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Homeless

The twisted odyssey of the displaced Santa Monica 'shotgun house' is the story of troubled preservation efforts writ small. Very small. But sometimes even a shack is worth saving.

By Fred Schruers

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It was just a pamphlet on a card table. The table sat under a tent at the fair that the City of Santa Monica held this spring at Clover Park, and the pamphlet was the catalog of the preservation-minded Santa Monica Conservancy, picked up randomly for a quick look.

Buried within it, amid the more celebrated buildings such as the Lido Hotel, was a structure whose knock-kneed stance and rectangular-heading-for-rhomboidal shape was hardly enhanced by a dingy black-and-white photo. Inelegantly titled "Shotgun House," it loomed like an auk awaiting extinction. A report I would eventually read described it with an auctioneer's detachment: "an extremely narrow one story board and batten [read: flimsy] cottage with a front gabled roof [a witch's hat of a thing] . . . one room wide and three rooms deep, without a connecting hallway . . . a simple vernacular structure" with slender porch posts supporting a shed roof and stick balustrade.

The house was even less of a pinup than it had been when built in the 1890s, probably thrown in as a free extra for the \$100 plot of land it sat on. It was part of the domain created by Abbot Kinney, founder not just of Venice but of the section of Santa Monica still known as Ocean Park, and his partner. Research shows that it likely arrived on a flatcar. As the report dishearteningly continues: "Until recently, the porch posts terminated in delicately scrolled brackets, now lost to vandals since photographed in 1998."

One couldn't have known all that from the pamphlet. The paragraph underneath the photo noted that the house had been moved from its original site at 2712 2nd St., between Hill Street and Ashland Avenue in Santa Monica, to make room for a two-story, generic Spanish-style house perched on a two-car garage. Well, I thought, money talks and conservation walks, even in the crunchy-granola enclave that is Santa Monica. The house seemed readily classifiable as someone else's problem. I flipped a few more pages.

And then flipped back for another look.

I had not realized that the structure in question stood perhaps 500 yards from me, just beyond the Santa Monica Airport runways, where it was planted at the edge of a herd of Japanese imports stored there by a dealership. It had been jacked up atop steel girders and hauled there early on the morning of July 27, 2002, amid much celebrating by a coalition of local preservationists. Nor did the paragraph point out that it was once again threatened by the wrecking ball—actually, you could take it down to kindling in 20 minutes with a good-sized crowbar—unless what's left of that preservationist flock can convince the City Council by Oct. 1 that they have the resources to move it and support it into the future.

The city has suggested a temporary home, at the former Fisher Lumber site, but first it needs long-delayed

paperwork from the owners of record, the Ocean Park Community Organization. With just two City Council meetings scheduled before the target date, on which the city will begin clearing the way for an expansive park on the airport tract where the house now sits, the community organization is quickly running out of time. Barring a deep-pocketed angel—what's needed is some \$7,500 to move the house again, or many times that to both move and refurbish it—the relic stands every chance of being bulldozed out of existence.

I tucked the pamphlet in a pocket and wandered the fairgrounds with my 2-year-old. But I started making calls the next day.

What made this house so oddly endearing? Its very ungainliness is part of its underlying importance. It's the last of a breed that once defined Santa Monica—not the upscale "shopper's paradise" that now draws herds of tourists, but the beach resort that the town still purports to be, a retreat from the baking settlements deeper in the Los Angeles basin.

There were once about 200 such cottages dotting the sandy sprawl that was more of a frontier town than a magnet for pricey boutiques. Stand where the house once stood, just a block from the grinding commercial panoply that is Main Street, and you feel an almost haunting reverberation of what had been a bucolic retreat. This patch of turf wasn't always the sole province of the rich—in fact, some of the house's occupants over the years may have labored on the local railroad, or in a stable or bakery or billiards hall. Luck (or impecunious owners) kept it nearly untouched by time, says Landmarks Commission chair pro tem Nina Fresco, who was one of the shotgun house's boosters even before holding that commission post. Others that resembled it have had so many additions that you can glimpse their origin, she says, "only if you squint."

Venerable buildings throughout California sporadically get jacked up and rescued—Jack Barber of American Heavy Moving & Rigging Co., who moved the shotgun house, recalls moving a schoolhouse in Newhall for the state Mountain Recreation and Conservation Authority. And Fresco notes that the enclave of Avalon on Catalina Island has been spared because of its strict development guidelines.

But seldom does a community get such a chance to show its old-school populism. City Councilman Kevin McKeown is generally acknowledged to be the most preservation-minded of that seven-member group, and he has seen two buildings that he argued to save sent to their doom (one while he was on a summer break) during the last 90 days. If the council comes to rule on the shotgun house once more, he'll be able to argue that they already made steps to move it once. Whether they feel an ethical obligation to do so again remains to be seen. "Dedicated activists have made us even more aware of the importance of preserving representations of Santa Monica's history such as the shotgun house," McKeown says. "Humble home though it may have been, it once housed a beach town being born."

