A Passion to Preserve

Fellows, Will

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Jeffrey Samudio

Jeffrey Samudio was born in the Los Angeles area in 1966. He studied architecture and planning at the University of Southern California, where in 1993 he helped to originate a program of historic preservation courses, the first such program in California. In 1987 he started an architecture, planning, and preservation firm, Design Aid, with a fellow student. Through Samudio’s teaching the language of good design and preservation is now part of the graduate real-estate program at USC. “For the first time, I’ve got the right audience in front of me: real-estate developers.” Samudio is cocreator of a book of early photographs of Los Angeles architecture, part of Arcadia Publishing’s Images of America series.

I Grew up in the historic northeast L.A. railcar suburbs of Mount Washington, Eagle Rock, and Highland Park. These communities were settled mostly by midwesterners, especially Presbyterians from Indiana, Ohio, and Iowa. So there was a heavy influence of midwestern traditions, values, and building types in the area. Occidental College, which is at the center of these communities, was established by the Presbyterians.

From the 1880s to the 1920s, wealthy families came out from the Midwest and East Coast in droves and settled in Pasadena, just up the Arroyo Seco. They built summer houses in these hills, where they could catch the breezes from the ocean. Later, with the influence of the Arroyo School and a myriad of artists, the plein-air movement began in this area. It played a major role in attracting the early civic and cultural boosters of Los Angeles and socially progressive people. So you had a very curious cross-section, people with strong midwestern values living in the same neighborhood with bohemians.

Teddy Roosevelt wanted to make part of this area a national park because of the natural beauty of the arroyo. Unfortunately the local boosters of this idea didn’t get their act together before it was all developed. But now it’s a genuinely wonderful area to live in. Eagle Rock Valley and Highland Park Valley are surrounded by hillsides with housing stock that’s quite eclectic, ranging from large mansions to duplexes to regular old suburban tract houses. Being some of the older suburbs of Los Angeles, they were among the first to go through integration in the 1960s. When I was a kid, they were considered one of the most integrated areas in California. I live now within the area defined as Eagle Rock, which was an independent city until it was gobbled up for water, like most communities around L.A.
I grew up the youngest of four boys in a very poor family. The day I was born was the day my mother received her divorce papers. The five of us lived in a tiny one-bedroom duplex. But we never felt poor because we lived in a community that was very diverse and tight-knit, and being in the center of the Los Angeles region, there were always things going on. We were obviously the most needy family on our block, so we were sort of watched over and taken care of. It was an area where openly gay and lesbian people could live, so I had a very positive upbringing. My babysitter was a retired makeup artist from Paramount Studios who had been a famous L.A. drag queen in the 1920s and 1930s.

I’m third-generation Hispanic American, by way of Mexico. Samudio is a Basque name. My mother was born and raised in Manhattan. The first Mexican restaurant in New York City, El Chavo Español, on Charles Street, is now a city landmark. My grandparents ran it as a private club, a speakeasy. My great-uncle used to make gin in the bathtub of an apartment upstairs. You name it; we’ve got the characters in our family—bootleggers, entertainers, psychics, whores. They moved out here after the war, as so many easterners did, because Los Angeles was a very urbane and cosmopolitan but lower-density version of New York. At that time L.A. was a fairly compact city, with the largest transit system in the country. That was dismantled soon after their arrival. My mother never drove until she was well into her fifties, so I grew up in a household that didn’t own a car. But we were in one of those old streetcar suburbs where you didn’t really need one. Buses provided us with excellent public transit.

Early on I realized that I lived in a pretty remarkable area that had quite an interesting history. Because we didn’t own a car, I was never stuck on freeways. Instead, I was stuck on city buses, which traveled slowly through the enormity of L.A., all its different neighborhoods. I would spend weekends taking different bus routes all over the city with my brother. It was a real hoot to just go out and get lost somewhere. It was a whole day’s journey to go to West Los Angeles or Westwood or the UCLA area or Santa Monica. It was another world, and a completely white world, which was not something that we were used to. And Pasadena, right next door, gave us a real sense of old California and the influence of old money on a new region. Greene and Greene’s Arts and Crafts–style Gamble House was at the top of the arroyo, close enough to ride my bike to.

Not having a car, I was always very appreciative whenever we would go on trips out of the neighborhood; I would devour everything I saw. I was not like any other kid. I spent a lot of time by myself, building enormous cities in the backyard or garage. I spent every dime that I earned trying to replicate in model form things that I saw around me. I had quite a photographic
memory for cities. Mostly I focused on buildings, and I would always have trolley-car lines and multilevel freeways. Off in my own little world, I guess I always knew that I wanted to go into architecture or urban planning. The grown-ups must have thought, “He’s a very old soul who still has a lot of designing to do.”

