Cultural Daily

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A Burning Vision Almost Lost: The Leimert Park Village Fire

AK Toney · Wednesday, April 29th, 2020

"We are the ashes of the Phoenix
We are the tongues of flames
We are the drums of fire
We are the theatre of vision"

—Keith Antar Mason

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The morning after 4/20, there was nothing in the air but COVID19 during our quarantine. There was a mass instant message video sent on FB at 4:35 am. When I looked at my phone, it was the first thing I checked. The video was 19 minutes and 53 seconds long. There was smoke and fire but disbelief in my eyes, I saw the historic Leimert Park Village *Vision Theatre* burning. The astonishment almost brought me to tears. There have been struggles throughout the re-development and construction of the new Fly Loft-structure added to the back of the *Vision Theatre*.

No one ever thought this kind of incident would happen in Leimert Park Village. Although there was no serious structural damage as the theatre stayed intact, some history and location have been erased during this burning. The video was posted and viewed before the KCOP Channel 9 News Chopper broadcast stating that "the historic *Vision Theatre* has sustained some serious damage." Apparently, they didn't get that instant message video sent via FB. The fire was almost out by the time that broadcasted from an overhead view.

Fortunately, there was no damage to the actual theatre but the marquee lighting sign above the entrance was blackened. The construction of new studios adjacent to the Vision; owned by Artist Mark Bradford and *Art + Practice* has been substantially cindered and will have to be torn down then built all over again. These were more than empty storefronts; they were neighborhood establishments.

Before these spaces were bought to be re-developed into artist studios, they were unsung stories of Mom & Pop businesses that were essential to Leimert Park Village. These businesses were on the west right side adjacent to the *Vision Theatre*. These past venues known as a boutique, record store, café, and cleaners were supposed to be art studios, those spaces are now burnt out vacancies.

In the early 90's these spaces were occupied by Kamau Daáood and Richard Fulton. On the west corner of 43rd Place and Degnan was the *Leimert Park Cleaners*, next to it was *5th Street Dick's*

Coffee Company, then there was *Final Vinyl* and adjacent to that was *Sonny's Boutique*. The *Vision Theatre* is between those spaces separating Ben Caldwell's *KAOS Networks* at the opposite east corner of 43rd Place and Leimert Blvd. Richard Fulton owned *5th Street Dick's Coffee Company* and Kamau Daáood owned *Final Vinyl*.

Final Vinyl was a record store that sold fine rare old vintage wax and vinyl, while *5th Street Dick's Coffee Company* served coffee with late night live Jazz and Open mic Poetry. Daáood lamented deeply, "Fire burned the old location of my record store *Final Vinyl* and location of *5th Street Dick's Coffee Company*. Homelessness, poverty, substance abuse and mental illness amid gentrification of the Village. There's work to be done."

The *Vision Theatre* was originally built in 1931 Spanish-style art-Deco as a neighborhood movie palace, it was purchased in 1990 by actress Marla Gibbs, known for being a maid that snapped back in the sitcom *The Jeffersons*, and being a nosy Wife and Mother of the show *227*. After foreclosure of the theatre in 1997, the City of Los Angeles purchased it and later converted it into a performance art center.

It has since been in a multi-million-dollar renovation phase of development with a Fly Loft project that should have begun in late 2010, but just started construction in summer of last year. The construction of that project will extend the back wall of the *Vision Theatre* and raise the height of the back wall and building to 70 or 80 feet.

The purpose of the Fly Loft is for theatre productions that present dance, performance art, and concerts utilizing the apparatus to enhance the visual effects on stage. The Fly Loft will be constructed from a sturdy sheet metal skin that can be lit, painted, or molded to give a portrayal of gestures that represent performances. Mural work created by artists in the community can also be installed.

According to *L.A. Times* reporter Angel Jennings, Wesson said in an email. "The preliminary investigation has shown the fire was actually in an abandoned building next door, and we are incredibly fortunate that the theater is largely intact. The theater has been envisioned as part of a revived stretch of the city that would be along a new light rail commuter line. Herb Wesson said the remodeling of the theater is expected to be completed by the end of the year." Herb Wesson is the 10th District Councilperson, which by coincidence covers the area of Leimert Park Village and is the largest city district in Los Angeles County.

This fire really hit home for a lot of Leimert Park denizens. It gives the perspective of Urban African Americans that are poor have no need or place in a thriving cultural environment. Ironically that environment and culture is called Leimert Park Village. After having a conversation with Joe McGil (Daáood's son-in-law), a sound mixer for the film industry. Since the quarantine he has been doing UBER Eats for employment during the COVID19 pandemic. McGil expresses, "This is a situation of 'Homeless Entitlement,' which means someone who is homeless that frequents an area where asking for money or assistance is allowed. When you don't give these things, the homeless person becomes belligerent, rude, threatening, violent or even causing vandalism and destroying property. This could be reasons of mental health or even maliciousness."

