



# Westwood Ho!

**VACANT STOREFRONTS. EMPTY PARKING STRUCTURES. FAILED CIVIC PROJECTS. CAN THE ONCE-THRIVING VILLAGE BE SAVED? BY ROBERT ITO**

**I**N THE 1980S, WHEN UNIVERSAL CityWalk was a parking lot and the 3rd Street Promenade was a blighted, half-empty street, when the Grove was mostly asphalt and Old Pasadena was just old, there was Westwood Village. Westwood was the quintessential college town, hot because UCLA made it so, its nightlife as much a draw for many prospective Bruins as

the campus itself. Outlanders came, too, thousands of them every weekend, attracted from Bakersfield and Tustin and all points in between by one of the densest collections of movie theaters in the country; if you wanted to see a first-run film on a huge screen, you came here. In an area boxed in by major thoroughfares, the Village was a pedestrian-friendly oasis, one of the few

areas where Angelenos unfolded their legs and walked. There were video arcades and sidewalk cafés and even a fleet of undergrad-powered pedicabs. For years Westwood was *the* place to be on a Saturday night—the Grove and 3rd Street and CityWalk all rolled into one.

Whether this was a good thing depended on if you were a high school kid trying out a fake ID or a home owner irked by all the traffic and the noise. Founded in 1929 by the Janss Investment Corporation, Westwood was always intended to be a quaint college town; the Jansses created guidelines for everything from its unified

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### URBAN AFFAIRS

Mediterranean architectural theme to building heights and signage. As multiplexes began to replace supermarkets and family restaurants, the crowds got bigger and younger, the scene more frenetic. Long-time residents went elsewhere to eat and shop. Then, on January 30, 1988, Karen Toshima, a 27-year-old graphic artist from Long Beach who was in Westwood to celebrate a job promotion, was shot and killed by a man aiming at a rival gang member. Suddenly Westwood was Not Safe, just one more part of the city where one didn't feel comfortable going after dark. Never mind that Westwood was, and is, one of L.A.'s safest areas. With that one fatal round, Westwood's fall began.

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Over the next few years, the crowds that used to flock to Westwood were lured away to places like the Promenade, which relaunched in 1989; CityWalk's opening in 1993 continued the drain. As more and more areas, from Melrose to Pasadena, became more pedestrian friendly, folks didn't have to trek to Westwood to get that Westwood feel. Meanwhile, UCLA itself began stealing students from the town by turning the on-campus Ackerman Student Union into a grand mall. In the Village, FOR LEASE signs became a common sight. Rents plummeted; once among the city's highest, they dropped from \$5 or \$6 per square foot in Westwood's heyday to less than \$3, where they remain. Community organizations with names like Save Westwood Village were formed to stanch the bleeding and to return the area to its pre-1980s neighborhood feel, to the way it was before it became Southern California's most trafficked teen hangout.

Today Westwood is a mishmash of high-end restaurants and cell-phone stores, clothing boutiques and empty storefronts.



## URBAN AFFAIRS

Once the envy of other college towns, it's now without a major bookstore, a CD shop, or even a McDonald's. Attempts at revival are evident throughout the Village, most strikingly on Broxton Avenue, which is quite possibly L.A.'s most beautiful failed street. There one finds lovely benches and public art and wide, promenade-style sidewalks inlaid with Bruin-esque blue and gold tiles. It would be a wonderful place to stroll and shop if so many of its buildings weren't vacant, from the cavernous former home of the Aahs! gift shop to the much-ballyhooed Westwood Village Community Service Center, which closed after only two years. On the corner is a neighborhood directory creat-


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ed by Westwood's now-defunct Business Improvement District, which disintegrated in 2002 amid charges of corruption; the guide lists "new" stores and businesses that fled the area years ago.

