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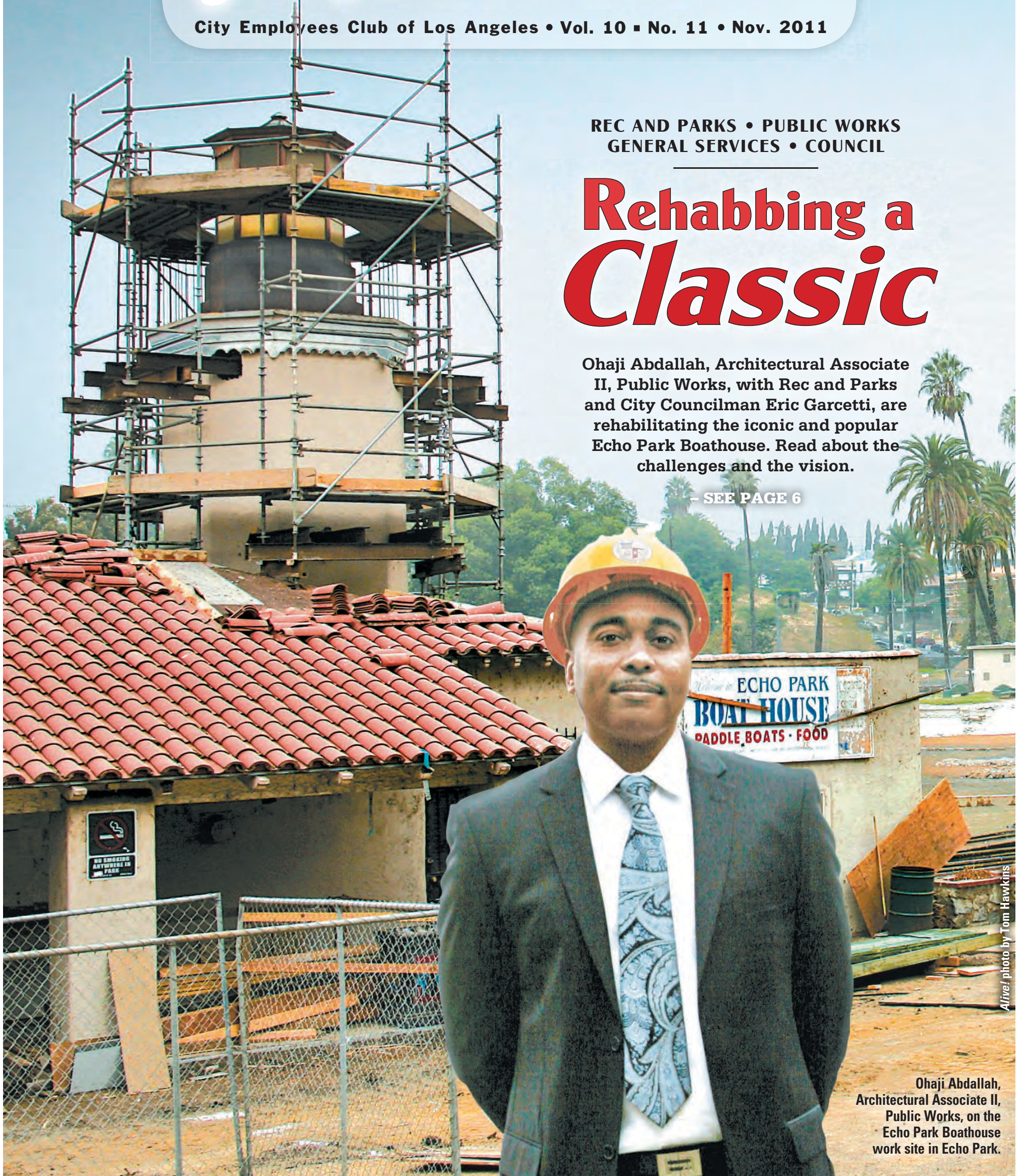
City Employees Club of Los Angeles • Vol. 10 • No. 11 • Nov. 2011

REC AND PARKS • PUBLIC WORKS  
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## Rehabbing a *Classic*

Ohaji Abdallah, Architectural Associate II, Public Works, with Rec and Parks and City Councilman Eric Garcetti, are rehabilitating the iconic and popular Echo Park Boathouse. Read about the challenges and the vision.

