THE ART OF REBUILDING

HARVEY GUILLÉN
ALTADENA
Guillén, a Los Angeles native and actor, stands in front of the house where he and his siblings battled a fierce flare-up that reignited, threatening to consume what little remained of their beloved neighborhood and surrounding homes. "The hoses had melted and there was no way for the neighbor to put out the fire," he says. "We rushed over with our sprinklers and put the fire out."

PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: PHIL LIMPRASERTWONG

AS THE DEVASTATING FIRES OF JANUARY 2025 SWEPT THROUGH L.A., ANGELENOS RALLIED TO FIGHT BACK. THIS INTIMATE ACCOUNT DOCUMENTS THE DESTRUCTION, BUT MORE SO, THE RESILIENCE AND CAMARADERIE OF THE NEIGHBORS WHO UNITED TO HEAL THEIR CITY

BY MICHELE MCPHEE WITH JON REGARDIE AND CHRIS NICHOLS

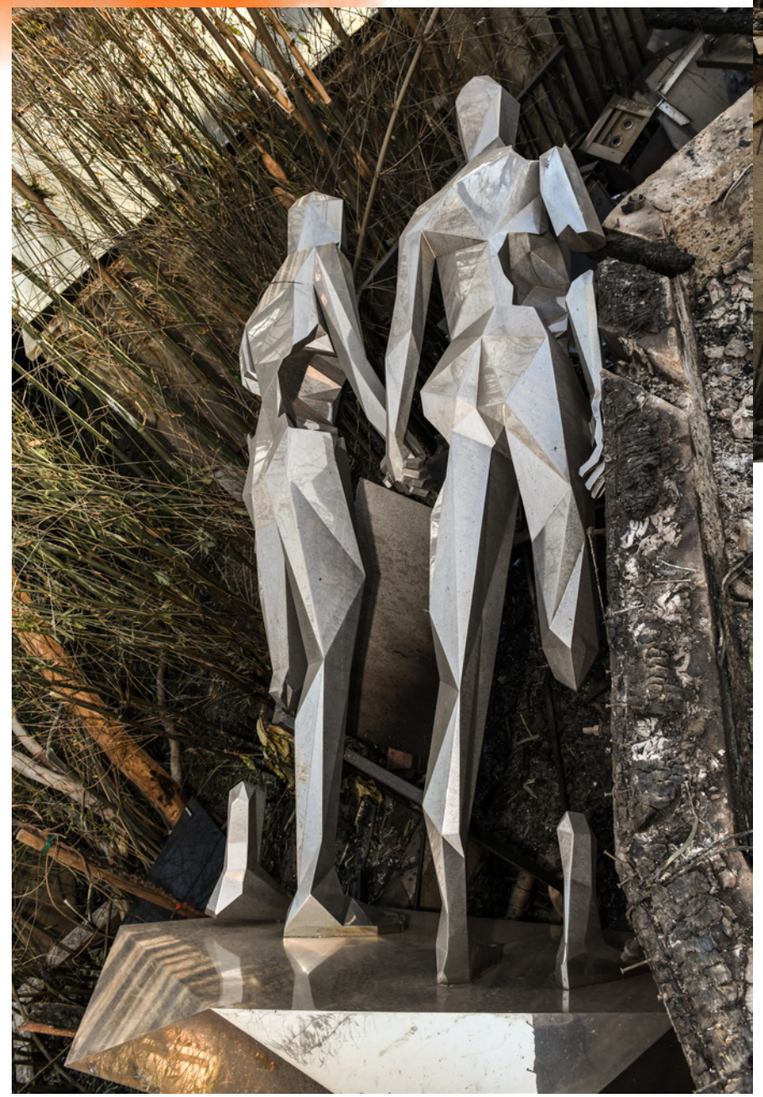
PHOTOGRAPHED BY IRVIN RIVERA

CAPTAIN FRANK LIMA
PACIFIC PALISADES
The LAFD Captain used an axe he pulled out of the trunk of his car, along with a small fire extinguisher, and smashed through a garden fence to extinguish smoldering embers at a home in the Palisades Highlands that caught fire after the house next door exploded in flames. The house was scorched but saved.

BROKEN BUT TOGETHER

AMID THE UNTHINKABLE LOSSES FROM L.A.'S UNPRECEDENTED DISASTER, THERE WERE ALSO SMALL MIRACLES AND HARBINGERS OF HOPE

BY MICHELE MCPHEE



RON RIVLIN
PACIFIC PALISADES
The owner of Revolver Gallery lost hundreds of artworks when his home burned down. But in a ravine behind his pool, he found a stainless steel sculpture titled "Broken but Together," symbolic of the hope he and his neighbors feel about rebuilding their prized community.

PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: PHIL LIMPRASERTWONG

LOCAL METEOROLOGISTS were breathless in repeating the warnings for "life threatening winds," over and over in the days before Jan. 7.

"Life threatening?" I thought somewhat incredulously as I left my beachside studio in Venice around 7:30 a.m. that morning. But, at the boardwalk, the brute force of what marked unimaginable, imminent wind-fueled destruction hit like a bat to the chest. Palm tree branches lashed in a violent dance overhead. Sand particles whipped into furious tornadoes and darted the skin. A sandwich board guiding tourists to breakfast burritos flew into the air and fell with a thud like a heavyweight fighter taking a TKO punch. All around, an ominous energy. Unsettling. Many Angelenos believe the Santa Ana winds rattle the psyche. Some writers, like L.A.'s Raymond Chandler, argue the gales can turn mild people murderous.

"There was a desert wind blowing that night," he wrote in 1946's *Red Wind*, a short story. *"It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything can happen."*

Anything can happen ... on this day, it did.

Three hours later, at 10:30 a.m., the Palisades Fire began. From the Venice Beach Boardwalk, spectators watched in horror as its ravenous flames built into a spreading wall of fire. An ugly, inky smoke began to stain the sky over the ocean. In the distance, crackling embers created a macabre fireworks show over the Palisades as a hellscape grew. In a matter of hours, famously picturesque swaths of Los Angeles would change forever.

