The Los Angeles Conservancy's Modern Committee fights to rescue remnants of 1950s "googie" architecture and other 2th-century landmarks.

By: Ed Leibowitz

Like worshipers upon calvary, they have gathered for a vigil on this congested stretch of old Route 66 in Arcadia. In the too-crisp blue of a Southern California Sunday morning, the imperiled symbol of their faith casts them into shadow: a mammoth, motionless, ornamental windmill towering atop a Denny's restaurant, soon to be closed for remodeling.

Theirs isn't exactly a mute vigil. Commandeered as the worshipers' own retro theme song, "The Windmills of Your Mind" pipes from a portable stereo. Truckers, housewives and day laborers blast their horns in response to the brazen varsity-style cheering and "Honk Your Horn if you love the windmill" placards that greet them as they pass by.

Temporarily confined to a wheelchair after a recent roller-disco mishap, Chris Nichols appears chipper enough in his blue guayabera shirt, blocky glasses and goatee. He and his cohorts have labored mightily on this media event. A relentless fax campaign blanketing much of greater Los Angeles has attracted several television networks and a swarm of newspaper reporters. They, too, now mingle at the foot of the windmill, which is an architectural relic from this restaurant's former existence as part of the Van de Kamp's coffee-shop chain.

At 28, Nichols can count himself a hardened veteran of the fight for Southern California's postwar coffee shops. While more traditional forces in the L.A. Conservancy, Los Angeles' leading preservation organization, have battled to save such endangered treasures as St. Vibiana's Cathedral and the city's Central Library, Nichols has launched more improbable crusades. As a chief strategist for the Conservancy's Modern Committee--the eclectic preservation outfit more affectionately known as Modcom--he has struggled to save cantilevered car washes, parabolic bowling palaces and rocket-era hamburger stands, along with high-modern residences and grand civic buildings.
Given his thick resume in preservation theater, Nichols could kick himself for failing to capitalize on the windmill's rich quixotic implications. "At the last moment, I thought, 'Why didn't we invite Robert Goulet?'" Nichols sighs. "He's in town performing Man of La Mancha right now!"

Modcom colleague Charles Phoenix manages a mock arching of the eyebrows. "You think he'd have joined us?"

"Oh, yeah," Nichols shoots back. "He would have sung 'Impossible Dream' right at the curb."

Despite the telegenic allure of these Modcommers in full protest mode, a few of the reporters are more than skeptical. "Does this make any difference in our lives or

anyone else's life?" one broadcaster asks Phoenix, thrusting a microphone under his chin.
"It shouldn't really be up to people today to get rid of everything from this era," replies Phoenix. "And this example is particularly significant because it's so novel. It's space-age coffee-shop architecture of the 1960s, topped by the old-world charm of the windmill."

Modcom propaganda swirling above his wheelchair--"It's a wind-wind situation," "DON'T BREAK the WINDmill," "Where there's a mill, there's a way"-Nichols is busy certifying this coffee shop's "sole survivor" status. "There are beheaded ones," he concedes to one reporter, "there are partial ones and there are ruins. But there's not a complete one with every piece checked off the list like this."

"Don't kill ...the windmill! Don't kill ...the windmill!" The deep chant reverberates against the asphalt. Modcom chairman Michael Palumbo, though weighed down by a "Save the Windmill" sandwich board, exudes nothing but confidence to the media. "We haven't heard from Denny's yet," he concedes, "but I anticipate--I anticipate!--a response from them."

Privately, Nichols and Phoenix aren't so sanguine. They worry that Denny's parent company, in its attempt to remake its eateries into retro-1950s Denny's diners, may be threatening vintage coffee-shop architecture throughout Los Angeles. Modcom's recent strategy sessions have been full of frantic talk about the perils of what they call Denny's "dinerization." But all the letter writing, community outreach, political pleas, celebrity appeals, newspaper ads and bravura street demonstrations can only get them so far. Forty years ago, Phoenix and Nichols point out, they might have been able to sway Denny's when it was still a local California roadside stand called Danny's Donuts. But today's national restaurant conglomerate is based in Spartanburg, South Carolina. "The fact that they're out of state is making things harder," Nichols laments. "There's no local pride."

"The demolition permit has already been issued by the city," Phoenix adds. "And Denny's is such a huge corporation that to get through to the top web of the powers that be is next to impossible."

