



The Case for Letting Malibu Burn

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Source: *Environmental History Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 1-36

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Forest History Society and American Society for Environmental History

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3984830>

Accessed: 18-11-2018 07:00 UTC

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The Case For Letting Malibu Burn

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Late August to early October is the infernal season in Los Angeles. Downtown is usually shrouded in acrid yellow smog while heat waves billow down Wilshire Boulevard. Outside the air-conditioned bank skyscrapers, homeless people huddle miserably in every shadow. A few blocks away, in poorly ventilated garment sweatshops, thousands of *operadoras* pant for breath in front of their sewing machines. Irritable bosses, their dress-shirts stained with sweat, bark endless orders in Spanish, Armenian, Korean, or Cantonese.

Across the Harbor Freeway, the overcrowded tenements of the Westlake district—Los Angeles's Spanish Harlem—are intolerable ovens. Suffocating in their tiny rooms, immigrant families flee to the fire escapes, stoops, and sidewalks. Anxious mothers swab their babies' foreheads with water while older children, eyes stinging from the smog, cry for *palletas*, the flavored cones of shaved ice sold by push-cart vendors. Shirtless young men—some with formidable jail-made biceps and mural-size tattoos of the Virgin of Guadalupe across their backs—monopolize the shade of *tienda* awnings. Amidst hundreds of acres of molten asphalt and concrete there is scarcely a weed, much less a lawn or tree.

Thirty miles away, the Malibu coast—where hyperbole meets the surf—basks in altogether different weather. The temperature is 85 (twenty degrees cooler than Downtown) and the cobalt blue sky is

clear enough to discern the wispish form of Santa Barbara Island, nearly fifty miles offshore. At Zuma surfers ride the curl under the insouciant gaze of their sun goddesses, while back at Topanga Beach horse-trainers canter Appaloosas across the wet sand. Elsewhere naked screenwriters poach in Point Dume jacuzzis, au pairs trade gossip in French (*quelle familles bizarres!*) over capuccinos at Malibu Colony Plaza, and tourists get lost in the hills searching for a view of Streisand's elusive palace. Totally indifferent to the misery on the "mainland," the residents of Malibu suffer through another boringly perfect day.

Needless to say, the existential differences between the tenement district and the gilded coast are enormous at any time of the year. But late summer is the beginning of the wildfire season in Southern California, and Westlake and Malibu share one decisive condition in common: catastrophic fire.

According to recent estimates, Westlake (including adjacent parts of Downtown) has the highest urban fire incidence in the nation: one of its two stations alone overwhelmed by an incredible 20,000 emergency calls in 1993.¹ Some tenements and apartment-hotels have continuous fire histories dating back to their construction in the early twentieth century. The notorious (and still standing) St. George Hotel, for instance, experienced fatal blazes in 1912, 1952, and 1984. Moreover, almost all of the deadly tenement fires in Los Angeles since 1945 have occurred within a one-mile radius of the corner of Wilshire and Figueroa (See Table One).

Table One ²

Fatal Tenement Fires (Downtown/Westlake)		
Date	Location	Deaths
1. 1947	659 Maple	1
2. 1952	St. George	7
3. 1969	320 S. Rampart	8
4. 1970	Ponet Square	19
5. 1972	Barclay	3
6. 1973	Stratford Arms	25
7. 1976	335 S. Witmer	10
8. 1979	Oxford	2
9. 1982	Dorothy Mae	24
10. 1984	St. George	1
11. 1986	116 S. Flower	5
12. 1993	330 S. Burlington	10
13. 1993	Grand Avenue	3
Total Dead		118*

Malibu, meanwhile, is the wildfire capital of North America and, possibly, the world. Fire here has a relentless staccato rhythm. The rugged 22-mile-long coastline is scourged, on average, by a large fire (1000 acres plus) every two-and-one-half years, and the entire surface area of the western Santa Monica Mountains has been burnt three-times-over this century. At least once a decade a blaze in the chaparral grows into a terrifying fire-storm consuming hundreds of homes in an inexorable march across the mountains to the sea. Since 1970 four such holocausts have destroyed more than one thousand luxury residences and inflicted almost a billion dollars in property damage. Some unhappy homeowners have been burnt out twice in a generation, and there are individual patches of coastline or mountain, especially between Point Dume and Tuna Canyon, that have been incinerated as many as eight times since 1930 (See Table Two).³

Table Two⁴

Malibu Firestorms (1930-1993)						
(10,000 acres plus)						
Date	Name		Acres	Homes	Deaths	
1. 1930	October	Potrero	15,000	—	—	
2. 1935	October	Latigo/Sherwood	28,599	—	—	
3. 1938	November	Topanga	16,500	350	—	
4. 1943	November	Woodland Hills	15,300	—	—	
5. 1949	October	Susana	19,080	—	—	
6. 1955	November	Ventu	12,638	—	—	
7. 1956	December	Sherwood/Newton	37,537	120	1	
8. 1958	December	Liberty	17,860	107	—	
9. 1970	September	Wright	31,000	403	10	
10. 1978	October	Kanan/Dume	25,000	230	2	
11. 1982	October	Dayton Canyon	54,000	74	—	
12. 1993	November	Calabasas/Malibu	18,500	350	3	
Total				1634	16	
Plus Smaller Fires				App. 2000	16	

Stand at the mouth of Malibu Canyon or sleep in the St. George Hotel, in other words, and you eventually will face the flames. It is a statistical certainty. The richest and poorest landscapes in Southern California are ironically comparable in the frequency of incendiary disaster. This was emphasized tragically during 1993 when a conflagration in May at a Westlake tenement, which killed three mothers and seven children, was followed in late October by a siege

of twenty-one Southland wildfires culminating in the great firestorm that forced the evacuation of most of Malibu on 2 November.

Whether considered from the standpoint of causality or social response, however, the two species of conflagration are inverse mirror images of one another. Defended in 1993 by the largest army of firefighters in California history, wealthy Malibu homeowners also benefitted from an extraordinary range of insurance, landuse, and disaster relief subsidies as well as obsessive media coverage. Yet—as most experts will readily concede—periodic firestorms are inevitable as long as private residential development is tolerated in the fire ecology of the Santa Monicas.

On the other hand, many of the 100-or-so recent fatalities from tenement fires in the Westlake and Downtown areas might have been prevented if slumlords had been held to minimal standards of building safety. If enormous resources have been allocated—quixotically—to fight irresistible forces of nature on the Malibu coast, then scandalously little attention has been paid to the man-made and remediable fire crisis of the inner city. As we shall see in some detail, the *political* history of fire in Los Angeles is a faithful reflection of larger class struggles.

THE FIRE COAST

From the very beginning fire has defined Malibu in the American imagination. Sailing northward from San Pedro to Santa Barbara in 1835, Richard Henry Dana described (in *Two Years Before the Mast*) a vast blaze along the coast of Jose Tapia's Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit. Despite (or, perhaps, because of) Spanish prohibition of the Chumash and Gabrielino Indians' practice of annual burning, mountain infernos repeatedly menaced the Malibu area throughout the nineteenth century.⁵ During the boom of the late 1880s, the entire ex-Tapia latifundia was sold at \$10 per acre to the Boston Brahmin millionaire, Frederick Rindge. In his memoirs, Rindge described his unceasing battles against squatters, rustlers, and, above all, recurrent wildfire. The great fire of 1903, which raced from Calabasas to the sea in a few hours, incinerated Rindge's dream ranch in Malibu Canyon and forced him to move to Los Angeles, where he died in 1905.⁶

From the time of the Tapias, the owners of Rancho Malibu had recognized that the region's extraordinary fire hazard was shaped, in large part, by the uncanny alignment of its coastal canyons with the annual fire winds from the North: the notorious Santa Anas, which blow primarily between Labor Day and Thanksgiving, just before the

first rains.⁷ Born from high-pressure areas over the Great Basin, the Santa Anas become hot and dry as they descend avalanche-like into Southern California. The San Fernando Valley acts as a giant bellows, sometimes fanning the Santa Anas to hurricane velocity as they roar seaward through the narrow canyons and rugged defiles of the Santa Monicas.⁸ Add a spark to the thick vegetation (the "fuel-loading" in the Malibu area is frequently above 40 tons per acre) on such an occasion, and an uncontrollable wildfire will result.

The speed and heat of the fire is so intense that fire-fighters can only attempt to prevent lateral spread of the fire while waiting for the winds to abate or the fuel to diminish.⁹

Less well understood in the old days, of course, was the essential dependence of the dominant vegetation of the Santa Monicas—chamise chaparral, coastal sage scrub, and live oak woodland—upon this inevitable cycle of wildfire. Decades of research (especially at the San Dimas Experimental Forest in the San Gabriels) have given late twentieth-century science vivid insights into the complex role of fire in recycling nutrients and ensuring seed germination in Southern California's various pyrophytic flora.¹⁰ Conversely, science has established the predominant role of biomass accumulation, rather than ignition frequency, in regulating fire destructiveness. As Richard Minnich has emphasized, "fuel, not ignitions, causes fire." "You can send an arsonist to Death Valley and he'll never be arrested."¹¹

A particularly important revelation was the virtually exponential relationship between the age structure of vegetation and the resultant intensity of fire. Botanists and fire geographers discovered that "the probability for an intense fast running fire increases dramatically as the fuels exceed twenty years of age." Indeed, half-century-old chaparral, heavily laden with dead mass, is calculated to burn with fifty times more intensity than twenty-year old chaparral. Put another way, an acre of old chaparral is the fuel equivalent of about 75 barrels of crude oil. A great Malibu firestorm, therefore, may generate the heat of three million barrels of burning oil at a temperature of 2000 degrees.¹²

Extreme fires, moreover, can destroy the structure of the soil itself. A water-repellant layer is created that dramatically accelerates subsequent flooding and erosion. Translated into practice, this means that "total fire suppression"—the official policy in the Southern California mountains since 1919—is a futile, indeed disastrous, strategy that makes doomsday-like firestorms and subsequent floods virtually

inevitable by preventing the recycling of dead chaparral by more frequent small fires.¹³ Minnich provides exhaustive documentary evidence that a monomaniacal obsession with ignition, rather than fuel, management simply ensures that fires occur “under the most severe fuel and weather conditions.”¹⁴

For a generation after Rindge’s death, his widow May struggled to keep the family Shangri-La isolated and intact. Like one of the iron-fisted heroines played by Barbara Stanwyck, the so-called “Queen of the Malibu” closed the ranch roads in 1917, strung barbed wire along the perimeter, and posted armed fence-riders with orders “to shoot to kill.” In one famous episode, Rindge gunmen provoked a tense confrontation with deputy sheriffs after driving off a road survey crew. Hysterical newspaper headlines warned of “Civil War in Peaceful Southern California!”¹⁵ Following one of the most protracted legal battles in California history, however, the courts granted the state a highway right-of-way across Rindge land. Opened to traffic in 1928, the Pacific Coast Highway gave Angelenos their first view of the magnificent Malibu coast and introduced a potent new fire-fuse—the automobile—into the inflammable landscape.