Myron Hunt’s incredible connection with Occidental College was a great influence on me. He designed every building at the Eagle Rock campus between 1912 and 1943. More than three hundred acres, it’s a rambling campus in sort of a refined Beaux Arts Mediterranean Revival style that completely takes advantage of the hillside location, with stunning views. And Sparkletts Water Company, a great Moorish Revival structure, was right below my elementary school. And, lo and behold, all but one of my elementary teachers were openly gay; they would bring their lovers to school events. It was the 1970s, man, and everything was cool.

My block was about one-third retired couples, one-third Ozzie-and-Harriet families, and one-third gay, ranging from retirees to young bikers. There were plenty of kids to play with, but I would usually spend a good portion of my time by myself reflecting on what I saw around the city and building my model cities. I had no interest in playing softball on the weekends. I would much rather have breakfast with the retired couples on my block, straight or gay, getting them to tell me about their lives and the history of the area. I would much rather sit with my friend Betty and her husband and her sister and hear stories about the Union Pacific Railroad suburbs and how the West was exploited by the railroads. We had a few veterans on my block, and I loved to hear their stories about things like traveling on the Queen Mary from New York to England during World War II. My mother and her family had taken the Queen Mary from Europe to New York in 1939, before the war started, so it was fascinating to hear the luxurious side of it from my mother, then how the ship was transformed for military service, and then brought back to life, to the glory of its heyday, just down the freeway at Long Beach.

Even though it was just seven miles from downtown Los Angeles, Eagle Rock was still a very isolated place. From the top of the hill above my house you looked down on the massive skyscrapers that were growing, but Eagle Rock still had the appearance of small-town America. We had our Carnegie library, the city hall where all kinds of gatherings were held, a beautifully designed park structure by Richard Neutra. We had architectural influences from Mediterranean, Spanish Revival, Arts and Crafts, all the way to the International style. And the memory of a couple of Rudolph Schindler homes that were lost to a freeway that encircled the valley. But the place was pretty much the land that time forgot.
My adoptive father passed away about a year ago. I took care of him the last thirteen years of his life, after he had a stroke. A Japanese American gentleman who grew up in the very segregated plantation culture of Hawaii, he was a Los Angeles city gardener for nearly thirty years. In retrospect I can see that he was gay, though I don’t think he would have defined himself that way or even understood it. A lot of repression there. It was a chance meeting; he sort of fell in love with me when I was about one year old and took care of my brothers as well. Everybody thinks that he and my mother had a thing going, but that was definitely not the case. He was in love with me as a son figure, and I with him as a father figure. He would take us on trips to all the wonderful towns and cities up and down the California coast. By the time I was in my teens we were getting more money, so we made annual pilgrimages to New York in the new family car. I would spend whole days just walking around Manhattan, taking in the great city.

The architect Ena Dubnoff was my instructor the first year at USC. I lucked out. If I’d had one of the male instructors I would never have survived. Ena was very motherly, a feminist of the strongest bent, but she never lost that wonderful soft side. She was much more nurturing than the hard-edged male architect assholes. Which is another reason why I didn’t go into regular architecture. Preservation was a much kinder, softer, and gentler environment.

When I was eighteen, in my second year at USC, Eagle Rock’s old jail and a whole block of historic buildings from the teens were threatened with demolition for a mini-mall. This was about 1985, the beginning of the mini-mallization of Los Angeles, the same boom that everybody else in the country tasted at the time. We saw the writing on the wall: rampant development was finally coming into this little Arcadian community that we all cherished. About 150 people were at a community meeting, really angry and trying to figure out how to stop mini-malls from proliferating. The developer agreed to work with me and others on an ad hoc committee, so we agreed to his request to hold off on submitting the historic landmark application.

At seven o’clock the next morning I got a phone call from Kathleen Aberman, a woman I had met the night before who would later become my surrogate mother. “They’re tearing down the buildings!” she said. “Can you come by and help me stop them? I’m going down there right now.” I went down to the site immediately, and half the buildings were already demolished. I got really angry. Kathleen, this very fashionable, gutsy lady who had parked her new Jaguar right next to the trash truck so that debris was falling all over it, was up on the roof of this building, getting arrested. Our city councilman was really scared that there was going to be a riot, and he couldn’t deal with housewives rioting, so he announced L.A.’s first mini-mall moratorium and that the
city would create a specific plan for Eagle Rock. At eighteen I was appointed to the planning advisory board and was one of the founding members of the Eagle Rock Association. We did an architectural survey of the area to identify valuable sites and to systematically declare them landmarks.