The next morning, Modcom is staring incredulously at victory--albeit a Pyrrhic one. The windmill has been saved, but Denny's will still graft an incongruous stainless-steel diner door with a big glass D onto the restaurant's front entrance. Inside, the soaring conical roof and subtle "Dutch Masters" tans and browns will be scrapped for the lowered acoustic-tile ceiling and wild purple-and-red color scheme of Denny's revamped design.

But, above the roofline, the victim has been spared its beheading. "The windmill was like a billboard," Phoenix explains. "It's an instantly recognizable symbol." The Van de Kamp's coffee-shop chain may be defunct, but the windmill will endure as a symbol

of Modcom's no-longer-so-quixotic notion that the roadside commercial strip of the 1950s and '60s somehow deserves to survive.

The wrecking ball, or threat of it, has served as the greatest galvanizer for preservationists in America. The 1963 demise of the old Penn Station spawned the preservation movement in New York City as surely as the destruction of Louis Sullivan's Stock Exchange Building mobilized Chicago a decade later.

The Los Angeles Conservancy, founded in 1978, had less tragic origins. It succeeded in rescuing the Spanish-Deco Central Library, whose near-demolition brought the organization into existence. Alas, Modcom, christened the "Fifties Task Force" when it was formed in 1984, was set in motion too late to save its own prime mover-Ship's Coffee Shop in Westwood, California. An unhinged celebration of the early space age, the building was torn down that year to make room for a high-rise.

When preservationists set out to save a Beaux Arts, Victorian or Art Deco landmark, they can usually rely on whole faculties of architecture professors ready to testify to the building's timeless worth. But the 50-odd Modcommers often fight for roadside attractions traditionally scorned by the architectural establishment. On those occasions when they weren't ignored altogether, the Modcommers' endangered commercial landmarks were dismissed as "Googie" architecture, named after a long-demolished Los Angeles restaurant whose mascot was a cartoon waitress with fried eggs for eyes. In his book-cum-Modcom-bible, Googie: Fifties Coffee Shop Architecture, historian and critic Alan Hess defines the term Googie as an architectural catcall for buildings deemed "a little too flamboyant, a little too western, and a little too American for serious consideration."

While film producers and new-media barons now enter bidding wars for high-modern minimalist homes by such architects as Richard Neutra and Pierre Koenig, many critics still take offense at the coffee shops, budget motels and drive-in theaters built during the same postwar era. Those boomerang roofs. Those winking, waving neon mascots. Those kaleidoscopic color schemes. Here was an architecture that knew no restraint, that groveled for attention and grabbed for the lapels.

Philadelphia architect and former Yale professor Denise Scott Brown can recall her own early Googie misgivings. "When I was a snobby little student entering architecture school, I hated it too," she says. "The cheapness of it. Although it had something in common with modern architecture, it had all these exaggerated curves and flashes. Of course, that style has come back now within a certain chic set. Designer Phillipe Starck, for instance, has based his furniture on Googie." Scott Brown herself can claim an outsized role in Googie's journey toward legitimization. Thirty-two years ago, with her partner Robert Venturi and graduate assistant Steven Izenour, Scott Brown deployed a platoon of Yale architecture students across the Vegas strip to make a serious appraisal of neon-drenched casinos and cracker-box motels. The result was the seminal 1972 Venturi-Scott Brown-Izenour reassessment, Learning from Las Vegas.

"These boxes and billboards will be seen as very high examples of folk art," she says now. "They need to be considered in the same way we view country quilts."

In the past, Modcom has found such goodwill in short supply. It was, for instance, only over the bitter opposition of the property owner and the dismissive testimony of a visiting University of Southern California architecture professor that they won California State Point of Historical Interest status in 1993 for an endangered 1949 Bob's Big Boy in Toluca Lake. That they managed to rescue the 1953 Downey McDonald's, the nation's oldest surviving McDonald's, against the initial wishes of the McDonald's Corporation itself, is a testament to their inexhaustible reserves of energy and penchant for the grand media gesture.

A little too flamboyant, a little too western, a little too American for serious consideration. Explaining Googie, Hess might almost be describing the Modcommers themselves. Although part of the more buttoned-down L.A. Conservancy, Modcom attracts a volunteer membership as youthfully ironic and far removed from the stodgy reserve of traditional preservation groups as a 1960s windmill coffee shop is from an 18th-century New England customhouse.

