This afternoon’s Central Avenue Festival and concerts are made possible in part by a grant from and cosponsored by Los Angeles City Councilwoman Jan Perry (District 9). The Kenny Barron concert is cosponsored by Alexandra & Victor Levine. Special thanks to our hosts for this afternoon’s festival and concerts: Coalition for Responsible Community Development: Mark Wilson, Executive Director; in addition to Alex Martinez & Shannon Ellis; and the African American Firefighter Museum - Brent Burton, President. Additional thanks to The Da Camera Society Community Partners: A Place Called Home - Charyn Harris, Conductor of Music Programs; RootDown LA - Shara Prophet, Programs Manager; and Mayme A. Clayton Library and Museum - Larry Earl Jr., Executive Director. A special thanks to Councilwoman Jan Perry and her staff, including Pamela Huntcon, Education Director.
**Historic Sites**

1. **African American Firefighter Museum (1913)**
   1401 S. Central Ave.
   - Concert Shuttle Pick Up & Drop Off
   - 12-6:00 PM: Museum open to explore
   - 2-4:30 PM: Light reception
     - Food prepared by kids from RootDown LA
     - Live jazz combo featuring kids from A Place Called Home
   - Mayme A. Clayton Library & Museum exhibit on performing arts on Central Ave. during the early years

2. **Second Baptist Church (1924)**
   2412 S. Griffith Ave.

3. **28th Street YMCA Building (1925)**
   1006 E. 28th St.
   - 2 & 4:00 PM Kenny Barron concerts

4. **Angelus Funeral Home (1943)**
   1010 E. Jefferson Blvd.
   Boarded up

5. **Dunbar Hotel (1928)**
   4225 S. Central Ave.
   Closed for renovations

6. **Golden State Mutual Life Insurance (1928)**
   (now PACE ECE Child Development)
   4261 S. Central Ave.

**Community Partners**

A. **A Place Called Home**
   2830 S. Central Ave.
   Providing live music at the AfAm Firefighter museum

B. **RootDown LA at Ralph Bunche House**
   221 E. 40th Pl.
   Preparing food for the reception at the AfAm Firefighter museum

C. **Coalition for Responsible Community Development**
   3101 S. Grand Ave.
   Caretakers of & renovating the Dunbar Hotel
   Caretakers of the 28th Street YMCA & Ralph Bunche House

Concert Parking is available in the Coca-Cola Building parking lot on the west side of Central Ave., immediately north of the African American Firefighter Museum. Enter on west side of Central Ave., immediately south of Pico Blvd.
Among the features of the City of Los Angeles is that, in the Downtown area, there are three streets with common names which are often found in other cities: Main Street, Broadway and Central Avenue. However, in most other cities, these streets may intersect and while one or two of them are found, it is most unusual to find all three. It is even more unusual that these streets all run parallel to each other. Main Street or Calle Principal is the first north/south street in Los Angeles. Broadway, two streets to the west, was originally Fort Street, but was changed when Broadway became a fashionable street name.

Central Avenue is confusing. It isn’t the center of anything. It starts at First Street, east of Main, closer to the river. Why is it called Central Avenue?

Early Los Angeles

Los Angeles is the second oldest city in Alta California, one of only two cities with a royal charter from King Carlos III of Spain. Founded in 1781, it was settled under the Law of the Indies by which laws Spanish colonization was dictated. There were three parts: missions, presidios or forts, and cities. If Los Angeles was dated according to the missions, it would be number 9 on the timeline. This system produced 28 foundations: 21 missions, 4 presidios and 3 cities, the latter being reduced to 2 cities as one city was unable to sustain itself. This remarkable achievement from over 200 years ago, the establishment of 27 foundations for colonization by Spain, is still the basis for much of today’s California. This also explains why Los Angeles, founded as a town, does not have a mission. Instead, it has the traditional Plaza, which is on Main Street opposite Union Station, and it has a town church on the western side of the Plaza. That church is the Church of Our Lady, Queen of the Angels at 535 North Main Street, facing the Plaza. The parish dates to 1784, and the current building was constructed beginning in 1818.

In 1850, as Los Angeles is about to become 80 years old, it is incorporated as a city in the new State of California, one of the United States. The old Ayuntamiento, or Common Council (forerunner of today’s City Council), quickly discovered that the city came with a very handsome feature. This dusty backwater town, the largest at that time in California, had Public Lands as a part of its legacy. On the south side of town, these lands began roughly south of Exposition Boulevard and lay between Rancho San Antonio and Rancho La Cienega o paso de La Tijera, hundreds and hundreds of acres. Realizing that the suburbs in the 1850’s lay north of Seventh Street, this was far out.

The Ayuntamiento, now comprised of a mixture of Yankees and Californios, put these Public Lands on the market in 1852. These lands came in a one-size-fits-all parcel of 35 acres. If you wanted a parcel, you had to pay a $10 fee to the mayor, who divided it up among the departments, put in $200 worth of improvements in one year (for example, you could build a home or install an
orchard), publish your intent to purchase by naming boundaries and then wait. After the year was up, the city would review these requirements and, if met, would furnish the buyer with a fee simple title. If you casually look at the street layout of South Los Angeles, you will find that these flat lands are extremely linear and divided neatly into roughly 35 acre parcels.

**African Americans Transform South Los Angeles**

One of these 35 acre parcels came into the possession of Ezra Kysor (also seen as Keysor) who was one of the only architects of note in mid- to late 19th century Los Angeles. He was the architect of the Pico House hotel (1869) on the Plaza at Main Street and St. Vibiana’s Cathedral on Main and Second streets (1876).