Westwood is not without its charms, from the underused Hammer Museum to the newly renovated Geffen Playhouse; it just needs a little help. Obviously a return to its glory days would be impossible, even if such a thing were desirable. What many in the Village support is a place attractive to both outsiders and locals, a mix of cool destination spots and resident-friendly shops. (After 27 years without a major grocery store, Westwood Village now has two, Ralphs and Whole Foods, both doing booming business.) On the plus side, Westwood has great bones—much like the Grove, except Westwood's bones are real—with scores of architectural landmarks preserved by farsighted preservationists and community leaders. On the negative side, parking stinks. Here's a nine-point plan for getting Westwood back on track.

  
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**1 Pull in 10 or 12 more destination stores.** With so many local malls jam-packed with the same Gaps and Bananas, the Village needs an infusion of one-of-a-kind stores. There are a handful here, like the funky clothing boutique Skyla, the Mystery Bookstore, and the comic-book emporium Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash, but Westwood is about a dozen short. Over the past two years, the Village lost opportunities to snag two great bookstores, Hennessey + Ingalls and Midnight Special, that were pushed out by the Promenade's high rents (from \$7 to \$13 per square foot). The other key, of course, is to get stores to stay put.

**2 Rejigger the Westwood Village Specific Plan.** Long the bane of developers, the Westwood Village Specific Plan places restrictions on everything from bars (can't have them, unless they're connected to restaurants or hotels) to drive-in restaurants (remember those? can't have them, ever). Drafted in the late '80s, the plan was created in response to Westwood's explosive growth over the previous two decades, and it remains one of L.A.'s strictest. This was fine during boom years, but the plan requires some rethinking when it's tough just getting businesses to hang around. Loosen it up a bit so that, say, restaurants could put in a couple of pool tables without falling into the forbidden—and somewhat archaic—"pool hall" category.

**3 Bulldoze Rite Aid.** Does Westwood really need five pharmacies? Or 18—yes, 18—hair salons? Shopping center developers call this "redundant retail"; in the zero-sum game of neighborhood development, one more mani-pedi place means one less bistro or clothing store. Need time alone? Go into Longs Drugs at any time of the day. "All of us in Westwood are scratching our heads," says Steve Sann, cofounder of the Westwood Village Business Association and co-owner of Nine Thirty restaurant. "It makes no sense to have a Longs on top of a Ralphs supermarket, which has a pharmacy." Bulldozing Rite Aid doesn't guarantee that Westwood will get a real music store (its last one, Penny Lane, just closed) or a Saks, but one can hope it



would free up some space for something besides prescription counters.

**4 Bring in bodies—and keep them here.** Instead of luring people back from the Grove or Old Pasadena, why not install a captive audience? Palazzo Westwood, a 350-unit residential complex opening in 2007, is a step in that direction, as is UCLA's recently completed Weyburn

Terrace apartments, home to 1,380 grad students. Weyburn-adjacent shops have already reported an uptick in sales. A good start but hardly an original idea: In the 1930s, the first UCLA dorms were in the Village.

**5 Charge more for metered parking.** What initially seems like *the worst idea ever* is actually pretty sound. According to Donald Shoup, professor of

urban planning at UCLA and author of *The High Cost of Free Parking*, the reason it's so hard to find parking in the Village is that meter rates are too low compared with those of the lots. The effect: always-full curb spaces, half-filled parking structures, and the perception that there's nowhere to park in Westwood, heightened by one's fifth angry spin around the block. Raising prices would get Westwood closer to the desired use rate (about 85 percent). This strategy, proponents claim, is what saved Old Pasadena, along with funneling meter revenues into local improvements. One example of what Shoup is

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talking about: The curb parking outside the four-story Broxton garage is free—and always full. “They got rid of parking on that street, and then they brought it back, but they never bothered to put meters in,” says Shoup.

