



L.A.'s K-Town: Culture and Community

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In the early twentieth century, Los Angeles' Korean and Korean-American population lived primarily on downtown's Bunker Hill, one of the few places that allowed non-white residents. Over the next few decades, the community began to shift to a part of downtown adjacent to the University of Southern California. The new Korean community near Jefferson Boulevard became a hub for organizations that provided Korean immigrants and families with services such as medical and financial assistance, as well as political and religious support.

By the 1950s, a second wave of Korean immigrants reeling from the Korean War made their way to the United States and Los Angeles. The population of what is now called "Old Koreatown" swelled with newcomers. A decade later, thanks to relaxed federal immigration rules, it grew even more.

Meanwhile, the central Wilshire area was growing by leaps and bounds. In 1957, the City lifted building height restrictions, and high-rise commercial buildings sprouted up along the corridor. Original residents of the area, lured by the siren song of affluent postwar suburbia, migrated west and to the suburbs, leaving the neighborhood free for denser development.

Lower rents and abundant commercial real estate drew the burgeoning Korean community to the area, many of whom set up storefronts and eateries in the area's now ubiquitous strip malls. In and between the pastel terra cotta of some of Los Angeles' finest examples of its early architecture, Korean immigrants made their homes.

As with so many neighborhoods in Los Angeles, the buildings and historic sites encompassed within Koreatown are home to multiple community identities, layered one atop another. Roughly 53% of the population in Koreatown identifies as Latinx. The El Salvador Corridor, formally designated in 2012, is located just south of Koreatown on Vermont Avenue, and Little Bangladesh borders four blocks of Koreatown to the north. The people in these neighborhoods influence the blocks and buildings of Koreatown through the food they eat, the languages they speak, and the buildings they inhabit. To explore the iconic buildings in Koreatown is to explore a storyscape of communities—the communities of Los Angeles.



Security Pacific National Bank Collection/Los Angeles Public Library

Art Deco in Koreatown

The term 'Art Deco' was coined in 1968 to describe the style of design popular in the late 1920s to 1930s. Post-World War I, designers sought to create a more modern look, influenced by non-anglo cultures (mainly Mayan, Egyptian, and Assyrian) and the new technologies of the machine age. Unlike previous classical architectural styles, such as Beaux Arts, Art Deco emphasized vertical, streamlined movement and included decorations with repeating geometric shapes and zigzag patterns. Glazed terra cotta, glass and mirrored surfaces, metal fittings, and custom-designed fixtures were also used. Built-in symbolic references to the building owners, or to the type of business conducted at the site, were also popular. Be sure to look for these features in Art Deco buildings along Wilshire Boulevard, including Wilshire Professional, The Wiltern, the Wilshire Galleria, and Bullocks Wilshire/Southwestern Law School.

Religion and Its Role in Koreatown

Koreatown is home to over one hundred religious institutions. Many of the larger houses of worship in Koreatown, such as Wilshire Christian Church, Wilshire Boulevard Temple, and Immanuel Presbyterian Church, were constructed in the 1920s. These grand structures catered to the affluent population living in Wilshire Center at the time. As the demographics of the neighborhood began to change in the 1950s and 1960s with new waves of immigrants, the role of religious institutions in the neighborhood began to change. The Oriental Mission Church on Western Avenue was one of the first places to serve as a communal gathering site for early Korean immigrants, providing essential social services. It and the churches that followed in its footsteps emphasized the need for education and encouraged people to start their own businesses. Today, most churches in Koreatown conduct services in English, Spanish, and Korean, and continue to play an important role within the community.

Skyscrapers in Koreatown

Fearful that the downtown streets of the growing city would follow the path of the East Coast's hulking, shadow-casting skyscrapers, Los Angeles chose a different route. By 1911, the Los Angeles City Council passed a bill limiting building heights to 150 feet. Additional height would only be allowed to accommodate unoccupied (i.e. non-leasable) space for rooftop mechanical rooms and similar considerations. As a result of this mandate, most of the older buildings in downtown Los Angeles and those along Wilshire Boulevard, such as the Gaylord Apartments or the Talmadge, are no taller than twelve or thirteen stories – the maximum number of floors a 150-foot height limit would allow.

