THE TIMES
MONDAY FEBRUARY 3 2025

The Sunday Times of London
February 2, 2025

‘So much has been lost’: an architect’s lament for Los Angeles

• NEW

The city blighted by fire had some of the most beautiful and innovative houses in the world, writes a British-born expert who has lived there for half a century

By Michael Webb



Kevin Keim had just returned to his home in Austin, Texas, when he heard of the Palisades fire ripping through the northwestern tip of Los Angeles. As director of the Charles Moore Foundation, he is responsible for the idiosyncratic house that Moore designed in 1973 for the late Leland Burns, a UCLA professor of urban planning. Without hesitation, Keim took the next flight back to LA to protect his baby.



Leland Burns’s home in Los Angeles

CHARLES MOORE FOUNDATION

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CHARLES MOORE FOUNDATION

It's not a smart idea to flout a mandatory evacuation order when a wildfire is raging out of control but Keim chanced it, evading National Guard patrols and later talking his way back into the sealed-off area, thinking: "I'll defend the house with a garden hose if I need to." And so for several days he became a one-person fire brigade, hooking up hoses along the street to extinguish flying embers that threatened to engulf the house and its neighbours.



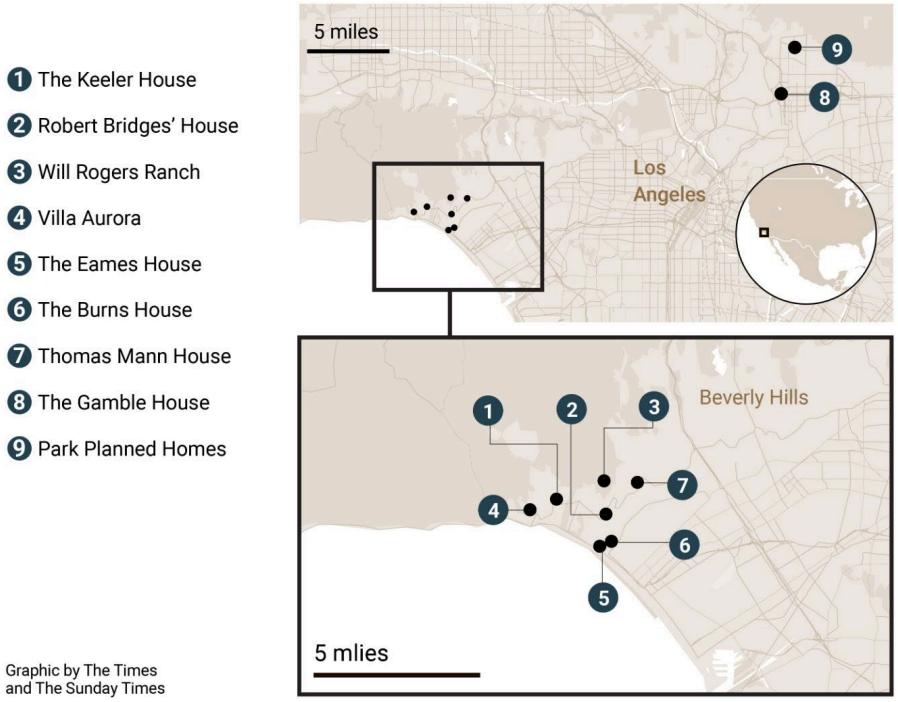
Kevin Keim said: "I found it difficult to work with the rudimentary mask and goggles I had, so they were usually just around my neck"

The Leland Burns house is intact, but thousands of other homes were less fortunate. Over the past three weeks, firefighters from all over the western United States have battled two major fires and several smaller outbreaks in Los Angeles. At least 25 people have died, which is the greatest tragedy. So much has been lost: an estimated 16,000 structures and vibrant communities that evolved over a century, reduced to smouldering ruins and toxic dust. The Great Fire of London is still remembered; LA's fires consumed homes and buildings over 59,000 acres — 80 times the area of the City of London.

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Mansions in path of the blaze



At the start of the 20th century, the Greene brothers created luxurious versions of the California bungalow, Irving Gill reinterpreted the Mission Style in thin planes of concrete and Frank Lloyd Wright designed textile block houses inspired by pre-Columbian temples. The Viennese architects Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra arrived in the 1920s. They and their protégés helped to create the greatest collection of innovative houses of any city in the world. Successive generations of progressive designers, from John Lautner to Frank Gehry and Thom Mayne, have built on the foundation laid by those pioneers.

A casual visitor sees little of this legacy. LA is Stealth City: most of the prime targets are off the radar — private property concealed behind walls and plantings. But go hunting, as I did 50 years ago when I first arrived, a copy of the indispensable Gebhart-Winter guide in hand, and you will glimpse treasures. Often, it's no more than a tantalising fragment; occasionally it's the full monty.

We can be thankful the flames didn't reach further. The Burns house was saved, and the Palisades fire was checked before it invaded a concentration of landmarks to the south and west, including the irreplaceable Eames House and several neighbouring Case Study houses. The Altadena fire stopped short of the Gamble House and other Craftsman gems.