He's echoed by Fresco: "We [Santa Monicans] are not just the mansions on La Mesa Drive," she says. "We are also the shotgun houses."

"And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack," runs the memorable line from the Talking Heads' "Once in a Lifetime." If any Santa Monican is at least figuratively doing that, it's Rick Laudati, the longtime mainstay of efforts to preserve the house. I met him one August day at the airport to have a look at the place.

At first glance he brings to mind a second lyric, this one from David Bowie: "He looked a lot like Che Guevara." A music-biz veteran, Laudati is now a silver-haired version of the rebel leader, and a significant force on the Shotgun House Committee. From the time 2712 2nd St. came onto the preservationist radar, he has led the effort to save it, not without controversy.

Although any threatened structure older than 50 years was automatically put up for review by the Landmarks Commission—an ordinance sponsored by McKeown has since reduced that age threshold to 40

years—2712 almost escaped the preservationists' notice. Once they got on the case, their spirited advocacy swayed both the Landmarks Commission and the council to lend at least half-hearted support, which ultimately kept the house alive.

The Landmarks Commission can merely advise the city staff and council. So it's impressive that they've more than doubled the tempo of landmarked structures since 2001, designating since then 27 of the 60-odd buildings now under city protection, matching up fairly well with the 87 that history-conscious Santa Barbara has specified. But compared to Santa Monica's two "structures of merit," Santa Barbara lists 120, with a bank of more than 500 potential additions carefully catalogued on what urban historian Jake Jacobus calls "a watchdog list." (McKeown recently won passage of funding to similarly build up Santa Monica's roster of potential landmarks.)

In the case of the shotgun house, the city twice has worked overtime to find it another location, leaving to Laudati and the Ocean Park Community Organization the harder task—finding the financial means. If the house is to survive, it will have to be saved by its own DNA—namely what former city historic resources consultant Janet Tearnen calls its significance in terms of "its age, architectural type and integrity," adding that it "deserves the highest level of local protection." Chris Gray, then with the Getty Conservation Institute, consulted for a report on the possible consequences of razing the house and called it "an architectural gem. . . . To even consider demolition of such a significant structure would in any other country be scandalous."

In these parts, though, we have an irresistible impulse to "improve" on all that came before. The shotgun house had been in the hands of a Venice family for more than four decades before being sold to a buyer with a San Luis Obispo address, who teamed with local architect S. Forest King to propose replacing the house. They were delayed by city planners long enough to get fed up, although they had been granted a certificate of economic hardship, clearing the way for its demolition. They sold the property to Braden Powell, a production manager. Because the original environmental impact report and the economic hardship certificate were still valid, his plan for a two-story Spanish-style dwelling was approved "over the counter," without a second trip to the Landmarks Commission. With the owners unable to find a permanent spot for the shotgun house, a demolition permit was issued.

Laudati and his coalition moved quickly. After some desperate politicking, they had the necessary permit to move the house. But by the time Powell arrived that day, his wreckers had already torn off the bathroom/kitchen addition and done some bumptious work inside. Finally, Powell deeded what remained of the house to the committee for a dollar.

Local architect Mario Fonda-Bonardi aptly said at the time of the first near-demolition that the house was hanging not just by a thread but by a spider's web—because of a web's tensile strength and the way any movement on the case reverberates via jungle telegraph to every corner of the city. So Laudati may have some reason to show a quiet confidence.

Standing in the middle of the dusty tract that is soon to be set upon by bulldozers and graders, he hints that an angel, possibly corporate, will emerge in time to make the save. We examine the small, sad rooms of the house, darkened by boarded-up windows and long ago stripped of its gingerbread. The key proposition, touted by both the city and the house's adherents, was that it be moved just blocks down Main Street to the city-run Community Gardens at Hollister, where it could have occupied part of the parking lot and served as a shed and haven. There's marginally more enthusiasm for that idea than when it was first pitched to the gardeners several years ago. Says Landmarks Commission chair Roger Genser, the effect then "was like swatting a hornet's nest with a baseball bat."

When I told Santa Monica Conservancy head Joel Brand that the structure as pictured in his organization's brochure looked almost like an eager if worried mutt hoping to be adopted from the pound, he said with empathy: "And if somebody doesn't adopt it, it's probably going to be put to sleep."

Since then, I've tried not to brood about the shotgun house. After all, the city's acrobatic efforts to save other structures have occasionally put those buildings in an altered state. A cottage that was a lonely outpost amid the apartments and condos on 5th Street was saved by repositioning it closer to the street so that a new condo unit could be wedged in behind it. In early August, the City Council gave its blessings for a plan for a 75-room hotel on Ocean Avenue, a project that necessitates pushing a Victorian house and a Spanish Colonial Revival building closer to the street, with the new hotel nestled behind. They worked within the recommendation of the Landmarks Commission that the historic structures and the new hotel "show only subtle differences in design."

Buckle those grandkids up—they're going to the theme park.

No need for a long drive. It's right around the corner.

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