The indefatigable Mrs. Rindge continued to fight the road builders and developers in the courts, but the costs of litigation forced her to lease choice parts of Malibu Beach to a movie colony that included Jack Warner, Clara Bow, Dolores Del Rio, and Barbara Stanwyck herself. The Colony’s unexpected house-warming was a lightning-swift wildfire that destroyed thirteen new homes in late October 1929.¹⁶ Exactly a year later, walnut pickers in the Thousand Oaks area accidentally ignited another a blaze which quickly grew into one of the greatest conflagrations in modern Malibu history.

The 1930 Decker Canyon fire was a worst-case scenario involving fifty-year-old chaparral and a fierce Santa Ana. Faced with a five-mile front of towering flames, 1100 fire-fighters could do little except flee for their lives. As the firestorm unexpectedly wheeled toward the Palisades, there was official panic. County Supervisor Wright, his nerves shaken by a visit to the collapsing fire lines, posted 100 patrolmen at the city limits to alert residents for evacuation. Should the “fire raging in the Malibu District get closer,” he gasped, “our whole city might go.”¹⁷ Fortunately this apocalypse (which may have provided the idea for the burning of Los Angeles in Nathanael West’s *Day of the Locust*) was avoided—no thanks to human efforts—when the fickle Santa Ana abruptly subsided.

In hindsight, the 1930 fire should have provoked an historic debate on the wisdom of opening Malibu to further development.

Indeed, a few months before the conflagration, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.—the nation's foremost landscape architect and designer of the California state park system—had advocated public ownership of at least 10,000 acres of the most scenic beach and mountain landscape between Topanga and Point Dume.¹⁸ Despite a further series of fires in 1935, 1936, and 1938, which destroyed almost 400 homes in Malibu and Topanga Canyon, public officials stubbornly disregarded the conservationist wisdom of Olmsted's proposal for a great public domain in the Santa Monicas.¹⁹ The County of Los Angeles, for example, squandered an extraordinary opportunity in 1938 to acquire 17,000 acres of the bankrupt Rindge latifundia in exchange for \$1,100,000 in delinquent taxes. (At a mere \$64 per acre this might have been the deal of the century.)²⁰

Instead, in December 1940, an impecunious May Rindge was forced to put her entire empire on the auction bloc. Potential buyers were advised "to make an early selection... [of] ocean-front lots, sites for villas, hotels, golf clubs, estates, beach and yacht clubs, income and business lots, small summer home places, ranchitos, 100-640-acre ranchos, and acreage for further subdivision...."²¹ The disconsolate Queen of the Malibu died two months later.

During the Second World War—severe drought years on the West Coast—hundreds of fire-watchers were sent into the Southern California mountains to guard against Axis saboteurs. A few months after they were withdrawn, 150 Malibu homes were incinerated in another November fire. Yet this new disaster failed to discourage a postwar migration of artists, printers, bookdealers, architects (including, Olmsted himself), poets, and screenwriters—many of very modest means, and some seeking to escape the scrutiny of McCarthyism—who envisioned Malibu as Carmel south. In an engaging memoir of this period, UCLA librarian Lawrence Clark Powell described a genial way of life devoted to Mozart and beach-combing.

He also provided a classic account of the onslaught of the terrible firestorm of Christmas week 1956 which, burning to the sea, retraced the path of the 1930 blaze.²²

The wind was still savage when we went to bed at ten, the sky swept clear, aglitter with stars, Anacapa flashed its warning light. The cypresses, pines and eucalyptuses were noisier then the surf. Cats' fur threw sparks when stroked. We slept in spite of the sinister atmosphere.

I woke abruptly at four to see a fierce glow in the sky.... God, the whole face of the mountain was burning, in a long line

just below the summit, and moving toward us on the wind. Fear dried my mouth. I knew doom when I saw it.²³

A subsequent Forest Service study of this disaster, which killed one person and destroyed 100 homes, stressed the impossible challenge of combating such unpredictable and tameless natural forces.

Malibu fires combine most known elements of violent, erratic and extreme fire behavior: fire whirls, extreme rates of spread, sudden changes in speed and direction of fire spread, flash-overs of unburned gases complicated by intense heat and impenetrable smoke held close to the ground.²⁴

Indeed, the uncontrollable 1956 conflagration, which coincided with a waxing of Cold War anxieties, had unexpected political repercussions. "If the government could not defeat wildfires in the Santa Monicas," critics asked, "how would it deal with possible nuclear conflagrations?" Accordingly the Eisenhower administration acknowledged the Malibu blaze as "the first major fire disaster of national scope," and Congress—more concerned with the credibility of a vast civil defense establishment than with the tragedy of local homeowners—debated how to provide "complete fire prevention and protection in Southern California."²⁵

According to fire historian Stephen Pyne, the Malibu blaze also symbolized the transition from the traditional forest-fire problem to a new "fire regime" characterized by the "lethal mixture of homeowners and brush." This artificial ecotone of chaparral and suburb magnified the natural fire danger while posing new obstacles to fire fighters who now had to defend thousands of individual structures as well as battling the fire front itself. "Whereas it was often remarked that chaparral, particularly that composed largely of chamise, is a fire-climax community, it is now joked that the same is true of the Southern California mountain suburb."²⁶

Finally, the 1956 fire—followed by two blazes, one month apart, in 1958-59 that severely burned 8 firefighters and destroyed another 100 homes²⁷—was the beginning of the end for Bohemian Malibu. A perverse law of Pyne's new fire regime was that fire stimulates development as well as upward social succession. By declaring Malibu a federal disaster area and offering blaze victims tax relief as well as preferential low-interest loans, the Eisenhower administration established the precedent for the public subsidization of firebelt suburbs. Each conflagration, moreover, was punctually

followed by rebuilding on a larger and more exclusive scale as landuse regulations and sometimes even the fire code were relaxed to accommodate fire "victims."²⁸ As a result, renters and modest homeowners were displaced from areas like Broad Beach, Paradise Cove, and Point Dume by wealthy pyrophiles encouraged by artificially cheap fire insurance, socialized disaster relief, and an expansive public commitment to "defend Malibu."

■ In the absence of fire-risk zoning, the only constraint on development was a shortage of water for fire-fighting and domestic consumption.²⁹ The completion of a trunk water-line in 1962, therefore, was the signal for a new land-rush. The County's Regional Planning Commission promptly endorsed developers' fantasies by authorizing a staggering 1400 percent expansion of the Malibu population over the next generation: from 7983 in 1960 to a projected 117,000 residents in 1980.³⁰ Although the California coastal acts of 1972 and 1976, under the populist banner of "Don't Lock Up the Beach!," eventually slowed the real-estate juggernaut (as well as squelching such preposterous nightmares as a proposed Corral Canyon nuclear power plant and eight-lane freeway through Malibu Canyon) the urbanization of the Malibu Coast—Los Angeles's "backyard Big Sur"—was already a *fait accompli*.³¹

Yet, even as they were opening the floodgates to destructive over-development, county and state officials were also turning down every opportunity, between 1945 and 1969, to expand public beach frontage (a miserable 22 percent of the total). Nor did they show any interest in creating a public landtrust in the mountains, which were entirely under private ownership, including even the streambeds.³² Consequently, most of Malibu remained as inaccessible to the general public as during the isolationist Rindge era. (For people of color, in particular, it continued to be absolutely off limits.)³³ As historians of the coastal-access battle have put it: "The seven million people within an hour's drive of Malibu got Beach Boys music and surfer movies, but the twenty thousand residents kept the beach."³⁴

Returning for a final look in the early 1980s, Powell bitterly decried this aristocratization of his beloved coast:

In a feverish buying and selling of land, the coast has become utterly transformed and unrecognizable. Each succeeding house, bigger and grander, takes the view of its neighbors in a kind of unbridled competition.... Once lost, paradise can never be regained.... developers have bulldozed the Santa Monicas beyond recovery.³⁵

The Malibu nouveaux riches built higher and higher in the mountain chamise with scant regard for the inevitable fiery consequence. The next firestorm in late September 1970 coupled perfect fire weather (e.g., drought conditions, 100 degree heat, 3 percent humidity and an 85 mile-per-hour Santa Ana wind) with a bumper crop of combustible wood-frame houses. According to firefighters, their cedar shake roofs “popped like popcorn” as a twenty-mile wall of flames roared across the ridgeline of the Santa Monicas toward the sea. With the asphalt on PCH ablaze and all escapes routes cut off, terrified residents of the famed Malibu Colony took refuge in the nearby lagoon. Firebrands fell like hellish rain on the beach, and day turned into night under the gigantic smoke pall. Coalescing with another blaze in the Valley, this greatest of twentieth-century Malibu firestorms ultimately took ten lives and charred 403 homes, including a ranch owned by Governor Reagan.³⁶

Furious property-owners—radically underestimating the real balance of power between fire suppression and nature—denounced local government for failing to save their homes, and demanded new, expensive technological “fixes” for the wildfire problem.³⁷ Elected officials, acutely sensitive to Malibu’s national prominence in political fundraising, were quick to oblige.³⁸ In the meantime, developers—racing to stay ahead of proposed “slow growth” coastal legislation—redoubled their subdivision efforts. The new Malibu boom, in turn, only provided more fuel for the three successive “Halloween” fires that consumed homes in October 1978, 1982 and 1985. The first two blazes both began in Agoura and roughly followed the route of the 1956 fire through Trancas Canyon, while the third repeated the itinerary of the 1930 Decker Canyon conflagration.

The 1978 fire, which burned superstars’ homes in the Broad Beach area (where Powell had lived in the more humble 1950s), also set a new speed record: crossing 13 miles of very rugged terrain in less than two hours (as compared to four hours in the 1970 fire).³⁹ One eyewitness described how the rampaging fire front “turned thousands of wild rabbits into balls of flaming fur that darted insanely about, only to start new fires at the spots where they fell.” The surviving beasts—domestic pets and wild animals alike—“mingled in chaos with human evacuees along the beach at Point Dume while oblivious surfers rode the waves.”⁴⁰ Traumatized Malibu residents, who were also battered by disastrous floods and landslides in 1978 and 1980, could be forgiven for imagining that Nature was getting angrier at them.