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The Eames House, built in 1949, survived:



JULIUS SHULMAN PHOTOGRAPHY ARCHIVE / GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



WALTER BIBIKOW/GETTY IMAGES

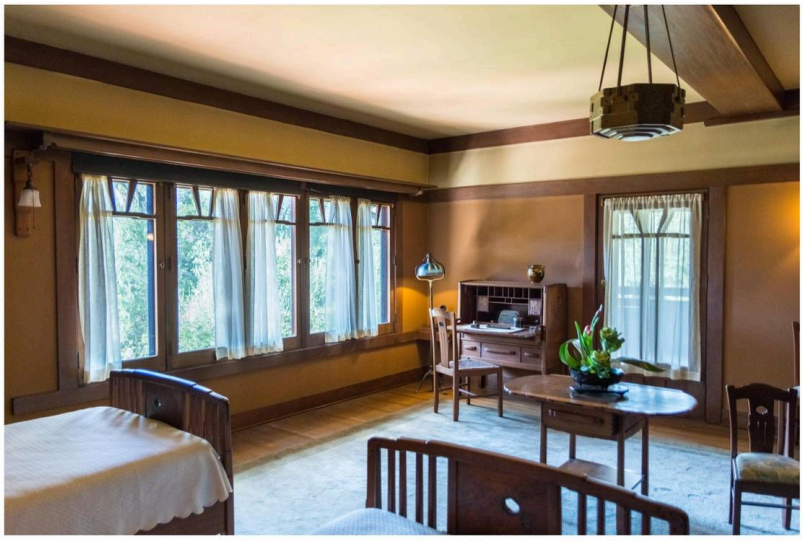
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So did the Gamble House, built in 1908:



ALAMY



ALAMY

Other masterpieces were less fortunate. Gregory Ain's Park Planned Homes in Altadena were a model of co-operative action; only five of the 28 units survive. Ain was an idealistic architect who fought to create communal housing projects for working-class families and soldiers returning from the Second World War. In appreciation of his efforts, he was denounced as a communist and his career abruptly ended.

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The Park Planned Homes have been reduced to ash:



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Destruction at Park Planned Homes in Altadena

DEREK LYONS/GOFUNDME

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Ray Kappe, the low-key visionary who founded the Southern California Institute of Architecture, designed a succession of woodsy, spatially exciting houses from the 1950s until his death in 2019. He showed me the Keeler House when I was writing a book about his work and I found it as impressive as the celebrated residence he had created for his own family.

Now the Keeler House has perished, though several siblings had a narrow escape.



The Keeler House was built in 1991

TIM STREET-PORTER / CROSBY DOE ASSOCIATES INC

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Will Rogers Ranch, a glorious shrine to the life and work of the American humorist, has gone:







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So has a near neighbour, the house that the architect Robert Bridges raised on concrete piers high above Sunset Boulevard:



TREVOR TONDRO/NEW YORK TIMES



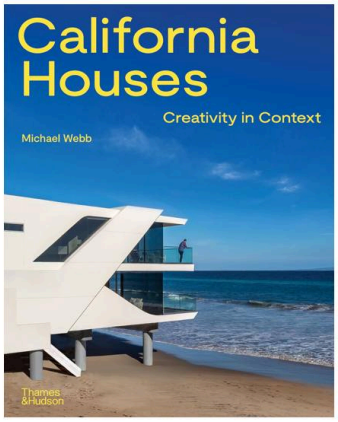


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But even at their most intense, the fires were capricious. The Thomas Mann House and the Villa Aurora, sanctuaries for the German exile community in the 1940s, were scorched but largely spared.

Flames skipped over a Malibu beach house featured on the cover of my recent book, *California Houses: Creativity in Context*, while incinerating everything around. Ironically, that book celebrated metal-clad houses that replaced several burnt out in northern California.



LA is peculiarly vulnerable to wildfires. It sprawls over hills and flats, and many of the most desirable neighbourhoods, from Malibu to Beverly Hills, are interspersed with patches of wilderness. From the air it appears a monotonous grid of housing, pulsing arteries of traffic and clustered warehouses. But in the hills, nature rules. Houses cling to the slopes of canyons left tinder-dry from a ten-month drought. A spark fanned by gusting winds can rapidly turn into an unquenchable inferno.



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European cities devastated by bombing raids in the last war were able to recreate much of their original fabric, for the gutted shells of public buildings could be restored. Visiting Berlin, Hamburg and Dresden today it's hard to imagine the ruins and rubble of 1945. In contrast, 70 per cent of Los Angeles is zoned for single-family houses, many of which are thin-skinned wood structures. Once a fire takes hold, only a brick chimney is left standing.

Those who lost their homes have to decide whether to rebuild or relocate. For many there is no choice: insurance in high-risk areas is becoming prohibitively expensive or unavailable. The city must provide other options, and it could do worse than study examples from the past. Some of the modern classics — notably the Ain clusters, Schindler's studio house, Neutra's VDL House and his courtyard apartments, where I am lucky enough to live — hold lessons for reconstruction.

These show ways of making best use of scarce land and densifying the urban fabric to remedy the shortage of affordable housing. Hopefully then at least some good can come out of this terrible tragedy.

Michael Webb has written 30 books on architecture and design. He moved to Los Angeles nearly 50 years ago after a brief stint with The American Film Institute in Washington DC.