I spoke with my literary manager that morning, a Pacific Palisades resident, about what now seems like utterly mundane nonsense. Neither of us knew that this would be the day that his house — and, as of this writing, 6,380 other homes and businesses in the tightknit seaside community and neighboring Malibu — would be reduced to ash. He is a collector of literary artifacts. All gone. His neighborhood, also gone.

> **"THIS IS AN ACT OF NATURE REMINDING US THAT NATURE WILL ALWAYS WIN."**
> - JAMIE LEE CURTIS

These enormous losses are what Jamie Lee Curtis came home to. The fervently proud born-and-bred *Angelena* had just boarded a flight to New York City when the texts started flying in about the fire in her neighborhood. She tells *Los Angeles* she felt fairly safe — even as her husband, fellow actor Christopher Guest, packed up their beloved rescue named Runi and a few belongings to hustle out of their home in a canyon on the outskirts of Pacific Palisades.

She recalls, "I never thought it would reach my house. To do that, it would have to burn across the entire area..." It did. She did not lose her home, but her community was decimated.

The church where she got sober in Alcoholics Anonymous was wrecked by flames, along with the women's community center where she attended meetings. The grocery store where she did her shopping, ravaged. Palisades High School, where Curtis shot a scene for 2003's *Freaky Friday*, was heavily damaged. Curtis rerouted back to her beloved City of Angels within a day. Gutted by the apocalyptic scene she returned to, she immediately pledged $1 million to help her

neighbors. “This is an act of nature reminding us that nature will always win,” she says. “We now have to live with that grim reality, make changes and use our creative community, our will and spirit to rebuild.”

That sentiment is shared by art collector and West Hollywood gallery owner Ron Rivlin. His three-story home was filled with art — works by Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, Damien Hirst and John Baldessari — and rare oddities, like a gumball machine from the Playboy Mansion, now dust. Desperate to find “something, anything,” he says, he climbed into the twisted rebar and hunks of debris with a ladder to look through the remains. In a ravine behind what had been a swimming pool, he spotted a glimmer. In the scorched brush, a stainless steel 15-foot sculpture: Michael Benisty’s “Broken but Together,” an aptly named artwork found among the hundreds lost. “I take it as a hopeful sign,” he decrees. “One that represents the spirit of Pacific Palisades.”

Fourth-generation Altadena homeowner Johnny Agnew — a teamster on the Ryan Murphy series *Monsters* — is also a collector of artifacts, vintage trailers, rare cars and Americana curiosities, items he kept at his home, a 1920s-era log cabin dubbed Funky Junk Farms. His art may not have caught an appraiser’s eye, but it was priceless to the people lucky enough to visit his makeshift museum. As firefighters battled a hurricane of flames on the Westside on Jan. 7, the Eaton Fire began to blaze at 6:18 p.m.

Agnew and his girlfriend Yipsy watched the horizon as the flames roared through mansions in the canyon on the opposite side of town and then pushed down into the historic enclave of west Altadena, home to generations of Black families like his.

By midnight, it was chaos, he notes. The sky was pitch-dark with smoke, an orange glow enveloping their cabin. “My heart sank. It was a mountain of fire, moving toward us,” Agnew says. The hurricane-force winds blew so ferociously that entire blocks — including theirs — were wiped out in minutes, at least 7,000 homes incinerated by fire like a book of lit matches, one after another. Mom-and-pop shops leveled; history wiped out. The delightfully eclectic Bunny Museum. Countless houses of worship. Fox’s famous restaurant. Now, all part of the war zone left behind. “It’s very emotional,” the 63-year-old says. “At my age, it’s supposed to be cruise control. Now we have to start over. We have 25 close friends who lost everything.” Still, Agnew is quick to talk about the outpouring of love from friends and strangers: “We are the lucky ones. We are alive. And we will rebuild.”

In his neighborhood, at least 17 people lost their lives. Those tragedies include Anthony Mitchell, a 67-year-old amputee, and his son, Justin, who had cerebral palsy; the two died side-by-side in a bed waiting for an ambulance that tried desperately to move through the blinding fog of black smoke and flames but wouldn’t arrive on time. On another street, Victor Shaw, 66, defended his family home with a garden hose before he was overcome by smoke inhalation, dying on the lawn where he had played as a boy. Two other elderly Altadena lifers — 82-year-old Rodney Nickerson, whose father is honored at L.A.’s largest housing development in Watts, and Erliene Kelley, 83 — believed the Eaton Fire, like others before it, would spare them. This time, the wildfires would not be so forgiving.

Another 11 people perished in the Palisades Fire, where fast-moving flames rapaciously devoured celebrity compounds, demolished entire beachfront communities, destroyed the Tahitian Terrace Mobile Home Park and decimated famous businesses like the Reel Inn and Moonshadows Malibu.

Among the lost include surfer Randy “Crawdaddy” Miod, a prolific contributor to the arts scene, who was found clutching his kitten to his chest in his Malibu bungalow. He died attempting to escape the wind-fueled flames that bobbed and weaved like a linebacker, leveling everything in their path. His mother said Miod’s last words to her were: “Pray for the Palisades. Pray for Malibu. I love you.” At a cottage nearby, one-time Australian child actor Rory Sykes, 32, who was born blind with cerebral palsy, was unable to escape his home despite a desperate attempt by his mom Shelley to douse the white-hot embers that landed on her son’s roof. “The water was shut off,” she wrote in a social media post, adding that even the “brave firefighters had no water all day.”

That lack of water, LAFD firefighters and union officials said, coupled with the unrelenting, unprecedented Santa Ana winds, crippled their efforts to control the hurricane of fire exploding all around them. “When you tap a hydrant and nothing comes out,” says International Association of Firefighters President Edward A. Kelly, “it’s like sending soldiers into war with tanks and guns and no ammunition.” Among the sites Kelly visited with his LAFD brethren was the devastated site of Corpus Christi Catholic Church and School in Pacific Palisades, where he paused to say a prayer at its intact granite altar. Firefighters began to buzz about what one called “a miracle” after recovering the Holy Tabernacle in the detritus and returning it to its Monsignor; all 14 stained glass Stations of the Cross were immaculate, which defied fire logic. “To me,” Kelly, a Boston native and lifelong firefighter says, “it’s a sign that this city is L.A. Strong.”

