Wendy and then Ethan. You knew us.



And. We had your numbers! 2741. 626 794 6561.

You lived with us as we lived in you—ordinary days, holidays, birthdays, days of joy. And you quietly held us in sad days and sick days. All days. You were steady and strong and sheltering. You weathered storms—internal storms of family chaos and outer storms of wind and rain and blazing sun. You stood quietly, confidently, silently through earthquakes and the shakes of life. You beamed as you preened with new coats of paint, floors polished, your kitchens and bathrooms spiffed, the new-roof hat. You nestled into our yard, peered over the camellias, around the lemon tree. Rested in the shade of the pepper and avocado trees. You were so beautiful!

Sometimes you sprung leaks. And cracks. And sticky doors and windows. And once you pooped on the basement floor.

You held the cool of the night into the day. In morning, shadows of eucalyptus leaves danced on your living room ceiling and walls. Afternoons, you rested in bright sun pouring through your bay window. In evening, you basked in the alpenglow on the mountains above. Nighttime you settled, the soft creaks and snaps of your aging walls under silver moonlight and you snuggled down in evening candle glow. On cold evenings, a friendly fire danced in your fireplace.

You embraced friends and family. Surrounded all who came with your welcoming and beautiful and gentle spirit. You cared for us and all who entered. You were the container of 4 1/2 decades of memories.

And then it came. The wind and the fire. Raging monsters. Hungry. Angry. Violent and raging and searing and scorching and explosive. A blizzard of embers embedded in your eaves. And you are gone. Gone with the stuff. The stuff of life. The stuff I thought I needed, wanted. Even the stuff of the ancestors – tables and dishes and books and pictures.

My beloved home. Ash Hermitage. Now ashes. Your chimney stands, like all the other chimneys, grave stones in a vast cemetery. I miss you. Some days I feel like ashes and rubble. Tear-streaming, shoulder-shaking lament. Some days I am warmed by knowing you were part of me as I of you. Memories flood—the wind and the fire can't take those.

And even in ash and rubble, you are teaching me. Home is sturdy and strong and sheltering and cool and beautiful and welcoming and hospitable. And home may not be a building but something bigger, deeper and indestructible.

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Altadena Heritage is a nonprofit, volunteer-based community advocacy organization dedicated to protecting, preserving, and raising awareness of Altadena's rich architectural, environmental, cultural, and historic heritage.

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The Lost Art of Altadena

By Michele Zack

The magnitude of Altadena's lost art cannot be contained in a few hundred words. It might be expressed in lifetimes or generations, or as vast distance is in light years. I offer these heartfelt though inadequate words as requiem for the art now missing from Altadena.

I confine myself mostly to the personal, given the impossibility of encompassing the collective vanishing of work in our funky town so rich with visual and other artists. The work, the lifetime collections of art, instruments, furniture, archives, materials, along with thousands of studios and work spaces, all vaporized in the urban conflagration of January 7-8, 2025 — poof! Nothing can bring them back; we have only memories, what is backed up on the web, and a few surviving photos.

Like spiders rebuilding webs after a storm, a big wind, or a good hosing down, artists, like everyone displaced by the fire, are regrouping to do the hard work of reweaving lives (here and elsewhere). Those opting to and able to stay are beginning the painstaking repair of massive rents in the fabric of our art-making community — which in many ways defined Altadena. Several are notably turning loss into new art, continuing the cycle.

Now to the personal: My husband Mark Goldschmidt and I moved into our glorious, somewhat rundown 1922 Mediterranean-style home on a half acre on Marengo Avenue in 1986. A few months later we married. Living two doors north of Calaveras (Skulls!) Street and the graveyard, we were the first White people among our immediate neighbors, who included an investment advisor, a shade-tree mechanic, and across the street — a home-based daycare center.

“Hasn't that house been ruined beyond redemption?” Altadena's top real estate mavin once asked, I thought rather cruelly.

No, actually. Not to its proud new homeowner, the one who would sit, reveling upon its dirt and buckling concrete driveway, astonished and grateful to be mistress of such a domain. And the shimmering alpenglow sunsets had been thrown in for free!

Mark and I were merely two among the crop of homeowners moving to Altadena in its latest real estate upcycle. Today it is called gentrification, but we thought of ourselves as simply the next generation of Americans buying a piece of the rock known as homeownership — then still within the reach of the middle class. Many of us were arty.



