

Leimert Park The History/Key Places



The History

Leimert Park is a one and a half square mile planned community in the Crenshaw district, designed by Olmsted and Olmsted, a firm headed by sons of Fredrick Olmsted, the architect and master planner of New York City's Central Park. It was created by Walter H. Leimert in 1927 as one of L.A.'s first planned communities. It was restricted to white residents until 1948, when Los Angeles' restrictive covenants were struck down by the Supreme Court. Restrictive covenants, clauses written into property deeds that restricted where people could live, were initially created to keep the Asians, Mexican and Jews from moving into white neighborhoods. But as the black population in Los Angeles grew, the covenants were used to restrict their migration into white neighborhoods as well.

Although blacks had lived in Los Angeles since before the turn of the century, the real black migration began in the 20's, 30's and 40's. Newspapers and Pullman porters who moved back and forth across the United States spread the news that Los Angeles was a place where African Americans could buy homes and get decent paying jobs. In the 20's and 30's and 40's however, blacks were forced to live in an overpopulated area along Central Avenue. 91-year-old Leimert Park resident, Verna Deckerd Williams, came to Los Angeles from Texas in 1924. White men had burned down her father's auto shop in one town and beaten him in another. Hearing that there was opportunity in Los Angeles, he moved his family out but was faced again with the same racial hatred. They

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moved into a house on 58th Street and the whites wanted them out. The white neighbors tried initially buying them out and then forcing them out:

“Fifty of them came to our house and stood on the lawn. Two of them came up to the door. The other forty-eight stood on the lawn with a sign, ‘KKK’s,’ and it took the local sheriffs two hours before they came. And by the time they got there, Papa was home and Papa was cleanin’ his Winchester. He had a Winchester from World War I. So he was cleaning it and getting ready for ‘em. If they were gonna come back, he was gonna start shootin’ ‘cause he said, ‘I’m not runnin’ anymore.’ He left Texas because of the problem and he said, ‘They’re not gonna run me out of my home.’

So he got a gang of people from 12th and Central. That’s where the colored business section was at that time. They volunteered to come out there and help us protect our home. And so every night they’d set up all night waitin’ for ‘em to come back. But they never came back, so finally after a month, Papa stopped havin’ the people there and we all settled down.”

Until 1948, blacks could not live west of Western Avenue. And while the covenants were enforceable by law, their effectiveness depended on the vigilance of the white neighborhood. Minorities went to great lengths, however to break the covenants. Sometimes, light skinned blacks would pose as the buyers, then would move their darker skinned neighbors or family into restricted areas. After the restrictive covenants were struck down, African Americans began to move west in greater numbers. First settling along Western Avenue in the 50’s and then further west to Crenshaw Boulevard.

Realtors took advantage of the situation, scaring the whites out of the Crenshaw area with a technique known as “block busting”... frightening the whites into selling their homes by suggesting that their children would be mixing with these “bad elements” ... that it would “no longer be a safe community.” The Crenshaw Neighbors Association, formed in 1964 with whites, blacks and Asians in the area, worked to maintain an integrated community. However by 1960 many of the area’s whites had fled. The Crenshaw District, while still integrated, became the core of the black community.

Leimert Park Village, the shopping district, is a cultural mecca with the character of Greenwich Village. Leimert Park itself is a triangular park at 43rd Place. The village is a one square block bordered by Crenshaw Boulevard, Leimert Boulevard, 43rd Street and 43rd Place. Leimert Village’s main street, however, is Degnan Boulevard. With its two story Mediterranean style buildings, it runs through the center of the block.

Over the years this area has become an oasis of African American art and music. It all began with the Brockman Gallery founded in 1967 at 4334 Degnan. Says Brockman co-founder Alonzo Davis, “After the Watts riot, there were a lot of artists doing works that were politically significant. They were making statements that were social. We filled a gap and a void there. We just opened a window that had never been available, especially on the West Coast.” The Brockman Gallery nurtured the early careers of respected artists like David Hammons and John Outterbridge, and the more

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established black artists also exhibited there – Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White, John Biggers, Noah Purifoy and Romare Bearden.

The Brockman Gallery no longer exists, but the cultural renaissance it fostered during the 70's and early 80's continues. The area today is struggling to maintain its identity as several of the long term tenants are being forced out by redevelopment and rapidly increasing rents. But the area still boasts galleries, coffeehouses, performance spaces, restaurants, and Afrocentric fashion and merchandise shops.

Key Places & Establishments

Fifth Street Dicks

Fifth Street Dick's Coffee Company, a storefront coffee and jazz house was key in the post-92 renaissance of Leimert Park. It was run by Richard Fulton, a formerly homeless man, who for four and a half years had lived on the streets of downtown Los Angeles. His logo showed a man pushing an overflowing shopping cart. Tables and chairs outside were the location of intense chess games sometimes going on until 1 or 2 A.M. Inside people lined up for coffee, read, and, upstairs in the jazz club, musicians jammed sometimes until five or six in the morning. He said about Leimert Park, "It's like it's reborn again, and the birth is from the inside. It's black ideas is how it's done. It's black folks who're going to enjoy it. It's black, and it's not stolen from anybody." Sadly, Richard passed away from throat cancer in 1999. Fifth Street Dicks remained closed until 2005 when his long-time companion, Irma, reopened the coffeehouse at a new location in Leimert Park.

