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Reporting from the Marilyn Monroe House Landmark Reversal Bench Trial

 ESOTOURIC'S SECRET LOS ANGELES
AUG 28, 2025

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Gentle reader,

We spent the morning in Superior Court Judge James C. Chalfant’s courtroom in Downtown L.A., perched on the edge of our seats as the fate of Marilyn Monroe’s lovely Brentwood residence was fought over by the property owners’ lawyer Peter Sheridan and Deputy City Attorneys Lucy Atwood and Matthew Meehan.

It was nearly two nail-biting hours of arguments for why the judge ought to toss out the June 2024 landmark designation and reactivate the demolition permit rendered invalid when councilmember Traci Park **initiated** a successful Historic Cultural Monument designation.

This is our 11th newsletter update on the many twists in the matter, including one extremely expensive and stressful **subpoena** for deposition and documents, and you can get up to speed with the timeline **here**.

For those eager to know if the house is safe or not, unfortunately there is no answer yet. With a case that is likely to be appealed no matter which way he rules, Judge Chalfant is taking his time to carefully consider everything in the record and the oral arguments.

At the close of today’s hearing, the judge stated that he anticipates making





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Today's hearing was primarily an opportunity for Peter Sheridan to make a series of arguments based on his objections to the record, seeking to undermine the City's case and to telegraph his intention, should he lose, of appealing to a higher court on grounds that the City's [Cultural Heritage Ordinance](#) is unconstitutional. (Yikes!)

Among the arguments floated today:

- There were still many required inspections to be checked off before any demolition permit would be granted, so Councilmember Park should not have invoked an emergency clause, but simply called for a regularly agendized vote.



- A convoluted question of if the landmarking process was a *quasi-judicial* or a *quasi-legislative* act, and if the former, a long argument that Councilmember Park's clear bias in favor of protecting this particular house rendered her unsuitable to play any part in votes on the matter. [City Council is certainly a legislative, biased body, since its members run on platforms stating what they believe in.] Park was also mocked for her [retro glam appearance](#) on the day she introduced the landmarking motion; it seemed sweet and respectful to us.
- An attempt to understand what role, if any, is played by the consultant written, outdated, incomplete [Survey L.A.](#) database and its various criteria

for determining if a structure qualifies as a landmark under a specific context statement. Specifically, if Survey L.A. states that the home of a performer ought to be their longtime residence while they are engaged in significant creative work, does that mean that by dying six months after moving in, Marilyn Monroe invalidated 12305 5th Helena Drive as a potential landmark? [Deputy City Attorney Lucy Atwood struggled to explain what Survey L.A. is for, but did assert that it was not the law and could be used or ignored as City Council saw fit as they applied the actual law, the Cultural Heritage Ordinance. We really wished that [Mike Callahan](#), who has been reporting on [Survey L.A.'s limitations](#), had been at this hearing to unpack this section afterwards.]

Marilyn Monroe's Historic Brentwood Home Saved From Demolition



- Citation of various case law involving governmental and regulatory entities taking material of value, like for instance [toxic chemicals used for pool cleaning](#), without a formal hearing. The repeated mention of pool chemicals reminded us that the property owners have violated the Cultural Heritage Ordinance by filling in Monroe's swimming pool sans permits. That code violation complaint, oddly, has been [closed](#).
- An allegation that the [motion](#) seeking to landmark Monroe's house was so simple that the couple of days allegedly spent by CD 11 staff preparing it must have been a cover for the councilmember lobbying her peers to support the vote.
- Another allegation of some alleged impropriety related to the volunteer author of the nomination Heather Goers wanting the nomination to succeed, and learning while working on it, of a job opportunity at the City's Department of Cultural Affairs venue Hollyhock House, which she later got. The judge saw nothing untoward in this, and observed that of course someone who volunteered their time on such a project would care about the result.
- A wild, unsupported claim that a previous councilmember initiated nomination for a celebrity owned home, the [Bob and Dolores Hope Estate](#) in Toluca Lake, had been rejected because, like Marilyn Monroe's home, it

was invisible to the public behind tall fences and trees. The **actual reason** was that the Cultural Heritage Commission believed it had been too heavily remodeled by Dolores Hope, and their daughter made an effective plea that it not be encumbered by landmark status, as a quick sale to fund the family's charitable trust had been her parents' wish.

- And finally, the rather unsavory, sad assertion that during the time she owned the house, Marilyn Monroe was so wacked out of her mind on drugs that she was no longer a creative artist of merit, so the house ought not to be preserved in her honor.

Recess came mercifully after a solid hour and 45 minutes of arguing, and the matter is now in the hands of Judge Chalfant.

As he weighs the merits of the case, we wish the Judge a clear mind and good spirits as he makes a ruling that is of enormous interest not just to those who love and care about Marilyn Monroe's legacy, but the continued application of L.A.'s 63-year-old Cultural Heritage Ordinance, one of the first and the strongest in the United States, and one by which numerous other cities have crafted their own ordinances.