Cobb Estate, by Mark Goldschmidt

Half of Altadena's Caucasian population had fled in a just over a decade from the early 1960s to the mid 70s. The 96% share of White residents counted in the 1960 census had shrunk to 48% by 1980 — when our Black population reached 43%. It was inevitable for the pendulum to swing, bringing back to the suburban enclave beneath the mountains an in-all-ways colorful new contingent. Altadena's package was irresistible to home seekers and renters: affordable and varied housing stock, beautiful surroundings near to amenity-and-job-rich Pasadena and LA, employers like JPL and the not-too-distant studios.

But people moving to Altadena from 1980 onwards — especially west of Lake Avenue and regardless of race, profession, or economic circumstances — were different from those fleeing it for Arcadia, Orange County, and the Beaches 10-15 years before. We, growing up in the Civil Rights, were a self-selecting group running toward diversity instead of away from it. The earliest of us are now old-timers; we, along with those moving in since the 1980s (of all races) turned out to contain a high proportion of artists, musicians, writers, or members in some way of “the creative classes.”

Those who arrived, or stayed through Altadena’s racial change of the 60s and 70s — and we “newcomers” — all of us together —created the town known as such a haven for art and artists.

Mark and I brought art with us; he was an artist who made a living as a landscape architect, and I a writer. Soon we began collecting — steadily filling our new space, so much bigger than the Pasadena courtyard bungalow we’d abandoned to move to Altadena.

A strong and notable base of artists, writers, and architects had lived here from the 1920s: Western super star author Zane Grey; Golden Age illustrator and builder of our house, Frank Brown; and Wallace Neff, to name a few. Too many significant Altadena houses to count were built for the wealthy in Altadena post-WWI, designed by famous architects before the Depression. But artists such as Kay Neilsen, Hildegard Flanner and her modernist architect husband Friedrich Monhoff also moved here and lived in modest, just-as-interesting digs, as we became the fastest growing community in unincorporated Los Angeles County of that period.

Altadena is deeply planted with, and has been constantly reseeded by artistic aspirations to which we added our own. The post-war housing boom brought more riches: in the 40s Holling C. Holling, best selling writer and illustrator of children’s books moved here, and the 1950s Altadena became edgy with the arrival of Jiyrar Zorthian, Charles White, Sidney Poitier, and others — who put our town on the radar of minority and ethnic artists, musicians, and writers (such as Octavia Butler) — who moved here in significant numbers from the 1960s onward.



On September 14, 2024, our home was a stop on Altadena Heritage’s Art-Full Homes Tour. Only the portrait, of Mark Goldschmidt’s ancestor Max, survives.

We collected Altadena artists we knew, who gave us work, or whom we could afford: Frank Brown, Junius Martin, Zorthian, Desdy Kellogg, Richard Davies, James Griffith, Cynthia Thiel, Elaine Carhardt and others. The collection expanded over the years to include inherited 19th century paintings and Asian art, and then more Asian art from our life in Thailand in the 1990s.

We expanded the home artist Frank Brown designed in the 1920s into a courtyard house in 2010, and Mark transformed its big garage into his art studio and office after retiring from gainful employment. We kept up our modest art-buying habit, reliable customers at the Library’s Art on Millionaire’s Row shows, Ben McGinty’s Gallery at the End of the World, and other local art sales. By 2024 we were done and our once-run-down Mediterranean treasure on Marengo Avenue was just about perfect — a home full of art, that just might have housed the largest single and quixotic collection of Altadena artists in town.

In 2024, Mark, longtime editor of this newsletter, published an issue focusing on the artists of Altadena that featured perhaps 20 working ones — with big apologies to others for the space limitations that constrained him to include so few.

Also, at the very end of 2024, Altadena Heritage hosted an art walk that included us, Sabine Meyer zu Reckendorf and Brian Mark — all Altadena artists living in our neighborhood within a few minutes stroll of each other. We are forever grateful to Altadena Heritage that a video of our art-filled home was made so that we can still wander from kitchen to dining room to the living room, through to the Cheerful Room, and behold the art we collected over our lifetime in Altadena.



The video mentioned by Michele Zack is available on our YouTube channel. View it by scanning the code.



