

BLOCK 8

Fairfax to Ogden on Sunset

Continuation and Contradiction of the Sunset Culture

Lyo Heng Liu

Music, film, automobile, bars & night clubs, these are the essential elements that help define the Sunset culture in Los Angeles, shaping both the ideological and physical dimension of the area.

Wisky a Go Go, Rainbow room, Tower Record - these music venues on the west of Sunset strip once propelled the rock music scene and fueled the strip's first cultural and commercial boom from the 20's to the 50's. Ever since the first film studio - Nestor Studio - founded at 6121 Sunset Blvd at the corner of Gower for the purpose of making westerns in California in 1911, the majority of American films were being produced in the Los Angeles area, and there began the legacy of Hollywood film.

Located on Sunset between Fairfax Ave and Ogden Ave, the two blocks of commercial entities, anchored by the well-known and unique Almor Wine and Spirits, capture the exciting Sunset spirit fueled by the entertainment industries. From the large scale urban spatial conditions to the intimate scale of social life on the street, this small block epitomizes the Strip's fictional and transient infused by the commercial culture, while also maintain a sense of permanency unique to a small community.



1 Almor Wine & Spirits



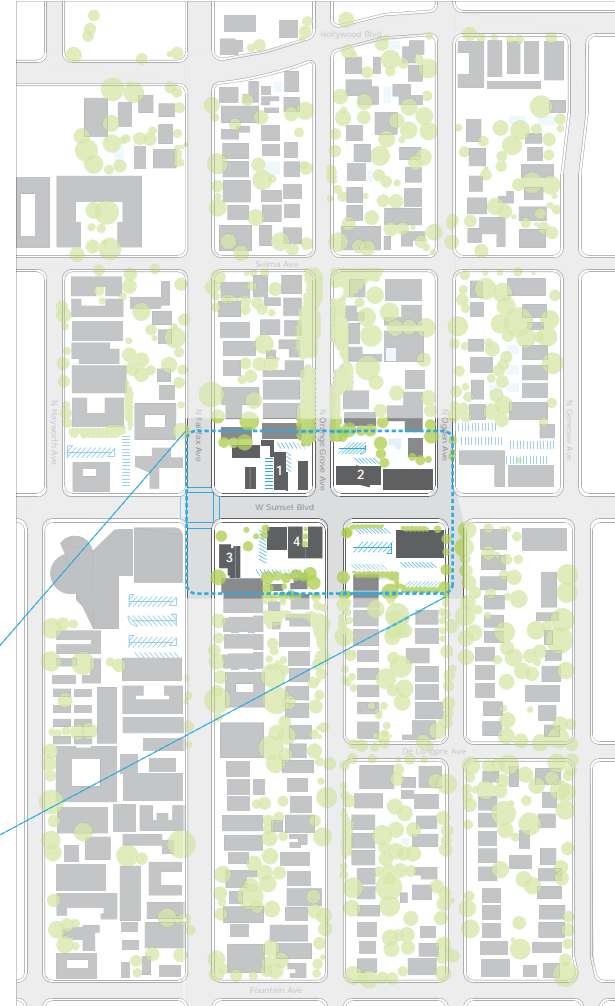
2 Blockbuster Video



3 Bristol Farms



4 Villa Rosa & Sam's Cafe



Historical Transformation

commercial culture and mobility

The evolution of the strip, just like many other cities in the U.S., has went through the transition from an agricultural community to an urban area shaped by consumer culture and mobility. Back in the 1800's, the corner of Sunset and Fairfax, where Mobil gas, The Almor store, KFC, and Blockbuster now stand, was a vast sweet pea

farm land. The subdivision, judging from the Sanborn map drawn in 1901, has just began on the south side of

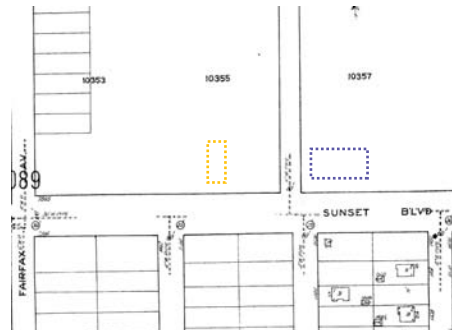


a sweet pea field located at about Fairfax and Sunset

Sunset Blvd for new residential housing, probably due to the development by the President of the Los Pacific Boulevard and Development Company H. J. Whitley, who also opened the Hollywood Hotel (the first major hotel in Hollywood) in 1902. The community then called Cahuenga (later Hollywood) was served by a highly insufficient single-track streetcar line that ran down the middle of Prospect Ave, which later was replaced by "the Hollywood Boulevard", a new trolley car line running from Los Angeles to Hollywood up Prospect Avenue (Wikipedia.com). As Tiger remembered,

there was a trolley system called the Red Car, on which he can still vividly imagine "the movement of freight and people". Ever since the establishment of the first movie studio at an unused roadhouse at 6121 Sunset Boulevard in 1911 by Centaur Co., the majority of American films were being produced in the Los Angeles area.