In the boardroom of the Hollywood forever cemetery, the monthly Modcom meeting has come to a fragile order. Silencing the hipster chatter with pounds from his gavel, chairman Michael Palumbo delivers an update on the Denny's dinerization crisis. "We established contact with the corporation," Palumbo reports. "The trouble is, they're not really interested in meeting with us."

Scattered among the 50 attendees, and more vocal than the rest, are a core of Modcom's stalwarts. Over many seasons of struggle, these dozen Googie activists have congealed into a family. They have their tiffs and favorite tiki bars, birthday parties and weddings, victory celebrations, and wakes for structures they tried in vain to save. They will spend weeks, months, even years, fighting to rescue a retro supermarket, a multicolored neon beacon above a liquor store, or some other endangered holdout that is more a fixture of their parents' youth than of their own.

Charles Phoenix has narrated a campy mid-century travelogue he calls "God Bless Americana," featuring color slides he purchased at garage sales. He has also recently coauthored coffee-table books on 1950s Hawaii and 1950s Vegas. John English, another regular, has risked life and limb removing neon signs from condemned movie theaters and has launched a local sight-seeing operation called Googie Tours. When membership chairperson Gretchen Spence appeared on "Greed," the game-show clone of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," she fantasized neither about a Jacuzzi overflowing with Dom Perignon nor a buying spree at Versace. "I've had my eye on a historic theater on Route 66," she told host Chuck Woolery. "I'd buy the theater, rehabilitate it, have a big party ...and save it from destruction!"

But it is Chris Nichols, the outreach chairman, who is the glue that holds Modcom together. Currently the media manager for an Internet celebrity photography venture,

Nichols devoured Hess' Googie book at age 14. Soon after, he turned his attention to his local red-and-white McDonald's, pleading its case to the town's mayor and lobbying the daughter of one of the Three Stooges to reopen it as a theme restaurant. Although he lost that battle to the bulldozer, his research and tactics were later used in Modcom's Downey McDonald's crusade.

At the meeting, Nichols waves before him a vital document. "Here's a list of bowling alleys that were acquired by the AMF Corporation recently," he announces. "As you know, AMF takes down all the neon signage, and puts up a little square box with their logo." Nichols' commercial agenda segues from bowling alleys to an endangered Chevrolet dealership to the Greyhound sign above the condemned Hollywood bus station. He ends with yet another Googie mergers-and-acquisitions alert. "The Lucky supermarket chain is now Albertson's," he warns. "So photograph your Luckys before they all disappear."

Next to the world's oldest surviving McDonald's in Downey, California, Speedee the Chef makes his mad neon dash through the night sky. The company's original fast-food mascot, Speedee runs headlong toward a future where he'll be outpaced by Ronald McDonald and where the red-and-white tile stand with the parabolic arches he points to will be forsaken for earth-toned brick and a mansard roof.

As former Modcom chairman Peter Moruzzi explains it, the dull uniformity of today's roadside buildings represents the triumph of the focus group over the instincts of the small entrepreneur. "You don't see those mavericks who used to start these businesses anymore," he says. "Think about it. All these national chains--McDonald's, Big Boy, Denny's--were started by visionaries. They were willing to push the boundaries of design. Now they're all corporations." Moruzzi, who works for a software company, faced this when he began researching his first love, the American motel--the quintessential mom-and-pop business. "They all had personality, individual signs," he says, "like the ones around Disneyland--the Kona Kai, the Swiss Chalet. It was wonderful. They had such character. That's what architecture should be all about."
He finds occasional relief from the monotony when he rolls into some half-forgotten hamlet that modernity has passed by. "The dental offices in a small town," he says. "Flower shops that go on for 50 years, never changing."

Moruzzi's Silver Lake home also seems frozen in postwar amber. His television console is a 1950s Sylvania Syloette, its screen surrounded by a fluorescent tube called the HaloLight. His rumpus room tiki bar, with its thatch roof and near-mint collection of pagan-god mugs, is an urban archaeological marvel cobbled together from demolished Polynesian restaurants. With his narrow spectacles and well-clipped mustache, reminiscent of an East German spymaster, the 39-year-old Moruzzi appears right at home amid these Cold War-era surroundings.