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Ohaji Abdallah, Architectural Associate II, Public Works, on the Echo Park Boathouse work site in Echo Park.

Alive! photo by Tom Hawkins



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***Alive!* Feature: The Echo Park Boathouse**

# Rehabbing a *Classic*



**THE *ALIVE!* INTERVIEW**

## ‘A Beacon of the Community’

On Sept. 28, *Alive!* editor John Burnes interviewed Ohaji Abdallah, manager of the Echo Park Boathouse rehab project, in the patio atop the Public Works building downtown. – Ed.



Ohaji Abdallah on the boathouse work site.

***Alive!*: Thanks, Ohaji, for showing us the project worksite today. You’re an Architectural Associate II for the Bureau of Engineering’s Architectural Division. But what’s your title as it relates to the rehabbing of the boathouse?**

OHAJI ABDALLAH: I’m the project manager and architect of the Echo Park boathouse rehabilitation.

**In layman’s terms, what’s going on there with the Echo Park boathouse?**

OHAJI: We’re doing a structural retrofit and historical rehabilitation. I don’t know if that’s layman’s terms, actually, but to break it down, we are retrofitting the understructure of the boathouse so that it can support the facility for the next 40 to 80 years, making it a long-term structure.

Architecturally we are saving the historical character-defining features of the boathouse as well as bringing the boathouse up to all of the current codes as it pertains to the work that we’re doing. For instance, the [boathouse’s] commercial kitchen requires a great deal of new civil infrastructure, a grease interceptor, and a new sump pump and pit – these items take the waste from the boathouse and pump them up to the sewer line at the street level.

**Are there restrooms in the facility?**

OHAJI: There’s one existing restroom in the facility, but it is not a handicap-accessible restroom. So as part of this project, we’re also rehabilitating the adjacent restroom

building to bring it up to standards for use as the ADA restrooms for the boathouse.

### **Rotten to the Core**

**This isn’t a complete restoration back to 1932, when the facility was built?**

OHAJI: No. Unfortunately not. We weren’t able to come up with enough [funding] to make that happen.

**But what you’re doing is really significant, though, because you are doing the structural work and making the boathouse good to go for a long time.**

OHAJI: Absolutely. It is our goal for all of our City projects to make them 40- to 80-year buildings, and that is the goal, whether it’s new construction or a historical rehabilitation.

**How bad a shape was it in?**

OHAJI: It was in very bad shape. And the more we go through construction, we find more and more areas of rot – entire walls are being supported by the stucco and plaster and not by the wood members themselves, because the wood members are so rotted. And that is the case with that [signature] tower. There were walls at the base of that tower area that were completely rotted out. It was literally the plaster holding it up before that shoring came in.

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# Four City departments come together to rehabilitate the Echo Park Boathouse, an icon of the City of Los Angeles.

*Photos by Tom Hawkins, Club Photographer, and John Burnes, Alive! editor; JuanCarlos Chan, Photographer, Rec and Parks; and courtesy the Security Pacific National Bank Collection, the Herald Examiner Collection, and Roy Hankey, Los Angeles Public Library photo archive, Christina Rice, Acting Sr. Librarian.*

A classic Los Angeles structure that was almost literally on its last legs is getting a fresh but thorough rehabilitation, thanks to four City departments that are coming together to get the job done. The iconic Echo Park Boathouse – well known from countless movies and visits from natives and tourists alike – is getting some thorough attention. It's a Rec and Parks facility that's being overhauled through the design work of Public Works/

Engineering's Architectural Division. The City Council Office of Eric Garcetti is raising the funds and building the neighborhood consensus, and the rehab work itself is being kept in-house through the efforts of General Services.

Everyone's combining their efforts to produce a first-rate attraction once again. The work is scheduled to be finished in early March.