Revisit the issue by scanning the code below



Art and Artists Fall/Winter 2024 Issue.

My Rubio Canyon

By Courtney Lavender

Years ago, I took some friends on a tour of Rubio Canyon, my favorite Altadena hike. Since moving to the neighborhood, I felt drawn to the space without understanding why. There's something magnetic there — a pull, a deep internal twisting, like a dream you can't quite remember. I became fascinated by it.

I told my guests about Thaddeus Lowe's Mount Lowe Railway, which ran into the canyon to a funicular that led straight up the canyon wall. I pointed out the ruins and old railroad ties. I told them how, only after I'd explored the old Echo Mountain hotel site above Rubio, my uncle had sent me a photo of my great-great grandparents at Inspiration Point, from their own journey on the railway in the early 1900s.

The four of us sat atop Ribbon Rock falls, talking about time, about what the canyon had seen not just over the past century, but the past six million years. One friend put their hand on a mossy stone wall. "What does it tell you?" I joked. I put my ear to the rock in jest. "SLOW," the rock said, loud as a bell in my brain. "...Oh."

Change is so slow, until it is fast. Time is imperceptible, until it is not. Until the vacation destination, the railway to the clouds, is but rubble. Until the tree whose exposed roots have been clinging for decades to a crumbling cliff decides to fall. We walked through the canyon, pointing out every one of these trees still deciding. They are so still, so silent, until their plummet. How long had they been there? How much longer would they remain?

Long ago, the Echo Mountain resort burned down. The Rubio Pavilion washed away in flood, a child killed. The canyon has withstood dynamiting of the very walls that surrounded us. It has seen its waterfalls buried by frivolous, manmade debris, then uncovered by powerful storm. This is to say nothing of geologic time, of the multiple mega-annum preceding humans' silly endeavors.

In that one word—SLOW—the moss wall communicated of all of this to me. It also seemed to suggest I slow down. "Attention is the beginning of devotion," Mary Oliver once wrote. It was here my devotion began. Time is actually only imperceptible if you are not watching. If you pay attention, you become privy to its passing. I began documenting those cliff-hanging trees — not intentionally, rather, simply out of desire to capture their beauty. Maybe, if I capture it all, I can keep it forever, as it is. I documented each season's arrival, each storm, small or large, and the subsequent rerouting of the creek's path the redesigning of its numerous boulders. I spent hours sitting in a narrow spot between the canyon walls, beneath a grove of White Alders, listening to the call of the Canyon Wren, the rustle of squirrels, the trickle of the creek. I would feel my pulse slow, my muscles unclench, my rumination shift to observation



One winter, there was an especially fierce flash flood which triggered a rockslide and wiped out a different swath of large, lush alders. 5' by 5' granite chunks lay atop the crowns of the toppled trees, their splintered trunks reaching broken fingers toward the sky. Long limbs had orange, oozing holes in their sides, hit hard by shattering shards. It felt like stumbling upon a crime scene. I imagined endlessly the violence that would have occurred in that moment — the rushing of the mud, the rocks raining from above. A whole hillside had spilled down, a cascade of silt and stone, filling up the creek bed. That section of the canyon now felt so foreign, so exposed, its previous chaparral green replaced with a barren, whitewashed grey. I returned again and again to photograph the rocks' jagged edges, comparing them to the rounded stones underfoot, worn down by centuries of water flow.

I learned their names, their ways. Granite. Gneiss. Schist. Hornblende gabbro. Our very own Rubio diorite. What could they tell me of their eons underground, of their time as basement rock, until they were thrust upwards in earthquake? What could they tell me of the instant their whole world changed? What could they teach me of accepting it? Time is slow until it is fast, tranquil until it is turbulent.

After noticing a new placement of the creek trail after that storm, I discovered and joined the Rubio Trail Crew. I found it a way to care-take the land that has taken care of me, and a new avenue to study both its cycles of gradual, predictable evolution, and its sudden, unexpected transformations. The canyon has seen more upheaval that we can fathom. Even knowing it as I have, for a brief moment, I have seen it rearranged.