The arrival of the Art Deco style, which favored tapering towers in the vein of New York's Chrysler Building, allowed architects to push the boundaries of what could constitute unoccupied "mechanical" rooms. The Bullocks Wilshire building (now part of Southwestern Law School) erected in 1929, tops out at 241 feet, thanks to a nearly 150-foot-high "mechanical room" atop its structure. Despite the City's height limit, Los Angeles got its "skyscrapers."

In 1957, Los Angeles made room for true skyscrapers when voters repealed the height limit, replacing the previous guideline with a Floor-to-Area (FAR) ratio formula. This "density-based" formula allowed buildings to be twice as high as before, as long as they occupied only half of their property footprint (or four times as high, occupying only one-quarter of their property). The result is evident in downtown and along Wilshire Boulevard: taller buildings with large, open plazas surrounding them.

The 34-story Equitable Life Building, completed in 1969, exemplifies the City's revised height ordinance. Though 453 feet tall (one foot shorter than City Hall), the skyscraper is set well back from the boulevard, and it offers spacious plazas and open space on all four sides. The Mercury, completed in 1963, looms 312 feet above the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue, yet provides open space on its southern and western elevations.

Exploring Olympic Boulevard: Sunday, November 5, 2017



1 Da Wool Jung
1000 S. Normandie Ave. • 2006

Da Wool Jung ("harmonious gathering place") is a traditional Korean-style pavilion. It was built using time-honored methods – without any nails or screws – by craftspeople from Korea. It is part of the Madang Open Space Project, organized by the Korean American Chamber of Commerce and Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative. The project sought to build a park connecting the pavilion with the Koreatown Senior and Community Center located across the street. The plan proved unfeasible, and the pavilion is all that was constructed.



Alex Inshishian

2 Kim Bang Ah
3031 W. Olympic Blvd. • 1960, Immanuel H. Lewin

Kim Bang Ah has been owned and operated by three generations of the Kim family since opening in 1967. A bakery and dry goods store, Kim Bang Ah provides the neighborhood with rice and acorn flours used in traditional Korean dishes, as well as signature rice cakes.

3 Guelaguetza
3014 W. Olympic Blvd. • 1975, Kang Ho Lee

Originally home to the Korean restaurant VIP Palace, which opened in 1975, the building served not only as a restaurant but also as a cultural center. Built

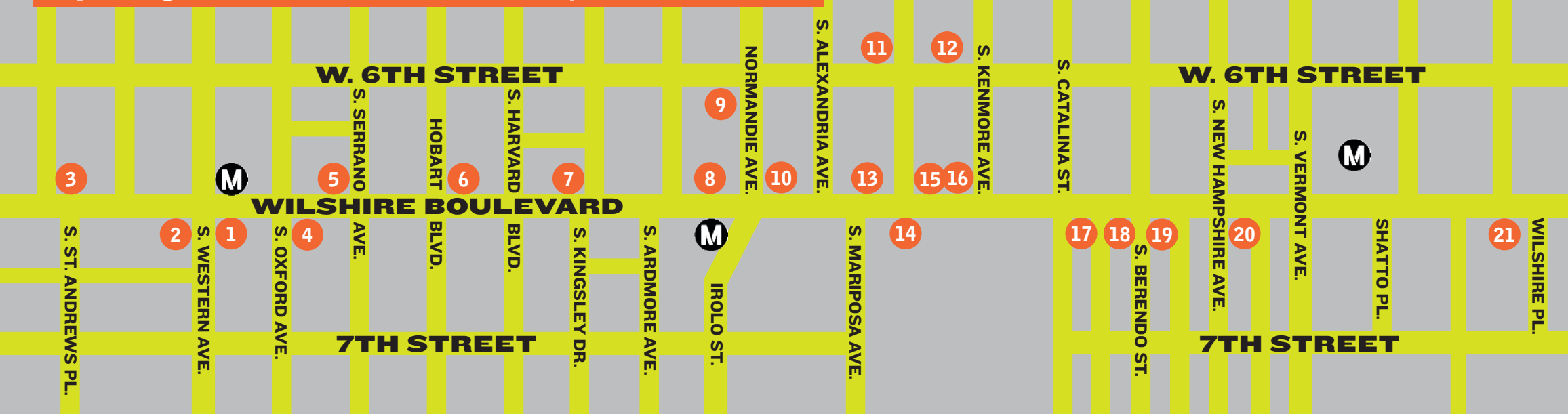
by Hi Duk Lee, who also built the neighboring VIP Plaza, the VIP Palace and Plaza were the first buildings in Los Angeles to be constructed in the traditional Korean style, with blue roof tiles and a façade painted to resemble Korean palaces. Now occupied by the Oaxacan restaurant Guelaguetza, which opened in 1994, the restaurant has continued to serve as a neighborhood gathering place, this time centered around Oaxacan food, dance, and culture. In 2015, it was awarded the James Beard America's Classic award.