Kysor decided to sell his 35 acre parcel and put it on the market in 1887. The area was way out of town at today’s Central Avenue between 48th and 52nd streets. He reserved his home and the surrounding gardens under the title “Central Park” and divided the balance of the tract into house lots. The main street on the east side of the tract was titled “Central Avenue.” In order to bring buyers to the tract during this particularly high point of the land sales boom of the 1880’s, the Los Angeles and Vernon Street Railway was built. It started at the Plaza and crossed over to today’s Central Avenue, beginning at First Street, and then south past the tract to Green Meadows Road, later renamed to honor Jonathan Sayre Slauson as Slauson Avenue.

Thus was born the first street in South Los Angeles. The old term “South Central” derives from South Central Avenue.

The sale of the tract was a success and many copy-cat tracts soon sprang up around it. These formed the nucleus of early street car suburbs for working class folks in South Los Angeles. Small Victorian and Craftsman style homes sprang up with front and rear yards and porches. Local trolley lines criss-crossed the region offering frequent and inexpensive public transportation in the era before the automobile. The cool afternoon breeze and the expanse of flat, far flung land terminating in mountains made the area very desirable.

About this same time, during the 1880’s, African Americans began to move in small numbers to Los Angeles. The Southern Pacific and Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroads were a source of employment for these new residents, and Los Angeles was the only town on the West Coast that boasted service from both SP (1876) and AT&SF (1885). They began to move into the area east of Main Street along First and Second streets. Each area of town had its own residents. There was a Chinese section, an Italian section, etc. Your area was where you would find your people and their institutions at that time. The African Americans settled east of Main. It was less desirable land, but more affordable as it was subject to flooding when the Los Angeles River was high. It
was also less desirable because the area was inundated with rail lines. Local service, regional service and long-distance service, long before Union Station, ran up and down and across the area east of Main Street as far as the river. It was somewhat dangerous with horse-drawn trolleys interacting with local trains coming in from San Pedro and Santa Monica as well as long distance trains coming from Chicago, Kansas City and New Orleans.

As the numbers of African Americans increased, their population outgrew the small sector that they had at First/Main streets. The community expanded eastward towards Central Avenue and then turned south along the avenue in the 1890’s. The march south on Central Avenue had begun and continued for decades.

**Central Avenue Renaissance: Between the World Wars**

On South Central Avenue, you found African-American institutions such as the local newspaper, mortuaries, schools, banks and churches. Housing was found on side streets on either side of the avenue. With the coming of jazz after the turn of the 20th century, the record stores on South Central Avenue became a destination for all Angelenos. This was where the latest sounds were heard up and down Central. It became a real hot spot.

After World War I, the city decided that it needed a larger Downtown. In an effort to create that, in 1922 the Planning Department zoned all of the housing in the Downtown area off the map. From the mansions lining Figueroa Street to the middle class housing near the river, housing was bulldozed or relocated to other areas. The African American community was completely displaced. Since the entire housing element was being eliminated as far south as Washington Street, this meant that not only new housing would have to be identified, but also a new commercial district as well.

The influx of mid-Westerners and Southerners that flooded Los Angeles after 1885 brought along a whole menu of prejudices that included relegating African Americans to the lower end of the social scale. The African-American community fought their way south along the avenue, block by block, south of Washington Street into a neighborhood of working class Angelenos, many of
whom were immigrants from Central Europe and the mid-West. Racial covenants on property made moving very tough so often the first members of the black community were people who could “pass” for white. Once it was discovered that these new residents were non-white, many of their neighbors made life difficult for the newcomers or moved away. African Americans were straight-jacketed into the Central Avenue corridor and its side streets by the use of housing covenants.

By the mid-1920’s, the transformation of the area south of Washington had begun to take hold. Black institutions opened up along Central Avenue in the section of numbered streets in the 20’s (for example, 28th Street) or on the streets that crossed it. The area became the pride of the African-American community.

And then there was the music.

While upper South Central Avenue, crossed by the streets that were in the teens (for example, 14th Street), had been known for its music, the Jazz Age became the defining moment for the avenue. Nightclubs, coffee houses and after-hours venues popped up all along the area around Vernon Avenue. The locals would party there and the after-hours crowd, many of whom were a part of the entertainment royalty who were not African American, would drive their fine cars up to these establishments and enter another world from the ones in which they lived and worked. It was a place to see and to be seen. People who would not ordinarily mix would find themselves rubbing shoulders, tapping to a familiar beat or just enjoying the moment.

The era between the wars (WW I & WW II) was kind to Central Avenue. This was when the music cognoscenti came to enjoy the rhythm and blues sounds of such legends as Charles...
Mingus, Buddy Collette, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Clora Bryant and Gerald Wilson. There were duos and bands, and money flowed like water along the avenue in the wee hours. The black-owned nightclubs were the driving force for the financial success on Central. This success, particularly in the 1920’s, allowed the addition of such “separate but equal” facilities as the Lincoln Theater, the Dunbar Hotel (see map, #5) and the 28th Street YMCA (see map, #3). The forced segregation caused the community to pull together to install its own rich infrastructure, much of which has survived.