Something that gnawed at us, through the whole hearing, was a questionable statement asserted as fact that the City never challenged: repeated statements from Peter Sheridan that all interested parties had had a full 30 days in which to challenge the proposed demolition, but nobody did so until after the permit was issued.

And yes, thirty days did pass between when the application for demolition was filed with LADBS and the permit was issued—which under ordinary circumstances would leave the owners free to do anything they wanted to do with their property.

What appears to be missing between those dates is the very **reason** for a 30 day delay when buildings older than 45 years might be demolished: an opportunity for community notification, so concerned citizens can choose to do something about it.

The mysterious nature of the transaction only fueled speculation about the new owner's plans. Carolyn Jordan, the chair of the Brentwood Community Council, a neighborhood volunteer group, said that when word of demolition began to spread, "all hell broke loose."

"How could someone take down one of the most famous houses on the planet that we have right here in Brentwood?" said Ms. Jordan, who said she fielded dozens of messages from concerned neighbors. "Part of what's really sad is that the prior owners really revered the fact that it had been Marilyn Monroe's residence."

Ms. Jordan said the community group was supposed to receive notice of demolition permits in Brentwood that are under review.

...of demolition permits in Brentwood that are under review,
but that never happened.

“Best I can tell is this caught everyone off guard,” she said.

In *The New York Times* on 9/13/2023, Carolyn Jordan of the Brentwood Community Council **said** her organization did not receive the legally required notice from LADBS and everyone was flipping out about it. (Parenthetically, BCC would later submit a letter **opposing** landmark status, and **Jordan's law firm** Glaser Weil soon got a new client: the property owners seeking their demolition permit.)

While the CD 11 City Council office should have received the same notice, staff of councilmember Traci Park stated that they were caught off guard when the pending demolition was reported by *The New York Post* and concerned citizens started begging the councilmember to do something about it.



And although the house is a tourist attraction where most visitors take a selfie against the wall, it appears that not one single fan who **visited** over the course of 30 summer days saw a prominently posted NOTICE OF DEMOLITION sign. A preservation pal stopped by the day before the council vote, and there was no sign posted then.

LADBS *does* send out notices of potential demolitions—inspired by this case, we've been using public records requests to obtain the copies circulated to City Council offices for more than a year, and have identified a number of good houses that might be moved to Altadena rather than demolished. Yet somehow, this world famous, \$8 Million property that quietly sold off market slipped through the civic cracks, leaving the Brentwood community, the councilmember and millions of fans in the dark until an anonymous L.A. angel tipped off *The New York Post* and saved the

house.

It's a really big deal that nobody knew the clock was ticking. But the City refuses to make this serious and concerning lapse by one of its own Departments a part of its case, even though it would strengthen the City's argument to state that there was truly an emergency that required the councilmember to act in haste.

With the former GM of LADBS presently **serving Federal time** for public corruption, we think even the appearance of impropriety around required notification ought to have triggered an internal investigation, and some public explanation by the City.

And finally, you'd assume, with a lawsuit concerning one of the most famous women in history, that the courtroom would be packed with interested citizens and reporters. But the only observers present were ourselves, recently departed Cultural Heritage Commissioner and architectural historian **Diane Kanner**, property owner Roy Bank and Bloomberg Law reporter Maia Spoto.



We spoke with Spoto after the hearing, and she gave us the last word in her **thoughtful piece**:

The hearing today—particularly, the city's "lack of granularity" in responses to procedural questions—"showed that the Department of Planning, the Office of Historic Resources, and City Council as a whole do not take historic preservation as a public policy seriously," Schave said.

However, "there could still be a happy ending," Cooper added, if the owners decide to relocate the house, regardless of how the court rules.

So think good thoughts for the preservation ordinance and Marilyn Monroe's lovely Brentwood residence over the weekend, and stay tuned for the final ruling as soon as we can get—and skim—it!



Saturday's tour is a ramble around the city's oldest cemetery, Evergreen in Boyle Heights. We've had the chance to consult the founding documents, and uncover a rich history of how Evergreen evolved and grew with Los Angeles itself. The day will be warm, but we know where the shade trees are, and you can't beat the post-tour dining options. Join us, do!

Yours for Los Angeles,

Kim & Richard

Esotouric

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Our work—leading tours and historic preservation and cultural landmark advocacy—is about building a bridge between Los Angeles' past and its future, and not allowing the corrupt, greedy, inept and misguided players who hold present power to destroy the city's soul and body. If you'd like to support our efforts to be the voice of places worth preserving, we have a [tip jar](#), vintage Los Angeles [webinars](#) available to [stream](#), in-person [tours](#) and a [souvenir shop](#) you can browse in. We've also got recommended reading bookshelves [on Amazon](#) and the [Bookshop](#) indie bookstore site. And did you know we offer [private versions](#) of our walking tours for groups big or small? Or just share this link with other people who care.

UPCOMING WALKING TOURS

• [Evergreen Cemetery, 1877](#) (8/30) • [Raymond Chandler's Noir Downtown](#)