The World Stage

The World Stage, co-founded in 1989 by world famous drummer, Billy Higgins, and poet/activist Kamau Daaood, provides a grass roots headquarters for Leimert Park. In 1989, Daaood gathered \$3,000 from a small group of people, including Higgins and opened World Stage when a similar venture, Artworks Four folded. Using the stage and the chairs from Artworks Four, The World Stage was born. The artist, Ramsess, provided the grand piano, rolling it over on his son's skateboard from his studio next door. The workshop-performance space seats only fifty, but has provided a rehearsal space and a nurturing environment that has given birth to at least two young jazz groups, Black/Note and B Sharp Quartet. During the week, there are instrumental and vocal workshops, Wednesday night poetry workshops and Thursday night jam sessions. Over the years, the World Stage's various workshops, jam sessions and performance series have provided support, training and creative outlets for a myriad of artists and musicians in the area.

Kaos Network & Project Blowed

The Kaos Network is run by Ben Caldwell. Started in 1991 as a meeting place for creative adults and young people, his goal today is for kids and adults to learn and use the new media technology. Working at the Brockman Gallery in the 70's while he was a UCLA film student, he and fellow student Charles Burnett, director of *To Sleep with Anger*, would "come <to Leimert Park> and say, 'Why don't we do what we're doing in the black community, not run from it? Figure out what the black community wants, and

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do it.” He says, “It’s important for me to stay here in the community...it helps to establish consistency in a community that has a lack of consistency.” Kaos Network is probably most well-known for Thursday night’s “Project Blowed.” Projected Blowed is a hip hop and rap open mike night that gave birth to rappers and rap groups such as Aceyalone, Medusa, Busdriver, Freestyle Fellowship, and Jurassic Five, and continues to provide an atmosphere where up-and-coming rappers can hone their skills.

Museum in Black

The Museum in Black, run by Brian Breye, displays and sells African artifacts as well as artifacts from this country’s era of slavery and memorabilia that defines our country’s segregation period. “It’s a sad chapter of our history, but it’s important to remember,” says Breye. He moved the museum from Beverly Hills several years ago, bringing it back to the community. “Black people need to know who they are.” Sadly, Museum in Black closed in July 2005, forced out by increasing rents.

Vision Theatre

In 1990, Marla Gibbs purchased the Leimert theater complex. What became known as the Vision Theatre Complex, the 1050-seat theatre built by Howard Hughes has hosted events with Hillary Rodham Clinton, Louis Farrakhan, Maya Angelou and singer, Nancy Wilson. The Crossroads Art Academy at 4310 Degnan provides programs in the arts to aspiring inner city youths. They offer acting/performing classes and opportunities for young performers to meet casting directors and working actors on the caliber of Denzel Washington and casting executive Reuben Cannon. They have also held premiers of *A Rage in Harlem* and *Living Large*, a concert by Stevie Wonder to raise money for a cancer patient, the California convention of The Rainbow Coalition, and a rally for Winnie Mandela. Unfortunately, in June of 1997, Gibbs lost the Vision Theater Complex after she was unable to raise the \$250,000 necessary to pay off a bank debt. Before then, Marla Gibbs owned about three-quarters of the property in the neighborhood. The City of Los Angeles eventually purchased the Vision Complex and has been slowly renovating the Vision Theatre. The Crossroads Art Academy was ultimately torn down as it was too expensive to bring it “up to code.” It has been replaced by a city parking lot.

Babe’s and Ricky’s

For 32 years, Babe’s and Ricky’s offered up the blues on Central Avenue. Evicted in 1996 from the club on Central, Laura Mae Gross, a 77-year old Mississippi-born woman, known as “Mom” to her musicians recreated Babe’s and Ricky’s in Leimert Park in 1997. They brought the sign over from the old club but not the pool table, where Laura Mae Gross, afraid to drive home from the seedy area, slept after closing. Part of the musicians’ job, after the last set, was to hoist the mattress onto the pool table and make her bed. In Leimert Park now, she no longer has to camp out.

Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra

The Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra (originally called the Underground Musicians Association) was established in 1961 by pianist/composer Horace Tapscott with pianist Linda Hill and Trombonist Lester Robertson among others. A desire to encourage and



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celebrate African American artists and music in their community inspired the musicians to form the Arkestra. They played at churches, big park events, or at lunchtime in schools around South Central Los Angeles and beyond. During and after the uprising in Watts in 1965, the Arkestra played on the streets and in the backs of flatbed trucks amidst the debris of the rebellion. They brought the music back to the community. A quintet which represented the core of the Arkestra was finally recorded in 1969 on Bob Thiele's Flying Dutchman record label resulting in the record, *The Giant Has Awakened*.

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