One of the icons of the black community in Los Angeles was coming of age at this time. Paul Revere Williams was born in 1893 on Santee Street in Downtown Los Angeles. He was orphaned as a child and studied a profession that all agreed was one in which he was doomed to fail. He overcame great odds and prejudice to become one of the finest architects in the city’s history. Among his works in South Los Angeles are the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>ADDRESS</th>
<th>DATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second Baptist Church (#2 on map)</td>
<td>2412 South Griffith Avenue</td>
<td>1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28th Street YMCA (#3 on map)</td>
<td>1006 East 28th Street</td>
<td>1925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelus Funeral Home (#4 on map)</td>
<td>1010 East Jefferson Boulevard</td>
<td>1934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden State Mutual Life Insurance (#6 on map)</td>
<td>4261 South Central Avenue</td>
<td>1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elks Lodge</td>
<td>3616 South Central Avenue (building demolished &amp; street numbering changed)</td>
<td>1931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pueblo del Rio public housing</td>
<td>1801 East 53rd Street</td>
<td>1942</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each of these structures contributed much to the community in which Williams also lived for much of his early professional career.

Another important South Los Angeles resident was Ralph Bunche. This graduate of local Thomas Jefferson High School grew up in a house on East 40th Place that has been restored and recognized as City Cultural Historical Monument #159. Bunche was well-known as an arbitrator. He helped with the initial effort to start the United Nations. His outstanding work in Palestine earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. The distinguished graduate of UCLA also has a large social sciences building on the campus named for him.

**Post-War Challenges & Civil Rights Movement**

With the arrival of World War II, there was a change in Central Avenue. The music scene quieted down. The black community, squeezed into the narrow Central corridor, finds the aging housing element to be a source of great difficulty. It is under maintained with peeling paint and inadequate plumbing. The houses are small and bursting at the seams with people who need more space. Central Avenue needs updating, but there is no money available to do the work. African Americans go off to war and to jobs in the defense industry.

After the war, blacks return to the pre-war status quo. Whites take back the jobs that African Americans held in their absence. While the avenue begins to come alive with the sound of music, a series of issues begin to overwhelm its resurgence. The old nightclubs need updating. That costs money. The federal government begins a crackdown on the nightclub scene as being a way to launder money and to promote easy living. The biggest and most unpreventable change is the arrival of the television set that allows people, in the comfort of their own home, to view first class entertainment. All of these conspire to wind down the sound of Central Avenue.

Since the nightclub scene did not reset to its pre-war position, the financial life drains from the avenue. It needs updating, but there is no money to do the work. The status quo is grating on the community. Blacks fought side by side with whites during the war and worked side by side with whites during the war, but, after the war, blacks are returned to a second class existence.

With the federal government taking the lead, the African Americans made strides in education (Brown vs. Board of Education, 1954) and housing (Shelley vs. Kraemer, 1948). The latter court case released the blacks from the Central Avenue corridor and they began to move westward towards the Baldwin Hills. Again, it was a block by block fight with white flight as a result. The opening of vast tracts in the San Fernando Valley after the war gave the whites a destination that allowed them to remain in Los Angeles and many went there. This further drained Central Avenue of its sense of place and its need for funds.

As these earlier court cases sought parity, many of the youth in the black community sought parity in other ways. They were willing, along with their elders, to move heaven and earth to gain
equality. This nationwide movement affected Los Angeles as well. The civil rights movement had arrived.

With the socially explosive changes of the 1960’s, the civil rights movement fit in very well. The old status quo was being challenged and the new order was going to make change. The high point for Los Angeles was the Watts Riots in August 1965. While it did not affect the whole city, it had a devastating and long-lasting impact on South Los Angeles. African Americans were willing to destroy their own neighborhoods to prove how poor their conditions were in comparison with the rest of the city.

Neighborhoods east of Alameda Street were not welcoming to the black community. Many of these neighborhoods were middle and lower-middle class areas such as Lynwood, Florence, Walnut, South Gate, Paramount, Bell and many others. There was an uneasy tension that kept this line in place. The Rumford Fair Housing Law, passed by the State of California in 1964, provided that housing would transfer without bias and this did not sit well with those people east of Alameda Street. After the Watts riots, the white middle and lower-middle class residents east of Alameda drifted away, moving to outlying suburbs or out of state to Arizona, Nevada and the northwest. This opened up the area to the black community, but, having started their westward migration and knowing of the animosity east of Alameda Street, the majority continued to leave Central Avenue in favor of western destinations.

The southeast portion of the county that was abandoned by the whites became immigrant housing for the Central American population that was rapidly moving to Los Angeles. With the varied housing types and the varied price ranges, it allowed mobility within the area for those who could afford to enter and then to move up.

In the aftermath of the riots, the more mobile, younger members of the black community drifted west towards Leimert Park and Baldwin Hills. The older members of the community remained, but lacked the resources and the energy to move Central Avenue in a new direction.

A New Era of Revitalization

Today, Central Avenue is a bi-focal street. Older African-American establishments co-exist with Central American stores and churches. The community is a blend of cultures and styles with a tolerance and a respect for the diversity.

Over the past 20 years, while the community has been transforming into a mixed race area, some great changes have been made. There are two new markets, a Fresh & Easy at Adams Boulevard and Central Avenue and a Superior Market at Central Avenue and 20th Street. These are the first full service markets to open in South Los Angeles in many years. Some big affordable housing projects have located in the area on Broadway at 51st Street (Broadway Village II), on Central Avenue at 33rd Street (Rittenhouse Square), and the soon to reopen Dunbar Hotel on Central Avenue at 42nd Place. The latter will open as a mixed use project with an affordable housing component.
Thanks to Los Angeles City Councilwoman Jan Perry and local fundraising, the Central Avenue Jazz Festival has entertained thousands on the last Saturday and Sunday of July for the past 17 years. With a great stage show, food kiosks and clothing booths, it’s a special way to spend a warm summer’s day listening to first-rate jazz.