There were similar signs of hope across the city. Some seemed spiritual. Others resulted from brave actions by first responders and everyday Angelenos like actor Harvey Guillén, who is a series regular on Hulu’s *What We Do in the Shadows*. Guillén, the son of Mexican immigrants, was the first member of his family to buy a home and he’d fallen in love with Altadena. He was at home with family when the Eaton Fire began its monstrous lurch toward his neighborhood. “I couldn’t believe what I was seeing,” he says. “It was raining fire.” He remembers saying a quick prayer — “please save my house” — before snatching a photo of his father and running out. When he returned the next day, he sobbed with “survivors’ guilt” that his sweet house was still

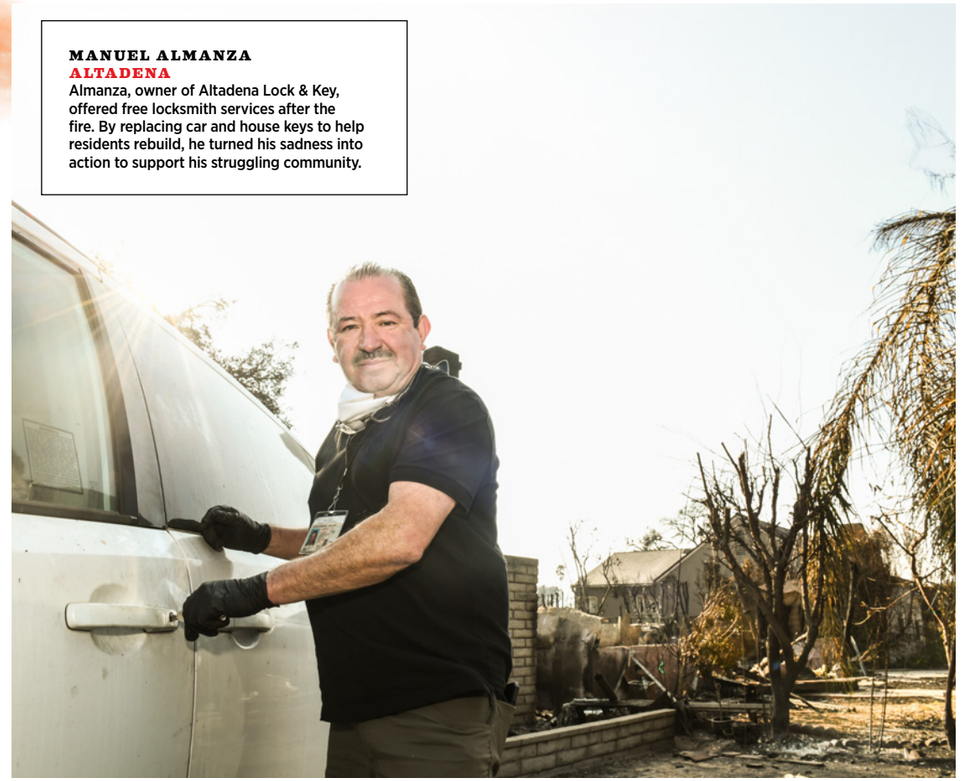
DISASTER DÉJÀ VU

SOMETIMES we feel as if we’ve seen it all. L.A. has been attacked by aliens and zombies in the movies but none of that compares to the real-life destruction we saw in Altadena and Pacific Palisades. Insurance companies describe wildfires as an act of God, and God has been busy destroying SoCal over and over for the past century. We always come back stronger. New regulations following the 1933 earthquake strengthened school buildings. After scores died when the L.A. river jumped its banks, the Army Corps of Engineers built a concrete channel so that would never happen again. California’s governor has made 57 disaster declarations this decade with more than half being wildfires. Here’s a look back at some of L.A.’s biggest natural and man-made disasters. — CHRIS NICHOLS

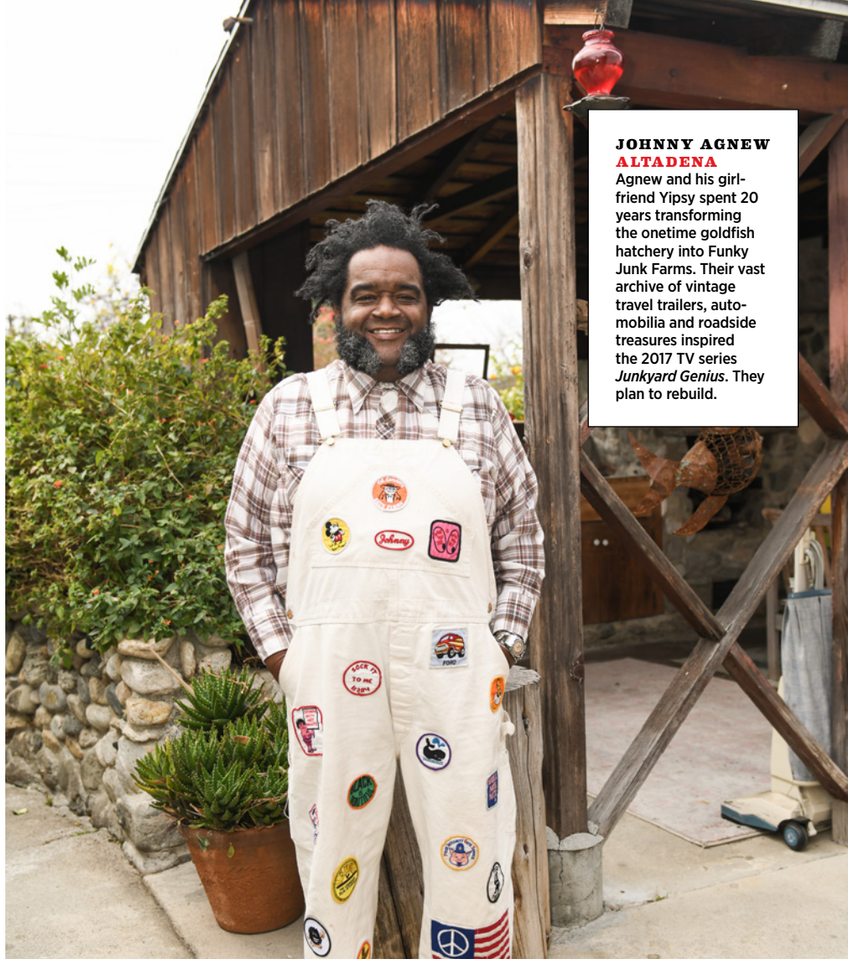
1928 ST. FRANCIS DAM DISASTER
Soon after the giant dam structure a few miles north of Santa Clarita was built, it failed, killing an estimated 450 residents and ending the career of William Mulholland, who first brought a water supply to Los Angeles.