Whether it's Rite Aid prying off the retro script of a former Thrifty's drugstore, or Washington Mutual swallowing Home Savings of America and jeopardizing bank branches adorned with mosaics by California artist Millard Sheets, the mergers of the

past decade have not been kind to Googie architecture. "Once a structure is passed on to new owners," Moruzzi says, "it seems that the history of the building disappears."

Take Modcom's crusade to save the Downey McDonald's, which Moruzzi himself led. In 1990 the hamburger stand was still in the same pristine condition as when it first opened in 1953. But no sooner had the original franchisees sold out to the McDonald's Corporation than the new owner bemoaned the eatery's lack of a drive-through window and indoor seating. McDonald's even branded it a $50,000-a-year loser. When the 1994 Northridge earthquake struck, a sign proclaiming "Closed Due To Earthquake Damage" was plastered across the plate-glass storefront. Yet the building appeared intact.

A tossed salad of constructive engagement, political and media appeals and on-site melodrama, the Downey McDonald's fight brought Chris Nichols' proclamation that "junk food can be history" to the front page of the New York Times. In the Downey parking lot, Modcom staged a "McFuneral"--a McAssassination attempt really--in which Nichols, decked out as Speedee the Chef, ran for his life as Ronald McDonald, who looked suspiciously like Modcommer John English, pursued him with a plastic knife. In October of 1996, McDonald's had a change of heart, and in press releases that betrayed no bitterness, the corporation and the L.A. Conservancy basked in mutual praise.

The Downey McDonald's and Toluca Lake Bob's Big Boy survive. But Moruzzi stills mourns "the mostly small anonymous stuff" that goes. "Stuff that there's no way you would have the energy or the time to try to save," he says. "But you see, it's the fabric that makes up the community, all those component parts. And those parts are disappearing, one after another."

In the city's last remaining 1950s coffee shops, you can often get a glimpse of them, debating, lecturing, sounding the preservationist's alarm over cheeseburgers or hot open-faced turkey sandwiches. One evening, they might materialize just northeast of the L.A. airport in the caveman-like grottoes of Pann's restaurant, a Googie-era triumph by master builders Armet and Davis. A few nights later, in the shadow of the city's Metropolitan Detention Center, they might be seen wolfing down pie and coffee in the decaying space-age restaurant they've nicknamed Jail Denny's. In their nerd glasses, gingham dresses and ancient cardigans, the Modcommers cling to these dwindling cathedrals of terrazzo and stone, like the astronauts of 1950s science fiction once clung to the mother ship.

Snapshot #1: Hip to hip in the circular booth, a group of Modcommers crowd around 92-year-old Wayne McAllister. The clanking of ketchup-smudged dishes, the squeals of toddlers trailing balloons, the greasy stench of hamburgers--for the awestruck preservationists, the entire sensory symphony of the Toluca Lake Bob's Big Boy recedes in the presence of the architect. In 1949 McAllister designed the fantastic crescent of concrete and glass that envelops them and transforms Riverside Drive outside into a kind of nocturnal aquarium--the SUVs and Cadillacs slithering by like oblivious fish.

Though heavy pouches now hang beneath McAllister's eyes, his six-foot frame is hardly stooped; and his high forehead, graced by a halo of thinning white hair, bears few wrinkles. Clearly, the Modcommers can still sense traces of the handsome San Diego teenager whose guidance counselor advised him to pursue acting or architecture, and who chose the latter, for the greater glory of the roadside landscape.

If not for Moruzzi, Nichols and other Modcom acolytes sitting at the table, this Bob's Big Boy, the third ever built, would have been scattered around a few landfills to make way for an office building. Although its owner once called it an eyesore, he has since come to treasure what he has helped to make the most profitable Big Boy in America.

Charlene Gould, Nichols' girlfriend and fellow Googie preservationist, gives McAllister an update on the radical remodeling, currently in progress, of the Santa Anita racetrack. Although outside the Modcommer's usual domain, the 1930s arena is one of their more pressing concerns. Already, two towering additions have been pushed up against its elegant facade. The Canadian owner has further plans to impose a Vegas-glitz-meets-Wild-West-rodeo theme on the graceful Art Deco structure, spurring its inclusion on this year's National Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 Most Endangered Places list.

McAllister himself had an architectural hand in another of the Trust's "Most Endangered" designees: Reno's 1947 Art Deco-style Mapes Hotel, which is now slated for demolition. The first high-rise in Nevada to combine gambling, dining, hotel rooms and entertainment, the Mapes was where Montgomery Clift and Marilyn Monroe bunked down while filming their movie The Misfits. In the early 1950s McAllister, who also designed the Las Vegas Sands Hotel and the El Rancho Vegas, reconfigured the Mapes casino and remodeled its top-floor Sky Room.