Central Avenue is a thriving, busy community. The street is lined with pedestrians and baby strollers, old and young, walking the avenue and animating it at a level not seen for many years. Small stores anchor the business community and make the area hum with activity. A visit here is almost like a vacation as it’s so close and yet so different from many other urban experiences.

- Greg Fischer

**Discussion of Historic Sites**

3 **28th Street YMCA Building (1924; Paul R. Williams)**

1006 E. 28th St.

- 2 & 4:00 PM Kenny Barron concerts

The 28th Street YMCA opened in Los Angeles in 1926 on an upbeat: the Spanish Colonial Revival building offered the African-American community a sparkling recreational facility with an indoor pool and affordable accommodations for young men who were migrating from other regions (and prevented by color barriers from staying at ordinary hotels). Philanthropist Annie Minerva Turnbo Malone, a black entrepreneur who amassed a fortune from hair pomades, was one high-profile donor. And the building’s designer was Paul Revere Williams (1894–1980), the first registered African-American architect west of the Mississippi. His celebrated output would eventually range from mansions for Hollywood stars, including Frank Sinatra and Lucille Ball, to hospitals, hotels, and even Los Angeles airport’s 1961 Jetson-style restaurant building. But the YMCA was an early work, introducing a commitment to affordable housing that would reemerge throughout his career.

This four-story concrete building became a city, state, and national landmark, but by 2009, when the nonprofit developer Clifford Beers Housing (CBH) acquired the property, it was in serious disrepair, the residential quarters shuttered. CBH engaged Santa Monica-based Koning Eizenberg Architecture (KEA) to revive the structure and create quality
permanent housing, with supportive services, for low-income tenants, including a mentally ill and chronically homeless population. Monthly rent is one-third of each tenant’s income.

Drawing on archival photos and documents with the help of the preservation consultant Historic Resources Group, the firm restored original architectural features and replicated lost elements, such as the facade’s balcony and some of its cast-concrete medallions. For the $11.9 million project, financed with tax credits and public funds, the architects cleverly inserted a 14-inch-deep level between the first and second floors to integrate new building systems. Upgrading to ADA standards, they reconfigured the 52 existing single-room-occupancy units into 24 studio apartments, each with its own kitchen and bathroom, and created ground-floor community spaces, as well as a slim new steel-and-wood-framed wing with 25 additional studios, for a total of 38,300 square feet.

KEA deftly played modern against vintage. The roof deck, a lounge that connects the new and old buildings, has a vermilion elastomeric surface—a riff on Williams’s terra-cotta roof tiles. And the aluminum sunscreen that shades and visually dematerializes the new wing has a perforated pattern abstracted from the main entrance’s 1920s bas-reliefs. The gymnasium has been refurbished, but to accommodate a residents’ lounge the architects filled in the pool, leaving its outline and mosaic surrounds visible. Encapsulated in geo-textile and foam board beneath fill with a concrete cap, the pool could someday regain its original use.

With such sustainable features as a solar hot-water system and an electricity-generating 38.7-kilowatt photovoltaic array, the project is on track for LEED Gold certification.

KEA reinterpreted the building’s original, and still much-needed, role. “It’s not exactly adaptive reuse—it was housing then, and it’s housing now,” says firm principal Julie Eizenberg. “You’ve got to respect what a huge story the place was for this community in its day. We definitely didn’t want to lose that.”

– Sarah Amelar, Architectural Record
Entering the African American Firefighter Museum, located across the street from the historic Coca-Cola Building on South Central Avenue, is like taking a step back in time. The museum is located at the historic Fire Station #30, which was one of two segregated firehouses in Los Angeles between 1924 and 1955.

Museum President and Firefighter Brent Burton has numerous stories of African-American firefighters as “When the fire department integrated, blacks were forced to sleep in the same bed, in the same location, and the other black firefighter on the other shift, slept in the same bed. White firefighters refused to sleep in the same beds that black firefighters had slept in,” Burton explained.

According to Brent Burton, prior to building Belmont High School in Belmont, California in 1824, the city was a very deserted place. However, when the school was built, the department, community and school district became concerned about school children looking at African-American firefighters in positions of authority; therefore, they relocated the African-American firefighters to other stations, including Station #30. The particular area where the station is located happened to be where many blacks were beginning to segregate towards when they migrated to Los Angeles.

When the stations became integrated in 1955, firefighters from Station #30 were transferred to other stations and were met with extreme hostility. Museum Historian Arnie Hartsfield, also known as “The Rookie,” expressed, “I complained about being segregated. When I was integrated, they called it integration, I called it isolation.”

The museum’s beloved historian, 92 year old retired firefighter Arnett Hartsfield, is their most cherished volunteer. As a Los Angeles Firefighter during the 1940s and 50’s he lead the integration of the Los Angeles Fire Department. As a graduate of USC’s law school, he and his fellow firemen known as the Stentorians, the NAACP and the local community, were instrumental in successfully integrating the LAFD. The stories of the men that endured an horrific fight are told by him and museum docents.

On display in the museum is a plaque that reads “Colored Served in Rear.” Brent Burton explained, “When the black firefighters were integrated, they were not allowed to eat with the white firefighters, and when they did eat, they had to eat by themselves, bring in their own
In June of 1955, firefighter Ray Lopez submitted a picture of a sign reading, “White Adults”, to the media. This photo exposed the racism within the fire department and lead to more equal rights in the fire service. Unfortunately, change did not come quickly.