The Eaton fire, and the heavy rains and debris flows that followed, have majorly altered the canyon once more, denuding it of most growth, save for some mighty oaks. The canyon floor has risen several feet with runoff. Devoid of most markers, it is disorienting. Again, I find myself imagining the violence — the heat and roar of the wind and fire, the unstoppable freight train of mud and rock — and its stark contrast to the serenity I better know. Much of my favorite grove of alders is now gone, my sitting stone either washed away or buried. I mourn it, I miss it, my memory so visceral at times I feel I could step straight inside. Yet I know, in my strange dance with acceptance, all I have lost is what I temporarily knew the canyon to be. My attempts to keep that were only ever lessons in impermanence. Not for the first time, it has been stripped bare, a blank slate for new life to grow upon. A new mental map for me to make, new trails for the crew to route. I will learn and relearn all it has to offer during my narrow window of its long, long life.

Altadena, Wild

By Hans Allhoff

The co-cowboy in Larry McMurtry's book *Leaving Cheyenne*, Johnny McCloud, closes the story looking back, sheepish, about the time he sabotaged his best friend Gid's afternoon alone with a woman they both loved. (Maybe you know the movie, *Lovin' Molly*.)

"I guess it was kinda mean, really—nobody gets enough chances at the wild and sweet," he says.

(I've always thought chances is the important word there, too, for the same reason that the Declaration of Independence says that one of man's inalienable rights is the "pursuit of happiness" and not happiness itself. Ours is a country of possibilities, not results.)

Leaving Cheyenne was published in 1963. Fifty-one years prior, Altadena's own Zane Grey, published *Riders of the Purple Sage*, and had this to write about Bern Venters's perch in Surprise Valley:

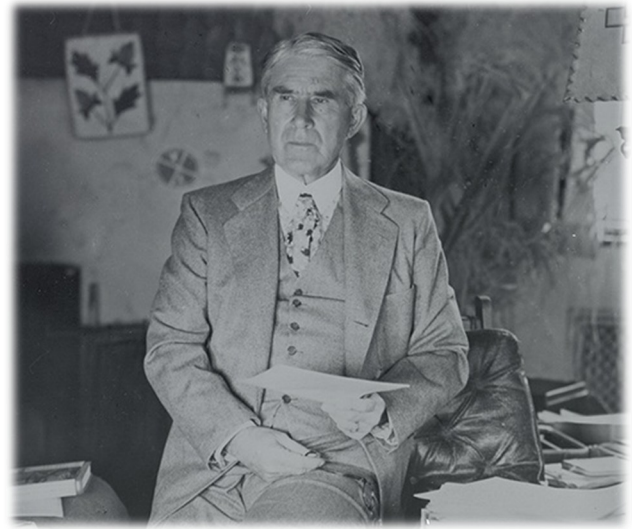
He heard the flutter of aspen leaves and the soft, continuous splash of falling water. The melancholy note of a cañon bird broke clear and lonely from the high cliffs. Venters had no name for this night singer, and he had never seen one, but the few notes, always peeling out just at darkness, were as familiar to him as the cañon silence. Then they ceased, and the rustle of leaves and the murmur of water hushed in a growing sound that Venters fancied was not of earth. Neither had he a name for this, only it was inexpressibly wild and sweet.

"Wild and sweet." Those words, again.

Had McMurtry, book collector and reader that he was, read and remembered this line from *Riders*? I like to think so. And did Grey come up with that pair of adjectives to describe a place right here in Altadena? I like to think that, too. It's true that he wrote *Riders* from his home in Lackawaxen, Pennsylvania in 1911, years before he planted himself in Altadena. But he'd visited Altadena on his honeymoon, and ridden the Mount Lowe Railway, in about 1905. That had to have been equal parts wild and sweet.

As was his first encounter with his mistress Brenda Montenegro, whom he met hiking in Eaton Canyon:

I saw her flowing raven mane against the rocks of the canyon. I have seen the red skin of the Navajo, and the olive of the Spaniards, but her...her skin looked as if her Creator had in that instant molded her just for me. I thought it was an apparition. She seemed to be the embodiment of the West I portray in my books, open and wild.



What prose!

I'll be damned if this isn't the Altadena spirit, even if we don't see mankind today, as Zane Grey did on the rim of the Grand Canyon, as "savage, driven by a spirit to roam, to hunt, and to slay." (That was a lot of Darwin and Herbert Spencer doing the talking.)

