

ONCE UPON A TIME IN L.A.

FABLED GABLES AND GINGERBREAD HOUSES

text by Sarah Lifton

photography by Bruce Bohner





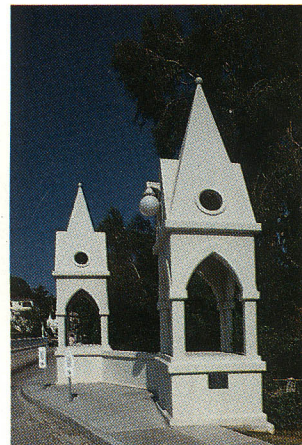
MORE THAN MOST CITIES, Los Angeles has always been tinged with an aura of unreality. The benevolent climate and inviting scenery, when juxtaposed with such phenomena as earthquakes and Santa Ana winds, suggest a kind of real-life amusement park that alternately delights and spooks its unsuspecting audience.

Over this unlikely mix of attributes, a group of East Coast businessmen during the early years of this century superimposed the ultimate illusion: the motion picture. On the streets, in natural habitats, and on sound stages, they created hundreds of fictions in which the city itself played many roles: the Old South, Rome, Egypt, Babylon, and the jungles of Africa, to name just a few.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans, dazzled by the land they saw on the screens of their local movie theaters, flooded into Los Angeles, intent on realizing their own dreams. Between 1920 and 1930, fueled by a combination of prosperity and boosterism, the region's population almost doubled, and the movies that had lured them became California's leading industry.

It was perhaps inevitable that many of these newcomers, failing to distinguish the real landscape from the one depicted in film, created enclaves within the city that resembled a series of movie sets. Much of Los Angeles became, in effect, a colossal back lot, seemingly designed and built by Central Casting, where practically everything was either more or less than it appeared to be. If one scratched the surface of the Southern mansions, Tahitian

huts, Tudor castles, Greek temples, Assyrian palaces, Egyptian tombs, and Mexican haciendas that proliferated, banks, restaurants, office buildings, tire factories, movie theaters, and private residences would emerge. Los Angeles may have been the original destination, but everyone, it seemed, was pretending to be somewhere or someone else. Such observers as Richard Neutra, Aldous Huxley, and Carey McWilliams noted that even the look of the place owed a debt to the movies. "There is always something so delightfully real about what is phony here," Noel Coward said, "and something so phony about what is real."



During the 1920s the fantasy architecture created for the back lots of Hollywood often found its way onto L.A.'s streets. Before being moved to its present site at 516 North Walden Drive in Beverly Hills, the Spadena House (left) served as offices for Culver City film producer Irvin V. Willat. In 1926 the Gothic Shakespeare Bridge (above) on Franklin Avenue was built to link Los Feliz with Silver Lake. Its distinctive arches and turrets seem lifted from the set of *Babes in Toyland*.

Amid such architectural sleight of hand, another group of émigrés must have sensed the underlying queerness of the place. At once incongruous and perfectly appropriate, the buildings they erected were entirely fantastical, conjuring up nothing so much as fairy tales. Cartoonish in their whimsy, they hinted at the diabolical forces that regularly visited the city and suggested a magical world populated by precious creatures. The idiom, dubbed “Hansel and Gretel,” owed a debt to Tudor and Norman country cottages, but the familiar elements of half-timbering, rough plaster, thatched roofs, and leaded-glass windows were caricatured.

L.A.’s most famous Hansel and Gretel structure, the Spadena House in Beverly Hills, began life, appropriately enough, as the office building for film producer Irvin V.



Undulating roofs covered with cascading shingles give “Hansel and Gretel” cottages their distinctive look. At opposite ends of the idiom’s spectrum are the “Egg House” at 3825 Dunn Street in Culver City (right) and a more formal structure at Longewood and Rodgerton drives (above). Nestled behind screens of lush vegetation, a dwelling at 2958 Beachwood Drive (above right) and another at 6116 Scenic Drive (above far right) fulfill our expectations of the classic cottage.

Willat. Designed by MGM art director Harold G. Oliver in 1921, the building features a tall, sharply attenuated gable and matching dormer covered with a tangle of shingles. “We have tried to reproduce a tumbledown structure of two centuries ago,” Willat explained at the time, “but which will be equipped with the most modern office appurtenances.” In fact, the house deceives the viewer in a number of ways. For example, it looks small from the outside but is really quite large within. The windows appear crooked but are actually straight. As to the lineage Willat was striving for, it is unmistakable. The structure captivates on-lookers in the same way the original gingerbread house of storybook lore entranced Hansel and Gretel. And one

dare not linger too long lest the witch emerge. (For many years a gargantuan broom, propped at a rakish angle against the gable, served as a warning.) Originally located on Washington Boulevard in Culver City, the Spadena House regularly elicited double takes from passersby. “It is said that this structure has occasioned more comments from passing motorists than any building erected in Los Angeles in recent months,” one L.A. newspaper reported in 1921. Seventy years later, the house, which was converted to a private residence and moved to its present Beverly Hills location in the early thirties, still draws gawkers





and tourists. In 1965 it also attracted the attention of movie-makers, who cast it in a cameo role as the Hollywood residence of Sir John Gielgud's character in *The Loved One*.