Firefighter Burton tells a particular story of an African-American firefighter named Ernie Roberts, who entered the service around 1947. When Roberts was integrated in 1955, he was amongst the first group of black firefighters to be sent from Station #30 to another location. When Firefighter Roberts was attempting to settle into his new station headquarters, a group of white firefighters took Ernie’s pillowcase while he was out, used it as toilet paper in the restroom, replaced it on his bed, and turned the lights out. “The whole practical joke and prank was for them to come back, get in bed and lay their head in it,” added Burton.

Today the AAFFM stands as the first and so far the only free standing African American Firefighter Museum in the United States. The first floor contains vintage fire apparatus, stories and pictures of pioneering African-American Los Angeles Firefighters. The Museum gallery is located on the second floor with pictures, artifacts and other memorabilia of African-American Firefighters, Captains, Chief Officers and historical women fire service professionals from around the country. There is a memorial tribute to the firefighters that perished during the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York City.


The Dunbar Hotel (1928; John & Vada Somerville)
4225 S. Central Ave.
• Closed for renovations

The Dunbar Hotel, originally known as the Hotel Somerville, was the focal point of the Central Avenue African-American community in Los Angeles, California during the 1930s and 1940s. Built in 1928, it was known for its first year as the Hotel Somerville. Upon its opening, it hosted the first national convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to be held in the western United States. In 1930, the hotel was renamed the Dunbar, and it became the most prestigious hotel in LA’s African-American community. In the early 1930s, a nightclub opened at the
Dunbar, and it became the center of the Central Avenue jazz scene in the 1930s and 1940s. The Dunbar hosted Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Lena Horne and many other jazz legends. Other noteworthy people who stayed at the Dunbar include W. E. B. Du Bois, Joe Louis, Ray Charles and Thurgood Marshall. Former heavyweight champion Jack Johnson also ran a nightclub at the Dunbar in the 1930s.

**Hotel Somerville Opens in 1928**

Originally known as Hotel Somerville, the Central Avenue landmark was a source of pride in the African-American community when it opened in 1928.

The hotel was built in 1928 by John and Vada Somerville, socially and politically prominent black Angelenos. John Somerville was the first black to graduate from the University of Southern California. The hotel was built entirely by black contractors, laborers, and craftsmen and financed by black community members.

For many years, the Somerville was the only major hotel in Los Angeles that welcomed blacks, and it quickly became the place to stay for visiting black dignitaries. In 1928, the Somerville housed delegates to the first NAACP convention held in the western United States. In 1929, when Oscar DePriest (the first African American to serve in Congress in the 20th century) visited Los Angeles, he was met at the station “by a large delegation of colored people, who formed a parade and escorted him to the Dunbar Hotel.”

The hotel was known for its physical amenities. Its Art Deco lobby had a spectacular chandelier (also in the Art Deco style), Spanish arcade-like windows, tiled walls and a flagstone floor. The lobby was said to look like “a regal Spanish arcade, with open balconies and steel grillwork, as opulent as the Granada Building at Lafayette Park.” One person who was present at the hotel’s groundbreaking ceremony recalled it was “a palace compared to what we had been used to.”

The hotel came to represent a level of achievement among the black community. Historian Lonnie G. Bunch III said, “On the one hand, blacks were not allowed to stay at major hotels. But with enough financial wherewithal and a strong sense of community a black man could build a large hotel.” Unlike earlier segregated hotels and boarding houses, the Somerville (and later the Dunbar) offered luxury amenities - a restaurant, cocktail lounge and barbershop. One person noted, “The Dunbar symbolizes luxury and respect even in the worst of times. Roy Wilkins wrote in the New York Amsterdam News of the hotel’s luxury and service: “Everything was just the opposite of what we had come to expect in ‘Negro’ hotels.”

The Somerville/Dunbar also played an important role in anchoring the new Central Avenue community. Prior to 1928, the black community in Los Angeles had been centered around 12th Street and Central Avenue, near Downtown Los Angeles. Somerville was the first to build a major structure so far south in the 42nd Street neighborhood, and soon other businesses followed.

After the stock market crash in 1929, Somerville was forced to sell the hotel to a syndicate
of white investors. The passing of the hotel from its original black ownership was a disappointment for a community that viewed the hotel as a symbol of black achievement. The hotel was renamed the Dunbar in 1929, in honor of poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

In 1930, the hotel was purchased for $100,000 by Lucius W. Lomax, Sr. (1879-1961). With ownership being restored to an African American, the “debilitating impact of John Somerville’s loss was reversed, and the hotel once again became the gem of black Los Angeles.”

During Somerville’s ownership, the hotel had no nightclub or live music. It was not until February 1931 that the Dunbar was issued a permit “to conduct a cabaret in the dining room.” Though he had sold the hotel, Somerville and others in the neighborhood opposed the establishment of a cabaret in his hotel, stating that such a use “would cast a lasting stigma on it.”

**HUB OF THE CENTRAL AVENUE SCENE**

Billie Holiday and other African American performers stayed at the Dunbar when working in L.A.

The Dunbar became known in the 1930s and 1940s as “the hub of Los Angeles black culture,” and “the heart of Saturday night Los Angeles.” In its heyday, it was known as “a West Coast mixture of the Waldorf-Astoria and the Cotton Club.” The Los Angeles Herald-Examiner described the Dunbar this way:

“It was once the most glorious place on ‘the Avenue.’ At the Dunbar Hotel ... you could dance to the sounds of Cab Calloway, laugh till your stomach hurt with Redd Foxx and maybe, just maybe, get a room near Billie Holiday or Duke Ellington.”

