



Designers Ron Woodson and Jaime Rummerfield founded Saving Iconic Architecture (SIA) in 2015.

# L.A. ANGELS

WITH SAVING ICONIC ARCHITECTURE, A DYNAMIC DESIGN DUO TAKES ON THE CITY'S TROUBLING LEGACY OF DESTROYING ITS PAST

Interior designers Ron Woodson and Jaime Rummerfield had been looking for an oversized lot for their client to build on when a realtor took them to a property she was hip-pocketing. The

site was as breathtaking as she had described, but it was the “teardown” situated there that stunned them. They immediately recognized it as Richard Neutra’s Chuey House. Designed in 1956, the structure has been described as a “mid-century marvel,” an alchemy of glass and wood that cantilevers delicately over the cliff, seamlessly merging indoors and out. “The realtor said, ‘You could tear it down and you’ll have a double lot,’” says Woodson, with evident anger. “You can’t make this stuff up!”

That experience was one in a series that galvanized the duo to found Save Iconic Architecture (SIA) in 2017. The non-profit foundation’s mission is to bring awareness and action to preserving endangered and significant architectural and cultural structures around Los Angeles.

It’s no secret that Los Angeles is changing. New residents are

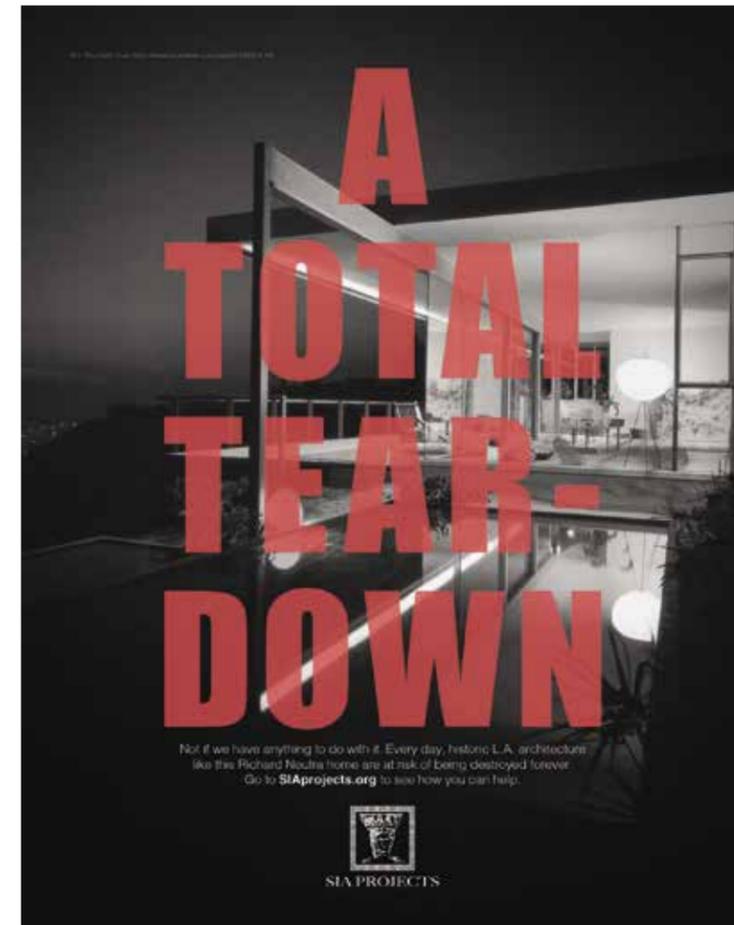
flocking here, drawn as much by the opportunities — in tech and in the arts — as they are by the weather. Real estate is sky high, and construction, electrified by the 2024 Summer Olympics, is increasing. With that expansion, however,

comes inevitable growing pains as the city of the future comes to terms with its past.

“We have a history,” says Jaime Rummerfield. “It’s a short one, but it’s significant. It’s Holly-

wood! There’s so much history and opulence and a way of life that’s like no other.” She and Woodson, who design together under the moniker Woodson & Rummerfield, are both native Angelenos who come from long-established Southern California families. Rummerfield is descended from “Lucky” Baldwin, a legendary land baron. Baldwin Hills, the enclave where Woodson grew up, is named after him. Woodson recalls accompanying his father—a respected musician who played with Sammy Davis, Jr. and the Paul Togawa Quartet—to some of L.A.’s most fabled homes, including Falcon’s Lair, the Wallace Neff-designed estate of heiress Doris Duke, and Ray Charles’s Beverly Hills home. Both houses are now gone.

