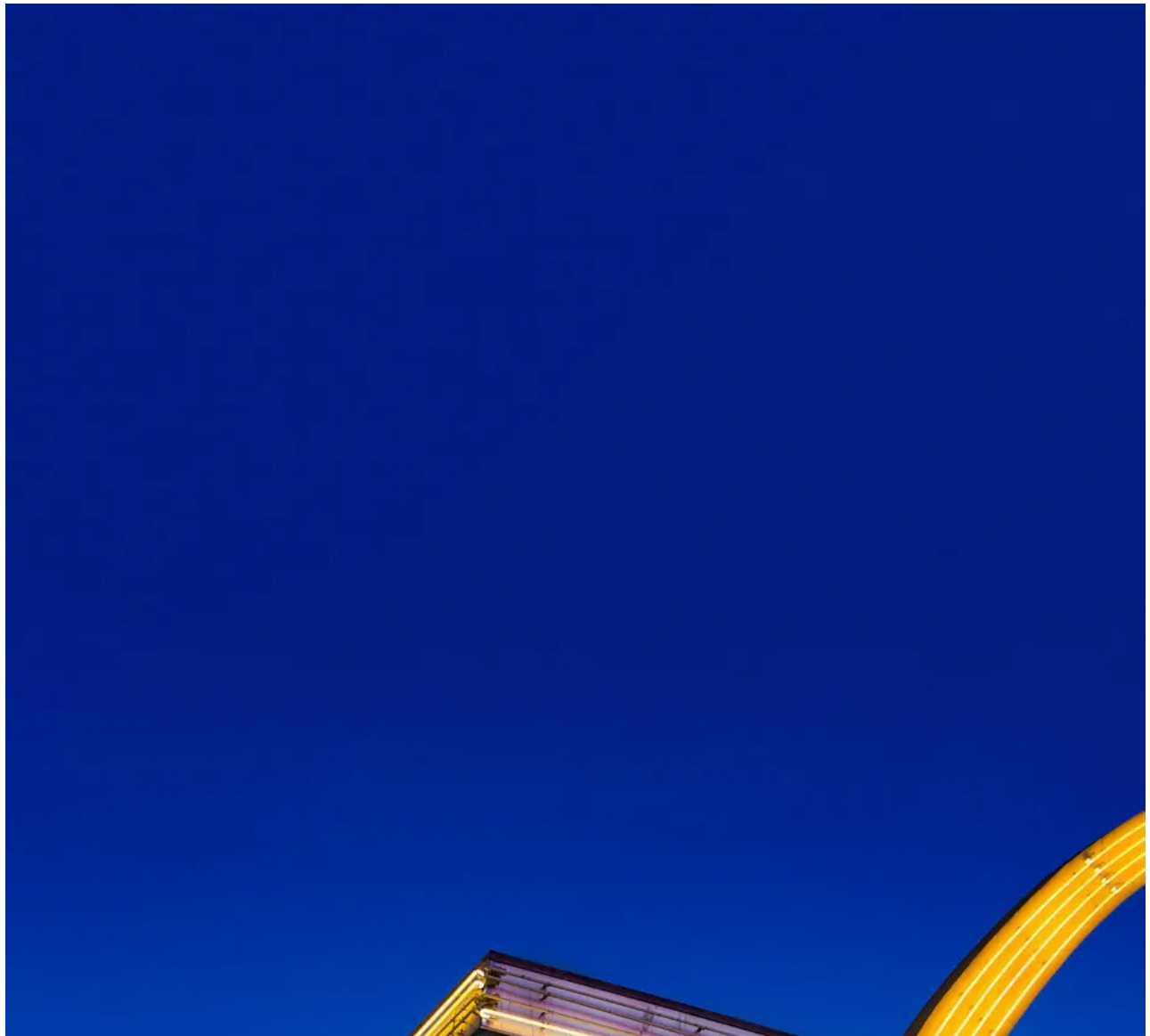


The Fight to Save Googie, the Style of Postwar Optimism

The car-centric architectural style, characterized by neon signs and dramatic rooflines, is now endangered. Its admirers mourn the loss of the ideals it represented.

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The oldest McDonald's that is still in business, in Downey, Calif. The brand's golden arches, once among the most ubiquitous examples of Googie, are harder to find these days. Ashok Sinha

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By [Anna Kodé](#)

Anna Kodé reported this story from Los Angeles.

In June, the Arby's on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles shut down. The news, announced on the restaurant's marquee — "FAREWELL HOLLYWOOD TY FOR 55 GREAT YEARS" — didn't seem surprising, with rents and labor costs on the rise. What was out of the ordinary was the public's response to it.