4 Hannam Market
2740 W. Olympic Blvd. • 1988, Lorand West

Opened by Kee Whan Ha, Hannam Market was the first of what would become a popular chain of Korean grocery stores. As the 1992 Los Angeles riots spread to Koreatown, Ha refused to leave his store unprotected. He organized his workers and other Korean business owners in defense of their properties, assembling at Hannam Market to take a stand. During a shootout at the market, one of Ha's security guards was killed. Hannam Market was left intact.

5 Koreatown Gateway Signs
2716 W. Olympic Blvd./3250 W. Olympic Blvd.
2011, Anne Kim

These four gateways, along with the artistic crosswalks and decorative lamps located along Olympic Boulevard, were constructed as part of a streetscape redevelopment project in 2011. Along the bottom of each gateway are panels of text that offer a brief history of the neighborhood. Perched on top is a Bong Hwang, an East Asian mythical bird that represents happiness and prosperity.



1 The Wiltern and Pellissier Building
3790 Wilshire Blvd.
1931, Stiles O. Clements and G. Albert Lansburgh

The Wiltern, a classic example of Art Deco architecture, originally opened as part of the Warner Brothers Western Theatre chain. In 1956, the Wiltern was sold to Franklin Life Insurance Company. It thereafter faced a steady decline, eventually closing its doors in 1979, the same year the building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. When the building was threatened with demolition, along with a very young Los Angeles Conservancy, along with the Citizens' Committee to Save the Wiltern, came to the rescue. The complex was saved from the wrecking ball through the intervention of developer Wayne Ratkovich and his firm, Ratkovich, Bowers & Perez.



Adrian Scott Fine

2 The Mercury
3810 Wilshire Blvd. • 1963, Claud Beelman

This Mid-Century Modern skyscraper was the last building designed by Claud Beelman. Commissioned by J. Paul Getty, it served as headquarters of the Getty Oil Company. In 2016, it was adapted into luxury condominiums.

3 Wilshire Professional Building
3875 Wilshire Blvd. • 1929, Arthur E. Harvey

The Art Deco design of this 13-story commercial office building features a stepped-back tower, emblematic of the Art Deco style. The terrazzo pattern outside the main entrance was custom-made by the Portland Cement Company.

4 Wilshire Colonnade
3701 Wilshire Blvd. • 1967, Edward Durell Stone

Formerly known as Ahmanson Center, Wilshire Colonnade is a tribute to classical Roman architecture. The central courtyard is designed to resemble a European plaza, and the entire building is covered in travertine marble imported from Italy, with walkways paved with marble. The courtyard is one of the few public, open spaces in the neighborhood.

5 Radio Korea
3700 Wilshire Blvd. • 1966, Gordon Bunshaft and Edward Charles Bassett for SOM



Alex Inshishian

Housed in the Mid-Century Wilshire Park Place building, Radio Korea is one of several radio stations in Los Angeles that broadcasts entirely in Korean. The station, which was founded in 1989, served a vital role during the Los Angeles riots by acting as an information center for the community. When the neighborhood was cut off from the police, fire department, and other emergency services, Radio Korea cancelled its regular programming and opened its phone lines, allowing people to call for help and exchange information.