And they are not alone. Many of the structures in Trousdale Estates, which included stunning work by A. Quincy Jones, Frank Lloyd Wright and Hal Levitt,



## Many stunning works by A. Quincy Jones, Frank Lloyd Wright and Hal Levitt have been razed.

have been razed. The late Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft, bought the breathtaking Wallace Neff-designed Enchanted Hill, then promptly moved it to the ground. The Ambassador Hotel, the Coconut Grove and Pickfair live on only in memories and photographs. Some, like the French Regency-style John Elgin Woolf home previously owned by Zsa Zsa Gabor, teeter on the brink of extinction. Others, like the Sheats-Goldstein house, which owner James Goldsmith will donate to LACMA, have been rescued only through heroic measures.

In Los Angeles, the history of the silver screen is woven into our buildings. Tourists clamber aboard double-decker buses to check out the homes where their idols live or their favorite films were shot. Walt Disney dreamed up his animated rodent in a bungalow in Los Feliz. Alerted to its imminent destruction, the Los Angeles Conservancy and Walt Disney Studios got involved and the tiny home was saved. ("Once that cultural reference is gone, where was Mickey Mouse created?" Woodson asks.) HGTV just paid well over asking for the Studio City house where *The Brady Bunch* kids grew up.

"It's tough," Woodson admits, "because the reason that everybody's a developer is because our land is so expensive." Certainly it can be challenging for heirs and long-term owners whose homes have multiplied in value many times over to say no to an eager buyer. "People can do whatever they want on their own property," says Rummerfield. "But it's important for them to at least understand the significance of certain pieces of architecture, and once that's established, there are many routes they can take. The seller

can have it in the sales agreement that parts of the house must stay intact. It doesn't even have to be landmarked, but our suggestion is to have city protection to help them preserve it. Or in the case of a particularly important work, the structure can be relocated."

Cultural relevance is one side of the preservation equation; The other side is architectural significance. The Case Study Houses, experiments in architecture built between 1945 and 1966, helped write the global language that describes modern building. Photographs of them by Julius Shulman inform our memories of the *Mad Men* era. Paul R. Williams was the first black member of the American Institute of Architects. His gracious structures—he designed more than 3,000 buildings across the

southland, including The Beverly Hills Hotel, and was part of the storied team that worked on LAX's Theme Building—shape our vision of the glamorous Hollywood residence. It's been noted that many of our favorite movie villains reside in the organic modern homes created by John Lautner.

The Los Angeles Conservancy, the Office of Historic Preservation and the Cultural Heritage Commission are California's answer to defending these spaces. "The city's good at it, but it's just such a large city that they need more help," says Woodson. L.A. Conservancy's director of advocacy Adrian Scott Fine agrees. "It's good to have a partner who has more time to devote to a specific issue," Fine explains. Plus, he adds, "Preservation is often a numbers game in terms of politics and convincing decision-makers to reconsider or change course. When these groups work together, there's more power."

SIA's mission starts with education. "It's incumbent upon us to let the public know about these structures even before they're in peril," says Rummerfield. Social media—they are @SaveIconicArchitecture on Instagram and @siaprojects on Facebook—is one way they raise awareness. The pair are also frequent panelists: In January they will speak at Las Vegas Market against the backdrop of the city's Neon Museum; in February they're scheduled for a talk during Palm Springs Modernism Week.

