

## Print Article



Period postcard showing the Beverly Theater in Beverly Hills



Ed Ruscha's "Then & Now" at Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles



Ed Ruscha  
*Then & Now*  
2005

# VANISHING

## by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

Ed Ruscha gets it, and he's made Los Angeles the subject of his art for decades. But these days, anyone living in L.A. gets it -- the city's everyday landmarks have become expendable.

It is not uncommon to round a corner and see that some beloved building has been eradicated, often in less than 24 hours. This month, it was the domed white structure on the corner of Beverly Drive and Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills. Originally built in 1925 as the Beverly Theater, one of the first motion picture theaters, the structure had a 1980s incarnation as the trendy Fiorucci boutique and most recently served as home to the Israel Discount Bank.

Shaped like a Disneyesque mosque, it was one of those weird buildings that have long exemplified this city's beloved eccentricity, like the Tail O' the Pup hot dog stand, which is now also threatened with removal. The Beverly was demolished to make way for the Montage Hotel, a truly unnecessary addition to a tiny neighborhood that already contains the Beverly Regent, the Peninsula and the Luxe in a three-block radius, not to mention scores of smaller hotels.

### Ed Ruscha: Then & Now

What has all this to do with Ed Ruscha? "Then & Now," his exhibition at Gagosian Gallery (which is also in Beverly Hills), on view Oct. 27-Dec. 24, 2005, is an extended meditation on this very subject. Inside the lush Richard Meier-designed space is a long white vitrine containing Ruscha's photographs of every building along the main stretch of Hollywood Boulevard as he photographed them in black and white in 1973 and as he re-photographed them in color in 2004. The work references his ground-breaking 1966 artist's book, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* and Steidl Verlag has published these 142 Hollywood Boulevard photographs as *Then and Now*, the artist's first book project in many years.

It is mesmerizing to see the ways that one of the city's most notorious boulevards has been treated by time, like the proverbial movie star preserved in her youth on celluloid and then appearing in a matronly role at the end of her career. She is still fabulous in maturity but her sassy insouciance has been lost. It is not that the buildings on Hollywood Boulevard are less beautiful. In fact, they were tackier in the '70s. By now, they have been "improved" by the "good taste" that is being imposed on the city the way stylists now dress starlets for the academy awards. Bad taste is out, which is why the tasteful Montage Hotel must replace the tacky but authentically strange pseudo-mosque that charmed and intrigued for decades.

Ruscha's installation at Gagosian captures the upsetting nature of these developments. A serpentine vitrine leads a viewer from east to west or vice versa, with two sets of color and black-and-white photos, each facing opposite directions. No matter where one stands, one is

## 142 gelatin silver prints in a box



One of 142 gelatin silver prints in Ed Ruscha's "Then & Now," at Gagosian Gallery



Detail from Ed Ruscha's "Then & Now," at Gagosian Gallery



**Ed Ruscha**  
*Every Building on Sunset Strip*  
1966

faced with two lines of upright photos and two lines of upside down photos. Since one is looking down into the vitrines, as though reading the book, a sort of reverie of passing time takes hold.

The installation generates an intentional disorientation that mimics the effect of living in a city where entire blocks can be quickly transformed into malls or condominium complexes. Years of visual memories are roughly displaced, the character of funky neighborhoods is "improved" and one finds that the terra firma of one's hometown is no more than the shifting sands of time. Ruscha's photographs depict some losses: a 1920s Mediterranean apartment building was replaced by the hideous Galaxy movie complex; a modest ranch home is adorned by ridiculous columns and plaster statues on pedestals. Meanwhile, L.A. is greener today with towering trees and privet hedges wrapped around the most modest bungalows. Ruscha's real theme is change and the bewildering pace of it.

This is a theme that he also addressed in the paintings that he presented at the Venice Biennale, which are on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Nov. 17, 2005-Jan. 29, 2006. When hung in the United States Pavilion, his cycle of paintings "Course of Empire" could be viewed as a metaphor for America's tenuous political position. For anyone familiar with L.A., however, they were poignant reminders of the eroding cityscape. The black-and-white paintings of banal industrial buildings were painted by Ruscha in 1992. Between 2003 and 2004, he returned to the sites and painted in color the same buildings or whatever had replaced them. A Tool and Die building is now used for some other purpose, its sign replaced by Korean script; Trade Tech is closed and surrounded by chain link fence. A phone booth has disappeared. The 1992 paintings were from his "Blue Collar" series; the more recent paintings are described simply as "Old."

The change evident in these paintings is not unique to L.A. It is payment due for "the course of empire," the unrelenting progress questioned by Thomas Cole in his cycle of 19th-century paintings of the same title. Whatever century, it is the artist's job to ask questions. Ruscha asks about progress and its toll.

### Julius Shulman: Modernity and the Metropolis

Ruscha's shows and book prompted these thoughts but they surfaced again on a visit to the Getty Research Institute to see "Modernity and the Metropolis," a tasty exhibition by L.A.'s preeminent architectural photographer, Julius Shulman, on view Oct. 11, 2005-Jan. 22, 2006. The show marks his 95th birthday as well as the transfer of his archives to the Getty's research library. Shulman's 8 x 10 in. black-and-white photographs document masterpiece after masterpiece of architectural innovation by Richard Neutra, John Lautner, Rudolph Schindler and so forth. These were among the most daring innovations in residential and commercial architecture in America yet many of them no longer exist.

Shulman rarely included people in his compositions, so one of the most poignant images depicts a 1947 house designed by Neutra for the director Joseph von Sternberg in what was then the rural countryside of Northridge. A semi-circular metal wall embraces the end of a patio and pool where Ayn Rand and her husband Frank O'Connor recline on lounge chairs. *The Fountainhead* author who endorsed man's ability to achieve greatness was marveling, perhaps, at the genius of the architect's design. Yet, all that remains of that particular species of greatness is Shulman's photograph. A condominium complex replaced the Neutra house in 1971.

### Tim Street-Porter at Earl McGrath Gallery

This month, Rizzoli published Tim Street-Porter's photographs of Los Angeles, which are on view this month at the Earl McGrath Gallery in L.A. Like Shulman, the photographer has made it his



life's work to document architecture but his book embraces a diverse range of buildings from the Mediterranean fantasies of architect Wallace Neff to Pann's, the authentic mid-20th-century diner with vinyl booths and a neon sign, and from Frank Gehry's Disney Hall to the Pepsi Cola bottling plant in the shape of an ocean liner.

Though he combines the mundane and the rarified, Street-Porter makes L.A. look like one of the most beautiful and desirable cities in the world in every single picture. The photographs were compiled over several decades of working in the city, but only one of the buildings that he photographed has been torn down. So far. Perhaps, his photographs, as well as those of Shulman and Ruscha, can stand as evidence for the case against the random demolition. Artist aren't politicians, thank God, but their art can make arguments that are more convincing than words.

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**Ed Ruscha**  
*The Old Trade School Building*  
 2005  
 Photograph © Paul Ruscha  
 Whitney Museum of American Art



**Julius Shulman**  
*Frey Residence, Palm Springs, 1953*  
 1953  
 J. Paul Getty Museum