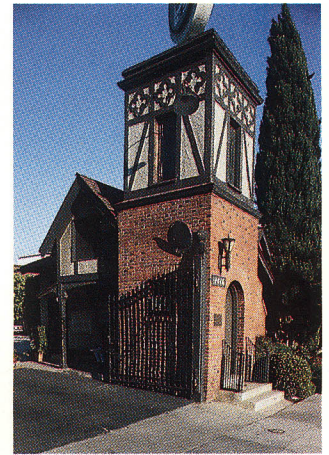
A more benign trio of dwellings adjacent to Culver City also boasts ties to the film industry. The "Egg House," along with its smaller siblings that surround it, was reputedly built by an MGM carpenter who scavenged his materials from the studio scrap heap. The builder warped the traditional imagery of the English Tudor house to create a fanciful portrayal of a European cottage. The half-timbering, no longer rectilinear, twists and bends through rusticated stucco. Thatching has been supplanted by a torrent of shingles on the high, domed roof of the largest structure. Oddly mullioned windows, dense foliage, and a ramshackle fence made of twigs complete the picture, which evokes elves and gnomes rather than wicked old crones.

Still other bewitching homes are scattered in the hills near Hollywoodland, the area that gave its name to the filmmaking capital. On Scenic Drive, a storybook cottage with an extravagant shingled roof and a profusion of ivy—perhaps the abode of a kindly woodcutter—stands opposite a miniature Tudor castle, complete with pint-size turrets. Around the corner, on Vista del Mar Avenue, another cottage remains shrouded by dense vegetation—its roof, windows, and door barely visible from the street.

Deeper into the Hollywood Hills, where Rodger-ton and Ledgewood drives intersect, an enormous house, like a cottage with hormone problems, rises imperiously from its walled

preserve. Its wildly undulating roofline is interrupted by quaint dormers; its taupe walls are cloaked in vines that twine dementedly up the side. By contrast, the Chateau Le-Moine, at Longwood Avenue and Ninth Street south of Hancock Park, could be a prince's castle, complete with multiple turrets, gingerbread, carving, and even gargoyles.

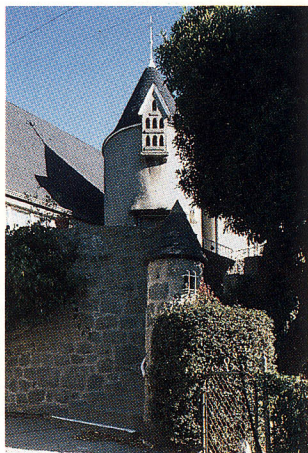
Given the cultural climate in which these homes were built, as well as Angelenos' insatiable appetite for myth and glamour, it isn't surprising that legends have grown up like ivy around many of these houses, imbuing them with an aura that is larger than life. Charlie Chaplin, who built his



Another idiom that lent itself to variation was English Tudor. A bungalow court at 2906 Griffith Park Boulevard (left) was reputedly built by Walt Disney and may have inspired designs for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Charlie Chaplin erected the buildings at 1416 North La Brea Avenue (above) to house an early studio. Homes at the corner of Milner Road and Las Palmas Avenue (above left) and at 6111 Scenic Drive (above far left) exude the flavor of Elizabethan England.

La Brea Avenue studio—now A&M Records—as a series of English Tudor cottages, is said to have also built the Hansel and Gretel courtyard on Formosa Avenue near Fountain Avenue, but city records make no mention of him. Supposedly, the property was also home to a succession of notables from Rudolph Valentino to Marilyn Monroe, but their residence there is also unverified.

The stories surrounding the 1929 bungalow court on Griffith Park Boulevard may have more basis in fact. Walt Disney, whose first studio was located nearby at the site of the Mayfair Market on Hyperion Avenue, is said to have built the eight Norman-style cottages for his staff. Again, city records don't offer corroboration, but when one of the houses caught fire two years ago, among the many people



With its pitched roofs and dramatic towers, the French Norman style was another favorite of L.A. fantasists. A house at 5826 Olympic Boulevard (right) seems designed by a confectioner. A turreted tower at 2910 Beachwood Drive (above) offers a lofty vantage point over a stone wall. And the homes at 4077 Lincoln Avenue (above right) and at 846 Longwood Drive (above far right) are architectural embodiments of the phrase, “a man’s home is his castle.”

who came forward to talk with the property's owner, Sylvia Helfert, was a woman Disney had employed. He had used one of the bungalows as an office, she claimed. Another gentleman, who had lived in a neighboring building for many years, recalled seeing Disney visit the cottages on numerous occasions. It has even been suggested that Disney may have used the bungalow court as the model for the structures in his animated classic *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*—a bizarre example of art imitating life imitating art.

Although Hansel and Gretel architecture was pretty much passé by the early 1930s, the spirit that spawned the style is far from dead. The J. Paul Getty Museum, which purports to be an authentic reconstruction of an actual

Roman villa; the Westside Pavilion, which calls to mind the set from *Babes in Toyland*; the Art Nouveau “Wedding-Cake House” on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills; and the countless turreted second-story additions that are being built all over the city are close in tenor, if not form, to the 1920s fabrications. Zoning laws and land values may limit the scope of modern-day fantasists, but Los Angeles remains a city where imagination and make-believe can be as genuine as fact.

“All fantasy should have a solid base in reality,” the English critic and author Sir Max Beerbohm wrote in 1911. In Los Angeles, to our everlasting delight, the reverse is true as well. □