THE BURNED-OVER DISTRICT

On-lookers were mesmerized by the desperate figure hanging from the third-story window sill of the burning Skidrow tenement. They shouted to him to hang on. "He clung there for several minutes before his grip loosened, and he fell, screaming, to his death in the paved alleyway below."⁴¹ Meanwhile every available ambulance in the city was rushing to 115 East Third Street. Scores of injured tenants—some with third-degree burns and multiple fractures—sprawled piteously on the sidewalks, while Skidrow missionaries prayed over them and grim-faced firefighters scaled ladders onto the blazing roof. They would eventually recover six more bodies from the Hotel St. George. And, for a few days, debate over avoidable but chronic fire tragedy would chase Korean War news out of the headlines of Los Angeles's four daily papers. It was 25 March 1952.⁴²

Like wildfires in Malibu, Los Angeles's tenement holocausts have been astonishingly faithful to a fundamental fire "ecology" (or perhaps we should say "algorithm") even if none of the ingredients are natural.⁴³ Consider, for example, the infamous and amazingly still extant Hotel St. George. As mentioned earlier, it hardly ever seemed to stop burning: scores of fire alarms over the decades were climaxed by fatal blazes in 1912 (6 dead), 1952 (7 dead), and 1984 (1 dead). Moreover, ten of the eleven fatal tenement fires that followed the 1952 disaster broke out in structures of strikingly similar configuration, and all eleven occurred within the same three-square-mile fire zone overlapping Downtown and Westlake.

The brief but brutal debate over the 1952 fire, which pitted Councilman Davenport, chairman of the Police and Fire Committee, against Fire Chief Alderson, exposed widespread official culpability. On the one hand, Chief Alderson justly pointed to the Council's repeated failure to enact the new fire-safety regulations recommended by his department three years earlier. On the other hand, Councilman Davenport excoriated the Chief for failing to enforce existing regulations. At the time of the fire, the Hotel St. George was in blatant violation of almost every section of the fire code: "bolted nailed door at bottom of rear stairs; unusable drop ladder; rotten standpipe fire hoses; landings of stairways blocked with furniture storage", etc. Raising the specter of corruption in the fire department, Davenport acridly told the press:

It looks to me that there is evidence here of dereliction on the part of the fire inspectors. It might even develop that the whole

building should have been closed.... For some reason—which I won't even guess at—he [Chief Alderson] lets these old buildings get away with murder.⁴⁴

This vicious circle of inadequate regulation and negligent enforcement, which persists today, has been compounded by the lethal design of the most common tenements. Built of cheap brick and soft mortar, without steel reinforcement, they were originally promoted as a safety innovation in the wake of the great San Francisco earthquake and conflagration of 1906: "the modern, fire-proof answer" to the old-fashioned combustible wooden building.⁴⁵ Designed for the most part as two to six-story "economy" hotels for railroad tourists, they typically featured large, open stairwells, steam heat, shared hallways, common lavatories, high ceilings, and fold-down murphy beds. In 1980 there were still 1079 of these hotel and apartment tenements—comprising 46,000 units and housing 137,000 residents—in Los Angeles, primarily in Downtown, the Westlake, and Wilshire districts.⁴⁶

Unreinforced masonry buildings failed catastrophically during the March 1933 Long Beach earthquake. Falling debris crushed more than 120 people to death and injured thousands more. New brick construction without steel reinforcement was quickly outlawed, although almost a half century passed before seismic retrofitting was required for the thousands of remaining pre-1933 unreinforced structures. In the meantime, as auto-courts and motels began to coopt their former tourist trade, the centrally-located economy hotels quickly metamorphosed into squalid tenements for the Depression's lost souls. (Robert Aldrich's 1955 film version of Mickey Spillane's *Kiss Me Deadly* offers an extraordinary *noir* tour of these decaying residential hotels before the razing of Bunker Hill.)

Fire officials soon recognized that these structures were as much damned by fire as by earthquake. Their most diabolical feature was the ubiquitous open stairwell that invariably acted as a huge flue spreading fire through the upper stories. "Furnaces with chimneys," complained one battalion chief. "You couldn't build better boxes to fry people in if you tried."⁴⁷ (A similar stairwell-as-chimney design—also advertised as "fire-proof"—had been responsible for the terrible Winecoff Hotel holocaust in Atlanta which killed 120 in December 1946—still the worst hotel fire in American history.)⁴⁸

Although open stairwells were barred from new construction by a 1947 ordinance, the city council—yielding to the same "slumlord lobby" as in the case of seismic safety—refused in a 1949 debate to make the standard retroactive.⁴⁹ The controversy surrounding the St.

George tragedy highlighted the stairwell problem but failed to shift the position of the council majority. Moreover, the city's public-housing movement, which had long promised to demolish the Downtown firetraps and rehouse the poor, suffered a crushing defeat in the November 1952 general election.⁵⁰

For nearly a generation politicians were able to forget about the tenement fire problem. Although serious blazes, often with casualties, were reported virtually every month in Skidrow or the Westlake district, there were no headline-grabbing tragedies. Then, on 12 October 1969, a ground floor-fire broke out in a 1920s wood and masonry structure on Rampart Boulevard, just west of MacArthur (formerly Westlake) Park. Following the deadly pattern of the Hotel St. George fire, superheated gases literally exploded up an open stairwell. With the front fire escape cut off by flames, dozens of tenants had no choice but to jump from the upper stories. The eight dead included a pregnant woman killed in a leap from a third floor window.

Eleven months later, a virtually identical fire broke out in the lobby of the Ponet Square, a four-story, Downtown apartment-hotel built in 1910. According to the analysis later released by fire investigators, flames raced up the flue-like stairwell at a velocity of 5 feet per second. At each landing, fire backdrafted down the hallways. Fire escapes, at the ends of hallways, were engulfed in flames before residents could reach them. Within a few minutes, the temperature in the stairwell and hallways reached the same extreme heat as a mountain firestorm, about 2000 degrees. Dozens of residents, meanwhile, were trapped inside their rooms with the temperature rapidly climbing to an ovenlike 400 degrees. Again the only choice was to jump or be baked to death. "I could hear bodies hitting the ground all around me," said Fire Captain James Williams. Demolition crews worked for a week to recover the last of nineteen victims.⁵¹

The back-to-back Ramparts and Ponet Square disasters finally forced the council to require the retrofitting of pre-1947 tenements. Owners were given the options of installing sprinkler systems, enclosing stairwells with fireproof doors, or simply demolishing their buildings. With sharp teeth, the "Ponet Square" ordinance might have made a serious difference. But the council, ever solicitous of property owners, allowed four years to make improvements and exempted all two-story structures. These loopholes condemned scores more to burn to death.

By 15 November 1973, for example, only 6 percent of owners cited had bothered to bring their buildings into compliance with the

law. That evening a fire started in a lobby sofa near an open stairwell in the ancient and unretrofitted Stratford Hotel near MacArthur Park. It was an uncanny repeat of the previous holocausts. Although firefighters reached the building within five minutes of the alarm, twenty-five tenants were already dead. It had taken only a few minutes for the blast-furnace heat to burn through their thin apartment doors. In the most poignant scene, five small children were found huddled around the body of their mother.⁵²

Over the next decade the weaknesses of the Ponet Square ordinance continued to be exposed by one fire tragedy after another. A few days before Christmas 1976, for example, ten Central American and Mexican immigrants were killed when another open-stairwell fire destroyed a two-story tenement in the Westlake district (335 S. Witmer). One of the fire-fighters at the scene later wrote a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* complaining that “vested interests” had blocked the extension of the stairwell ordinance to hundreds of dangerous two-story structures. “Its the old story: Cost versus Safety”.⁵³ His point was grimly reinforced by further fatal tenement fires in 1979 (two dead) and 1981 (one dead).⁵⁴

During the 1970s, meanwhile, the elderly white population in the Downtown and Westlake firetraps was largely replaced by poor immigrant families—*recien llegados*—from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Responding to the 1976 Witmer fire, for example, firefighters had been amazed to discover 75 adults and children crammed into nine single-room units on one floor, with a single shared kitchen and toilet.⁵⁵ The new immigration also transformed the economics of slumlordism. In the absence of affordable residential construction during the 1970s, owners of the older tenements found themselves with monopoly power over the bottom-end housing market. As a result, the percentage of total income paid by the poorest families for rent soared from 37 percent in 1977 to 60 percent in 1987. Rents, profits, and overcrowding increased in lockstep with one another, while maintenance and building safety rapidly deteriorated.

Meanwhile, savage budget cuts in the wake of Proposition 13 (1978) were shrinking the Fire Department (minus 15 percent) at the same time that the demand for its services was exploding (plus 50 percent). Local fire stations, undermanned and overwhelmed by emergency calls, began to neglect regular fire inspection. Slumlords, in turn, routinely disregarded citations for fire-code violations. When investigators did have time to pursue non-compliance cases, they

typically found ownership disguised behind various fronts and straw men.⁵⁶

The Dorothy Mae Apartments—a four-story brick tenement built in 1927—was a microcosm of new immigrant life in one of these rent plantations. Most of its residents had migrated together—an entire transplanted village—from El Salitre in Zacatecas. Fathers and mothers worked together in Downtown garment sweatshops, while grandparents and older children took care of toddlers and infants. On the weekends “Little Salitre” celebrated christenings in the Dorothy Mae parking lot or walked to nearby Elysian Park for communal picnics and soccer matches. They paid rent to an abstraction called HLL Management Company, a facade for attorney Hiram Kwan and ten anonymous partners. Although the Dorothy Mae was equipped with fire-proof “Ponet doors,” they illegally were kept propped open. The absentee owners pointedly ignored repeated citations from fire inspectors.