1933 LONG BEACH EARTHQUAKE
Just a month after the 6.4 quake that destroyed much of Long Beach and killed 120 people, the state adopted the Field Act. This early building code outlined new regulations to help make structures, especially hospitals and schools, safer. Twenty thousand homes were destroyed or seriously damaged, with damage estimates of $50 million — or $1.2 billion today.

MANUEL ALMANZA
ALTADENA
Almanza, owner of Altadena Lock & Key, offered free locksmith services after the fire. By replacing car and house keys to help residents rebuild, he turned his sadness into action to support his struggling community.



JOHNNY AGNEW
ALTADENA
Agnew and his girlfriend Yipsy spent 20 years transforming the onetime goldfish hatchery into Funky Junk Farms. Their vast archive of vintage travel trailers, automobilia and roadside treasures inspired the 2017 TV series *Junkyard Genius*. They plan to rebuild.



1934 FLOOD: HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE CRESCENTA VALLEY

1934 CRESCENTA VALLEY FLOOD
A month after wildfires swept through the San Gabriel mountains, a foot of rain fell on the barren land, causing a flood that quickly swept through north Glendale. On Dec. 31, 1933, flood waters overtook the American Legion Hall, where a crowd, including volunteers from the Red Cross, had taken refuge. Twelve were killed at the hall and local historians say that 284 death certificates were signed in the Montrose community alone.

PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: PHIL LIMPRASERTWONG

standing — before noticing his neighbor's home was smoking.

Guillén and his siblings grabbed a hose and soaked his neighbor's house, saving it. It was an act that unwittingly put the family among the ranks of countless civilians who did what they could to aid exhausted, frustrated first responders from CalFire, the LAFD and nearby companies, plus 1,100 California inmates — among them juvenile detention center volunteers — who by then, had been engaged in a Sisyphean struggle to contain wildfires igniting all around them for days. They kept coming: the Hurst fire in Sylmar; the Kenneth near Woodland Hills, the Lidia in the Angeles National Forest, the Woodley in the Sepulveda Basin, then the Sunset in the Hollywood Hills. Flying embers made it as far as Ventura County, igniting the Auto Fire. Soon, help began to arrive on the line — and it was needed, as week two saw the Hughes Fire ignite in Castaic and the Laguna Fire in Ventura County.

The Navajo Nation Fire Department sent its best. So did Mexico; Canada. Then Texas and Vegas and Oregon and Utah and Tennessee. Civilian fire brigades began to fan out across the

1938 LOS ANGELES FLOOD
Throughout L.A. history, floods have killed more people than fires or earthquakes. After five days of rain, some 115 people were killed and 6,000 homes were damaged or destroyed. Damages are estimated at a billion dollars in today's money. A few months later, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began pouring concrete to channel the river to avoid another disaster.

[redacted]

miles upon miles of ruined neighborhoods to mitigate further damage to the structures that were left as the National Guard posted up to prevent looting. Dozens of bad actors were arrested, including some dressed as firefighters who were using a lifesaving, nonprofit app most Angelenos had never heard of until the fires broke out: Watch Duty.

Across L.A. County, Watch Duty's unifying tone began to ding with real-time evacuation orders that corresponded with maps of the fast-moving fires so people knew where to go. "When this fire lit, we knew this was going to be catastrophic," the service's creator John Mills says. "We started sleeping in shifts," he recalls of his staff of 15. "What is happening, it's on an untouchable scale we could not have foreseen."

For all the destruction, there were endless stories of unfettered heroism. LAFD Captain Frank Lima was driving toward the Station 69 firehouse in Pacific Palisades when he spotted embers flying into the window of a house on Marquez Avenue, right next to another home fully engulfed in flames. Lima leapt from his car, grabbed his axe — along with a tiny fire

PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: PHIL LIMPRASERTWONG; 1938 FLOOD: EMRY DAVIS IV/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

extinguisher — smashed through a garden gate at the house, and forced his way inside with white-hot fire all around him. He emptied the little hydrant, and that house is one of the only ones on the once-picturesque block in the Palisades Highlands neighborhood unscathed. An Engine Company came along and assisted Lima, who still visits the house to make sure it's standing.

Overhead, fire pilots dazzled us with action movie-worthy shots of staggeringly accurate water drops from helicopters, planes and super scoopers — precision dumps that erased gigantic swaths of fire, captured in videos every bit as exciting as scenes out of a Marvel superhero film. In today's world, the "superheroes" are the countless Angelenos who immediately jumped in to help.

Social media influencers took over the Pasadena Rose Bowl to create a spontaneous evacuation center. An Altadena locksmith on Lake Avenue that survived the fires offered free house and car keys to his neighbors who weren't so lucky. Venice surf shops began collecting donated essentials. Strangers offered up rooms and guest houses to the more than 150,000 Angelenos left homeless or displaced, while

RIOTS: MICK TAYLOR/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

1992 LOS ANGELES RIOTS
The most devastating civil unrest in American history left 58 dead and more than $1 billion in property damage that was spread all over Los Angeles County. The fires, looting and destruction stretched from Pacoima to Long Beach.