McGil's concerns and reasons are valid. Incidents of being rude and threatening were occurring long before the COVID19 pandemic, before the quarantine, all during this redevelopment and gentrification phase of Leimert Park Village. These outbursts of behavior were usually ignored by most denizens of the Village or sometimes if necessary, handled by dismissal in a polite gesture. The Social Distancing action stopped most activities of gathering and congregating. For the African American community, congregation is a large part of counsel, culture, and healing. For the homeless community, it has been a necessity for survival. The reasoning for the homelessness' behavior stems from a locked gate which encloses located across the street from the *Vision Theatre*. Since the quarantine, it has worsened the matter. The homeless would congregate and sleep in the park.

Now they are congregating across the street from the park and committing disruptive behavior that has become destructive. Whereas warmth would be a home with a stove and food, the homeless are shelter in place within a corner of wooden wall partitions with a bar-b-cue pit of flames. All right and nestled next to the *Vision Theatre.*

When the quarantine ordinance became effective, there were no more drumming circles, no vendors selling market items such as art, food, books, crafts or clothing. There were no more dancers or performers. The Village suddenly became a place less frequented, and there certainly was no *Art Walk* on the *Peoples Street* in front of the *Vision Theatre*. Every third Sunday this ritual would go on, which was delegated and introduced by Ben Caldwell of *KAOS Network.*

Caldwell states, "Looking at the past such as *Project Blowed*, *5th Street Dick's*, and *The World Stage*. We discovered that *Project Blowed* handled the troubled youth with Hip Hop congregations and symposiums. *5th Street Dick's* was owned by a homeless man providing soberness for the drug and alcohol afflicted. *The World Stage* provided musical entertainment for the Adults and poetry writing workshops. All these venues together provided a safe passage for communing and congregating in an at-risk, violent environment. This is the community we live in, and the homeless people are our people. The Richard Fulton of our time would not have allowed this fire to happen. The *Peoples Street* in front of the *Vision Theatre* was supposed to supply access for gathering and learning about the story of Leimert Park Village for the people. The Quarantine only aggravated the situation."

Gatherings like this would happen daily, weekly, and weekends. People from all over Los Angeles County, from other counties, states even countries would migrate to Leimert Park Village for the "Third Place, Other Voices" experience.

The "Stay Home, Stay Safe" ordinance destroyed the homeless way of living. The homeless not only must deal with shelter in place, but human contact or even donations became a harder act of kindness to follow, especially when everyone must be at least six feet apart from another. Not to mention, you don't want to be caught doing a kind act without a mask and gloves.

The real question about the fire in Leimert Park Village is, "Which is more valuable, preservation of human life or preservation of property?" The answer would seem to be self-obvious. Developers need to consider when investing to build a community, whom do you serve when that property is a commercial real estate? The point is that the homeless encampment that let the fire get out hand and burn out of control were not concerned about a building, but more about how they were going to keep warm. It was a bar-b-cue grill. I noticed this during the viewing of the instant message video 8 minutes and 41 seconds in. The black four-legged grill which stood about three and half

feet high, was in front of the fiery building with flames and grey smoke coming from within the burning. This became disturbing because now the incident could be construed as homeless community negligence. Not to mention the endangering of others, and the lack of consideration for the meaning of a Village.

When Marla Gibbs decided to name the art deco old movie palace the *Vision Theatre*, this was not the way she thought a community would react to redevelopment and change. The *Vision Theatre* has become a beacon for African American culture and Black art. It has essentially evolved into the landmark that symbolizes a Village called Leimert Park. The owners of Leimert Park Village need to understand that the homeless population does not leave, until the homelessness ends.

Unfortunately, owners of commercial real estate pay the consequence when land and property are destroyed. Mark Bradford still owns the empty burned out spaces that were going to be rebuilt as art galleries and studios. Bradford is not only a Commercial Real Estate Developer, but he is an International Artist from Leimert Park Village and was a former student of Ben Caldwell at the University of CAL ARTS. He came to Leimert Park Village with a purpose to revitalize and to bring his art back to the source of where it was born from; the question is how well has Mark Bradford communicated this to the community he is redeveloping?

Investment Developers have a responsibility for the communities they serve and profit from. During this COVID19 pandemic and quarantine, the city, the people, and the property owners must consider our homeless population not as a problem, but as a people that are a part of us in this current situation together. Right now, we all have a burning vision to reconnect, gather, and congregate; we must not lose sight of this, if we are together for survival it’s imperative that all is done safely with consideration for others. Which essentially means in the current situation, ending homelessness in Leimert Park Village and the city of Lost Angels.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, April 29th, 2020 at 1:00 pm and is filed under Discourse
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