

The Below Text was created by Steven Luftman for The L.A. Conservancy, 2018.

1548 Micheltorena - Casas Micheltorena

1. Significance

The Bungalow Court at 1548 to 1550 1/2 North Micheltorena was built in 1923. The three duplex bungalow buildings that make up this bungalow court were designed in a simplified Mediterranean Revival style and are located on a single lot on Micheltorena Street, north of Sunset Boulevard between Hamilton Way and Berkeley Ave in the Silver Lake—Echo Park—Elysian Valley community plan area of Los Angeles.

Silver Lake was first developed as Edendale in the late 1800s. In 1911 much of the west side of Silver Lake was subdivided as Mabery Heights. Developed as a close-in Streetcar Suburb, Mabery Heights advertised weekly in the Los Angeles Times touting a ten minute streetcar ride to the downtown business district. The subject property lies adjacent to Mabery in an area subdivided as tract 5036 in 1923 by Alfred B Chapman's Trust. With Andrew Glassell, Chapman also developed Glassell Park, the City of Orange, and Chapman Avenue in Orange County is named after him.

The population of Los Angeles grew from 100,000 in 1900 to 1.2 million in 1930. With this exponential growth new multi-family housing types developed. As noted in *Garden Apartments of Los Angeles* by Architectural Resources Group, the bungalow court is one of the housing types that resulted from this housing movement. It emerged in Pasadena in the 1910s and was the first multi-family property type to integrate common garden or courtyard space into the site plan. The property type consists of multiple detached bungalows situated around a common shared space. Rather than facing the street, the entrances to the units face inward toward a common courtyard, garden or driveway. The bungalow court brought the Craftsman bungalow, a distinctly Southern Californian dwelling that proliferated in the 1910s and 20s, to the middle class without compromising the privacy, comfort and openness of its single-family counterpart. Early bungalow courts were often constructed by builders rather than architects and intended for residents of modest means, their evolution represented a major shift from preceding idioms of American dwelling types. Bungalow courts were the first multi-family prototype to focus more on space than object, providing residents with the advantages of parks and shared spaces for communal interaction within a densely urban setting.

The subject Bungalow Court was built by Carlos Gibson, it incorporates the comforts and conveniences of a single family dwelling on a modest scale. The property is made up of two one-story duplex residential buildings and one two-story duplex building. Each building contains two, one-bedroom apartments. A shared courtyard and driveway runs on the south side of the property providing circulation access as well as open space. Each unit has an individual porch entrance with concrete stoop and pent roofs supported by corbels. Secondary entrances are located at the sides of the units from the kitchen. The secondary entrances have concrete stoops and arched hoods.

Each bungalow has a flat roof bounded by a stepped parapet with clay tile coping. The primary bungalow façades are symmetrical, with the entrances located at each end of the two single story bungalows. The two-story bungalow is asymmetrical with the two entrances sharing an archway that supports a balcony on the second floor. Fenestration consists of wood frame double-hung sash windows. The main windows on the front façade and courtyards are paired, all courtyard facing windows are in four-over-one muntin configuration.

Carlos E. Gibson, was listed on the original building permits as Architect and Contractor. From census and city directory data we know that Gibson worked as a construction supervisor and a draftsman. It was common that the bungalows were either from stock plans or from a "kit" like those offered from Pacific ReadyCut Homes, it is likely that this is the case for these bungalows on Micheltorena. The property served Mr. Gibson and his wife Margret as both their home and as income property from 1923 until they moved in 1953.

The property's proximity to the streetcars probably permitted an easy commute for the Gibsons. The subject property was only a block and a half walk to Pacific Electric's Hollywood streetcar line with direct service to downtown where Carlos Worked for the Department of Water and Power and one transfer to Glendale where Margret worked as an private secretary for Richfield Oil in Glendale.

2. Project Work

The Prop Shop purchased the Micheltorena bungalows as a distressed property to rehabilitate the buildings into modern housing while retaining their essential character-defining features.

The work started with lifting the bungalows removing their damaged footings and pouring new concrete foundations to modern standard.

The buildings were carefully taken down to their studs. Original doors, windows, and built-ins were restored. Missing original windows and doors were recreated by the Prop Shop's union carpenters. The fenestration was brought back to its 1923 form, true divided light four-over-one for windows facing the courtyard and one-over-one for the windows facing the back—with wavy glass. Period kitchens and baths were recreated, coved ceiling in the living rooms were restored.

While this work was not done to Secretary of Interior's Standards, there was great effort used in restoring the buildings. A licensed structural engineer was retained and the Prop Shop employs a team of craftspeople to work with their design director.

The broken concrete driveway in the courtyard was removed and replaced with stone pavers.

The original garages were converted to offices, and an additional building was built so every unit would be provided with an office/storage room. A row of six partially covered parking stalls with installed 240 volt outlets for electric car charging was added.

included was complete systems upgrades, including the electric, plumbing, roofing, and mechanical/HVAC systems. Essential character-defining features, such as wood windows, floors, moldings, doors, siding, were retained and repaired. Elements too deteriorated to repair were replaced in-kind. Other damaged elements such as the original front stoops and handrail were replaced with compatible but differentiated new elements.

3. Condition and Challenges

In spite of a good degree of historic integrity, the residences were in very poor condition and required significant capital investment and intensive work to render them habitable.

Over the last 90 plus years the bungalows have suffered from deferred maintenance. There were shoddy kitchen and bath remodels, some windows and doors were replaced with cheap substitutes. Doors and walls were missing. An illegal addition had to be removed and original floors were damaged or covered with cheap vinyl or carpet.

The open-space had been badly filled in with concrete which was crumbling.

Most concerning, the foundations were not up to current standards and in places had decomposed beyond repair.

4. Public Benefit

The current housing environment in Southern California has been described as a crisis. This project on Micheltorena can be a model as one part of the preservation solution to that crisis.

In Los Angeles the housing crisis has created an endangered setting for treasured historic neighborhoods and buildings. The bungalow court is especially endangered in spite of its celebrated status as a quality native Southern Californian developed architectural type. In the past the Micheltorena Bungalows' low density zoning, RD1.5-1VL, would have protected this court, but recent zoning changes have been especially troubling. The Small Lot Subdivision zoning rules seem to target bungalow courts, their ancestral forebears. It is ironic that the new Transit Oriented zoning rules are incentivizing the destruction of this housing type, which was originally developed as a solution to adding density along transit lines.

Los Angeles is filled with developers and contractors who would see this property as an infill lot, an opportunity to make a quick dollar. Frank Barbano's Prop Shop saw it as an opportunity to bring back a revered housing type to their former quality. Historic context is important to Mr. Barbano, and the Silver Lake neighborhood is filled with similar scale housing built in the same time period including other Bungalow Courts.

We see Casa Micheltorena as a model, it demonstrates that historic preservation can be profitable. It also can be seen as a model for new multi-family housing developments, the Bungalow Court is a demonstration, relatively affordable—high quality, high-density housing with shared open-space is possible.