

History Comes *Alive!*

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



by Hynda Rudd
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Modern Bunker Hill

Here's part two of our look at one of downtown's best-known areas, covering 1950 to today.

Hello dear readers, please give another welcome to this month's guest columnist, the architectural historian and writer Nathan Marsak. Make sure you read last month's column, too, about Bunker Hill's origins up to 1949.
— Hynda

Story by Nathan Marsak; Photos courtesy the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archive, Christina Rice, acting Sr. Librarian

In last month's *History Comes Alive!*, we examined Bunker Hill's early history and her transformation from lofty land of grand mansions to salacious hotbed of decrepitude and vice. Of course, reality was much more nuanced and complex. In the hill's Victorian heyday, she was home to many common people, while the Mid-Century hill was a bastion of calm atop the madly rushing city below. The perspective of the time also played a pivotal role: where today we consider recycled housing to be "green," the powers that be saw decay; where we find New Urbanist "walkability" in intricate neighborhoods, the Mid-Century sprawl-adapted, shopping-center mind saw a vaster firetrap. In short, the City had it in for the old Bunker Hill, and as the sun passed its 20th-century midpoint, the hill's fate was sealed.

LA's 1948 Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), emboldened by the Federal Housing Act of 1949, decreed in 1951 that Bunker Hill was its first and primary official urban renewal area, which entailed the seizure and demolition of more than 7,300 housing units. The hill had already come to symbolize urban blight in part because planners had for decades bandied about bulldozer-themed redevelopment theories; many owners deferred maintenance due to such talk. Thus the legal confirmation of the hill's destruction exacerbated the centrifugal movement from the City's core in general, and the hill in particular, and it became all the more a rental community, primarily for the elderly poor.

But not everyone paid heed to the apocalyptic trumpets. Although the City had just

made known its intention to wipe clean the 136 acres, a downtown lawyer named Stuart Oliver decided to build his new house in the middle of Bunker Hill in 1952, high atop the corner of Fourth and Hope. Oliver deduced that displacing more than 9,000 people and the attendant legal wrangling involved in taking their property was going to take time; he was correct.

Hollywood also famously turned its post-war eye toward Bunker Hill for the perfect cinematic backdrop. The vogue for *film noir*—known for deep shadows, despair, and a dark blur between good and evil—found its expression on Bunker Hill. To name but a few: Burt Lancaster, fresh out of the joint, is drawn back into crime among the hill's rooms in *Criss Cross* (1949); child murderer David Wayne lives and stalks his tiny prey on Bunker Hill in the remake of Fritz Lang's *M* (1951); hardboiled private eye Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) is after clues in the Hill Crest Apts. and Donegan "Castle" in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).

Bit by bit, though, the Hill was eaten away. Fourth Street, which dead-ended at Flower, was widened in 1954 during construction of the "Fourth Street Cut," a 32-foot-deep, 687-foot-long viaduct, resulting in the loss of many prominent buildings. Another major traffic artery, the Hollywood Freeway, had recently taken out much of adjacent Fort Moore hill to the north. That project involved losing the two tunnels under Fort Moore, and in 1955-56, the iconic twin bore Hill Street tunnels north of First were removed. In 1957, the residential area of Bunker Hill, often known as Court Hill, between First and Temple, was razed for the 1958 Superior Courthouse and Hall of Administration (this plot of land soon was added to by the Music Center and DWP Building). Even south of



Looking south from the Los Angeles County Superior Court Building towards Bunker Hill. First Street is in the foreground, with Grand Avenue (right) and Olive Street (left) seen on each side of the parking structure. 1986.



An architect's model of Bunker Hill redevelopment is unveiled in September 1970. The \$1 billion project was expected to cover 136 acres and be completed in 1980.

First, on Grand, the oft-photographed "Gingerbread Age" Carpenter's Gothic wonders, the Richelieu and the Melrose Hotel, fell to the wreckers for a parking lot.