Needless to say, the ensuing tragedy on 8 September 1982 was again stamped from the same terrible mold as the Hotel St. George thirty years before. A deliberately set blaze in a first floor utility room smoldered for a while until it burnt through to the stairwell. Within seconds it became a miniature fire-storm sucking every last molecule of oxygen from the inside of the Dorothy Mae. The 200 residents had almost no warning: 24 died (including 7 members each of the Diaz and De La Torre families) and 150 were injured. Little Salitre was devastated.⁵⁷

Eight months later, while the city council was supposedly debating a proposed “Dorothy Mae” ordinance mandating automatic sprinklers and smoke-activated fire doors, the postwar history of tenement fire came back, full circle, to the Hotel St. George. The Skidrow crematorium’s latest owner was a Palos Verdes millionaire who had changed nothing but the name to the silly plagiarism: “LA Six Motel”, and was under criminal investigation for 121 separate health, building-safety, and fire-code violations. The six-story structure’s misdemeanors included fire escape doors that opened the wrong way, missing fire hoses, inoperative smoke detectors, substandard wiring, gaping holes in the walls, cracks in the ceilings, no heating, sagging floors, and, not least, one of the largest vermin populations on the West Coast. Superior Court Judge Dickran Tevrizian, who toured the St. George in 1982, called it “a time bomb.”⁵⁸

It went off on 13 May 1984. Although an elderly man was burnt to death, alert fire-fighters, primed to the perils of the St. George, were publicly congratulated for stopping the blaze before it became

"a major catastrophe." At the same time, Fire Chief Donald Manning urged the city council to pass the urgently needed "Dorothy Mae" ordinance. The response from Robert Farrell, chairperson of the Building and Safety Committee, spoke volumes about the improvement in relations between the Fire Department and the Council since 1952. "What ordinance?," he demanded.⁵⁹

"THIS IS HELL, DUDE!"

Like 1970 when Ponet Square and Malibu were ablaze within a few weeks of each other, 1993 again put wildfire and tenement fire in stark counterpoint to each other. Before analyzing the divergent political reactions to fires primarily destructive of property and those mostly lethal to human life, it is necessary to recall the dramatic chronology of a long and harrowing fire season. If Southern Californians seemed unprepared for the trial by fire that followed, they had no one to blame but themselves. Unlike the earthquake a few months later, the fires of 1993 came down grimly familiar pathways. There was no shortage of omens.

Harried fire inspectors, for example, knew 330 S. Burlington Avenue only too well. Since 1988 they had repeatedly cited its owners for their failure to repair defective smoke detectors and fire doors. Building and safety officials, meanwhile, had slapped the sprawling 69-unit structure with a notice of substandard housing, while health inspectors had responded to innumerable tenant complaints about broken plumbing, leaking ceilings, and obscene infestations of rats, cockroaches, and fleas. True, there were other tenements in the Westlake district with comparable dereliction, but they were 60 to 85 years old. The Burlington Apartments had been built in 1985.

The naive belief that Los Angeles' tenement problem gradually would be reduced by sheer attrition of blighted buildings was confounded in the 1980s by the appearance of huge four-story stucco boxes precariously supported by their parking garages. These poorly constructed "super-cubes," containing from 36 to 112 cramped units, were scarcely more than instant slums designed to exploit the desperate demand for cheap shelter in the central city. Speculators—typically headquartered, like the Burlington's owners, in the affluent western end of the San Fernando Valley—took advantage of federal tax exemptions and Los Angeles' unreformed zoning code to impose exorbitant new densities (amplified by overcrowding) on poor neighborhoods in the Westlake, Mid-City, and Hollywood districts.

Thus when fire inspectors visited the Burlington on three separate occasions during April 1993 they found people living in closets and infants sleeping in dresser drawers. They also discovered that the Ponet fire doors were again nailed open and that few of the smoke alarms actually worked. After the first inspection they ordered the owners to post an emergency 24-hour fire watch until the violations were corrected. The owners, Sidney and Frances Kaufman of Woodland Hills, did not comply. A week later (16 April), after two further visits to the Burlington, the inspectors reissued the order. Once again the Kaufmans disregarded it. At this point departmental regulations required the inspectors to take the citations to the fire marshall for an emergency hearing and possible prosecution. They failed to do so.

Two weeks later (3 May) fire broke out on the second floor. It erupted through the open fire doors to the third floor then blasted out the windows facing the interior courtyard. Residents—many of them Kanjobal (Mayan) Indians from Guatemala—were trapped between the inferno in the hallways and the toxic smoke that quickly filled the tiny courtyard. Desperate parents dropped screaming babies and toddlers from upper-story windows into the arms of people on the street. A local Eighteenth Street Gang member, Carlos Ingles, became an instant neighborhood hero when he caught six children, then, hearing cries, entered the building to rescue a young couple from their blazing bedroom. Still it was too late for ten victims, including two pregnant women and their fetuses.

The wildfires came six months later. The rains of the previous winter had produced exorbitant new brush growth, now dried and ready for burning. As in other recent fire years, the Santa Anas began howling just before Halloween. On the morning of Tuesday, 26 October, Southern California woke up to perfect fire weather. Los Angeles Fire Chief Donald Manning accurately assessed “a potential day for disaster” and dispatched ten city engine companies to the rim of the San Fernando Valley where chaparral meets suburb. Shortly after lunch a blaze was ignited in the crucible of so many Malibu fires: just across the Ventura County line in the grassland corridor between Agoura and Thousand Oaks. A regional fire war room was quickly established in the Los Angeles County Fire Department’s new headquarters in the Montebello Hills.

Early Wednesday morning, as a 50 mile-per-hour Santa Ana whipsawed power lines and ripped the fronds from palm trees, suspicious fires erupted one after another in Chatsworth (northwest San Fernando Valley) and Santa Paula (eastern Ventura County).

Meanwhile a transient, camping in Eaton Canyon along the flank of Mt. Wilson, tried to keep warm by kindling a small fire which immediately spread to century-old, unburnt chaparral. Within twenty-four hours it would destroy 118 homes in Altadena and Sierra Madre. As dawn broke on the 27th, the Thousand Oaks/Malibu, Chatsworth, and Altadena fires were out of control (five firefighters had already been critically injured), and new fires were being reported throughout five Southern California counties. As local forces were overwhelmed, statewide mutual aid agreements kicked in, and one hundred engine companies were sent southward on Interstate-5—sirens screaming—from Bay Area and San Joaquin Valley fire departments.

They arrived too late to save the two dozen homes destroyed on the 27th by the first Malibu fire. But events in the Santa Monicas, and even Eaton Canyon, were overshadowed by the holocaust, beginning Thursday just after lunch, that with incredible speed consumed Laguna Beach “as if it had been soaked in gasoline.” 27,000 residents were evacuated from the path of a conflagration that had been long predicted and equally long disregarded.

The narrow streets of wood homes with shake roofs finally succumbed to the devastation that for decades officials had warned was the region’s destiny. After the Oakland fire two years ago, Orange County Fire Captain Dan Young said communities such as Laguna Beach were ‘designed for disaster.’⁶⁰

The Laguna Beach blaze (the biggest Orange County fire since 1948), which injured 65 firefighters, destroyed 366 homes (most of them valued over \$1 million) and caused \$435 million damage, seemed to be the dramatic denouement to a catastrophic fire week: in fact, it was only the first act.

The second began on the morning of 2 November near a pair of water tanks on Mount Calabasas. Within a few minutes angry Santa Anas transformed a careless or deliberate spark into the seed of a great firestorm. Two off-duty volunteer firefighters, driving up Old Topanga Canyon Road, spotted the initial plume of smoke and managed to hook up a hose to a hydrant, but they were quickly overwhelmed by the fire’s explosive growth. “I immediately thought it was arson,” one was quoted in the *Times*. “I don’t exactly know why.”⁶¹ (Several months later Sheriff Sherman Block would publicly accuse the two of starting the fire so they could put it out and become heroes.)

While county crews were still racing to the scene, the implacably advancing fire ambushed its first victims at a ranch a few

hundred yards downhill from the water tanks. Miscalculating the fire's velocity, residents Ron Mass and Duncan Gibbins foolishly attempted to defend their home with a garden house. They recognized their mistake almost immediately, but it was too late. Mass jumped into his jeep, but the fire caught him before he could get out of the driveway. Hideously burned, he managed to stagger to the edge of Old Topanga where firefighters saw him: his blistered arms "outstretched like a scarecrow." British screenwriter Gibbins, meanwhile, had dashed back to rescue his cat. He ran right into the fire's deadly thermal pulse. It charred 95 percent of his body. Paramedics later discovered him, barely conscious, in the ranch's swimming pool. "'I don't want to die,' he said over and over. Smoke poured from his mouth, and he talked in the terrible high-pitched squeal of a man with lungs scorched beyond repair."⁶² (Gibbins died later in the hospital, but Mass survived his third-degree burns.)

By the early afternoon the summit of the Santa Monicas was a funeral pyre. In face of the Santa Anas, the ridge-line network of fuel-breaks failed to slow the conflagration. Veteran country crews, aided by air tankers and helicopters, gamely defended their fire line on Old Topanga Road, but it was impossible to stop a 30-foot wall of flames, driven by 70 mile per winds, from cascading down the steep ravines and gorges that led to the Malibu coast. Multi-million-dollar estates in Carbon and Las Flores Canyons—some built on the ashes of humbler houses destroyed in 1956 and 1970—became so much fire fuel.⁶³ The situation was now out of control. From LAX or West L.A., the dark nimbus billowing above the Santa Monicas looked like a volcanic eruption. At 1:30 pm a sheriff's helicopter ordered Malibu Colonyites to begin evacuating their beachhouses.

Meanwhile, in the hills above the ocean, overwhelmed firefighters and terrified residents fought for their lives. Some had to drive through barricades of fire, while others saved themselves in empty swimming pools. Sean Penn and Ali McGraw, amongst scores of others, saw their homes burn to the foundations. Time and again, firefighters were betrayed by the feeble water pressure in hydrants or trapped in the labyrinth of narrow mountain streets. In the upper Los Flores Canyon, an Alhambra fire crew miraculously survived a fireball that incinerated their truck.