The Dunbar hosted prominent African Americans traveling to Los Angeles, including Duke Ellington, Joe Louis, Louis Armstrong, Lena Horne, Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, and Josephine Baker. The Dunbar was “the gathering spot for the crème de la crème of black society, the hotel for performers who could entertain in white hotels but not sleep in them.”
The Dunbar also became the place where African American political and intellectual leaders and writers, including Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Bunche, Thurgood Marshall and James Weldon Johnson, gathered. It has been described as “a place where the future of black America was discussed every night of the week in the lobby.” Celes King, whose family owned the Dunbar in its heyday, said, “They were very serious discussions between people like W. E. B. Du Bois (founder of the NAACP), doctors, lawyers, educators and other professionals. This was the place where many of them put together the plans to improve the life style of their people.”

One of the regulars at the Dunbar in its heyday was future mayor Tom Bradley, then a young police officer. Bradley would stop in for coffee and conversation. Bradley later recalled, “I remember, from the days of my childhood, walking down the avenue, just to get a look at some of those famous superstars.”

More than anything, the Dunbar is remembered for its role in the Central Avenue jazz scene. The nightclub at the Dunbar was the home-away-from-home for, and the stage for performances by, artists including Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Louis Jordan, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Cab Calloway, and Nat King Cole. Even Ray Charles stayed at the Dunbar when he first moved to Los Angeles.

In addition to the main nightclub, former heavyweight champion Jack Johnson opened his Showboat nightclub at the Dunbar in the 1930s. “Jack Johnson ... ran his Showboat nightclub in one corner, and black bands practiced on the mezzanine for acts across town later that night.”

The hotel was also popular with the white community, and many from Hollywood spent their Saturday nights at the Dunbar and surrounding clubs. Celes King recalled once when Bing Crosby bounced a check at the hotel, and her father (the hotel’s owner) kept Crosby’s check. “It was a big joke between them.”

The neighborhood was also the home of other famous jazz clubs, including Club Alabam (next door), the Last Word (across the street), and the Downbeat (nearby). Even local musicians who were playing at other Central Avenue clubs would gather at the Dunbar. Lee Young, the drummer who led a band at the Club Alabam, recalled: “The fellows in the band - Charles Mingus, Art Pepper, all of us - would hang out between sets next door at the Dunbar . . . Between the club and the hotel you’d see movie stars and all the big show business names of the day.”

Musician Jack Kelson recalled the sidewalk in front of the Dunbar as the most desirable place to hang out on the city’s coolest street. He said, “That’s my favorite spot on Central Avenue, that spot in the front of the Dunbar Hotel, because that to me was the hippest, most intimate, key spot of all the activity. That’s where all the night people hung out: the sportsmen, the businessmen, the dancers, everybody in show business, people who were somebody stayed at the hotel. ... By far that block, that Dunbar Hotel, for me was it. And it was it for, it seemed to me, everybody else. Sooner or later you walked in front of that hotel, and that’s where everybody congregated.”
Another writer recalled the area around the Dunbar as “a place where people love to congregate and have a good time, check out the new models and pick up on the latest lingo.” The Dunbar built a reputation in the 1930s as “the symbol of L.A.’s black nightlife,” as “regular jamming sessions and meetings in the hotel lobby elevated the structure to a practically mythical status.” Lionel Hampton had fond memories of jam sessions and practices on the Dunbar’s mezzanine. Hampton recalled, “Everybody that was anybody showed up at the Dunbar. I remember a chauffeur would drive Stepin Fetchit, the movie star, up to the curb in a big Packard, and he’d look out the window at all the folks.”

In his autobiography, Buck Clayton shared some of his memories of the Dunbar. He recalled the Dunbar as “jumping” with loads of people trying to get a glimpse of the celebrities, and parties thrown by Duke Ellington and his guys with “chicks and champagne everywhere.” Clayton recalled an instance when Ellington and his orchestra came to Los Angeles shortly after the 1932 release of the song It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing). Ellington’s band was in the Dunbar restaurant when the song came on the jukebox. It was the first time since leaving New York that they had heard their recording. Clayton described the band’s response: “So much rhythm I’ve never heard, as guys were beating on the tables, instrument cases or anything else they could beat on with knives, forks, rolled-up newspapers or anything else they could find to make rhythm. It was absolutely crazy.”

The Dunbar was also known for its food. One musician recalled they “had good old southern-fried everything.”

The Peace Mission years

For a brief period during the Great Depression, the Dunbar was converted into a hostel for members of the Peace Mission Movement of Father Divine. In 1934, Lucius Lomax sold the hotel to the Peace Mission. The hotel staff was discharged, and the building was renovated as lodging for the mission’s members. The Peace Mission Movement, run by Father Divine, operated a multi-racial religious colony at the Dunbar, with members using the dining room (formerly the site of a cabaret) for Holy Communion ceremonies. The Dunbar was sold to the Neslon family in the late 1930s, and it resumed its role as the cultural center of the Los Angeles black community.

Deterioration and redevelopment

Just as racial segregation had created a need for the Dunbar, racial integration in the 1950s eliminated the need. Duke Ellington, who had previously kept a suite at the Dunbar, began staying at the Chateau Marmont in Hollywood, and others followed. As one writer put it: “When the barriers against integration began to crumble in the late 1950s, so did the Dunbar Hotel.”