The point is that we crave the kind of independence that allows us to build our own worlds. And that requires a place that, as Ben McGinty once described Altadena to me, lets people "just show up and be." Take this, from an Altadena Libraries "Community Conversation" in 2017:

One of the most powerful reasons for people to want to move to Altadena is its original character. And certainly once someone has lived in town for a few years the feeling of being a bit independent and almost 'off the grid' permeates one's psyche to the point of no return. Many participants stated how they loved being slightly out of step with the rest of society and could not imagine living in Pasadena with its layers of regulations and bureaucracy.

Grey, likewise, said Altadena allowed him "the conveniences and improvements that a city could yield, without the undesirable phases of city government and taxation."

The wild and sweet is in our place, and it's in us. And above all, it's our beloved mountains. Those same mountains that John McPhee said "are not kidding with this city," have always invited us to seek solace and liberation in their beauty.

So said our hero: "[T]he greatest appeal to me has always lain in the beauty that abides here. I need but to look out of any window to get a magnificent view. To the north the great mountains sweep on."

With time, our dear Altadena will sweep on, too. What a chance, this place.

Are Bungalow Courts Coming to Town?

By Mark Goldschmidt

Some friends and I were pondering the future of Altadena right after the fire, lamenting the good people we are bound to lose—the elderly, the tenants, the middle-class—who don't have the resources and patience to rebuild. Someone said, "You know, it would be great if Altadena could build lots of bungalow courts." Maybe this could be a way to attract young people our community needs at a time when it is so hard for anyone starting out in life to buy a house.

Courtyard housing was popular in Southern California from early 20th century until the 1930s, when new zoning laws mandated front, side, and rear setbacks. And, of course, parking. This made it impossible to fit a bungalow development on a typical neighborhood lot. Now, however, there's been a widespread change of heart at County level. Mitch Glazer, Assistant Deputy Director of the Current Planning Division told me they are working on an Interpretation Memo that will allow bungalow courts, which will be issued soon.

This is good news. If done right I believe that bungalow courts will be a boon to Altadena, housing the young and old, and fostering social connections. I base this on my own experience: In 1985, new in town, I moved into Reinway Court in Pasadena with my new girlfriend. Her second floor apartment faced north down a long courtyard to the street and a view to the mountains beyond. It was special, a friendly place, inhabitants were varied, seminary students from Fuller, artists, musicians, writers, and a number of single elderly folk.

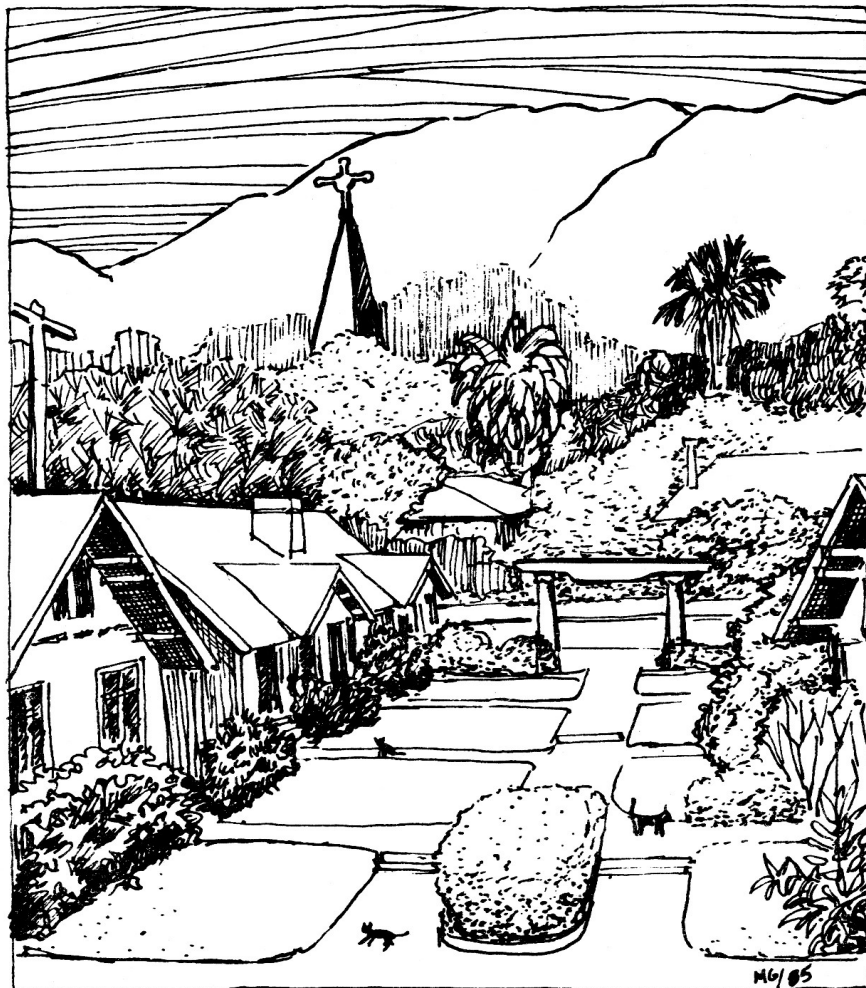
The neighborhood was sketchy, and the court was unfenced, but it felt safe. I attribute this to the old ladies who watched over the place: sweet Viola, who collected clothing for the Native Americans, Mrs. Allen, who checked the oil on her 1961 Mercury Comet each morning before leaving for her daily grocery shopping, and mean old Joan, always, always ready with a nasty word.