6 Wilshire Boulevard Temple
3663 Wilshire Blvd.
1929, Abram M. Edelman and Samuel Tilden Norton

Wilshire Boulevard Temple is home to the Congregation B'nai B'rith, which was founded in 1862 and is the oldest Jewish congregation in Los Angeles. The temple's exterior features a traditional Romanesque three-arch portal and rose



Tom Bonner

7 St. Basil Catholic Church
3611 Wilshire Blvd. • 1969, A. C. Martin & Associates

The design of St. Basil Catholic Church, begun by Albert C. Martin, Sr. and finished by his sons, Albert Jr. and John Edward, was inspired by third- and fourth-century Christian churches. Constructed in the Brutalist style, it comprises over 9,000 cubic yards of concrete, including a 160-foot spire. The church features poured concrete reliefs depicting the fourteen Stations of the Cross, sculpted in just twenty-eight days by Franco Assetto.

8 The LINE Hotel
3515 Wilshire Blvd.
1964, Daniel, Mann, Johnson & Mendenhall (DMJM)

Originally opened as the Wilshire Hotel, the updated 384-room LINE Hotel retains the essence of its Mid-Century Modern roots. Its rooms feature floor-to-ceiling windows and industrial chic furniture. The LINE has positioned itself as a community space, opening its lobby to the public and serving as a gathering spot for groups, such as the popular Koreatown Run Club. It is also home to two of local chef Roy Choi's establishments, Commissary and POT.

9 Hotel Normandie
605 Normandie Ave. • 1926, Walker & Eisen

The Renaissance Revival-style Hotel Normandie was one of the most prominent hotels on Wilshire Center. Notable residents included English author Malcolm Lowry, who completed his magnum opus *Under the Volcano* here during the 1930s. J Lou Architects purchased the hotel in 2010 and began an extensive restoration, earning an L.A. Conservancy Preservation Award. Today, the hotel's 91 rooms have been restored to their 1920s grandeur.



Adrian ScpttFine

10 Oasis Church
634 S. Normandie Ave. • 1926, Robert Orr

Oasis Church, once the Wilshire Christian Church, was the first church built in the area. Designed in the Romanesque style by parishioner and architect Robert Orr, the building replaced the parish's original bungalow-style structure. Visible from Wilshire Boulevard is the rose window by the master craftsmen at Judson Studios, said to be a copy of one in the Rheims Cathedral in France.

11 Chapman Court
3511 W. 6th St. • 1928, Morgan, Walls & Clements

Chapman Court, once known as Chapman Park Studios, was originally owned by the Chapman brothers, who also owned Chapman Plaza and the now-demolished Chapman Hotel. All three had Churrigueresque façades, a popular look in the early 1920s. Chapman Court includes ground-floor retail units and unique, two-story live-work spaces on the upper floors. The rooms feature detailed molding, paneled walls, arched windows, and high ceilings.

12 Chapman Plaza
3451 W. 6th St. • 1929, Morgan, Walls & Clements

Originally Chapman Park Market, the plaza was one of the first automobile-centric, drive-in markets on the West Coast. With a fortress-like façade and Churrigueresque towers, the Spanish Colonial Revival structure attracted drivers with its rooftop sign. Motorists could drive directly into the courtyard and buy all their groceries in one spot. Renovated by Wayne Ratkovich in 1990, it is now occupied by a variety of primarily Korean businesses, and remains a popular locale.



Alex Inshishian

13 Equitable Life Building
3435 Wilshire Blvd. • 1969, Welton Becket & Associates

This 33-story International Style skyscraper is currently the tallest building in Koreatown. Built on the former site of the Chapman Hotel, the Equitable Life Building's lobby houses rotating public art exhibitions.

