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Councilmember Traci Park, City of Los Angeles
Council District 11, City Hall Office
200 N Spring St., #410
Los Angeles, CA 90012

10 September 2023

Re: LADBS Demolition Permit Process and Historic Structures

Dear Councilmember Park,

As one member of the preservation community, let me say how impressed I was by your bold and swift action to halt the impending demolition of the Marilyn Monroe house located within your district. We have lost so many historic structures of note throughout our city, often due to a lack of public knowledge of impending demolition and government indifference.

Richard Schave and Kim Cooper of Esotouric asked me to jot down some thoughts as to how the public notification process could be better addressed by the city. Both Richard and Kim know of my experience with the LADBS and OHR in response to the illegal remodeling work conducted at the Pig'n Whistle Café on Hollywood Blvd. My research found serious compliance issues that had been overlooked by LADBS inspectors. Sadly, no corrective action has been taken to date.

In the paragraphs that follow, let me propose some suggestions as to how the LADBS demolition permit process could be improved. My suggestions are aimed at making the public knowledge of an impending demolition permit more widely known and improving LADBS' handling of such permits with respect to historic or culturally important buildings. My suggestions follow three main themes as such:

- Revise LACM 91.106.4.5.1 to improve the public notification process related to the issuance of LADBS demolition permits.

- Improve the LADBS website (or provide a new website) so that people can easily find both pending and issued demolition permits for historic buildings.
- Order LADBS to stop being complicit in the destruction of historic buildings when they fail to provide timely notice to other city entities as required by law.

A. Public Notification of Demolition

The requirement to notify by mail abutting properties, and to post signage regarding pending demolition of a building 45 years or older, was enacted by City Ordinance 183312 in 2014.

Added detail specifying the size and type of sign to be posted took effect in early 2020 with the approval of Ordinance 186484. The official requirements for obtaining a demolition permit for historic and cultural buildings are found in LAMC 91.106.4.5.

If the intent of the notification requirements is historic preservation (as implied by the age criteria), why limit the notification to abutting properties? The abutting properties are most impacted by the physical demolition, but the emotional and cultural impact of the demolition goes far beyond. Historic and cultural buildings can connect people located throughout the local neighborhood, the city, the State, the Nation, and the world. A notification limited to only the abutting properties fails to acknowledge, and also hides, the potential significance of the building to those who are impacted culturally, historically.

In addition, with regards to a neighborhood undergoing large-scale demolition, what use is mailing a notice to an occupant in an abutting property when that occupant has already been displaced? Or mailing notice to an address where the owner has already evicted the tenants? In this situation, there is no public to notify because the adjacent neighbors have already been removed, the neighborhood destroyed. Thus, the notification serves no purpose.

The posting of a notice solely at the physical site is inadequate for similar reasons. For example, the Marilyn Monroe house is located at the end of a cul-de-sac. The site is secluded and out of the way. No one walking along, or driving down, S Carmelina Ave would see a sign posted at the end of W 5th Helena Dr. According to Richard and Kim, people visiting the site reported that no

sign is posted. Was one put up and then removed? To what extent did the LADBS verify sign placement?

We know that the current notification requirements are inadequate since it took an emergency action by the City Council to halt demolition. A robust and effective notification process would provide all potentially impacted stakeholders sufficient time to respond and act. To provide timely and effective notice, the following actions are proposed:

- The party seeking a demolition permit should post public notice in the local press. The posting should run for a minimum of one week and serve as an announcement to the public that a demolition permit application is being filed. Proof of publication should be required by LADBS as part of the demolition preinspection and posting application.
- Mail notification should include all property tenants and building owners located within 500 feet or more of the site. Notice should be mailed out at least 30 days prior to the approval of a demolition permit for a non-historic building; 90 days prior for a building 45 years or older.
- The LADBS should include a list of all demolition permit applications in the bi-weekly entitlement reports. These reports are sent out to interested parties and they often contain information about pre-demolition inspections. Expanding coverage to include permit applications would provide the public with useful and timely data.

B. Improve the LADBS Website

The LABDS maintains a website where one can obtain current building permits and their status, filed complaints and their status, and historical building permits. The website provides access to the different data systems used by LADBS to track and manage projects. Several other websites provide access to building permit data via a geographical interface.

One key feature, and potential limitation with regards to preservation use, is that all these sites rely upon the building address as the starting point. While this makes perfect sense for the

LADBS and the permit applicant, preservationists need to know that is happening within their sphere of concern. The current website design is useful only after the fact, after the public learns that a given address is slated for demolition. If such notice happens at the end of the 30-day posting period, there may be too little time left to act.