It was a whole little world. I lived there just a bit over a year before we left for a home of our own in Altadena. I treasure memories of that time when I could walk out to our shared front yard and talk with new friends, greet acquaintances, or pet one of the many cats that adorned the court.

Could this housing type work in Altadena? Yes. They don't have to be luxurious, like the marvelous Andalusian architectural creations in Hollywood. In Pasadena they were nicely appointed, but much more sober, catering to tourists escaping eastern snow, and people like me who just wanted a beautiful micro-community to call home.

We all fear what Altadena could become, with the economic and psychic costs the Eaton Fire has imposed: clusters of identical bare-bones structures without architectural grace. To

my mind, a unit in a bungalow court, while compact, should provide everything needed for a comfortable life—to those truly invested in the Altadena experience. Dwellings with front doors opening to green, homes with dignity and delight, arranged around a shared garden court, adding gentle density to our leafy green town. A place to connect, and a beautiful place to call home.



Reinway from our 2nd floor bedroom, 1985, by Mark Goldschmidt

A Next Level Historical Survey for Altadena

By Becky Nicolaides

Altadena is undergoing a new historical survey, thanks to a \$420,000 grant from the Getty Foundation and a \$1.5 million grant from the Mellon Foundation, given in the wake of the Eaton Fire.

Overseeing the project is the LA Conservancy, which quickly invited Altadena Heritage to play a leading collaborative role. There are two facets to this project, whose purpose is to survey, preserve, and honor Altadena's history. The first is a "historic resources survey," an in-depth technical report that will serve as a land-use planning tool for LA County. By laying out the history of Altadena, surveying surviving buildings, sites, and districts, and clarifying what may qualify for historic designation, this survey will help county planners take historic preservation into account when making land use decisions for the community.

The second initiative is a "cultural asset mapping" project, a more wide-ranging and comprehensive survey of Altadena's past and present, done with much community input and including everything – both surviving structures and those lost in the fire. The idea is to document Altadena from many angles and perspectives, to "crowd source," if you will, a broad survey of the places with meaningful significance to the many people and communities of Altadena. This project demands community engagement, and Altadena Heritage will support this effort along with groups such as the Altadena Historical Society, Altadena Rising, the Foothill Catalog, and the SoCal National Organization of Minority Architects.

This dual approach will allow for the inclusion of both tangible heritage, such as buildings and sites, and intangible heritage, like oral histories, community and cultural traditions, and memories of beloved places. Both will play a crucial role in folding a sense of history into Altadena's recovery, to ensure that heritage, culture, and memory are a part of policy and planning decisions moving forward.

The team working on these projects includes two of LA's leading cultural resources firms, Architectural Resources Group (ARG) and Historic Resources Group (HRG), Altadena author Michele Zack, and myself, Heritage's newest board member. The team is building upon the 1991 survey conducted by Tim Gregory and Altadena Heritage. I sat down with Katie Horak, principal at ARG, who was there from the beginning of this initiative. What follows are excerpts from our conversation, edited for clarity and length.