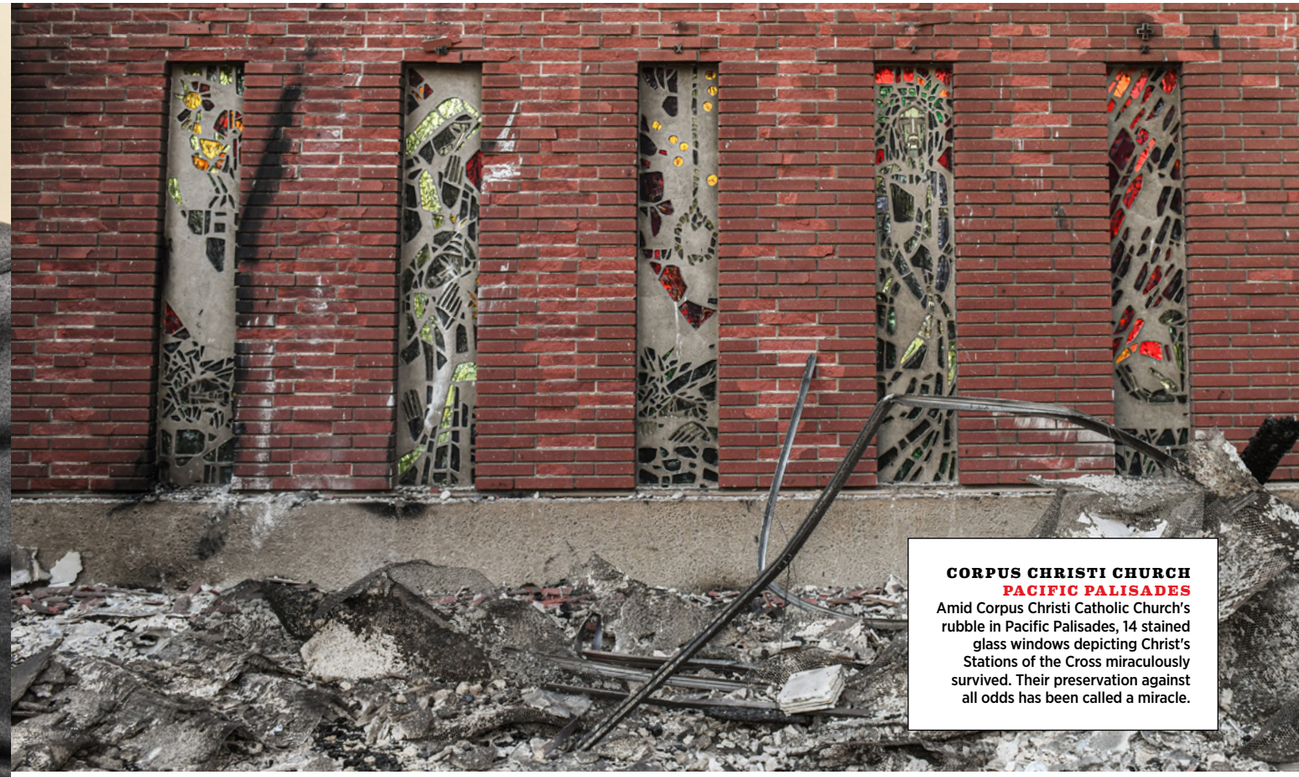
[redacted]

hotels gave away free rooms. Countless restaurants dedicated their kitchens to those in need, delivering food (and comfort) to weary survivors and frontline workers. The Pasadena Humane Society rescued 700 terrified animals; dogs, cats, turtles, a small dragon, motherless kittens and even, at least for one night, a pony. Rescued horses were rushed to nearby equestrian centers. Veterinarians across the city turned their hospitals into makeshift shelters. Volunteering and acts of community service have replaced red-carpet events and awards shows.

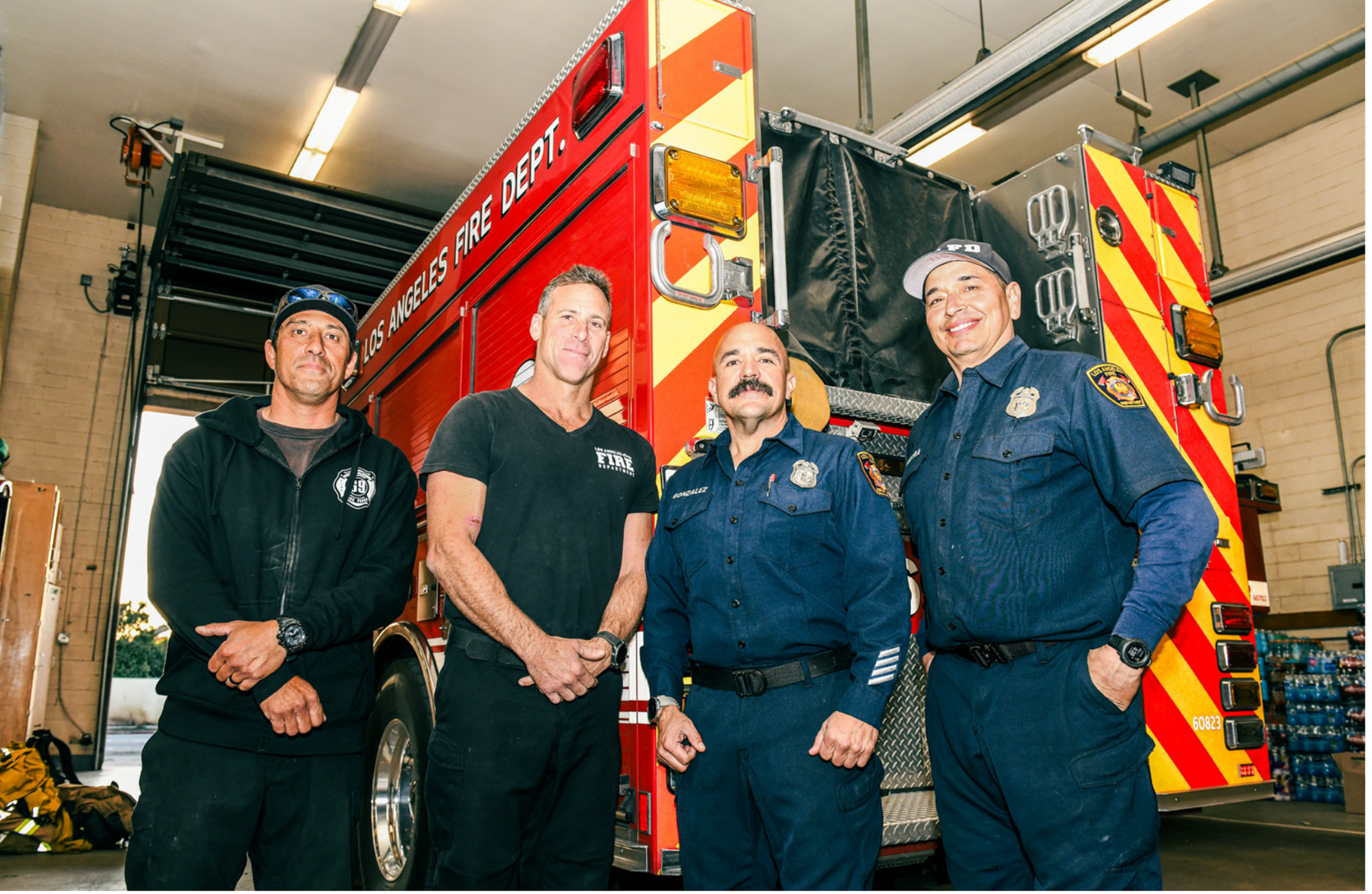
Spontaneous murals by artists across the city remind us that the real superstars in Tinseltown these days are its first responders. Graffiti artists from the Santee Public Gallery took over a wall near the Venice Beach skate park that reads on one side, framed by the Pacific Ocean: "Thank You Firefighters." On the other, it reads: "Heroes in Red," backdropped by the boardwalk where spectators watched in horror the growing red threat on that windy Jan. 7 morning.