Bernard Johnson bought the Dunbar in 1968, but the hotel continued to lose money, and Johnson closed the hotel’s doors in 1974. While closed in 1974, comedian Rudy Ray Moore used the hotel extensively in his low-budget film Dolemite, and in 1976, the movie A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ but a Sandwich was filmed at the Dunbar. Owner Bernard Johnson also opened a museum of black culture for a time. But for most of the years from 1974 to 1987, the building was vacant.
and declined drastically, as transients began using it for shelter, and the building suffered from graffiti, broken windows and litter.

A renovation effort was started in 1979, but stopped when city funding ceased. By 1987, the Dunbar was marred by graffiti and generally tarnished by neglect. That year, a plan was announced to convert the Dunbar into low-income housing units with a museum of black culture on the ground floor. The 115 hotel rooms on the top three floors were gutted and replaced with 72 apartments. The mezzanine, lobby and basement retained their original décor and were converted into a museum and cultural center. The project was funded in large part with city redevelopment funds at a cost of $4.2 million.

In 1990, the Dunbar re-opened as a 73-unit apartment building for low-income senior citizens and museum of black history. Delegates from the NAACP national convention helped rededicate the Dunbar in July 1990 following its renovation. Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley attended the rededication ceremony and praised the efforts to “breathe new life and vigor into this magnificent hotel.”

The Dunbar hosted a jazz show in 1991, attended by noted music journalist Leonard Feather. Feather wrote that the event was like “a visit to a haunted house.” When one of the musicians played a Duke Ellington theme, Feather said “you could look up at the balcony and see, in your mind’s eye, Duke himself at a piano on the mezzanine, working out an arrangement for tomorrow’s show.”

By 1997, the neighborhood around the Dunbar was 75% Latino and by 2006 the neighborhood was predominantly Latino and poor, with most of the nearby storefronts having their signs written in Spanish.

In 1974, the Dunbar was designated as a Historic-Cultural Landmark (no. 131) by the city’s Cultural Heritage Commission. The plaque called the hotel “an edifice dedicated to the memory and dignity of black achievement.” It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

**Dunbar Village**

In recent years, Councilwoman Jan Perry (District 9) has spearheaded efforts to preserve and repurpose the historic Dunbar Hotel. Thomas Safran and Associates (TSA) and the local non-profit, Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD) were chosen for a partnership to develop the $29.3 million Dunbar Village development.

The Dunbar Village development includes refurbishing the Dunbar Hotel, including 40 units of affordable senior housing, and the renovation of the existing Sommerville I and II apartments, with 41 units of affordable family housing. All three properties will be connected to create the Dunbar Village, an 83-unit mixed-use, intergenerational community for seniors and families. The building will be Silver LEED certified.
“Central Avenue and the Dunbar Hotel have long been an important part of our Los Angeles history. It is wonderful to see the Avenue come alive again and know that this historic landmark will be restored for people to enjoy for generations to come,” said Perry. “Dunbar Village will preserve our shared history, create quality jobs for local youth, and offer much-needed affordable housing for families and seniors.”

Sources: Wikipedia (“Dunbar Hotel”), and; “Dunbar Hotel takes a step toward renovation”, December 13, 2011, from Intersections South LA, an online newsletter published by USC Annenberg School of Journalism presenting news and views from South Los Angeles.

A Place Called Home (APCH) was started in 1993 by Founder and President Debrah Constance. It was created to give the gang affected youth of the impoverished inner-city a place where they could come after school, get a snack, do their homework, watch TV, play with their friends, and be with people that care about them - basic rights that all kids should have. From this fundamental concept, APCH grew at an exponential rate and now offers its youth members many programs including an all-day school in collaboration with the Los Angeles Unified School District; computer lab; music; art; dance; tutoring and mentoring.

APCH began working with twelve inner-city children in a basement of a church. In September of 1996, with a growth in membership to 400, APCH moved to its present location - a 10,000 square foot facility.

In April of 1997 APCH was recognized at the Presidents’ Summit as one of the “top 50 teaching examples” in the United States and in April,
2003 APCH was awarded with the President's America's Promise Award honoring it as one of the “safest places for children”. And in 2007, APCH was honored to be awarded with Bank of America's Neighborhood Excellence Award recognizing the Center as a model program contributing to the community-at-large.

Below is an excerpt from an interview with Jonathan Zeichner, Executive Director of A Place Called Home which appeared in OnCentral, a blog that focuses on health and quality of life in South Los Angeles. OnCentral is a project of KPCC Southern California Public Radio.

**OnCentral:** What kind of change has APCH undergone since its beginning in 1993?
**JZ:** Since then, the agency has developed significantly and evolved into being more than just a recreational safe haven, but really now a place that is devoted to education and development in a holistic way of the whole child, as well as working with the family and the community. So now our focus is on education, counseling, nutrition, fitness, the arts, our college preparation program, our college scholarship program and, most recently, a vocational development program.

**OC:** So everything.
**JZ:** Yeah, I mean the goal really is to find out and nourish what are the needs, what are the passions, what are the talents, what are the skills, and to provide the tools and the inspiration for young people to see themselves and take responsibility for becoming contributing citizens who are taking an interest in their own future but also understanding that they have an important role to play in the future and the path of their families and community.

So if you’re unhappy with your surroundings and the fact that there’s too much violence and crime in the neighborhood, too many liquor stores and not enough grocery stores and unemployment is high and the educational system has neglected this neighborhood in a lot of ways – that you have to make the change, first, internally, then start externalizing that to make a difference in the community. I really believe in that. I have seen absolute miracles happen.

Even though you might say we’re only working with 300 kids a day here, maybe 1,200 kids over the course of the year – that may seem like a small number, but when you extrapolate that over what the impact will be when they get a high school diploma and a college education, then they get a job, then they learn about volunteerism ... that actually has a huge impact.