Becky: can you describe how this project came about?

Katie: On January 7, as we all watched in horror as the fire ripped through Altadena, we at ARG were desperately wanting to help and trying to think of what tools we have that could be helpful to the community. Something that we thought of right away was our ability to interactively map, in GIS, all of the her-

itage sites in the fire are-as and document their condition, post-fire. There was so much confusion in that first day or two about what was lost and what wasn't, and so much misinformation circulating around. So we thought, well, maybe we could just map everything and that would help the City and the County, as well as community members and people across the world who are looking for accurate information about the post-fire condition of heritage sites.

For the mapping project, what we

did first was just take all of the heritage data that already existed in Altadena and map it in GIS.

The next step was to pair this data set with the fire impact data that was being compiled by the County. And then we paired that with Google Street View imagery, so you could go to any parcel, see what the Google Street view image was before the fire, see what the image is after the fire, and then understand if there had been any heritage information about that particular site. [the online maps are available on the LA Conservancy's website at: <https://www.laconservancy.org/2025-fire-impact-mapping-initiative/>]

Continued on next page



Left to right: Adrian Scott Fine, LA Conservancy, and Brannon Smithwick and Katie Horak, ARG.

“A Next Level Historical Survey for Altadena” - *Continued from previous page.*

So that was phase one. And we had always thought that there'd be a phase two of this that would be more on-the-ground survey work. The initial mapping we did from our desks. On February 21, 2025, we went up and we did a day of survey work with staff from the LA Conservancy in Altadena, and we drove around and compared what we saw with the data that we had compiled. We found that in the burn areas there was just total devastation, and very little left to document. But the thing we really noticed is that we were driving by a lot of really amazing historic buildings that were still there that had no data at all. We were like, oh my gosh, there are so many historic buildings here that haven't been documented in the past and don't have any data. And so that's when the idea came up – maybe what would be really beneficial is a comprehensive historic survey of the community now, after the fire, because I feel like the existing heritage sites are going to become even more important as community touchstones now. I think what remains is critically important as rebuilding continues. And could the data from a survey inform the County's land use planning moving forward?

Becky: What kinds of places might be included in the cultural asset mapping?

Katie: It could be anything. It could be a park, it could be somebody's home. It could be where someone took piano lessons, it could be the cafe where they got coffee every morning. I think it could be anything.

Becky: Definitely the hardware store. I'm missing that place a lot. Do you want to say anything more about how the team is going to go about doing the “historic resources survey”?

Katie: It's going to be very much a traditional survey. Our methodology is the same as what we would've done for Survey LA or anywhere else. We're going to do community outreach to inform people about the work and to gather as much information as we can. We'll be working closely with partners like Altadena Heritage, Michele Zack, and you. We'll be doing a reconnaissance survey where we drive every single street and look at every single parcel, and that will include everything that was burned and everything that wasn't burned. And then document all of the eligible historic resources, and delivering that data to the County in a format useful to them in land use planning.

Becky: Can you talk about how people might be able to participate in this?

Katie: Anybody who wants to share any information about the history of Altadena and the places that are meaningful to them can participate! We will have a page on the LA Conservancy's website where anybody can contribute information to either project. So if they know of a historic place that still exists and they really want to make sure the survey team has information about it, anybody can say, please take a look at such-and-such place, because it's important for such-and-such reason. [The LA Conservancy site is now live at: <https://laconservancy.tfaforms.net/119>]

Or anybody can say, I really want this place to be remembered even though it's gone. The hope is that the more people who want to participate will, I think that the better for either project, either for things that are remaining or things that are not.

Becky: Here's a big question I've been trying to wrap my head around. Not just for the community, but even for myself in our house that we lost. How do you commemorate places that no longer exist? How do you keep civic memory alive in places that have gone through this, especially at these mass scales of displacement? Are there any parallel projects that have surveyed historic places that have been ravaged by a natural disaster or maybe by something like redevelopment?

Katie: I think that a good corollary might be the survey work that happened after the Northridge Earthquake [in January 1994]. At that time, Historic Resources Group did a ton of survey work – going out and assessing properties that were going to be using FEMA funds to determine whether or not they were historic resources. That was obviously a very different situation

because most buildings were damaged by the earthquake, and not totally destroyed like they were in the fires.

