

Cultural, architectural destruction in the Los Angeles fires

Hong Jian
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The fires that have been engulfing Los Angeles for more than two weeks have become the costliest such disaster in US history. They have killed 28 people to date and caused an estimated \$275 billion in long-term economic damage, with only a small portion covered by insurance. The blazes have destroyed over 12,000 structures and burned more than 60 square miles in and around Los Angeles, leaving devastation in their wake.

The various fires have resulted in the evacuation of 200,000 people and the ruin of entire neighborhoods, reducing thousands to homelessness, as well as wiping out hundreds of small businesses. Generally speaking, “this disaster, like most other disasters, impacts the vulnerable most,” as one expert noted this week. The calamity itself is the product of climate change, government neglect and the anarchy of the “free enterprise” system.

Southern California, in addition to being a center of the film and television industry, is a major focal point of cultural creation and exhibition. It is also home to remarkable recreational sites, tourist attractions and parks.

Inevitably, given the fierce, uncontrollable intensity of the fires, recent weeks have seen countless individual works of art consigned to smoking rubble. The conflagrations have collectively leveled numerous heritage sites, libraries, churches and buildings designed by renowned architects.

The WSWS has already taken note of the loss of more than 100,000 scores, in addition to the complete musical and personal archive of 20th century composer Arnold Schoenberg, “a profound cultural blow.”

One of the cultural venues seriously damaged by the fires is the Zorthian Ranch in Altadena, which was a 48-acre historic artist commune. It was founded in the 1940s by Armenian-American artist Jirayr Zorthian. The Zorthian family escaped the Armenian genocide and emigrated to the US in 1923.

The ranch’s website explains:

On the morning of January 8, the Eaton Fire blazed rapidly through much of Altadena and surrounding areas, destroying many homes and businesses, and disrupting the lives of all in its path.

Although an impressive and valiant effort was made to save the Zorthian Ranch, almost all of it was destroyed in the fire. Thankfully, every individual that resided there as docents, builders, artists and collaboratives made it to safety through this catastrophic event. The many animals up there were ushered to safe places.

Two main houses remain. The community spaces, the rest of the property, as well as the historical archives with Jirayr Zorthian’s artwork are now gone.

The family is now attempting to raise the funds necessary to keep the place running as an artistic community.

Also destroyed were several architectural and historical landmarks, such as the Zane Grey Estate in Altadena, designed by Myron Hunt and Elmer Grey in 1907. Elmer Grey was a prominent American architect in the early 20th century, who designed numerous landmarks in southern California, including the Beverly Hills Hotel, the Huntington Art Gallery, the Pasadena Playhouse and Wattles Mansion. The author Zane Grey (no relation), well-known for his works in the Western genre, bought the Altadena estate in 1920. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002.

The Will Rogers Ranch House, designed in 1926 by A.C. Semrow, and which became part of a state park in 1944 (and was listed as well on the National Register of Historic Places), was also lost in the Palisades fire. Will Rogers (1879-1935) was a prominent American

vaudeville performer, writer and humorist-social commentator. He was hugely popular at the time of his death in a plane crash.

The Will Rogers Ranch Foundation website carried this message:

We are deeply saddened to share that both the historic home of Will Rogers and “the Barn that Jokes Built” have both fallen victim to the Palisades Fire.

“While the loss to the Will Rogers Ranch is devastating, it pales in comparison to the loss of the property and businesses and, more importantly, the lives of those in the surrounding area.” -Jennifer Rogers, Rogers family representative. ... This loss is immeasurable, but we remain committed to preserving Will Rogers’s legacy for future generations.

Other architecturally significant buildings destroyed include the Pasadena Waldorf School/Scripps Hall, designed by Charles W. Buchanan in 1904 and also listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1999.

Park Planned Homes, which was one of the first modernist housing tracts in the world, built in 1948 by Gregory Ain was also burned. According to one commentator, it “appears 20 of the 28 houses were lost. ... This project (1946-48) consisted of 28 houses and a landscape design by Garrett Eckbo. It was of high significance to both architectural history and landscape history.” (solarhousehistory.com) Ain was a left-wing figure, hounded by the FBI in the 1950s.

The Palisades Business Block, built in 1924 by Clifton Nourse, was just recently restored before being leveled by the fires. It was listed by Los Angeles as Historic-Cultural Monument #276. The Andrew McNally House, built in 1887 by Frederick L. Roehrig was the former home of the renowned mapmaker, and was used in numerous Hollywood productions. It was burnt to the ground on January 8 by the Eaton Fire.

Newer buildings, such as the Keeler House, built in 1991 by Ray Kappe, one of the founders of the Southern California Institute of Architecture, were also lost.

In addition, there were numerous libraries and schools damaged or lost. The Theosophical Library Center in Altadena, which featured collections of rare books, manuscripts and artwork from around the world, along

with the Palisades Branch Library, and the Odyssey Charter School-South, were all reduced to ashes by the fires.

Religious sites such as the Altadena Community Church, the Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center and the Masjid Al-Taqwa Mosque were also consumed in the blazes.

Museums and galleries, including the Alto Beta Gallery in Altadena and the iconic Bunny Museum, which housed 46,000 rabbit-themed exhibits, and the Eaton Canyon Nature Center, a hub for environmental education, were all destroyed along with their exhibitions.

Popular culture sites were also not spared. The Palisades Fire consumed the home where the Doors’ hit “Light My Fire” was penned, as well as the Moonshadows Malibu, a famed restaurant along the Pacific Coast Highway.

This is only a very partial list. Some of these sites have stood for over a century, others only a few decades, but they were all an integral part of the cultural heritage of Los Angeles and southern California.

Many of the individual artworks are simply irreplaceable, while the buildings, and even more, what they meant as places where people congregated, will be difficult if not impossible to recreate under decaying capitalism, which subordinates everything to profit. The loss of so many landmarks, so many cultural sites will be felt profoundly by great numbers of people in the coming weeks, months and years.

The American ruling elite, “predatory, in the full sense of the word, and criminal” (Trotsky), is entirely culpable for the ongoing tragedy. Careless, philistine, shortsighted, indifferent to everything but their bank accounts, they took no serious measures to prevent the fires, or to provide protection from the fires, which—as can be seen, for example, by the ability to save the Getty Museum from the Palisades Fire—was entirely possible. However, the money was not made available, and the plans were not made. The result is another American catastrophe.



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