The 1950s saw media and political warfare over Bunker Hill. As Mayor Norris Poulson said of the hill in 1958, it was "one of the city's eyesores—a district posing problems of health and fire protection. It's a blight on the city." Edward Roybal, while a City Councilman before heading to Congress, led groups trying to block council approval of the renewal plan, citing injustices against the hill's residents and property owners, and citing that, at the very least, better settlements and more efficient relocation services were needed. Alas, City Council approved the CRA's plan in 1959; families were to be given "up to \$200" for relocation.

Ten years after the CRA had first set out to exercise eminent domain, the agency acquired its preliminary handful in 1961. The Hill Crest Inn, commanding a perch at Third and Olive, north of the upper terminus of Angels Flight, was a 47-unit frame apartment building. Built in 1905, and partially financed by Col. Eddy of Angels Flight fame, it was the first to die by the agency's hand, demolished in September. From there, the agency stepped up the pace of securing the rest of the 136 acres. At times the "Battle of Bunker Hill" was often contentious, with critics charging that agency chairman William T. Sesnon, an oil man, was after the hill's oil deposits, that the taxpayer-funded government land grab was in collusion with private developers, and that there ultimately would be no takers for the new superblocks.

But in March 1965, Connecticut General Life purchased the site of the 1929 art deco Monarch Hotel at Fifth and Figueroa, which with great fanfare became the 42-story Union Bank Tower—the hill's first "slum clearance" skyscraper. In 1966 City Administrative Officer C. Erwin Piper released a sweeping indictment of the CRA: He concluded that in its 18 years (without an audit) it boasted only flawed policy making, wasteful land sales, and a needlessly myopic use of the bulldozer approach as its sole renewal method. Further fueling the criticism, the 13-acre Bunker Hill Towers opened in March 1968 on a site that

in the original plan for Bunker Hill, designed by I.M. Pei, had been set aside for a park.

1969 saw the removal of the remaining landmark structures. Stuart Oliver's 1952 home was unceremoniously pushed off its cliff in September. The Castle and the Salt Box, 1880s structures declared historic-cultural monuments, were moved to City land in March, but remained unsecured, and thus burned by vandals in October. Angels Flight was also removed in March, with the promise that it would be returned "in two years." (In fact, it took 27, but at least it was returned!)

The next buildings to rise were the Security Pacific Bank, the World Trade Center, the Bonaventure Hotel, and the like. While the 1949 Federal Redevelopment Act had ostensibly been enacted to revive neighborhoods and build housing for the poor, a home for the aged didn't open until 1981, presumably after those elderly removed in 1961 had already passed. Further financial towers and corporate plazas were constructed over the past 30 years, but Bunker Hill, while still not particularly pedestrian-friendly, is now known for the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Colburn School, and Disney Hall. Currently Eli Broad is building his mammoth contemporary art museum at Second and Grand, site of the old Dome Hotel, a parking lot since 1964.

So, was Bunker Hill as bad as the City and the papers made it out to be, or was it, as its citizens reported, guilty of hanging its wash out to dry? Could it have been retained and maintained à la the Society Hill neighborhood in Philadelphia's city center, which utilized federal redevelopment monies to restore its historic fabric? It is the source of continued study and argument. We do know that Bunker Hill was a victim of its progress-obsessed time. City fathers decried Bunker Hill as "too dense," when in 1950, LA didn't even rate among America's top 25 in terms of urban density. They also likely raised a disapproving eyebrow at its diverse ethnic makeup. So it is increasingly ironic that now we hand out zoning variances as "density bonuses" and socially engineer deliberate diversity. We should mourn Bunker Hill not only as a worthy relic of the past, but because it was so ahead of its time.

About the Author



Architectural historian Nathan Marsak is author of the book *Los Angeles Neon*, a contributor to the *1947project*, *OnBunkerHill* and *InSROLand* blogs, and history columnist for *DTLAX* magazine. Though a Louisiana oil and gas man by trade, he makes Highland Park his home.



Two residences on Bunker Hill are dwarfed by the Union Bank building behind them. 1968.