For Curtis, the outpouring of love and support amid continuing mayhem comes as no surprise. After all, as she says: "We are the City of Angels." ■

HUMANE SOCIETY PASADENA
Izzy Nidetz cares for a litter of orphaned kittens rescued from the Eaton Fire zone, just a handful of the more than 700 tiny lives saved by the Humane Society.



CORPUS CHRISTI CHURCH PACIFIC PALISADES
Amid Corpus Christi Catholic Church's rubble in Pacific Palisades, 14 stained glass windows depicting Christ's Stations of the Cross miraculously survived. Their preservation against all odds has been called a miracle.



GRAB A HOSE, TAKE A STAND

INSIDE THE HARROWING LAFD FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL AT FIRE STATION 69

BY MICHELE MCPHEE

PHOTOGRAPHED BY IRVIN RIVERA

PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: PHIL LIMPRASERTWONG
FIRE: COURTESY FRANK LIMA

FIRE STATION 69
PACIFIC PALISADES
Opposite page, from left: Captain Nathan Bordofsky, Captain Mike McIndoe, firefighter Eric Gonzalez and firefighter Octavio Silveyra. Below: the Palisades fires grew so dangerous, LAFD firefighters had to seek refuge inside Fire Station 69 to save their own lives.

BY NIGHTFALL on the day the wildfires began, the scene in the Palisades was apocalyptic for the firefighters in the center of its unstoppable path. Blistering hot embers were the only thing visible in the blinding black smoke. Molten flames burned through thick fire hoses. Propane tanks exploded like heavy artillery in the darkness. It seemed like everything was ablaze, the sky filled with erratic firebrands carried by whipping, hurricane-force winds, all fueling the monster that ate through entire blocks in a matter of minutes.

And, despite the efforts of the firefighters on this harrowing battlefield, there was nothing they could do to extinguish the behemoth, and their own lives were increasingly at risk. Air support waterdrops were grounded because of the deadly Santa Ana gales. Worse, fire hydrants had run dry. The reservoir that should have been replenishing the hydrants was inexplicably empty, akin to sending soldiers into war unarmed. "We were chasing our tails trying to find water. We were running from home to home trying to turn off water mains to stop the strain on the system," LAFD firefighter Andy Carter remembers. "This is our community. In our minds, we are focused on doing everything we can to save every home."

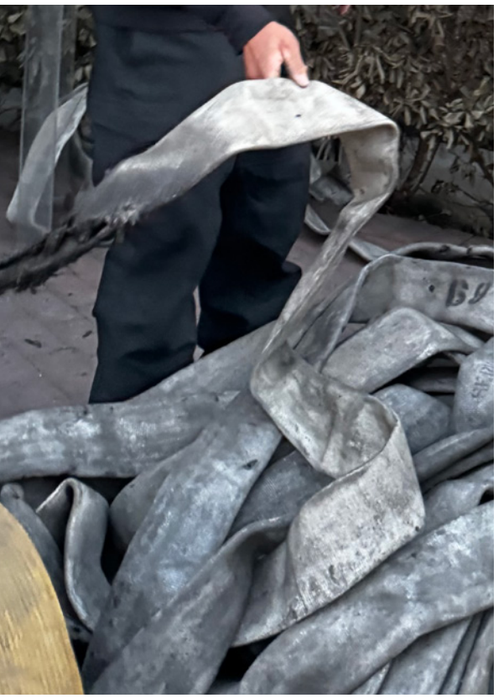
With no water, saving houses was a futile mission. The conditions were so dire, firefighters now had no choice but to retreat to safety just to survive. The closest foxhole in this inferno was Fire Station 69 on Sunset Boulevard in the heart of the Palisades.

Earlier in the evening, the LAFD made the highly unusual decision to recall off-duty firefighters, urging the city's members to call the Department Operations Center with details of their availability. Within minutes of the alert, the lines were jammed. The cavalry had been called and its members answered. Station 69 Captain Nathan Bordofsky kept getting a busy signal until he said, *Fuck it*. He grabbed his gear, jumped in his Jeep at his Calabasas house and aimed it toward his second home: Fire Station 69. He was in for a rough ride.