The prosperity brought by the rising of the film industry in Hollywood infused the strip with nightclubs, bars, and other venues for the movie stars and entertainers, which, along with the rock music scene, fueled the strip's first cultural and commercial boom in the 40's and 50's. The formation of this consumer culture, fused with the wide-spread of the automobile, transformed the strip into a vibrant commercial area of mobility. As shown in the maps as years



vacant lot

Sanborn Map 1901



vacant lot

Sanborn Map 1946



Almor Wine & Spirits Blockbuster Video

Sanborn Map 1950



Almor Wine & Spirits Blockbuster Video

2009

passed by, the residential units development around 1910's along Sunset Blvd were gradually torn down for the demand of commercial spaces, with one and only exception – the Villa Rosa, whose list of famous dwellers have made it the relic of the bygone residential era within the block.

As seen today, the commercial spaces all share a common attribute – the prominence of parking spaces. The parking lot for Almor and KFC, for example, locating to the back of the commercial space, takes over roughly one half of the lot and connects both adjacent street (Sunset & Orange Grove). The simple form of both Almor and Blockbuster buildings, their large graphics, and the orientation of the front facades toward the street, are all designed to attract and serve automobile traffic. At Almor store, the horizontal piece protruding out from the facade with “parking” sign attach to the end, signifies the parking lot at the rear, and thus epitomizes the arrangement of rear parking lot specifically designed for motorized access. This spatial typology is the typical layout for all the commercial spaces on the strip since the 50's. “Due to political pressure brought on by big oil, auto, and tire lobbyists, all the rails were torn out in the late 50's and into the 60's. And as the auto took over the southern California landscape, parking

became key to doing business on the Strip,” said Tiger. No business without sufficient among of parking – the Strip, much like the Miracle Mile on Wilshire, has become the “first real monument of the Motor Age” where the area “will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture” (Banham, 5). Indeed, the space for automobile on the urban fabric is all invasive. Right against the east wall of the Almor store stands a “crowning non sequitur” as Banham puts it – an enormous billboard sign 3 times the high of the building advertising something entirely different. The sacrifice of architectural integrity for the convenience of car drivers is one of the “collateral damage” of the war in the advertising industry. The space of virtual has taken over the real, in both physical and perceptual dimension. However, by putting the parking and the shopping on the same level, according to Banham, allow for further expansion of shopping facility as demand increased. It also made it possible to expand the shopping facility as demand increased. It also made it possible to stir up the shopping and the parking more intimately, so that “the long walk across the parking lot could end sooner” (Banham, 136).

The shaping the spatial typologies, here in block 8 as well as the Strip in general, are

dictated by the consumer culture fused with the idea of mobility.

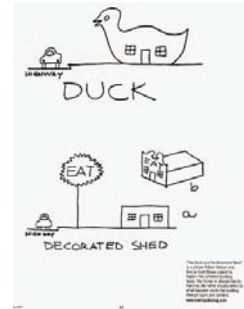
Architecture and Design

note on modernism and iconography

The Almor building was first built as a Curries Ice Cream Parlor in the early 1950's. The white, horizontal piece that protrudes out from the front facade to the east, with the "Wine" and "Parking" sign, used to hold a sugar cone with a scoop or two of ice cream on top. This ice cream cone, according to Tiger, was taller than the building itself. "Look for Curries mile high cone in the sky", an old Curries radio commercials jingle refers directly to the dominant icon, giving the store its unique branding identity. Blown up taller than the building itself, the mile-high cone is a simple yet powerful statement communicating unambiguously to those moving forty miles per hour through the city about the ice cream sold inside. In contrast with the many modern commercial buildings, these iconic signs speak with exactitude and humor about



a similar "Mile High Cone" decorating the Curries Ice Cream Parlor between Sunset Blvd and Highland Ave, 1939



Robert Venturi's "Duck and Decorated Shed"

their function. The literal translation from its function to the treatment of architecture, in a sense, resembles the Venturi duck diagram, where "the signifier (form) has certain aspects in common with the signified (content)" (Learning from Las Vegas).