Don and Amy Yarrow were not so lucky. The elderly couple, who lived in a modest trailer at the top of Carbon Canyon, had been Malibu residents since the 1940s. They tried to outrun the firestorm in their Toyota pickup, but the fire was faster. They got a mere 100

yards down the road before being engulfed in flames. It took several days to identify their charred remains.⁶⁴

Malibu at dusk was a surreal borderland between carnival and catastrophe. On the pier nonchalant crowds played video games while television news helicopters hovered overhead like noisy vultures and the Coast Guard cutter *Conifer* stood offshore, ready to evacuate residents. Beneath the flaming hills, the Pacific Coast Highway was paralyzed by a hopeless tangle of arriving fire trucks and fleeing Bentleys, Porsches, and Jeep Cherokees. Hundreds more trekked out on horseback, by bike, or on foot. A few escaped on their roller blades. Three hundred sheriff's deputies were brought in to guard against looting. The chaotic exodus was oddly equalizing: panicky movie stars, clutching their Oscars, mingled with frantic commoners. Confronted once again with its destiny as a fire coast, Malibu replied in the vernacular. "This is hell, dude," one resident told the *Times*. "I'm expecting to see Satan come out any time now."⁶⁵

The crisis also tested Malibu's strange, bespoke morality. When the firestorm temporarily cut off PCH as an escape route, for example, entrapped residents had to make some tough choices. The *Malibu Times* celebrated the case of two intrepid housewives from the Big Rock area who loaded their jewels and dogs into kayaks and took to sea, where they were eventually rescued by blond hunks from Baywatch Redondo. Only the fine print revealed that, in saving their pets, they had left their Latina maids behind.⁶⁶

Firefighters, meanwhile, were beginning to have the eerie sense that they were struggling against supernatural cunning. After feigning at Malibu Colony and Pepperdine University, the fire suddenly changed direction and pivoted eastward toward Tuna Canyon. As frantic fire crews battled walls of flame in the lower canyon, the swirling red center of the firestorm easily outflanked them on the north, heading straight for Topanga, the Getty Museum, and, ultimately, the fat neighborhoods of the Palisades (where 70 city fire engines were already waiting).

By early Wednesday morning (4 November), Deputy County Fire Chief Donald Anthony had deployed 7,500 firefighters—some from as far away as Oregon and Oklahoma—for a last-ditch stand along Topanga Canyon Road. No one had ever seen such a gigantic mobilization of personnel and equipment. The urban ladder rigs, forestry pumper trucks and bulldozers stretched almost bumper to bumper for eleven miles. Courageous helicopter pilots threw away their safety manuals to fly dangerous night water drops. At dawn they were relieved by C-130s capable of bombing the chaparral with

3000 gallons of fire retardant at a time. Still the inferno aggressively parried each human tactic, repeatedly leaping over the fire lines to ignite brush on the east side of the road. The battle raged savagely until late Wednesday afternoon when the firestorm literally ran out of fuel and wind at the edge of the ocean. It had lasted thirty-six hours.

As in previous years, the prime-time drama of a Malibu fire produced an extravagant outpouring of sympathy from government agencies and common citizens. FEMA director James Lee Witt assured fire victims that the Clinton administration, having declared Malibu a federal disaster area, would provide "all the aid they need to rebuild homes and lives." Meanwhile, scores of trendy restaurants, bistros, and boutiques supplied the upscale equivalent of the Red Cross (which was also on the scene). Insurance adjusters set up camp in Winnebagos next to the Malibu pier. The County promised tax relief. A group of German architects offered to work for free. Fire victims formed a support network. Tony Hopkins offered an apartment to Dick Van Dyke. Zsa Zsa Gabor gave shelter to some homeless horses.⁶⁷

Eleven days later, while the tabloids were still shedding crocodile tears for burned-out movie stars, another fire—invisible to most of the media—killed three residents (the same as the Malibu holocaust) and critically burned twelve others in a dingy Downtown residential hotel. Once again, the double standard of fire disaster was rubbed in the faces of the poor—in this case, Mexican and Guatemalan garment workers. The owners of the Grand Avenue tenement—mere spitting distance from the site of the Ponet Square—had a notorious record of fire, health, and safety code violations. They had ignored longstanding tenant complaints about locked fire escapes, inoperable smoke detectors, vermin infestations, and crack addicts who monopolized the common bathrooms. When an evicted tenant threatened to burn the building down, however, the landlords immediately called the police. "They never came down. They said that if anything happens, call 911." A police spokesperson later explained, unconvincingly, that it had been "an awful busy day."⁶⁸

THE INCENDIARY 'OTHER'

"I was extraordinarily liberal until I came to Malibu, now I'm a fascist."

Screenwriter, quoted in the *Times* ⁶⁹

The LAPD's curiously phlegmatic attitude towards tenement arson sharply contrasts with official hysteria about suburban wildfire. The

1993 firestorms, following so close on the heels of the Rodney King riots, opened a pandora's box of white fear. One disaster was superimposed upon the other. From Laguna to Ventura, rumors spread that "some new breed of terrorist, or worse, several, were on the loose." Public officials openly speculated that Black gangs were at last making good on the old—largely apocryphal—threat "to burn rich white neighborhoods." In private, some even hinted darkly about a possible "Muslim connection" to New York's World Trade Center bombing.⁷⁰ (Ironically the burning hills were full of hundreds of present and former gang members: all risking their lives under extreme conditions as members of state and county firecrews.)⁷¹

The homeless also cast fiery shadows in Southern California's social imaginary. The Eaton Canyon fire, accidentally triggered by a transient, seemed to confirm mountain and canyon homeowners' worst fears of an invisible army lurking in the brush. Clandestine hobo encampments, like those in Tuna Canyon along the Malibu coast, were singled out as intolerable fire hazards. Blazes of indeterminate origin were routinely ascribed to the homeless.⁷²

As media-hungry politicians went slumming from one fire scene to another, inflammatory rhetoric escalated. Governor Wilson, desperately trying to toughen his image, compared arson with child molestation and proposed life sentences for the guilty. This did not satisfy two Orange County Republicans—Congressman David Drier and Assemblyman Ross Johnson—who insisted on the death penalty for the instigators of fatal blazes. Drier even demanded one-year prison terms for accidental fires.⁷³

Meanwhile, fire investigators zealously emulated the federal-local taskforce model deployed during the 1992 riots. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms' agents joined city and county fire officials, sheriffs' deputies, and local homicide detectives in an unprecedentedly intensive search for the arsonists believed to be responsible for setting 19 of the 26 recent Southland fires. Private contributions raised the reward for apprehension of the Malibu arsonist—initially described as a mysterious figure in a "blue pickup"—to \$350,000.⁷⁴

For its part, the normally temperate *Los Angeles Times* blew its editorial fusebox over the arson issue. Livid that some environmentalists had characterized homeowners themselves as the real firebugs, the paper reassured readers that it was "hardly a crime against nature...to choose to live in the mountains, at the urban/rural interface." Instead, it called for "a true paradigm shift in the way that [Californians] think about fire."

Fire prevention and crime prevention in California are becoming one and the same ... Californians need to stop viewing brush fires solely as acts of God and start thinking of them as sometimes acts of criminal—even pathological—man. What the arsonists did to us in the last two weeks they can do to us next week, or the one after that, if weather conditions are right for their evil crime. ... We are no longer fighting it'; we are fighting 'them'.⁷⁵

Ironically, the *Times*' "paradigm shift" from *it* to *them* has been the conventional wisdom in Southern California for generations. Although probably not more than one in eight blazes is caused by arson,⁷⁶ Anglo-Californians have always *criminalized* the problem of mountain wildfire. The majority have never accepted the natural role or inevitability of the fire cycle. (Conversely, there has been a persistent tendency to *naturalize* the strictly human artifact of tenement fire.) The political, as distinct from scientific, discourse in each generation has been obsessed with the identification of an "incendiary Other" responsible for fire destruction.

In the early twentieth-century, this "cruel-hearted and selfish man" (Frederick Rindge's description) was portrayed as an Indian, sheepherder, or, most frequently, a tramp. During the First World War, the Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) were believed to be lurking behind every burning bush in California. A decade later, major wildfires—like the 1930 Decker Canyon blaze—were usually blamed on itinerant farmworkers, especially the Okies. A year after Pearl Harbor, on the other hand, FBI agents and National Guardsmen were combing Las Flores Canyon for clues to the identity of "Axis saboteurs" responsible for the 1942 Malibu fire. Reflecting popular preoccupations during the Eisenhower era, the *Los Angeles Times* added new profundity to its reportage of the 1956 Malibu fire by linking arson to sexual perversion. According to a psychologist consulted by the paper, arsonists "set fires at night in order to see women run out of their homes in a state of undress."⁷⁷

The political backlash to the 1993 firestorms, however, was unprecedented in its virulence and scope of blame. Ugly seedlings of neo-McCarthyism sprouted in the charred ruins of affluent subdivisions. Following the demagogic lead of Governor Wilson, conservatives claimed to trace the web of a vast conspiracy against the sacred rights of property. In addition to the spectral "terrorists" directly responsible for the fires, vengeful homeowner and pro-development groups indicted such fellow-travellers of arson as gays, liberals, the Sierra Club, and an endangered rodent.

In Laguna Beach, for instance, pro-growth forces attacked openly gay councilmember Robert Gentry, who lost his home in the fire, for devoting "too much attention to Aids victims and not enough on fire protection." Scorning the charge that homes with wooden roofs and siding virtually invited a holocaust, the so-called Laguna Coalition instead excoriated environmentalists for opposing a proposed three-million-gallon reservoir.⁷⁸ On Orange County talk radio stations, the Sierra Club was denounced as "arson's fifth column."

In Riverside County, meanwhile, burned-out homeowners charged that federal regulations designed to protect the rare Stephens kangaroo rat had prevented them from clearing tall brush around their homes. "My home was destroyed by a bunch of bureaucrats in suits and so-called environmentalists who say animals are more important than people," claimed one distraught resident. "I'm now homeless, and it all began with a little rat"...(The allegation that wildlife regulations prevented fuel clearance is a canard. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service actually encourages the *mowing* of grasses that surround homes for fire safety; the problem is that homeowners find mowing too troublesome, preferring simply to roto-till their ecosystem under.)⁷⁹

These attacks were, in effect, the opening salvos in a major political offensive to unleash further pyromaniac suburbanization. Thus, Rep. Ken Calvert (R- Riverside), supported by the powerful Riverside Building Industry Association and the Farm Bureau, proposed a radical revision of the Endangered Species Act to protect property rights. At stake were 77,000 acres of federally protected habitat that developers had long coveted. Likewise along the Laguna coast, pro-growth forces were orchestrating an identical hue and cry against the gnatcatcher. This small, almost extinct bird was depicted as an arsonist through a bizarre syllogism that equated any undeveloped landscape or protected habitat as fire hazard *ipso facto*.