I have found the work of Architecture Sarasota to be really inspiring; I had a chance to visit them in January of [last] year just a couple of weeks after the fires and see the recovery work they had been doing after Hurricanes Helene and Milton [Sept and Oct 2024]. A lot of their historic resources hadn't previously been formally surveyed, and so after the hurricanes they were doing rapid determinations of eligibility for owners who had historic resources that were heavily damaged by the hurricane so that they could get leniency with building codes in rebuilding efforts and take advantage of other incentives. They also mobilized teams of architects and engineers to provide pro bono assistance to homeowners. They've come up with a whole disaster recovery toolkit. Architecture Sarasota is a real model, I think, for how nonprofit heritage groups are helping provide resources to owners in places that are ravaged by disasters. They are Sarasota's equivalent of the LA Conservancy.

Becky: How do you think a historic preservation mindset can help guide Altadena's recovery?

Katie: There's been so much said about the incredible built character of Altadena and how it was a little bit of everything. It had this unparalleled community character, including the natural environment, the built fabric, and of course the community itself. If these two projects can help tell the stories of Altadena and what made it – and continues to make it – such a significant place, and if they can be a tool to help inform the rebuilding process, I think that can be a really positive thing.

“Throuple” - Continued from page 1.

Seven years in, sitting at the dining table in the strange space created by this partition, I projected all my problems onto it. I pried off one small piece of trim and the flood gates were open. Sixty-four CAD models later, the house had rejected every single design. The house did not like anything we were drawing up. We were imposing ourselves upon it and we could hear the house saying, “It’s just not...me”.

One day, I was on a plant-watering break and my partner Miao had something very different drawn on the screen. “What was this? This is not what we were doing...” The plan made sense for the house and built upon a geometry that was already there. It was impractical, potentially expensive, and would require moving out of the house for at least 6 months. “It’s perfect!” the house (imaginarily) said.

We don’t have children, but we have a house, and we are overprotective, codependent and care for it obsessively.

When the red sky shone through the clerestory window at 6:48pm on January 7, we left our dinner on the stove, looking back once from the front door at circular views of normalcy, framed by a cool white, high-powered flashlight. We left our house-our-third, anchored in its 24” of concrete, behind.

At sunrise, a text from a neighbor. Our house was still there, and there was a route to neighborhood not yet roped off. We raced back, apologetic and filled with adrenaline as the fire continued to take one house at a time. Closer, now the towers of black smoke were two blocks away, in 180 degrees. We went to work with buckets of pool water on the roof, clearing leaves, dragging a Christmas tree and patio furniture away from the house. It grew dark, and we said a more proper prayer for our third as we abandoned it again.

Our house survived the fire, but the sigh of relief was short lived. The winds stuffed it with lead and hard to pronounce chemical byproducts, through every midcentury casement window, sliding glass panel and previously unknown cracks that revealed themselves through perfectly straight lines of black dust. The house is now sick. We enter it with masks and caution, treating our beloved third as contagious. It’s become a stranger, frozen in time with Christmas ornaments, birthday decorations and the board games that we were playing in the dark. A smell of char in place of baking bread, cobwebs in place of warm sculptural lighting – it doesn’t recognize itself either.

All three of us will be a little different in the future. Hopefully stronger and more bonded through shared experience. We look forward to reconnecting with the house and a day of pancakes, sofa forts, polishing the impractically brass sink, and not talking about benzene.

ALTADENA HERITAGE SMART TALK SERIES “Healing, Hope, and Commemoration: Artistic Responses to the Eaton Fire”



Friday April 24th, 2026 7:00pm

The historic Woodbury-Story House
2606 N. Madison Avenue, Altadena CA 91001



Tickets



More Info

Altadena Artist Mira Dancy's exhibition of oil landscape paintings, *Mourning's Orbit*, are based on photographs she took following the Eaton Fire.

Visit <https://www.nightgallery.ca/exhibitions/mira-dancy5>.



Gutted Pine on Jaxine, 2025



Tim's Palms, 2025



Altadena Heritage
730 E. Altadena Dr.
Altadena, CA 91001-2351

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Courtesy of the artist, Mira Dancy,
whose recent paintings respond to
the Eaton Fire.



Altadena Crest, 2025

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