Judy Sibelman, whose family had owned the business, said that she was overwhelmed by the "outpouring of emotion" from strangers. People wrote to the family "saying things like 'I was a writer at one of the studios around the corner, and I would sit in a corner booth at Arby's and write,'" Ms. Sibelman said. "One person even said they lost their virginity there. I certainly hope it was in the parking lot."

On social media, people posted poetic, yearning odes — but not to the curly fries. They were more concerned about what would happen to the restaurant's giant neon cowboy hat sign, a relic of the 1960s. One fan dramatically eulogized the sign [on X](#), calling it a "garish dreamcatcher" that represented "abundance and continuity amid a roaring void."





After more than 50 years in business, the Arby's on Sunset Boulevard closed in July. Ashok Sinha for The New York Times

That cowboy hat is an example of the architectural style known as Googie (pronounced ghoo-ghée, with two hard G's), which was popular from the 1940s to the 1970s. A product of car culture, Googie had its origins in Southern California and was adopted widely by roadside businesses, including motels, doughnut shops and drive-ins. The style is defined by a

futuristic, space-age look, with loud signs and dramatic rooflines to grab the attention of people driving by in cars.

Amid the [homogeneous grayscape](#) that we currently find ourselves in, the loss of the Sunset Boulevard Arby's seemed to symbolize the loss of something greater — a time when public spaces were fun and wacky, and when something as humble as a fast-food restaurant was designed to stun.









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Today, Googie buildings are an endangered species, facing redevelopment, demolition and restrictive design codes. Just months after the Arby's closed, another Googie landmark was threatened: the longest-operating Norms restaurant, on La Cienega Boulevard, which was the subject of an Ed Ruscha painting. The slow disappearance of the style has fueled the passion for it. Earlier this fall, I spent a few days driving around Los Angeles and learning more about Googie from its most ardent fans, who've been fighting to protect the style for decades.

The critic Douglas Haskell is credited with popularizing the term Googie to refer to the style, in a 1952 article in *House and Home* magazine. Mr. Haskell named it after a restaurant in Los Angeles designed by the architect John

Lautner. But the style was considered unserious or tacky in highbrow circles and was largely ignored by other critics.

For everyday people, though, Googie was a way to experience cutting-edge architecture. "More than any of the custom homes that Modernism is famous for, Googie allowed the average person to participate in the modern era as they went about their daily lives," said Alan Hess, an architect and historian who wrote "Googie: Ultramodern Roadside Architecture."

The architect Helen Fong played a major role in designing some of the most well-known and eye-catching Googie buildings, including the first Norms, the Holiday Bowl and Pann's Restaurant. Ms. Fong was known for being meticulous, and she loved a pop of red: Just as Pann's was about to open to the public, she thought one of the walls looked too blank, so she took out her red nail polish and started painting some of the tiles, said John English, a historic preservationist and a friend of Ms. Fong, who died in 2005.

Just as today's brands are built to shine on Instagram and TikTok, Googie structures were built to entice through a car window. They were usually at prominent intersections, and along with the neon signs, they had large glass windows "to show off the interior to people as they drove by," Mr. Hess said. "People would look in and see a lot of happy diners. The whole building was a three-dimensional billboard displaying the color and the activity and the people."

Advances in glass manufacturing techniques allowed the material to be used more widely, so people came to see it as a "striking new technology," as Mr. Hess put it, which reflected the technological optimism of the era. After World War II, there was a hopefulness surrounding the future that was promised by American innovation, spurred by the rise of the car, nuclear power and space exploration. A futuristic aesthetic permeated the culture —

as seen in the high-tech-obsessed television show "The Jetsons," which depicted several Googie-style buildings. Googie was the future, and the future was Googie.

... And Fall

When Googie was popular, an "atmosphere for experimentation" was in the air, Mr. Hess said. Suburbs were growing, and many regions had yet to implement design guidelines. But that mood would be short-lived.

"Eventually, stricter sign codes came into play — new height limits, smaller square footage," Mr. English said.

Much of this shift began in the 1960s. President Lyndon B. Johnson announced his "America the Beautiful" initiative in 1965, saying, "I want to make sure that the America we see from these major highways is a beautiful America." Later that year, he signed the Highway Beautification Act, which called for restrictions on signage and advertising. While the law largely targeted billboards, it helped spread the idea that "commercial clutter" was overtaking American roads, Mr. English said.

Attitudes toward neon started to sour. Many people thought the signage was gaudy, and it was expensive to manufacture and maintain. In the early 1970s, a sign ordinance in Denver banned "moving neon."

Companies, too, wanted something different. In 1982, the Holiday Inn chain switched out its neon "Great Sign" for a cheaper, plastic sign. "Once synonymous with prosperity, neon has fallen victim to a combination of forces, ranging from rising energy costs to evolving notions of good taste," The New York Times [reported](#) in 1985.