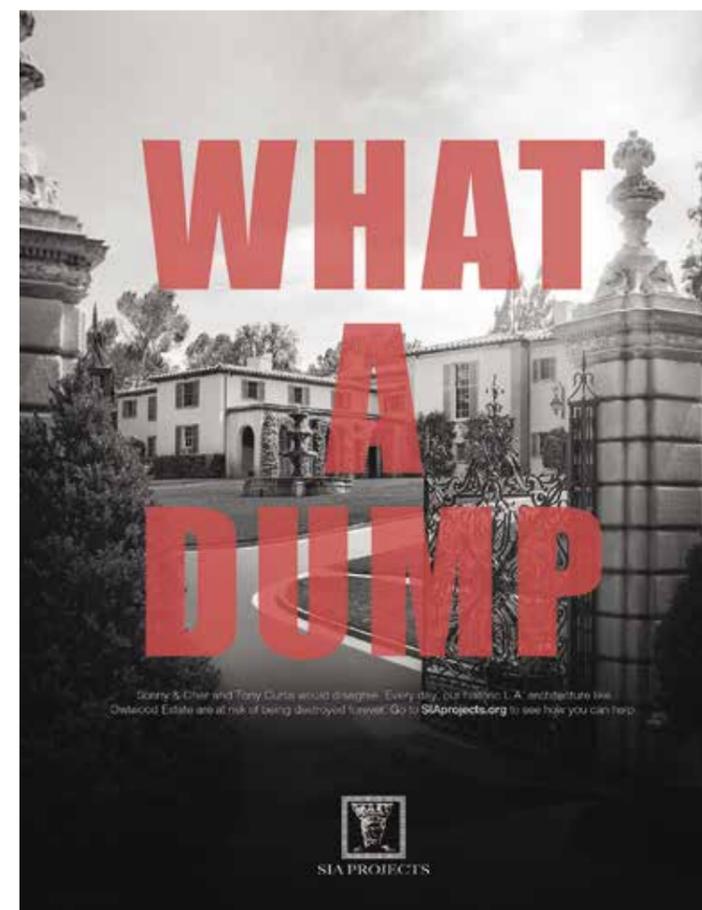
Then there are SIA's fundraisers, which serve a dual purpose: raising money while offering partygoers a chance

to experience these spaces first-hand. "People don't often have a chance to see these wonderful, historic structures in person," notes Rummerfield. The next gala, held in Palm Springs on February 19, will take place at Villa Paradiso, Cary Grant's desert retreat, a Spanish Moorish-style estate built by Alva Hicks in 1928. "It's just the last of its kind," says Rummerfield. "And once they're gone, they're lost forever."

While navigating the balance between growth and preservation is tricky, Fine is adamant that the past is key to envisioning the future of Los Angeles. "Preservation in general is about managing change, not about stopping things," he says. "It's important that as L.A. continues to grow and develop and evolve, we're mindful of our past and our rich heritage so that we can achieve all those goals at the same time. One doesn't have to come at the expense of the other."

It's clear that something needs to be done. One idea is to expand on the adaptive-reuse ordinance that was put in place in parts of the city in 1999. "Having a dialogue of solutions is better than the only answer being demolition," says Rummerfield. Citing possible alternatives to eradicating Lytton Saving Bank, which will be torn down to make way for a much-contested Frank Gehry project, she suggests that "it would have been a cool restaurant, it would have been a cool entry to the building." Unfortunately, as Fine points out, in that case as in many others, "the owners/developers were not interested in looking at that option."

"A mindful thing for the city to do would be to have a group of experts who really understand



tions are limited to the exterior and what is visible from the pedestrian right-of-way. "There's a lot of code," Rummerfield says, "but it can be done." (In fact, the designers recently modernized the interior of one HPOZ home for a client.) And after all, Woodson points out, visual unity is not only what makes an area desirable, it helps those areas retain their value. "Nobody wants a boxy spec built next to a glorious Spanish," notes Rummerfield.

Educating developers and real-estate agents can also be part of the solution. For example, as Woodson and Rummerfield discovered when they spoke at Dallas Market in September, a course on architecture and the history of the city is a required step in obtaining a real-estate license there. Perhaps similar measures can be put in place here.

And what of the Chuey House? "The owners have agreed that they won't pursue any type of demolition while they're still waiting for a buyer," Fine explains. "Once a buyer emerges, hopefully he or she will want to keep the Chuey House right where it is and rehabilitate it. That would be our ultimate desire. If somebody doesn't want to do that and wants to consider moving the building, then there's some parameters about how that could be accomplished."

For Woodson and Rummerfield, that represents progress. "That's a good solution," says Rummerfield. "Yes," says Woodson. "We're very pleased." Baby steps •

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