The paths on Temescal and Sunset Boulevards were blocked by cars that had been abandoned by desperate evacuees who fled toward the Pacific Coast Highway in a terrifying dash just minutes before their vehicles became charred hulls of steel. High-tension power lines crackled in the streets as flying trees ripped from their roots in the 90-mile-per-hour winds narrowly missed smashing through his windshield. All around, the windows of home and businesses blew out, adding oxygen to the raging fire tornado leveling everything in its ugly orange-hued path. "I had never seen anything like it," Bordofsky recalls. "So much destruction."

In one of the dozens of hot spots, firefighter Eric Gonzales — who, like everyone else assigned to Station 69, is a veteran firefighter with decades of experience — was asked to scout a safe route to refuge in the department's "plug buggy," the nickname given to a pickup truck used for supply runs. He followed the same treacherous path his brother firefighter Bordofsky was navigating toward the firehouse. When he finally made it, things were bad. The refuge itself was in peril. "It was an inferno: It was raining fire all around it, ember casts everywhere," Gonzales says. He sent an alert over his LAFD radio. *Time to go!*

Former Station 69 Captain Frank Lima, now L.A.'s union boss for the International Association of Fire Fighters, was already in the Palisades in a small department vehicle doing what he could — checking on his members and the community, and helping Engine 19 put out a house fire with a small extinguisher — when Gonzales' radio call went out. The situation was well past the point that could ensure the safety of the firefighters, who were already fatigued and defeated by circumstances well beyond anyone's control. Everyone was urged back to Fire Station 69 before the already unfolding tragedy in Los Angeles could include a first responders' funeral.



FIRE STATION 69
PACIFIC PALISADES
Above: Captain Nathan Bordofsky holds a heavy fire hose ripped apart by molten flames. Right: Inside the station.

Fire Station 69 has always been a special place for Captain Mike McIndoe. His father had served there before him when he was a boy, so a great bulk of his life was formed in the firehouse's protective fold. His unit was knocking down anything they could on "the Alphabet Streets" of the Palisades when he got the call. He rounded up his troops and pushed back through the plumes of smoke, dodging the sparking, dangerous detritus on the path to Sunset Boulevard. In a matter of minutes, the firehouse would be defended by two engine companies and a ladder truck, roughly two dozen firefighters in all.

The mentality of *L.A.'s bravest* has always been "take a hose and take a stand," says Station 69 Captain Eric Nakamaru. And on this night, that motto was about to be tested in a historic way.

There was no doubt the assembled firefighters, backed by their combined experience, were ready for a face-off with the encroaching flames.

1994 NORTHRIDGE EARTHQUAKE
Los Angeles was jolted awake at 4:31 a.m. by the 6.7 magnitude temblor, which carved a wide path of destruction. Freeways collapsed, apartments pancaked and reconstruction took years. In the end, 72 were dead and damages were estimated at $20 billion.

2017 WILDFIRES
There were 29 wildfires across Southern California, including the massive Thomas Fire, that December. One firefighter and one civilian were killed, and more than 1,300 buildings were destroyed. Damages were estimated at $3.5 billion.

2020 COVID-19
Even though masks and sanitizer are not as prevalent as they were four years ago, COVID continues to have a big impact on our lives. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health reports that 14,840 Angelenos have died from the disease, with the total number in the county somewhere over 36,000.

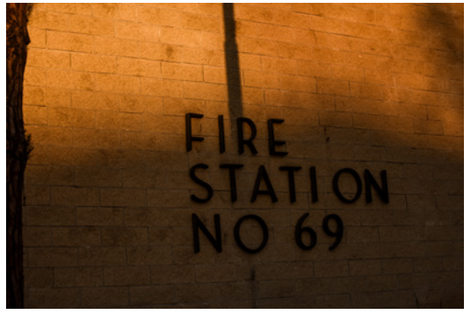
The ammunition — water — was the only thing lacking. To save the firehouse, they had to make do with a paltry 500 gallons stored in a reserve, on a single piece of apparatus. In seconds, the firefighters were positioned in strategic locations: on the roof, and at points that circled the building. With that, the heroic battle to save Station 69 and its LAFD protectors began. "It was like the Alamo," Lima describes of what he calls a "once-in-a-generation fire."

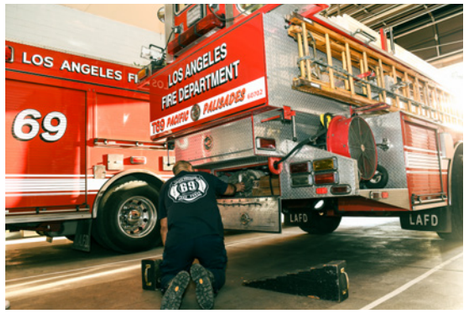
"Firefighters were in a fight for their lives. It was so dangerous out there, it's a miracle we didn't lose any firefighters," he adds. "The angels were looking out for us."

Battling back the flames that surrounded them for hours was a perilous and scrappy scrum that dragged on into the early morning of Jan. 8. But the firehouse was saved. More importantly, so were the firefighters inside.

In the weeks since the brave stand for Station 69, a steady stream of grateful Palisades residents, among them Jay Leno, have stopped by with food and hugs. A banner now hangs in front of the firehouse with a message for the people of Pacific Palisades: "We are in this together. #PalisadesStrong." It is their neighborhood too, Carter says, adding proudly, "Fire Station 69 remains steadfastly in the service of their community." ■

PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: PHIL LIMPRASERTWONG; FIRE HOSE: MICHELE MCPHEE; NORTHRIDGE: ROBERT A. EPLETT/FEMA NEWS PHOTO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; WILDFIRES: SCOTT LIEBENSON/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; COVID-19: U.S. MARINE CORPS/CPL. ALEXA M. HERNANDEZ/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS





BUILD, BABY, BUILD

HOW TO REPLACE THOUSANDS OF LOST HOMES — AND ALSO CUT THROUGH L.A.'S NOTORIOUSLY SLOW PERMITTING AND APPROVALS PROCESS

BY JON REGARDIE

TWO DAYS AFTER the devastating wildfires broke out, Mayor Karen Bass was already looking toward the future. In the burned areas, she stated during a briefing on Jan. 9, "We're going to clear the red tape and unnecessary delays and costs and headaches that people experience in ordinary times so that we can rebuild your homes quickly."