In Malibu, local wrath fell on advocates of greater public access to beaches and critics of hillside development. It was a replay of an old battle. After the 1978 fire, for example, the Coastal Commission wanted celebrity homeowners to provide more public easements to Trancas Beach. Governor Jerry Brown's Malibu friends, however, generated such an uproar against "government by extortion" that he renounced his own stunned commissioners as "bureaucratic thugs."⁸⁰ Four years later, while state officials were preoccupied with fighting the 1982 Trancas Canyon firestorm, local guerrillas attacked a public-access project at El Pescador beach. "Tires were slashed, sand

put in gas tanks, machinery pushed over the bluff, and site improvements trashed.”⁸¹

In late 1993, other Malibuites were again frothing at “radicals” who advocated more access as well as stricter fire-safety regulation of new and rebuilt housing. “They have forsaken our constitutional rights, and have shown a shocking insensitivity to [our] traumatic situation.” Public access, meanwhile, was equated with freedom of movement for arsonists. Residents demanded restricted access to mountain roads during periods of acute fire danger. They also raged against critics of California Fair Plan, a state-mandated insurance pool that subsidizes firezone dwellers by spreading costs amongst the mass of homeowners. Those who wanted the rich to pay a fairer share of the cost of protecting their homes were accused of instigating a “new class struggle between flatlanders and hillsiders.” As in the wake of past fires, *victimhood* preempted any serious debate about the social costs of sustaining luxury lifestyles along the Fire Coast.⁸²

Finally—by the end of summer 1994—the great arson manhunt had dissipated into a maze of false leads, misidentifications, minor arrests, and inter-agency squabbles. The evil shadow of “Fedbuster,” whose menacing letters suggested a vast conspiracy (“They burned me now I’m going to burn back. I fight fire with fire. You like puns, chumps? Sizzle, sizzle.”), turned out to be the mad projection of a former sex offender with no role in setting any of the fires. Similarly, the dramatic confession of a transient Satanist that he set the Laguna Beach fire “in order to commune with a demon” left egg all over the face of Orange County District Attorney Michael Capizzi when it turned out that the suspect actually had been in a Mexican prison at the time of the fire.⁸³

In the meantime, the investigation of the Malibu fire turned full circle to focus on the conflagration’s original heroes: the two off-duty firefighters on Mount Calabasas. The result was a unseemly brawl between Sheriff Block, who publicly accused the two of arson and murder, and District Attorney Gil Garcetti who refused to indict them for lack of evidence. As the half-lynched firefighters were left to writhe in the agony of unproven accusation, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms announced that it was taking charge of the bungled investigation.

REDLINING FIRE PROTECTION?

Councilmember Mike Hernandez’s field office is a suite of tiny rooms above a pool hall and El Pollo Loco. The principal decoration is a wall

map of his First Council District, an oblique archipelago of Spanish-speaking neighborhoods consolidated by 1980s voting-rights litigation to increase Latino representation on the Los Angeles City Council. One half of Hernandez's quarter-million constituents are crowded (fifty per acre) into the fire tenements of the Westlake area; the other half (fifteen per acre) live in the bungalow belt that sprawls across the Elysian Hills from Echo Park to Garvanza.⁸⁴ Westlake, however, is an electoral wasteland, with the smallest percentage of registered voters in the entire city. As a result, Hernandez's predecessor devoted most of her attention to politically active homeowners and small businesses in the northeast half of her District.

Hernandez—a large, quick-witted man with the slightly cherubic face of Diego Rivera—has tried to redress this historic inattention to Westlake's predominantly immigrant population. He and his staff daily confront slum conditions of Dickensian dimensions. Although Hernandez has no tolerance for private exploiters, his wrath is especially directed against public agencies that negligently disregard Westlake as Los Angeles's Third World. "Equity" has become his fighting motto. Whether the issue is garbage collection, recreation, school crossing guards, street cleaning, library facilities, drug dealing, or fire safety, the comparative standards in Westlake are appalling. Hernandez emphasizes that there is nothing even remotely approaching per capita equality of city facilities or services.⁸⁵

Fire inspection is a major case in point. Shortly after the Burlington fire, the *Los Angeles Times* did a sampling of tenements in the Westlake district and discovered that, despite epidemic safety violations, fully two-thirds of the structures had not undergone the annual fire inspection required by law. Hernandez was outraged and ordered the city's Chief Administrative Officer to prepare an independent audit of the entire city. The CAO, sampling ten inspection records in each of thirty fire stations, found that only 51 percent of the categorical inspections had been made. Sixty-two percent of the buildings in the sample were in violation of the fire code.⁸⁶

Hernandez's indignation about the Burlington disaster also jolted the Fire Department into conducting its own internal audit, employing the *Times*'s methodology of randomly selected buildings. Despite the frequent boast by Fire Chief Manning that his department had "the best fire inspection program in the nation," auditors uncovered a stark double standard. "Under the current system," they observed, "inspectors spend the least time in many of the areas with the greatest fire hazards." Annual fire inspection rates, for example, were almost three-times higher in some upper-income areas, like Bel-

Air and Encino, than in poor and fireprone Westlake or South Central. In mitigation, the internal audit argued that the disparities in inspection rates were the inevitable result of the much higher levels of emergency response in inner-city areas. Overworked and understaffed fire companies, in other words, were too busy battling blazes to have time to complete their entire schedule of safety inspection.⁸⁷

It was more difficult for the auditors to explain other anomalies. There was, for example, the "startling pattern of neglect of fire prevention records," 85 percent of which did not even indicate when buildings needed to be reinspected. Inspectors, moreover, were found negligent in referring persistent code violators for prosecution, and the entire Department was deemed in urgent need of more fire-prevention training.⁸⁸

Hernandez scoffs at the idea of an unavoidable trade-off between suppression and prevention in the tenement fire belt. "A two-tier system of fire safety is morally indefensible." If anything, he argues, the audits dramatically demonstrate the need for a major redistribution of fire-prevention resources from the suburbs to the inner-city. Although acknowledging that the Fire Department is severely understaffed (having lost 400 firefighters to budget cuts since the late 1970s), he is fiercely critical of what he characterizes as an "unfair policy of allocating personnel by the number of structures rather than population." (Westlake has almost twenty-five times the per-acre population density of Brentwood, Bel Air or the Palisades.) He claims, in particular, that his district has seen elements of its fire protection shifted to tony new suburbs in the northwest San Fernando Valley.

When I interviewed him in June 1994, Hernandez—together with council allies Jackie Goldberg (Hollywood) and Mark Ridley Thomas (South Central)—had spent a long, frustrating year trying to move city housing agencies and the Fire Department into action around proposed fire reforms. On one hand, Fire Chief Manning had promised to computerize fire inspection records and create a fire safety taskforce targeted on high-density areas like Westlake and Hollywood. On the other hand, the city council had ordered housing officials to integrate fire-safety enforcement into their overall, multi-agency strategy of slum abatement. The measures proposed by Hernandez and his colleagues ranged in graduated intensity from withholding rent from noncompliant owners to placing their buildings under a city receivership.

By the first anniversary (3 May) of the Burlington tragedy, however, nothing at all had been accomplished. Although the council's

fire-safety plan, adopted in December, had ordered the Housing Department to initiate regular progress reports in mid-January, none had been issued. Meanwhile, the Fire Department had failed to take the first steps—including even the purchase of file cabinets to store reports—in the implementation of Manning's promised reforms. While Hernandez and Goldberg scolded housing officials, Fire Commissioner Larry Gonzales told the Fire Chief (who, as usual, had pleaded budget constraints): "I am outraged by the snail's pace approach that the Fire Department is taking. ... This is an emergency situation where many of these people are unsafe."⁸⁹

Hernandez and Goldberg have also had to battle the potent influence of the landlord lobby on the city council. Incorporating the "bottom-line recommendations" of the both the CAO and the Fire Department, their proposed "Burlington ordinance" would require the installation of "Dorothy Mae"-type sprinkler systems in some 5600 hotels and apartment houses with more than 15 dwelling units, built between 1943 and 1990. "The time is long overdue for the City of Los Angeles to require sprinklers in 'low rise' residential structures...it would have prevented the widespread panic and loss of life at 330 South Burlington."

At an estimated cost ranging from \$450 to \$900 per unit and stretched out over a compliance period of 7-9 years, the ordinance is described by Hernandez and Goldberg as "not cost prohibitive." Needless to say, landlords sharply disagree and have denounced the measure as a "death-knell for affordable housing." They are applying fierce pressure on the council to defeat or eviscerate the ordinance. Judging by the city council's unhappy record of subservience to landlord interests, it will be a protracted battle. Yet the "Burlington ordinance" is the absolutely essential third leg of the tripod of comprehensive fire reform that includes the new high-density-area fire inspection taskforce, and the proposed fire-code sanctions to be enforced through the city's slum abatement program.

In historical perspective, Hernandez's various initiatives represent, at long last, a determined effort to complete the work half-heartedly begun by the council nearly a quarter-century earlier in the aftermath of the Ponet Square fire. Hernandez, however, is under no illusion that reformation of fire regulation and enforcement, by themselves, can actually cut the Gordian knot of the tenement fire problem. The political economy of slum housing itself must eventually be addressed. One aspect is the pattern of absentee ownership in "rent plantation" areas like Westlake. Another is the shoddy construction and density of new low-income apartment complexes,

which are concentrated, by a system of *de facto* segregation, in only a handful of councilmanic districts. Hernandez has made it clear that slum abatement must mean an increase in local equity, and that he won't tolerate his district simply as a high-density labor Bantustan for the rest of the city.

THE FIRE BOOM

"I have this sense of impending doom...."
Stephen Pyne⁹⁰

In one of his last articles, the well-known Los Angeles writer and environmentalist Richard Lillard challenged Frederick Jackson Turner's famous thesis that the American frontier—and with it, the frontiersman—had ended in 1890. As a matter of fact, Lillard asserted, the frontier was alive and well in the edenic canyons above Malibu and Hollywood. The unique challenge of the wild mountains in the big city brought out the true grit in its self-selected population. "The whole hillside and canyon ambience, almost always fresh and wild smelling, both attracts and holds the kind of individual that Frederick Turner and many a traveller, Tocqueville included, knew in the backwoods districts." The neighborly and self-reliant hill folk, moreover, were tempered to heroic proportions by the implacable constancy of the fire danger, "keeping an outlook for arsonists or children playing with matches, as their forefathers once kept alert for hostile aborigines."⁹¹

At the same time, however, Lillard warned harshly against the creeping threat of mountain society's antipode: Sloping Suburbia.