14 Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools
(former site of the Ambassador Hotel)
3400 Wilshire Blvd. • 2010, Gonzalez Goodale

Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools are a collection of six schools located on the former site of the Ambassador Hotel. Designed by Myron Hunt in 1921 with later renovations by Paul Williams, the Ambassador fueled the westward expansion of Wilshire Boulevard and housed the world-famous Coconut Grove nightclub. The Ambassador hosted every United States president from Herbert Hoover to Richard Nixon, as well as six Academy Awards ceremonies. It was also the tragic site of Robert F. Kennedy's assassination in 1968. Despite years of effort to save the Ambassador by the Los Angeles Conservancy and other groups, it was razed in 2005. All that remains are an Art Deco pylon at the Wilshire Boulevard entrance, portions of the hotel entrance portal, and the east wall of the Coconut Grove.



Alex Inshishian

15 Brown Derby
3377 Wilshire Blvd. • 1937

The popularity of the original Brown Derby restaurant, built in 1926, resulted in its relocation and expansion half a block east to 3377 Wilshire Boulevard in 1937.

Shaped like the hat it was named for, the Brown Derby was designed to draw the attention of passing motorists. In an effort to save the building mid-demolition, the Los Angeles Conservancy and Hollywood Heritage negotiated to keep the dome of the hat intact. The dome was later moved and incorporated into the 2nd floor of the Brown Derby Shopping Center.

16 Gaylord Apartments
3355 Wilshire Blvd. • 1924, Walker & Eisen

The building – as with the boulevard itself – takes its name from the real estate mogul Gaylord Wilshire. Opened in 1924 as a luxury hotel, the Gaylord was later converted to apartments. The first floor includes the historic restaurant, H.M.S. Bounty. In 2006, the Los Angeles Conservancy held a “wake” on this site to grieve the loss of the Ambassador Hotel, whose demolition was completed that year: hundreds attended to pay their respects. 2017 marks the H.M.S. Bounty's 50th anniversary.

17 Willard H. George Building
3330 Wilshire Blvd. • 1929, Richard D. King

This Art Deco building was once home to the Willard H. George Co. Furrier store, a high-end boutique that specialized in chinchilla fur. Known as “the chinchilla industry's greatest friend,” Willard developed a grading system for chinchilla fur that was adopted nationwide. A stucco façade was added in 1948 covering most of the Art Deco flourishes, including the ziggurat tower. The building was purchased in 2016 and is undergoing a careful restoration to return it to its 1929 design.



Los Angeles Library Photo Collection

18 Immanuel Presbyterian Church
3300 Wilshire Blvd. • 1928, Chauncey Fitch Skilling



Adrian Scott Fine

Modeled after French Gothic cathedrals, Immanuel Presbyterian houses a congregation that dates to 1888 and today serves a mixture of nearby communities. The building's stone-clad corner tower soars 205 feet above Wilshire Boulevard, supported by a steel frame that allows for a strikingly spacious interior. The traditional stained-glass windows were created by the Dixon Art Glass Company of Los Angeles.

19 Talmadge Apartments
3278 Wilshire Blvd. • 1923, Claud Beelman and Alan Curlett

Named after silent film actress Norma Talmadge, whose husband Joseph Schenk developed the building, the Talmadge was home to a variety of actors, starlets, and socialites. Today, it remains a high-end apartment building.

20 Wilshire Galleria
3240 Wilshire Blvd. • 1939, Myron Hunt

The Wilshire Galleria was once home to I. Magnin, an iconic department store famous during Wilshire Boulevard's fashionable heyday. The Art Deco building incorporates an eye-catching, all-marble façade with black marble along the street level and white marble above. This high-end department store chain specialized in couture fashions and eventually merged with Bullocks. In 1990, the store closed, reopening two years later as the Wilshire Galleria shopping complex.

21 Southwestern Law School
3050 Wilshire Blvd. • 1929, Parkinson & Parkinson

Originally built for the department store Bullocks Wilshire, this Art Deco icon was designed to incorporate onsite parking and a porte-cochere. It was the first department store to cater to the emerging automobile-driven, suburban culture of Los Angeles. Bullocks Wilshire attracted Hollywood stars and elites, aiding the westward development of the city along Wilshire Boulevard. Southwestern University School of Law purchased it in 1994, restoring the building's historic elements while adapting it for academic use. The project earned the L.A. Conservancy's President's Award.

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