## The Project

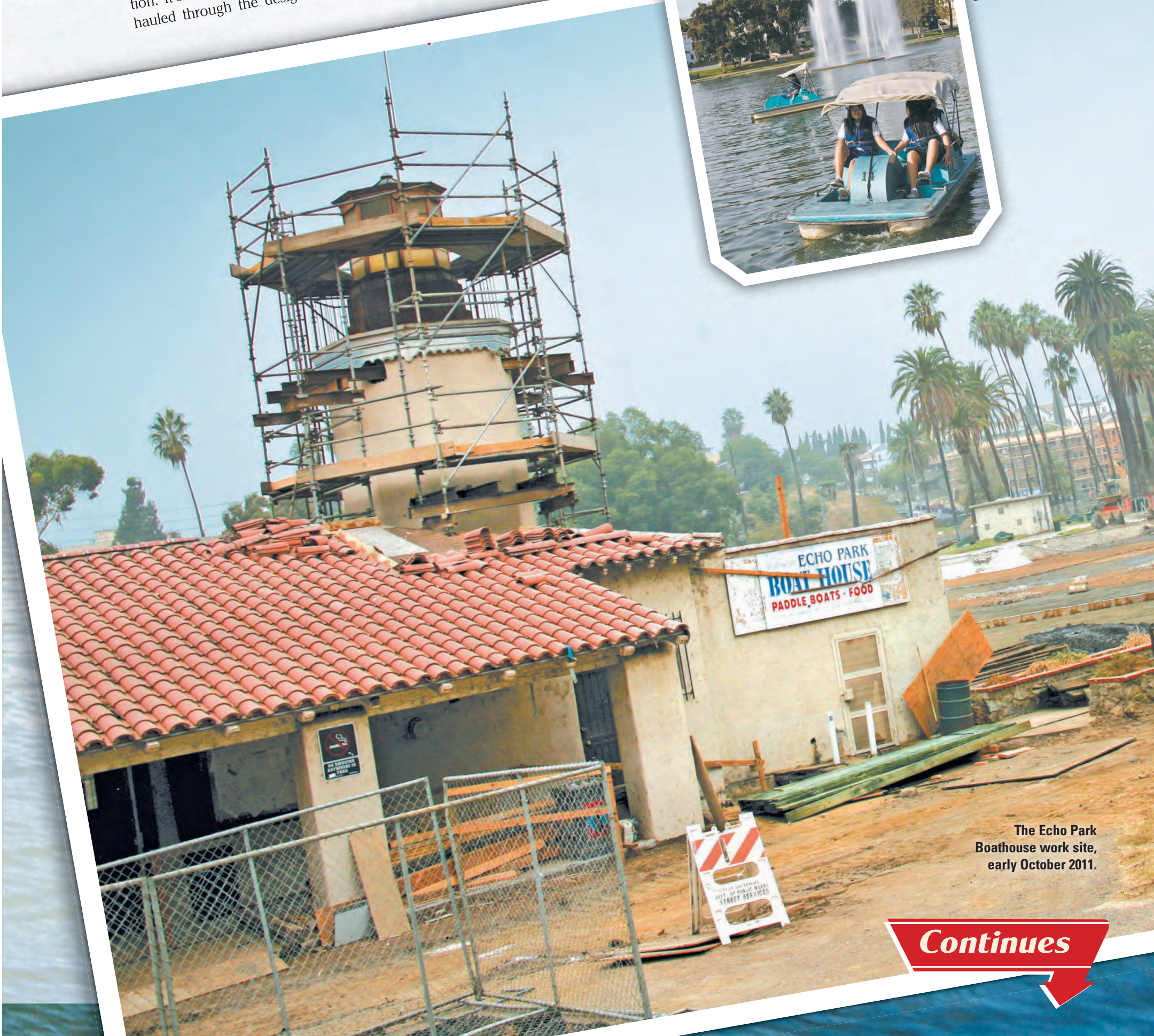
The 1,500-square-foot Echo Park Boathouse, originally constructed in 1932, was designed in the Spanish Colonial Revival Style and is posi-

tioned over the Echo Park Lake. The facility has undergone several aesthetic and building system retrofits throughout the years. The most recent rehabilitation effort, Phase I, was completed in 2007. Phase I entailed preserving the existing piles, rehabilitating the dock, and providing disabled access to the dock. Phase II of the Echo Park Boathouse Rehabilitation includes the completion of the aesthetic, and structural retrofit of the existing building and mechanical systems. The Boathouse Rehabilitation is a small part of the larger Echo Park Rehabilitation project.

Good luck with this great project! We'll come back and revisit once it's finished.