It is not habitation amid wilderness. Mankind has conquered nature instead of adjusting to it. Often the new instant enclaves have a supermarket, a cleaning and dyeing establishment, and a laundromat. The immigrating mini-city populace consists of country club types rather than hillsiders.⁹²

Although Lillard was only writing in 1981, his mountain frontier is virtually extinct. "Country Club types" have everywhere conquered, and now monopolize almost all the picturesque seacoasts and foothills. Despite brave but belated attempts at open-space conservation, like the Santa Monica Mountain Conservancy, Southern California's remnant natural landscape continues to be destroyed or

privatized. As we saw earlier, fire itself accelerates gentrification and the replacement of bohemian lifestyles by snobbery and exclusiveness. The great impetus of this movement to the hills is no longer communion with nature or frontier rusticity, but, as critic Reyner Banham recognized in the 1960s, the search for absolute "thickets of privacy" outside the fabric of common citizenship and urban life.

Hillside homebuilding, moreover, has despoiled the natural heritage of the majority for the sake of an affluent minority. Instead of protecting "significant ecological areas" as required by law, county planning commissions have historically been the malleable tools of hillside developers. Much of the beautiful coastal—sage and canyon—riparian ecosystems of the Santa Monica Mountains have been supplanted by castles and "guard-gate prestige." Elsewhere in Southern California—in the Verdugo, Puente, San Jose, San Joaquin, and San Raphael hills, as well as the Santa Susana, Santa Ana, and San Gabriel mountains—tens of thousands of acres of oak and walnut woodland have been destroyed by bulldozers to make room for similar posh developments.

Yet the "flatland" majority—including the poor taxpayers of the Westlake District, who have never seen a Malibu sunset—will continue to subsidize the increasing expense of maintaining—and, when necessary, rebuilding—Sloping Suburbia. As Richard Minnich points out, hillside homeowners, unlike tenement-dwellers, have access to almost unlimited fire protection.

The money flows to the Santa Monica Mountains instead of poor areas of Los Angeles because fighting firestorms is an emergency action. In fact, all wildland fires, even one acre spots, are treated as emergencies. The Forest Service and other land management agencies have no *a priori* budget. After the fire is suppressed, they just send a bill to the government. Budgeting is *a posteriori*, which means there are no strings. They can spend as recklessly as possible. Urban fires aren't treated this way.⁹³

Meanwhile, the suburbanization of Southern California's remaining wild landscapes has accelerated in face of the perceived deterioration of the metropolitan core. As middle and upper class families flee Los Angeles—and, especially, its older, "urbanized suburbs" like the San Fernando Valley—they seek sanctuaries deeper in the rugged contours of the chaparral fire-belt. The population, for example, of the Calabasas-Agoura Hills corridor—the crucible of almost all Malibu firestorms—has tripled since 1970 (to nearly 60,000) with hundreds of new homes scattered across isolated hilltops and ridges.

Ignoring every lesson of the recent fires and earthquake, two new mega-developments (Newhall Ranch and Ritter Ranch), totalling 32,000 homes, will soon begin construction in the environmentally sensitive, fire-prone Santa Clarita and Leona valleys of northern Los Angeles County. Statewide, some seven million inhabitants—the whitest and wealthiest segment of the population—now live in the suburban-chaparral ecotone where wildfire is virtually inevitable. (Excluding national parks and military bases, Mediterranean California experienced some 10,000 wildfires per year during the 1980s.)⁹⁴

At the same time, suburban firestorms are becoming more apocalyptic. The social cost of fire has increased in almost geometric relation to the linear growth of fire-suburb population. Two-thirds of all the homes and dwellings, for example, destroyed by wildfire since the state-wide record-keeping began in 1923 have been burnt since 1980 (see Table Three). Resuming Stephen Pyne’s argument that the 1956 Malibu fire was the inauguration of a new fire regime, it may be that the 1991 Oakland fire (\$1.7 billion insured damage) and the 1993 Southern California fire complex (\$1 billion) mark a qualitative escalation in fire danger, if not the actual emergence of a new, “post-suburban” fire regime.

Table Three⁹⁵

California Urban Wildfires (1923-93)

<u>Period</u>	<u>Homes destroyed</u>	<u>% of total</u>
1923-64	1626	17%
1965-79	1539	16%
1980-93	6303	67%
<u>Total</u>	9568	100%

This “fire boom” is most obvious from the standpoint of those who annually risk their lives fighting mountain firestorms. As Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt complained while visiting the Malibu fire scene, “fire-fighting is getting more expensive, more hazardous.” To use a military analogy, the new density of hillside housing has transformed the battle against wildfire from a war of maneuver into the equivalent of street-fighting. Firefighters’ energies are now dispersed into house-by-house defenses, while traditional wildfire techniques, like the use of backfires, are vitiated by the threat to near-by homes. As a result, there is an increased danger of units being cut-off and trapped by wind-driven infernos, as happened several times during the 1993 events. The accelerated suburbanization of the fire-belt also makes it more likely that major conflagrations will occur simultaneously, thus

stretching regional (mutual aid) manpower reserves to their limit. But larger firefighting armies by themselves are no solution. As one national forest official observed: "These fires in Malibu prove that you could throw in every fighter in the world and still can't stop it."⁹⁶

Most experts agree that the most effective technique against the rising fire danger is regular "prescriptive burning" every 5-7 years to reduce the accumulation of fuel loads. This return to Gabrielino indian technology, however, has proven almost impossible to implement in Southern California, outside of national forest jurisdictions. All controlled burns entail some small risk of runaway fire, and local fire departments are understandably intimidated by their potential liability. Hillside homeowner associations, moreover, vehemently oppose prescriptive burning because of the belief that "blackened hillsides and ash in the swimming pools reduce property values." In a typical case, the Los Angeles County Fire Department was recently sued by a Topanga Canyon resident who claimed that controlled burns would make it impossible to sell his home.⁹⁷

Mountain homeowners also continue to reject any special fiscal responsibility for the defense of their precarious habitats. Penny-pinching Malibuites, for example, have resisted every effort to force them to update their notorious water-system or widen their narrow, winding streets. Yet they continue to expect (thanks to their disproportionate political clout) that the general public will bear the exploding costs of a scientifically discredited strategy of "total fire suppression." As Alan Kishbaugh, the president of the powerful Federation of Hillside and Canyon Associations of Los Angeles (which includes Malibu affiliates), recently put it, "we're sitting here in our homes, doing our part, and expecting the best protection available... when it comes to fire protection, Californians are entitled to the best that exists."⁹⁸

As in the aftermath of previous fire tragedies, homeowners have been seduced by idea of a "technological fix" to the problem of wildfire ecology. The latest fetish is the so-called CL-415 "Super Scooper": a gigantic amphibious aircraft capable of skimming the surface of the ocean and loading up to 14,000 gallons of water per fire-drop. For several years the Federation of Hillside and Canyon Associations has been fiercely lobbying state and local officials to purchase a fleet of these Canadian-built planes at \$17 million each. Since last year's evacuation of Malibu, moreover, the Federation has received the support of the powerful West L.A. Democratic machine as well as most of the regional media, including the *Los Angeles Times*.⁹⁹

Once again, both politicians and the press have allowed the essential landuse issue—the rampant, uncontrolled proliferation of fire suburbs—to be camouflaged in a neutral discourse of natural hazards and public safety. But “safety” for the Malibu and Laguna coasts, as well as hundreds of other luxury enclaves and gated hilltop suburbs, is becoming one of the state’s major social expenditures, although—unlike welfare or immigration—it is almost never debated in terms of trade-offs or alternatives. The \$100 million cost of mobilizing 15,000 firefighters during Halloween week 1993 may be an increasingly common entry in the public ledger. Needless to say, there is no comparable investment in the fire, toxic, or earthquake safety of inner-city communities. Instead, as in most things, we tolerate two systems of hazard prevention, separate and unequal.

¹ Data provided by office of Councilmember Michael Hernandez, whose First Council District includes the Westlake community.

² From Los Angeles *Examiner* (henceforth LAE) and Los Angeles *Times* (LAT).

³ Cf. David Weide, “The Geography of Fire in the Santa Monica Mountains,” MA thesis, Geography, CSULA, Los Angeles, 1968, 1-2, 87, 91; Klaus Radtke, Arthur Arndt, and Ronald Wakimoto, “Fire History of the Santa Monica Mountains,” in Symposium on the Dynamics and Management of the Mediterranean-Type Ecosystems (San Diego, 1981), *Proceedings*, Berkeley 1982, 440-441; and Jerry Meehan, “Avoiding Deja vu: The Historic Wildfire Corridor,” *American Fire Journal*, (May 1991): 14-15.

⁴ Los Angeles County Fire Department records and Los Angeles *Times*.

⁵ For a recent overview of aboriginal “fire farming,” see Thomas Blackburn and Kat Anderson eds., *Before the Wilderness: Environmental Management by Native Californians*, Menlo Park 1993.

⁶ Cf. W. W. Robinson, *Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit: An Historical Approach*, Los Angeles 1958; and Frederick Hastings Rindge, *Happy Days in Southern California*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1898.

⁷ The Santa Ana-driven pattern of October through December conflagrations in the Santa Monicas contrasts with the interior ranges where the fire season reaches its climax in July. (Weide, 34-35)

⁸ Conversely these same canyons allow fresh, cool ocean air to penetrate the polluted San Fernando Valley. The Santa Monicas are the most vital “airshed” for metropolitan Los Angeles.

⁹ Environmental Protection Agency (Region IX), *Final EIS/EIR: Las Virgenes-Triunfo, Malibu-Topanga - Area Wide Facilities Plan*, San Francisco 1977, 2/112-2/115.

¹⁰ There is a vast literature, but see especially Sterling Keeley (ed.), *The California Chaparral: Paradigms Reexamined*, Los Angeles 1989.

¹¹ Quoted from a letter, 2 September 1994. See also his “Fire Behavior in Southern California Chaparral Before Fire Control: The Mount Wilson Burns at the Turn of the Century,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 77(4) 1987; and “Fuel-Driven Fire Regimes of the California Chaparral” (in press).

¹² Michael Rogers, “Fire Management in Southern California,” in Symposium, *op. cit.*, 496-98.

¹³ For the history of fire-suppression in the mountains of Southern California, cf., Ronald Lockmann, *Guarding the Forests of Southern California*, Glendale 1981; and C.R. Clar, *California Government and Forestry*, Sacramento 1959.

¹⁴ Minnich has compared, in great detail, the fire histories of Southern California and adjacent Baja California. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on fire suppression in Southern California’s increasingly urbanized mountains, while fire control doesn’t exist in Baja’s wild hill areas. As a result, only Southern California has experienced recurrent firestorms. Baja wildfires were more numerous, but smaller and never catastrophic. See *The Biogeography of Fire in the San*

Bernardino Mountains of California, University of California Publications in Geography, Vol. 28, Berkeley 1988, 5-6.