A very useful feature would be a webpage that would allow for searching all demolition permits filed within a given geographic area and/or range of dates. Users would be able to set alerts based on screening criteria such as distance of demolition site from their home address or the location of all pending demolition sites within a given definable area. It would also be useful to be able to select between demolition permits for all buildings and just historic buildings.

Another issue regarding the LADBS website is data quality. Very often data may be missing, incomplete, or out-of-date. When an application or permit is approved, little effort may be made to go back and update the data fields. Below is the online pre-inspection record for the Marilyn Monroe house (Permit No. 23019-30000-03016; accessed 10 Sept 2023).

12305 W 5TH HELENA DR 90049

Pre - Inspection only, not a permit for construction

Application / Permit	23019-30000-03016
Plan Check / Job No.	B23WL01942
Group	Building
Type	Bldg-Demolition
Sub-Type	1 or 2 Family Dwelling
Primary Use	()
Work Description	****DPI AND POSTING****TO DEMO EXISTING SINGLE FAMILY RESIDENCE, AND DETACHED STRUCTURES, TO CLEAR LOT
Permit Issued	No
Current Status	Completed on 08/03/2023

Permit Application Status History

No Data Available.

Permit Application Clearance Information

Demo Preinspection	Not Cleared	7/31/2023	Department of Building and Safety
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Contact Information

No Data Available.

The status is listed as “Completed on 08/03/2023.” The demo preinspection status is listed as “Not Cleared, 7/31/2023.” This is confusing and conflicting. The status of the application can not be completed until the preinspection has cleared. Either the preinspection entry is out of date or the status entry is in error. I also note that no contact information is presented. Someone filed the application, and the information is available, but the LADBS did not enter this data into the system.

C. Require LABDS to Provide Timely Information to City Entities

By law, the LADBS is required to notify via mail the local Council District Office and the Certified Neighborhood Council Office of all demolition notices for buildings 45 years or older within their respective jurisdiction. Kim Cooper informs me, and she confirmed, that no such demolition notice was received by the Brentwood Community Council. Members first learned of the approved demolition permit for the Marilyn Monroe house via news reports.

And if notification did occur, of what importance would the address 12305 W 5th Helena Dr have compared to any other demolition notice received for a similar building? How would a staff member know that this house deserves special attention? The current law does not require LADBS to conduct any form of assessment regarding historic importance.

At a minimum, the permit application should require the applicant to conduct a preliminary assessment of building history. The applicant should be required to review available LADBS permits and submit data regarding year of construction, architect, builder, and any character-defining features. An online search should be conducted to identify either major events or owners/occupants of note associated with the address.

Within a few minutes of performing a Google search, I found that 12305 W Helena Dr is listed on the Historic Places LA website. The address is given a classification code of QQQ (may be eligible, more research required). Such a finding should raise a flag that the LADBS should involve other city agencies such as the Office of Historic Resources. For the Marilyn Monroe property, no outside agency was contacted and asked to provide clearance.

LADBS' reluctance to reach out to others also fails to utilize and take advantage of the large network of citizens who are interested and most willing to help. Often, members of Hollywood Heritage, The Art Deco Society, and the Los Angeles Conservancy assist OHR in the preparation of historic documentation. For any building 45 years or older, OHR should be included in the clearance process.

To not overwhelm the limited staff at OHR, I propose that an outreach program solicit input from all interested stakeholders. The same website that provides public notice of demolition permits could include a citizens' forum. The forum would provide a place for people to collect and post relevant information for a given address. Then, upon a clearly defined closing date, OHR would review the data and render their decision to LADBS regarding clearance.

In Conclusion

Councilmember Park, I hope you agree with me that the City of Los Angeles can do a much better job in managing the notification process associated with the demolition of potentially historic buildings. Nothing proposed in this letter should be an undue burden to the City or permit applicant. Buildings found worthy of historic nomination must still go through the same nomination and approval process. All that changes is the dysfunctional nature of the current system where concerned citizens have to rely upon emergency actions by city council to halt a mad rush towards demolition.

I hope you find my suggestions of value and I thank you for your help in addressing an issue of importance to the preservation community. I would be happy to discuss this matter with your planning staff, and I'd like to have Kim and Richard present as well. The three of us have been discussing this list of notification improvements for awhile, as well as other issues related to historic building preservation and the threat posed by illegal demolition and construction.