Padding on Echo Park Lake in the 1980s. These boats were rented out of the Echo Park Boathouse.



The Echo Park Boathouse work site, early October 2011.

**Continues**

**THE *ALIVE!* INTERVIEW, continued**



Ohaji Abdallah, Public Works/Engineering, explains the boathouse project.

**Wow. Phase one was a couple of years ago?**

OHAJI: 2004, I believe. Phase One concentrated on rehabilitating the dock area, which had become so dilapidated – the dock itself was so rotted – that it was dangerous. People could have fallen through. There were plenty of holes throughout the dock. And we knew that, to do a Phase Two at a reasonable cost, we would need to tackle the structural retrofit of the dock, the piles and the diaphragm of that area, early on. We did that in Phase One.

**I see. And that was completed. And then you were able to secure funds for the second phase.**

OHAJI: Yes, absolutely.

**Will there be a phase after this one?**

OHAJI: Not that I know of. At the moment, no. As we went through design, we looked at a [possible] phase three and asked, what would that consist of? At this point, it would consist of the proper [full] restoration of the facility. All of that work

could be done without destroying all of the good work and money spent during the current Phase Two.

**That makes perfect sense. So after Phase Two it will be a complete project.**

OHAJI: It will be a complete project, absolutely. If additional historical funding comes through, then we can go through and restore it back to 1932, recreating the historical woodwork in the concession area and windows back to the style of 1932.

**Some of the wood that you said was rotten, was the original wood from 1932?**

OHAJI: Absolutely. It was original wood. And as a matter of fact, in the tower, we were able to find wood members that had the Sears stamp. Back in the 1920s and 1930s, Sears and I believe Montgomery Ward used to sell homebuilding kits, and they provided lumber for a variety of different reasons and were in the construction business. So yes, that wood is original.

**That's amazing. Sears wood in a City building.**

OHAJI: Yes.

**So the rehabilitation project will bring the boathouse up to code. Does that also include seismic concerns?**

OHAJI: Absolutely. The piles themselves have done a very good job at holding what is called the dead weight of the building. They've done a great job over the years. We're adding only four new piles to address the seismic concerns. As earthquakes

occur, the building can act as one complete diaphragm which will reduce the possibility of the tower peeling off from the rest of the building and falling into the lake.

**Had it been closed recently? Or only in anticipation of this project?**

OHAJI: It had actually been closed for almost a year before this project began. That was unfortunately due to the financial state of the City itself.

**An Important Project**

**How important is the boathouse? How much of an icon is it?**

OHAJI: I personally believe that all historical structures, especially for this community, are tremendous icons. The lake and the boathouse are tied together as one obviously. But the boathouse is the iconic figure that the community members see when they open their windows from those homes along Echo Park Avenue and Glendale Boulevard. They see the structure as a beacon of their community, especially now since we've gotten the lighting back up and running. It has created more fanfare for the community in general.

Everyone has been looking forward to the rehab of the entire lake as well as the boathouse. *[Echo Park Lake is also being rehabbed by the City, in a completely separate project. – Ed.]* The lake project is such a large project. And yet the boathouse still garners similar amounts of attention. It's such a small project, especially when you look at the construction and design budgets. It became evident to me just how important it is when we attended the community meetings. There was such a strong reaction. There's a very strong historical preservation community presence in Echo Park. They're very concerned with the conservation and preservation of their historic structures. And they consider this as one of their signature buildings. An iconic building of Echo Park.



The Echo Park Boathouse with its iconic lighthouse tower, taken a few years ago.



Ohaji Abdallah, Public Works/Engineering, explains the project while on site.

## Rehabbing a *Alive!* Feature Classic

### THE *ALIVE!* INTERVIEW, continued

**When people find out that you're involved in this project, do people say to you, "Oh, I grew up there" or "I met my wife there"? Do people tell you those stories?**

OHAJI: Absolutely. I'm actually closing out several other major projects throughout the City, neighborhood city hall projects. When I mentioned this project to several of the councilmen and deputy [staff members], they were tremendously excited. They showed up at the community meetings, even though this wasn't the council district that they work in. They grew up in these neighborhoods.