I declared my first city landmark when I was about twenty. (That building was the only one in Eagle Rock that was burned during the Rodney King riots in 1994.) By the time I finished undergraduate, I had declared a dozen landmarks. One of these buildings I can see from my front porch, a four-story house, the last Women’s Christian Temperance Union home for wayward women. When we found out it was closing and scheduled for demolition for a large apartment complex, we saved it. The publicity surrounding our saving it at the very last minute helped us find a new owner for it. It has been fully restored as the headquarters of the Greater Los Angeles Association for the Deaf.

The Eagle Rock Association has really set wonderful standards for our community. Now nobody comes into this part of the city without calling five or six of us to serve as an ad hoc design review board, and we’re about to become an official design review board. I can honestly claim to have killed about three dozen inappropriate developments in our community and to have saved about a dozen really remarkable historic properties, all but one or two of which have been fully restored. A few years ago I coined the marketing phrase for this area, “L.A.’s Hometown.” Hollywood loves filming here whenever they need a shoot for a quiet little midwestern town. It’s awfully good revenue for revitalizing historic buildings.

To do preservation in Los Angeles you have to emphasize diversity, economic development, viable economic use, and ownership and empowerment by all cultures in a neighborhood. You talk about historic resources as maybe the third or fourth thing down the list. Instead of sounding like debutantes from the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, talking about this lovely building and who built it and who lived in it, you have to work with a lot of really nagging social issues. Especially after the Rodney King riots, that became incredibly clear. The first building that I designated a landmark is a perfect example: the kids in the neighborhood knew that the old Victorian house was owned by a bunch of whiteys, and who cares about them, so they burned it.

At twenty-eight I was appointed architectural historian for the state historical resources commission. That catapulted me to a whole different level of politics, sort of the state cultural police. Much more than I ever could on a local planning commission, I began to understand the power of policy to affect the built environment, cultural values, how our culture views itself, and what will be left in a hundred years to reflect our lives. I was the
youngest person ever appointed to this position, but I’m used to hanging around an older crowd. Viewed as a young whippersnapper, I got really active on a few issues, helped rewrite the state’s preservation master plan, and took part in the great debate on the detrimental effects of sprawl.

Being openly gay gave me a lot of power in what I was doing, because nobody messed with me as I suggested revisions to the state’s preservation master plan, to recognize marginalized groups. So now, as funding comes down the pike, gays and lesbians are plugged right in there as a deserving bunch of guys and gals.

We recently had major hearings on where preservation is going in California and how it should be funded. Half the room was gay, and I was shocked that so many of them got angry at me when I mentioned gay men’s involvement in the revitalization of the Castro in San Francisco. Several years ago we got a grant from the National Trust to create a cultural map of gay and lesbian historic sites in Los Angeles, much like the maps that had been created in New York and Boston. Things like where the Mattachine Society first met in the late 1940s and the location of the bathhouse that George and Ira Gershwin owned in the 1920s. I had to defend myself to a lot of gay friends in preservation who I thought would have been completely supportive. “Gay culture and history? What culture? What history? Why are you doing this, Jeff—drawing attention to bathhouses?” I was hearing from my younger friends a lot of conservative attitudes that I would have expected from closed older guys. I thought, it’s part of our cultural history, guys. Get over it. Get over yourself. See a therapist, quick.

I’ve always been haunted by the area that I grew up in. Even though my office is in Hollywood and most of my social life is in West Hollywood, I still live here in Eagle Rock. It’s a nice little repose and a taste of reality. I live in a wonderful old 1912 Craftsman. When I was eighteen, I took my college housing stipend and went in with my brother to buy this house. My brother has since moved on to suburban hell, but the entire family considers this house the family house. It has a huge arroyo-stone front porch with a swing chair and the American flag flying: Mom, Chevy, and apple pie all rolled into one.

I never tire of preservation. I never consider what I do, work. It’s fun. And then to teach architectural history and theory and design. My offices are in Whitley Court, which is sort of Preservation Central in L.A. Five major firms in an old residential bungalow court in Hollywood, the leading consultants for cultural resources in Los Angeles. Christy McAvoy, the owner of the largest firm, is the person who taught me how to deal with city hall and how to identify historic resources when I was a teenager in the Eagle Rock Association. She attended my swearing-in to the state historic resources commission and can claim to be my preservation mother.