**6 Get UCLA to support the Village.** To entice UCLA students into Westwood, you have to get them off campus—specifically, out of Ackerman, where Bruins can get discounts on Macs, surf the Net for free, or shop at the Book-Zone, one of the country's largest campus bookstores (Ackerman also has the area's only Taco Bell). The competition is a sore spot for some Westwood retailers. “The biggest problem we have in Westwood today is the university,” says Stan Berman of the beloved Stan's Donuts, who also supplied crullers on campus for four decades before being ousted by Krispy Kreme. “Up until a year ago, I used to sell them about 40 to 50 dozen a day,” he says. “They eliminated a lot of little businesses here from Westwood. Now they make their own muffins, pizza crust—they do every damn thing.”

Efforts have been made to get students



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into Westwood, including the recent formation of the Revitalize Westwood Committee, a student-merchant alliance, and the creation of the boosterish gowestwood.ucla.edu Web site, which hypes local goods and services. Keith Parker, UCLA's assistant vice chancellor of government and community relations, admits Westwood can be a tough sell. "Westside Pavilion is not that far from us. Century City is not that far from us," he says. "You've got a student population that's fairly mobile, so it isn't as though students don't have other choices and options."

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Quick fix: How about a few more bars and clubs? Not a lot, just enough to give students a place to go after blowing their midterms. With UCLA being, for all practical purposes, a dry campus (there's booze in the Faculty Center), it's the one area where Westwood has a competitive edge.

**7** Alert Angelenos to the wonderful town conveniently located just south of the UCLA campus. We'll do our part. There is, admittedly, a lot to love about Westwood. Unlike the prefab promenades inspired, consciously or not, by Westwood's old-town feel and pedestrian-friendly walkways, the Village is truly a village, with small, family-owned businesses that have operated here for decades. Oakley's Barber Shop has been cutting heads since 1929; there are jewelry stores—from Sarah Leonard to Muriel Chastanet—that boast generations of sons and daughters as employees. There's the too-cool W Hotel, home of Rande Gerber's Whiskey Blue bar and the soon-to-open Bliss spa, and a smattering of high-end restaurants, including Tanino and Eurochow. A 42,000-square-

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foot Equinox gym recently opened; the iconic hot dog stand Tail o' the Pup might relocate here. The Hammer got an influx of cash to help complete its \$26.5 million Billy Wilder Theater, and the Los Angeles Film Festival, after years at the DGA, is moving to Westwood in June. While we're singing the praises of Westwood, why not...

## 8 Declare a moratorium on newspaper articles about how "Project X" is going to save Westwood.

We can't think of anything more disheartening than having each new project or store opening—from Ira Smedra's Village Center Westwood mall, scrapped in 2002, to the Circuit City megastore, which closed two years ago—trumpeted as a sign of better things to come, only to see stores close and projects collapse. A sampling from the local press: "Signs of Resurgence in Westwood Village" (1989), "Westwood Looks to Recapture Old Aura" (1991), "Westwood Yearns for a Return to Its Glory Days" (1993), "Westwood Attempts to Wake from Its Slumber" (1996), "Westwood Anticipates Brighter, Livelier Future" (1999), "Stores Retreat from Troubled Westwood" (2002), and "Westwood Ho!" (2006—it's the one you're reading). While we're at it, why not a surcharge—sort of like a media-wide curse jar—for every newspaper reference to Westwood as a "ghost town"? (Reporters should also avoid terms like "limping along," "in the dumps," and "forlorn.")

## 9 Finally, hire one of the city's cracker-jack marketing agencies to give Westwood a sexy new slogan.

A lot of the good ones are already taken, like "The City of Youth and Ambition" (Garden Grove) and "The Heart of Screenland" (Culver City). We don't advocate a return to Westwood's 1950s marketing pitch—"Shop with ease. Ample parking"—but how about something that plays up its hometown charm, like "Not as Packed with Plate Jugglers and Caricaturists as the Promenade"? Or maybe "Hey! We've Got Supermarkets Again." Anything would be better than one of its original slogans, "A Town for the Gown," which was weak even in 1929, when Westwood had a lot less to crow about. **LA**

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