And Echo Park has turned around. At one point it was considered a fairly dangerous neighborhood. It wasn't considered a neighborhood that you really wanted to drop \$300,000 or \$400,000 on a historic home. But it has made a complete turnaround. The community members have taken their neighborhood back from the unwanted elements. They're raising the bar for all of the neighborhoods in that area.

### Cool Parts of the Project

**When were at the site earlier, we talked about the portholes in the tower that you're uncovering. Talk about some of the unique features that you find really interesting as you supervise this project.**

OHAJI: One of the most interesting features is that the entire boathouse sits on piles. As I've looked at some other boathouses – a lot of them, the main portion of the building is actually on land while the dock is on piles. But the Echo Park Boathouse sits entirely on piles. That's interesting, especially when you consider how well the substructure has held up over the years.

Architecturally the tower is one of the most striking elements. A large portion of the tower is built of copper. Essentially, the top portion of the lighthouse is built of copper and redwood.

The porthole windows that at one point were open but were closed I'm sure due to maintenance concerns, are now being reopened, re-glazed, and re-waterproofed.

**There will be light coming out of them again.**

OHAJI: Yes, there will be light shining out of them.

**How long do you estimate they were closed?**

OHAJI: I would say they've been closed since the 1970s. There was a rehab done in the '70s, and I noticed on the drawings from that project that the porthole windows were not shown on the drawings.

**So at least that long.**

OHAJI: So at least that long, absolutely.

**There are whole generations of people who have never seen those original portals.**

OHAJI: Certainly.



From left: Ohaji Abdallah, Public Works/Engineering, with John Burnes, *Alive!* editor.

**You rented a boat there before the boathouse closed.**

OHAJI: Yes, I did. After Phase One was done, I took my daughter out. We went on to the lake. It's a really beautiful lake.

### Departments Working Together

**This is a multi-department project. I know that Councilman Eric Garcetti and his office staff have been very integral to this project. Can you talk a little bit about their passion and involvement?**

OHAJI: They've been integral to the point that they've been out finding the grants to make this project happen. They facilitated the community meetings. They've been outstanding. They certainly went over and above the call of duty to make the project happen. And they also worked with Rec and Parks to go after the coastal historic endowment grant from the state of California.

**Talk about the involvement of General Services involvement. They're doing the construction work.**

OHAJI: Yes. They also did Phase One, so it was natural for

us to use their construction team because they were already familiar with the job. We were able to ship drawings over to them throughout the design phase, get their input on how to facilitate sort of the structural substructure work. The quality with General Services is always outstanding. They're not profit-based. It behooves them to provide quality rather than providing the cheapest element or the cheapest labor that they possibly can. They're also our maintenance division, so doing a good job during construction means less rework that will have to be dealt with by their maintenance division.

**And finally, let's talk about Rec and Parks. I mean is this technically their project?**

OHAJI: Yes, Rec and Parks is the owner of the facility. We are using their maintenance guidelines as a standard for us during design. They know that all of the plumbing and HVAC [heating-ventilation-air conditioning] items that we're adding can be easily maintained by their staff.

### The Stuff of Dreams

**What's your dream for the boathouse? What is your dream for the way that people will interact with it once your work is finished?**

OHAJI: The dream is that people will actually hang out at the boathouse. I hope that the Council Office will find a vendor not just to facilitate the concessionaire stand and the boathouse rental but who will also pull in the artistic elements of the Echo Park community. It's a really artistic community, with lots of bands and performing artists. Allowing those activities to happen directly in front of the boathouse, creating a sort of stage for the entire Echo Park in front of the boathouse, would be an outstanding achievement. I'm hoping that we can offer Wi-Fi services there so that it becomes a hangout and a study area for all of the local kids.

**That's great to hear. And you need to be finished with it in February.**

OHAJI: Absolutely. That is the goal, to be finished in February or early March.

**Thanks, Ohaji. We'll be back when it's finished!**

OHAJI: Thank you, John. We appreciate it. ■

The boathouse in 1948.



### Much Work to Do!

Here are recent views of the boathouse during the early part of the rehabilitation project. As Ohaji Abdallah explains in the *Alive!* interview, there is much work to do.



### Thank You!

The Club thanks Ohaji Abdallah and Michelle Vargas, Public Works/Engineering; and Andrea Epstein, David Attaway, and JuanCarlos Chan, Rec and Parks, for their assistance in producing this article.