However, as modern architecture (pioneered by Le Corbusier in France, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius in Germany) gained popularity in the United States due to the Bauhaus school of thought and practice after the Second World War, modernism became the dominant design solution in both institutional and commercial architecture. The new commercial standard of efficiency, driving by the rationalism of the market economy, called for a more simplistic, abstract formal language with minimal or no decoration. As marked by the transition from the Parlor shop to the Almor liquor store, the

architecture had shifted from a half-grown "duck" to a true "decorated shed", with symbolic signs that depends on "learned meanings" - instead of the icon of a large wine bottle, the large sign on top of the generic box of sheet metal and painted plaster spells "LIQUOR", while "Almor" and "WINE and SPIRITS" sign are systematically distributed on the facade. Both the scale and the placement of the signs are designed to attract drivers' attention, and this kind of abstraction or simplification of the building form for the optimization of commercial purpose is further achieved by making the front facade transparent, essentially making



the entire “shed” decorated not only with graphics, but the exact elements that are being sold inside. The extensive wine selection, ranging from great values under ten dollars to the most critically acclaimed and hard to find bottles, is constantly on display and become the spectacle itself. The de-materialization of the generic shell is especially evident at night, with the enigmatic, red neon light and spot lights bringing forth the graphics and the wines on the selves, while the building mass recedes into the shadow of darkness.

This transformation from the “decorated shed” to an almost “invisible shed” has



H & M

prelude a new movement of commercial architecture, as manifested in most of the high end fashion stores such as H & M, with its large glass curtain wall and highly reflected materials, the entire store are seemingly made out of light, glamorizing nothing but the products inside. The activity of shopping is indeed detached from the form that houses it. But the fantastic world

created by the iconography , including the numerous colorful billboards (in fact, Almor has one right next to it), have contribute to the Strip's unique characteristics, adding a layer of fictional quality to its identity.

Social life

A sense of community

“Social life on the [Sunset] street was an every day adrenalin rush of excitement,” Tiger Joe Michiels, the second generation owner of the liquor store Almor Wine & Spirits since 1950’s, offer us his unique experience in living the life and culture of the Sunset street, which were saturated with an almost fictional aura infused by the music culture, yet retain a strong sense of community and permanency.

Tiger’s life on Sunset began in back of the Coach & Horses Liquor Store 5 blocks to the east from Almor (owned by his father), next to

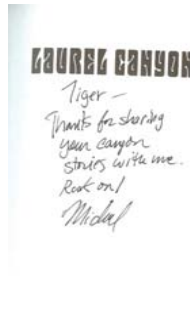


The 3rd Generation of Michiels family’s Almor with the graphic “WIND and SPIRITS” designed by tiger’s mother

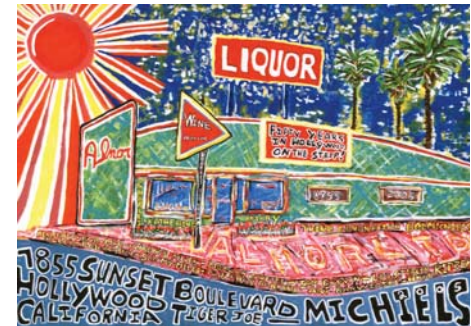
which Tiger’s uncle Joe owned the Coach & Horses Bar. Catering to Hollywood celebrity clientèle and Los Angeles community in general, stocking for local bars and hotels, and delivery service has brought Tiger into close contact

with many musicians through parties in the 60’s and 70’s. Some of his unique memories with the Sunset music scenes later became one of the resources for Michael Walker’s book *Laurel Canyon: The Inside Story of Rock-and-Roll’s Legendary Neighborhood* - a vivid account of the emergence of rock culture in the mid-1960s near Sunset blvd.