15 LAE, 14 August 1928.

16 Ibid, 27 October 1929.

17 LAT, 1-3 November 1930.

18 Olmsted made this proposal wearing two hats: first as director of the state park survey, then as chief consultant to a Los Angeles County citizens commission. Cf. Olmsted quoted in LAE, 3 January 1929; and Olmsted Brothers and Bartholomew, *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region*, Los Angeles 1930, 97-114.

19 LAE, 8 September 1936; and LAT, 25-27 November 1938.

20 LAE, 15 June 1938. One of the chief advocates of the proposed tax swap, UCLA Provost E. R. Henrick, made an explicitly ecological argument for preserving "the rare...fauna and flora existing there." (Ibid.)

21 From *Rancho Malibu, An Historic Real Estate Offering* quoted in Robinson, 38.

22 Because of the 20-year threshold of chaparral combustibility, firestorms in the Santa Monica tend to occur in alternate decades: 1910s, 1930s, 1950s, 1970s and 1990s. (See Radtke et al, 441)

23 Powell, 41.

24 Quoted in Stephen Pyne, *Fire in America*, 404.

25 Ibid. Conversely, Southern California wildfires were used by researchers to model the behavior of nuclear firestorms. See C.M. Countryman, *Mass Fires and Fire Behavior*, U.S. Forest Service Research Paper PSW-19, Berkeley 1964.

26 Ibid, 404-415.

27 LAE, 3 December 1958 (Malibu) and 2 January 1959 (Topanga Canyon). Weide also emphasizes the 'exponential' increase in fire destructiveness. Eight major fires in the 1955-58 period consumed considerably more acreage than nineteen previous fires in the 1936-54 period, 18.

28 For example, after the 1978 fire many rebuilding Malibu homeowners were exempted from the new standards of water pressure and width of access roads adopted by the county in the 1960s. See LAT, 9 October 1982. (For reaction of Eisenhower to 1956 fire, see Ibid, 30 December 1956.)

29 A 1975 survey of all the planning and regulatory bodies responsible for the Malibu Creek watershed revealed that none used fire risk as a criterion for the regulation of development. See W. David Conn, "Environmental Management in the Malibu Watershed: Institutional Framework," EPA, Los Angeles 1975.

30 LAE, 14 August 1960.

31 One-third of the Santa Monica Mountains—70,000 out of a total of 220,000 acres—as already lost to development in some form by 1978. See Joseph Brown, "The Mountains and the Megalopolis," *Sierra*, May 1973, 364-65.

32 Cf. Michael Heiman, *Coastal Recreation in California*, Berkeley 1986, p. 51; and League of Women Voters of Los Angeles County, *Open Space in Los Angeles County*, Los Angeles 1972, 33.

33 Once in the 1950s there was a rumor that Nat King Cole might attempt to move to Malibu. Art Jones, the Colony Association's 'dictator', vowed that "he would personally head a vigilante group to burn him out." See Davis and Davis, "Secrets of the 'Real' Malibu Colony," *Los Angeles Magazine* (September 1984), 153.

34 Thomas Mikkelsen and Donald Neuwirth, *Public Beaches: An Owners' Manual*, Berkeley (California State Coastal Conservancy) 1987, 96.

35 Powell, 60.

36 There were no less than 770 wildfires reported in California during the last half of September. Cf. Stanley Young, "Up from the Ashes," *Los Angeles Magazine*; (February 1971) and LAT, 27-29 September 1970.

37 Thus Malibu homeowners' leader and state Democratic chieftain, Paul Ziffren, after the 1970 fire: "What I don't understand is how we can do all those things like playing space basketball and yet we're still fighting fires the way we did 25 years ago." (LAT, 29 September 1970).

38 A celebrated example occurred in the late 1970s when the Malibu Colony was being pounded by the heaviest surf in a quarter century. Larry Hagman, *Dallas's* J.R. Ewing, is reported to have told the Governor of California: "Jerry, do something. Goddammit, we're in real trouble. Get your ass down here!" In short order, Malibu was declared a disaster area and National Guardsmen were helping sandbag Hagman's—and, sometimes Brown date, Linda Rondstadt's—homes. See Davis and Davis, 155.

39 Cf LAT, 23-27 October 1978, 9-10 October 1982, and 15-17 October 1985.

40 Ibid, 24 October 1978. As might have been predicted, the aftermath of the 1978 fire was another ratcheting-up of socio-economic exclusivity. "Phoenix-like upper Broad Beach reemerged as a

new community. Gone forever was the modesty of a ranch-style rural housing tract... doors have been replaced by gates, doorbells by alarms...." (Young, 97).

41 The *Examiner* and the *Times* offered conflicting accounts of whether A.D. Bernhardt jumped from his third-story window or the roof. Cf. LAE and LAT, 26 March 1952.

42 LAT, 26-27 March 1952.

43 There are, of course, other "fire ecologies" within the city. A dozen or more fire deaths, for example, are now caused every year by the window and door security bars that trap residents—especially young children and the age—in their burning homes. Not surprisingly, this problem is especially concentrated in South Central area, where the arson rate is also high.

44 Chief Alderson was later forced to retire because of his rabid opposition to the racial integration of the department.

45 Brick construction received new impetus in 1924 after 35 people were burnt alive in a three-story wooden hotel in Venice. See California Commission on Immigration and Housing, *Eleventh Annual Report*, Sacramento 1925, 19.

46 See Los Angeles City Planning Department, "Final EIR on Earthquake Hazard Reduction in Existing Buildings Before 1934 in the City of Los Angeles," EIR 583-78-CW, Los Angeles 1980. Paul Groth has written a fascinating history of the residential hotel in the United States: *Living Downtown*, Berkeley 1994.

47 Eugene Schmitz quoted in LAT, 17 November 1973.

48 New York *Times*, 7-9 December 1946. The 1980 MGM Grand fire in Las Vegas took 84 lives.

49 LAE, 26 March 1952.

50 See Donald Parsons, "'This Modern Marvel': Bunker Hill, Chavez Ravine, and the Politics of Modernism in Los Angeles," in *Southern California Quarterly*, LXXV/3-4 (Fall/Winter 1993).

51 LAT, 14-16 September 1970. Later, the arsonist, Castro Figueroa, was convicted of 19 counts of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.

52 Ibid, 15-17 November 1973.

53 James Kinninger, letter to the editor, LAT, 7 January 1977. Also see LAT 22 December 1976 for account of fire.

54 Ibid. 18 May 1979 and 6 November 1981.

55 Ibid, 22 December 1976.

56 See *ibid*, "Los Angeles' Slums: A Growth Industry" (a series), 30 July 1989.

57 Ibid, 9-12 September 1982, 18 February 1984, 31 July 1985 and 23 December 1986.

58 Ibid, 14 and 21 May 1983.

59 Ibid

60 Ibid, 31 October 1993.

61 Ibid, 7 November 1993.

62 Ibid, 3 November 1993. Also *The Malibu Times*, 11 November 1993.

63 The following streets were burned in 1956 and again in 1993: Carbon Canyon, Carbon Mesa, Rambla Pacifico and Sumac Ridge.

64 LAT, 6 November 1993.

65 Ibid, 3 November 1993.

66 *The Malibu Times*, 11 November 1993. The abandoned maids managed a narrow escape down the beach to Topanga.

67 Ibid, and LAT, 30 October and 4-6 November, 1993.

68 Ibid, 16 and 20 November 1993.

69 Ibid, 8 July 1984.

70 Ibid, 4 November 1993.

71 2,000 state prison inmates saw service on the firelines (*Ibid*, 30 October 1993). Also see *ibid*, 5 November 1993 for a profile of the South-Central Panthers: a professional fire-fighting unit made up of former gang-members.

72 Ibid, 30 October 1993.

73 *The Malibu Times*, 11 November 1993; LAT, 18 November and 13 December 1993.

74 Ibid, 18 November and 13 December 1993.

75 Ibid, 5 November 1993.

76 "State officials" cited in *Ibid*, 13 December 1993.

77 See Rindge, 122-123; C. R. Clar, *California Government and Forestry, Part 1: From the Spanish days until the creation of the Department of Natural Resources in 1927*, Sacramento 1959; LAE, 21 October 1942; and LAT, 30 December 1956.

78 Ibid, 1 November 1993.

79 Ibid, 16 November 1993.

- 80 Ibid, 26-27 October 1978. The Legislature then exempted homes destroyed by natural disaster from the requirements of the Coastal Act of 1976.
- 81 Mikkelsen and Neuwirth, 100.
- 82 Cf., *The Malibu Times*, 11 November 1993; LAT 12 November 1993.
- 83 *The Orange County Register*, 2 October 1994.
- 84 For population density by community plan area and council district, see City Planning Department, *Population Estimate and Housing Inventory*, Los Angeles 1993.
- 85 Hernandez interview, 14 June 1994.
- 86 Ibid; LAT, 7 October 1993.
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 Ibid.
- 89 Ibid, 28 May 1994; Hernandez interview.
- 90 Interviewed about Southern California's wildfire problem in *Daily News*, 14 November 1993.
- 91 Richard Lillard, "Mountain Men and Women in the New West of Los Angeles," *South Dakota Review*, 19:1/2 (Spring/Summer 1981), 29-40. Lillard's two most important books were: *Desert Challenge: An Interpretation of Nevada* (1942); and *Eden in Jeopardy: Man's Prodigal Meddling with his Environment: The Southern California Experience* (1966).
- 92 Ibid, 38.
- 93 Quoted from letter, 2 September 1994. His solution? "Privatize the fire disaster industry. In geographically definable disaster zones ... get FEMA out of it. Red line these hazard zones and force people to pay insurance commensurate to the true danger they are living in. People living on the Fire Coast with their million dollar homes will very likely be burned out within about twenty years. Therefore, their premiums should be about \$50,000 annually. Such premiums just might result in more rational land use."
- 94 Cf. *Los Angeles Business Journal*, 26 July 1993; Larry Gordon, "Growing Migration to Fire-Prone Areas Fans Concern," *Los Angeles Daily News*, 5 November 1993; and California, Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, *Fire Safe Guides for Residential Development in California*, Sacramento 1993, 1.
- 95 Data (except 1993) from Ibid.
- 96 Gordon, op. cit.
- 97 Cf. LAT, 5 November 1993; and *Los Angeles Daily News*, 14 November 1993.
- 98 Interviewed in LAT, 4 November 1993.
- 99 Cf. The Federation of Hillside and Canyon Associations, Inc., "Presidents Message," *News*, October 1991; LAT editorials, 4 November.



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