Although his Bob's Big Boy has received the State of California's imprimatur, and despite a major Modcom exhibition of his work a few years ago, McAllister, as with most architects who built coffee shops and casinos instead of city halls and avant-garde homes, has struggled with the notion of his own historic importance. His drive-through restaurants, he once said, were a "pebble in the lake, a spit in the ocean," the products of a "modest office."

Only lately has Modcom's veneration pulled him toward a reassessment. "My work may not have impressed a lot of people back then," he muses, the lights of the traffic outside reflected in his bifocals. "But it certainly does now."

Snapshot #2: Beneath the gravity-defying roof of Silver Lake's 1958 Astro Family Restaurant, the Modcommers hold forth on the fate of the Mapes, which, but for McAllister's role, might be well beyond their orbit. "It's supposed to be demolished next month," Nichols says.

"I can't understand that, man!" John English exclaims.

"It's a gambling town, all the vices," replies Alan Leib, a wiseacre filmmaker and activist originally from Chicago.

Leib proposes solutions ranging from a mining-town makeover of the Mapes to its acquisition by hipster hotelier Andre Balasz, who did such wonders with the Chateau Marmont Hotel in West Hollywood. By the meeting's end, Modcommers are almost jocular as they contemplate a road trip to witness the demolition. "Five, four," Nichols starts the mock countdown. "Waaaiiit!"

On a windswept winter afternoon, beret pulled down to her eyes, Gretchen Spence is again speaking into a TV camera, but this time, not for "Greed."

"We just want to get a sense of what you guys are doing here," says a perky correspondent, accosting Spence and the other Modcommers who have driven through ten hours of California desert and Sierra snow to behold the Mapes Hotel in its final sunset.

"I've seen the Mapes only in postcards," replies Spence, "but it's more beautiful than in pictures. I'm glad we saw it, but I don't know if I'll be able to watch it be blown up."
Bulldozers are still chewing at the hotel's innards, and puncture wounds to admit the explosives pock its facade. The Mapes implosion will be handled by Controlled Demolition, Inc., the same family-owned business that brought down the Las Vegas Sands.

For their farewell dinner, the Modcommers retreat to the recesses of Trader Dick's, a Polynesian restaurant in nearby Sparks. Surrounded by dried blowfish and the silent screams of tiki gods, they roast the Reno City Council for destroying the hotel. The following morning they traipse through the neon iridescence of Reno's Virginia Street. Nichols sports a tweed hat and crimson bow tie; Gould's freezing cheeks are wrapped in a frayed scarf. The birds who have been the Sky Room's sole tenants these past two decades wheel around the doomed hotel. "Where's the Audubon Society?" Spence asks. "Let's get a protest together."

The group stakes out a partially obstructed view on a bridge already thronged with amateur photographers and tipsy revelers. As the Mapes' 8 a.m. execution nears, Nichols places a last cell-phone call to Wayne McAllister; but nobody answers. As Nichols snaps the phone shut, the crowd begins its countdown--like Times Square at the close of the dying year.

A series of detonations pierces the air. For about five seconds, the Mapes remains upright, as if the unseen firing squad had shot off only blanks. Then the rear wall of the structure starts swooning into the basement, and the roar of a distant surf becomes a cacophony of bursting glass and collapsing concrete. The front of the Sky Room clings to its commanding view while its three other sides are already well on their

way down. Then it, too, surrenders its brave face; the majestic turrets and plate glass fold into a heap of debris readable in Charlene Gould's crestfallen face. "Oh, baby," she groans, burying her head in Nichols' chest. They have only a moment until the brown cloud sweeps across the river. Without thought, they run, he in his bow tie, she in her faded scarf, as the Mapes, in granular form, fills their nostrils. A few more steps, and the cloud has overtaken them. Stumbling, unseeing, still fleeing, the Modcom couple dissolves into dust.

Architect Wayne McAllister died in Arcadia, California, on March 22, 2000, at age 92.

Leibowitz, Ed. "Out From Under The WRECKING BALL." Smithsonian 31.9 (2000): 112. MAS Ultra - School Edition. Web. 29 Nov. 2012.