“Other than all the clubs on the strip,” Tiger wrote in one of his personal correspondence to Walker, “gathering of the bands often took place at the Hyatt and Thunderbird, to party hearty into the wee hours.” (tigerjoe.com) The Beatles, The Doors, Led Zeppelin, Little Richard - all these names that mentioned in Tiger’s letter reminds us the wild antics carried out by some famous rock band members that gave the Hyatt hotel its nickname “Riot Hyatt”. Creativity and



Thank note from Micheal to Michiels



Almor: Fifty Years in Hollywood on the Strip! by Tiger Joe Michiels

sentimentality, rock and alcoholism, spark of genius and wild behaviors have interwoven into the fiction of the social life imbued by the rock culture on Sunset. Its surrealism can only achieve a certain degree of reality through personal account such as Tiger’s. This kind of glamorous and fictional quality of the music era, whether a coincident or not, is also reflected in a painting Tiger did of his own Almor store. Painted in bold strokes with passionate, vivid colors, the almost cartoon like graphic, rather than a realistic portrait of the store, is an highly romanticize, atmospheric rendering of the store fuses with family life and the hip and glamorous culture of Sunset as a continuation of the rock music tradition. In this painting, two seemingly contradicting ideas coexist - the fictional, transient quality of the city life on Sunset (as

conveyed through the atmosphere and strokes) and the sense of permanency (conveyed through the text "Fifty Years in Hollywood on the Strip!" and the inclusion of Tiger's family member's names as part of the compositional elements). In essence, this painting is a surreal portrait that captures the real spirit of the life on Sunset - it is a place where diverse, even contradicting ideologies and conditions coalesce - "leisure, family life and union with nature" - these essential elements that define "suburban ideal" (Fishman, 157) is cherished so much by Tiger that they become the central elements in his painting, yet his life and business also evolve around the music scenes where people and musicians come and go - a social life that's intrinsically provisional. As if under the urge



the bottle

of preserving some sense of permanency out of the transient, Tiger, when leaving the Hyatt one morning, picked up one of the broken Moët et Chandon, Cuvée Dom Perignon Champagne bottles

(threw over the balcony by either Led Zeppelin or one of the Beatles) whose bottom survived the fall. He cleaned up the jagged edges and turned it into a flower pot. Tiger still owns it today.

Film Stars

Romanticism / De-Romanticism

Located in the heart of Hollywood made famous by its world renowned film industry, the Strip has fostered a “premier” collection of boutiques, restaurants, bars, and nightclubs that attract movie stars besides rock stars and entertainers. With their sky-high price range and extremely limited access, their “premier” quality is defined by the high degree of exclusiveness. Only the rich and famous have the privilege to enjoy the ultimate seclusion and luxury, much like the celebrities who live in the nearby Hollywood Hills or Laurel Canyon right above the Strip. These highly exclusive zones and neighborhood, visible yet inaccessible, help maintain and perpetuate the fantasy and fictional quality of the celebrities and film industry.

However, in this small zone where a unique sense of community is fostered, even the fictional obtain and degree of realism. Besides the Blockbuster rent store which allows customer total freedom to embrace themselves with the latest films, news of movie stars either from digital media or word-of-mouth, the Bristol Farms across the street has become a celebrities magnet either by its prime location, unique architecture, or successful marketing campaign as

promoting healthy lifestyle with its organic food and best service.

Here, Jonny Depp can be seen in casual dress, strolling with shopping cart with grocery and his young daughter getting a “free ride”. And Cameron Diaz in plain white tan top, blue jeans and flip-flop (although they

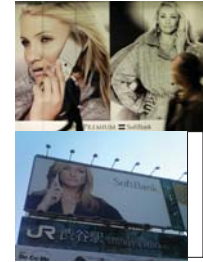


Jonny Depp with his daughter

might cost more than the Bristol Farms staff's one week salary, the point is that you can't really tell) is shopping for the organic grocery or flowers just like thousands of other shoppers. Cameron Diaz as a neighbor is standing right here in front of Bristol Farms, frozen in this moment, toying with people's popular perception of her media existence as the dangerously sexual Charlie's Angel, or the simulacrum whose close-up shots with SoftBand phone perpetuates in the urban media-scape of Tokyo in the form of large scale billboards and wallpapers, glamorous and desirable, yet remote and unapproachable. Close to the vibrant Strip



Cameron Diaz at Bristol Farms



Cameron Diaz on Display, Tokyo

yet maintaining its unique domestic quality in the urban context thanks for the Almor store, Villa Rosa apartment, the small Sam's cafe, and Bristol Farms, this is the place where the most natural and casual aspects of life can occur without fear or anxiety. It is a free zone where even the “rich and famous” can be free to be themselves for a while besides home, simply enjoying the common pleasure of domestic shopping.