The futurism that animated Googie would also play a role in its slow death.

"When the weirdness of that technology set in," Mr. Hess said, "when people realized that nuclear power was not quite the panacea that everyone thought it was going to be, when pollution of water and air became big issues in the '60s and '70s, that led to a reaction against an interest in bright, shiny, futuristic appearances in popular architecture."

Preserving the Past

Today, Googie is beloved again, as the reaction to the Arby's closure showed. But preserving it is no simple or straightforward task.

The Sunset Arby's is now a Prince Street Pizza. In July, Los Angeles's Cultural Heritage Commission nominated the cowboy hat sign to be a local landmark. But after a review, it declined the nomination last month, in a decision that can't be appealed.

For now, the sign is still standing.

"It gives me a warm feeling, that this thing that put me through school and put shoes on my feet and helped my parents have a good retirement is still there in some way," Ms. Sibelman said.

The Norms on La Cienega was spared, too. Raising Cane's, which owns the property, was planning to turn it into another one of its chicken finger joints. After public outcry, the company [halted](#) those plans this month.

But Mr. Hess noted, "I've been involved in historic preservation for a long time, and there aren't many real success stories, sadly." Landowners, local government and incoming commercial tenants must all agree to save a site for its original character to remain. "The rules of commercial architecture are that people want something new," he said.

Standing outside what was once the Holiday Bowl on Crenshaw Boulevard, Mr. English described the drawn-out efforts to preserve the building. The bowling alley, constructed in the 1950s, had been a hub for Black and Asian residents in times of racial tension, a place where you could [order eggs](#) with your choice of char siu or hot links.

In 2000, the bowling alley closed, and a developer threatened to demolish it. Preservationists rallied against the plan, but [others called the building a blight](#). Eventually, a middle ground was reached: The alley was torn down, but its adjoining coffee shop was saved. It's now a Starbucks — with a zigzagging roofline.

In the 1990s, Mr. English worked to save the McDonald's in Downey, Calif., the oldest still in business. The brand's signature golden arches soar over either side of the restaurant, which opened in 1953. The company wanted to demolish it, arguing that the structure was damaged by the 1994 Northridge earthquake.

Eventually, the city [refused](#) the company a demolition permit, and the building is still intact today. But across the country, McDonald's golden arches, once among the most ubiquitous examples of Googie, are harder to find, as the company opts for plainer designs in newer locations.

"I used to give a lot of Googie tours, but at a certain point it got rather depressing," Mr. English said. "So I kind of stopped doing that."

The spontaneous experience that Googie was made for — driving around and stopping to try a new spot because of its design — is much rarer these days. We look up exactly where we're going on Instagram or Google Maps, we reserve a table on Resy, and we decide what we're going to order before we even get there.

And as rents soar, few businesses can afford to invest in bespoke design.

In the time of Googie, there was more budget — and desire — for innovation within commercial architecture. “Being a commercial architect was the most fun job in the world, if you were lucky enough to have been one during the ‘50s and ‘60s,” Ms. Fong told [Los Angeles magazine in 2000](#). “There was a kind of freedom — an abundance of money from clients, energy, an educated work force, thanks to the G.I. Bill, and people who, thanks to the postwar economy, had the money to eat out.”

Ms. Fong didn’t imagine long lives for the spaces she was creating. “We all knew that commercial architecture would come and go based on the forces of commerce,” she said. “It wasn’t our function to think in the long term. If we could make restaurants appealing, make you feel good when you’re in them, then we’d done our job.”

That they are still making people feel good, so many decades later, seems like a testament to the democratic nature of the design.

While other Modernist creations, like Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater or Philip Johnson’s Glass House, were celebrated as high art, the term Googie was often used pejoratively. But those private homes were sequestered from most of the public. Googie, on the other hand, belonged to the people.

Plenty of cultural trends from the same period haven’t aged as well, like tract housing and the man in the gray flannel suit. But there’s something about Googie that is dazzling us once more.

The sense of excitement for tomorrow that fueled Googie is hard to find in general these days. If anything, today’s mainstream culture wants to go back in time, not forward. Consider the surge in vinyl record player sales, the endless stream of film remakes or the slogan that won the election, “Make

"America Great Again." Even the contemporary obsession with Googie could be viewed as part of this nostalgia boom.

Now, there's a pervasive sense of despair, rather than hope, about technology's ability to solve our problems. Social media was supposed to make us feel connected, but in fact we feel [lonelier](#). Artificial intelligence was supposed to make our jobs easier, but [it's put them at risk](#). We've lost faith in the future, and Googie represents a time when we still had it.