It was the type of comforting promise that stunned and stricken Angelenos want to hear, but it masks the gargantuan complexity of replacing thousands of lost homes in a city with infamous bureaucracy, where even renovating a garage can means months or more of permitting hell — and that's before construction begins.

So how do Los Angeles, Pasadena, unincorporated Altadena and other areas, where building and permitting rules vary, do it?

Start by breaking the process into smaller steps, instructs Steve Soboroff, the veteran Los Angeles developer and businessman whose resume includes constructing 6,000 housing units at Playa Vista and helping get Staples Center (now Crypto.com Arena) green-lit in the mid-'90s. As an example, Soboroff — who has since been named Chief Recovery Officer by Bass — points to the "Alphabet Streets" in Pacific Palisades; he says that, from the outset, you need the leadership and power of the federal government. Although ceding control would undoubtedly bring legal challenges from home and property owners, he believes this is the only feasible way to clear blocks covered in ash and debris, and remediate soil poisoned by fire toxins.

"You get a coordinated effort for demolition, for trash removal, for soil removal, soil replacement, for utility replacement," he says, acknowledging it could take three years, but that, "it's so much easier to have 10 bulldozers do it all, than 250 bulldozers fighting with each other to do it one at a time." The end result, he adds, is thousands of lots ready for building. "It's got your curbs. It's been graded and all the utilities are underground, and all you do is take your plans and start your construction."

In L.A., getting those plans approved has historically been like slogging through a minefield, with challenges ranging from neighborhood-specific building restrictions to city plan checkers demanding "corrections" on architectural drawings. In ocean-adjacent areas, California Coastal Commission rules pose even higher hurdles.

On Jan. 12, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed an executive order to speed rebuilding by, among other things, suspending California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) reviews and California Coastal Act permitting for damaged and destroyed properties. The following day, a similar Bass order took steps including creating a debris removal task force and calling for the establishment of a seven-day-a-week permitting center, with representatives from 13 city departments and bureaus, that work to quickly approve applications.

Those steps could help clear logistical logjams, but for Mott Smith, a developer and chairman of the board of the Council of Infill Builders, a first step involves addressing a longstanding philosophical snafu in city departments.

"The single most important thing we could do would be to very explicitly, from the top down and bottom up, consciously change our city culture from a culture of 'no' to a culture of 'yes,'" he says. "All of the policy changes won't make a difference if people at the counter still view their job as preventing mistakes instead of facilitating successes."

Smith advises instituting "self-certification," a process utilized in cities including San Diego. It allows licensed architects and engineers to design plans, attest that they meet all building codes and standards, and then skip the lengthy plan-check process. It would not apply to every development, only the simplest, and full plans and drawings must be submitted (and inspections still happen).

Bass' order calls for exploring the feasibility of self-certification. The idea also resonates with Councilmember Nithya Raman, who chairs the council's Housing and Homelessness Committee. She tells *Los Angeles* that even before the fires, she had been looking at this and other permit-speeding proposals, particularly for single-family homes. She acknowledges there must be "robust monitoring," but believes this could deliver dramatic change in L.A.

"IT'S SO MUCH EASIER TO HAVE 10 BULLDOZERS DO IT ALL, THAN 250 BULLDOZERS FIGHTING WITH EACH OTHER."
— STEVE SOBOROFF

"Self-certification, or a streamlined process where you get your permits for projects within 30 days, is a radical reorientation of our system," she says on the Sunday evening after the fires started.

Other ideas for quick rebuilding are being proffered; Brian Lane, a principal at the Santa Monica firm Koning Eizenberg Architecture, suggests immediately re-approving "any permit pulled in the last 15 years" in impacted areas, including a home expansion, an ADU or a pool. But at the base, there's a need for speed. Smith notes that a developer who secures financing for a $10 million apartment complex could be spending $3,000 a day on interest, insurance and other costs. Moses Kagan, a developer and co-founder of Adaptive Realty, which manages more than 140 apartment buildings across the region (its own properties, and for other owners), echoes the take, and points out the importance of simply knowing what's required.

"It's a disaster to buy land and then have to fight with the city for years about what you can build," Kagan says.

To prevent that post-fire, Kagan recommends establishing a sort of governmental or approvals strike teams, a collection of city staffers who know the precise neighborhood regulations and all work together. "You keep the same people doing it, so they build relationships with each other and relationships with the architects and builders in the zone, and then everyone gets some specialization," he says.

Soboroff, who also served on the Police Commission and helped bring the Space Shuttle Endeavour to the California Science Center, recognizes that the needed level of fast permitting likely exceeds the city's capacity. His solution? Outsourcing, by contracting with dozens of firms that will examine the thousands of homeowner applications. "The city gives the firms the rules, but the city gives the firms the stamp that says 'approved,'" he says.

This is only part of the rebuilding challenge. The crush of so many projects happening simultaneously could strain supply chains and drive up the costs of building materials. Even if contractors from other areas rush to L.A., hoping to make bank, a Trump Administration crackdown on immigrants could thin the ranks of those who do so much construction work in the region. And all this in a place that was already suffering from a housing shortage.

The tasks are monumental, but L.A. has rebounded before from wildfires and riots, as well as COVID-19. Soboroff, who has worked with mayors going back to Tom Bradley, believes that in Bass, L.A. has a connected ace in the hole.

"She uniquely has the relationships in the state, in the county, on a federal level, in Congress, in the Senate," Soboroff says. So when she references a new strategy to attack a problem, he adds, "Her strength is in being able to make things happen that way." ■