**OC:** You talk about seeing miracles. How do people know that’s not just another nonprofit tagline?
**JZ:** I think one thing is anything can happen at APCH. I’m excited to be here, and one of the reasons is I know that whether it’s a play reading by known actors, which happened yesterday; whether we have a musician here from Somalia who’s going into our recording studio and sit with our kids and talk about his life and being a refugee and coming to this country to use his artistry to sing about peace and love and people getting together and making a difference; whether it’s a kid being introduced to new food and planting a seed in the garden – those are the kinds of miracles I’m talking about. They come sometimes in very small packages, but they change lives.
And that to me is the miracle – every day is a day when you could possibly make a new choice about what you’re going to do with your life. You could make a new friend. You could learn a fact that changes your whole idea about the world. More than anything, the goal here is for kids to feel a sense of empowerment and responsibility and membership in this community that we have, but also in the greater community. That is the miracle, when human beings decide they’re going to connect and change things.

There are other kinds of miracles. We lost funding recently from the community redevelopment agencies, as did many, many others when they were dismantled across the state – and a week later, Coldplay did a benefit concert for us and raised back more than two-thirds of the funds that we had just lost. So there is a certain leap of faith involved in running a nonprofit. There’s going to be struggle, there’s going to be challenge, but oftentimes they come hand-in-hand with a gift or a blessing that you didn’t expect.

**OC: And are you hopeful?**

**JZ:** I’m always hopeful. I come here every day believing that today is the day when something great is going to happen and we’re going to make a difference and some kid is going to have a revelation that will change everything for them and for the people that they interact with. So I’m constantly hopeful about the individuals we work with, and I see a lot of great things happening in South Central and South L.A.

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**RootDown LA**

221 E. 40th St. (Ralph Bunche House)

- Preparing food for the reception at the AfAm Firefighter museum

Below is an article by author and organic food expert Max Goldberg appearing February 17, 2010 on his popular blog Living Maxwell.

**RootDown LA: Reconnecting Youth in South Los Angeles to Farm-Fresh Fruits and Vegetables**

**RootDown LA**, a project of Community Partners, is a non-profit organization based in Los Angeles whose purpose is simple: to get kids reconnected to real, whole foods that are not processed nor laden with chemicals.

The organization works with youths at schools in urban, low-income areas of South Los Angeles and starts with the very basics. It teaches kids about the changes in our food system over the past 100 years, how we’ve been disconnected from healthy whole foods, and how the average high-calorie, highly-processed food diet is causing epidemic rates of obesity and related illnesses.
With its fun and nutty cooking lessons, RootDown LA focuses on busting the myths that healthy food tastes bad and isn’t affordable by making delicious veggie heavy meals, all of which cost under $2.00 per serving. RootDown LA is creating food “experiences” in order to get kids to fully engage with food and to want to take ownership of what they are putting into their body.

It’s not always easy as many of these kids, just like most Americans, are in the habit of choosing the more readily available highly-processed foods which are often filled with sugar, artificial additives, preservatives and pesticides.

In order to create lasting demand for this real food in the broader community, RootDown LA created a Youth Leadership Program so that the lessons can be taught and passed on from one child to the next. Once a kid goes through a 4-week training program, he or she can then get paid for their participation in future community events that promote healthy food.

The organization was co-founded in 2008 by Megan Hanson, a chef and Certified Nutrition Educator who has a background in food advertising and marketing, and Katie Atkiss, who holds a Masters in Public Health and has worked for years in South Los Angeles tackling obesity prevention.

Due to the importance of the work and the fantastic results that these two women have gotten so far, people are taking notice. As part of a child obesity prevention program, the University of Southern California has hired RootDown LA to help provide youths in its MYLA leadership program the skills and knowledge to make better food choices.

Furthermore, RootDown LA is in discussions with LAUSD (Los Angeles Unified School District) School Food Services and other organizations in the area, all of whom do similar food systems, gardening and nutrition education work, to see how collaborative efforts could build healthier food environments in schools.
Coalition for Responsible Community Development
3101 S. Grand Ave.
  • Caretakers of & renovating the Dunbar Hotel
  • Caretakers of the 28th Street YMCA & Ralph Bunch House

Founded in 2005, the Coalition for Responsible Community Development has a unique focus on young people in Vernon-Central (age 16-25), and collaborates with residents, businesses, community-based organizations, civic leaders, and Los Angeles Trade Technical College, to improve the quality of life in our community.

CRCD leads initiatives to foster a safe and economically vibrant neighborhood - a place where young people can thrive and contribute to neighborhood revitalization. With effective partnerships, CRCD promotes public safety and civic pride, trains and hires unemployed youth to remove graffiti and beautify the neighborhood, engages young people in education, training, and career-building; builds permanent supportive housing for transition-age youth- including former foster youth and other low-income residents, and strengthens small businesses to promote economic growth.

Below is a news release from December 2012 announcing the grand re-opening of the landmark 28th Street YMCA, a prime example of CRCD’s successful efforts in the community it serves.

South L.A. landmark YMCA opens as 28th Street Apartments
News Release from the office of 9th District Councilwoman Jan Perry
Monday, December 3, 2012

Los Angeles, December 3, 2012—A distinguished landmark in South Los Angeles—the 28th Street YMCA designed by African-American architect Paul Williams—has been restored to serve low-income adults and youth transitioning from homelessness to independent living. Co-developed by Clifford Beers Housing (CBH) and Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD), the $21 million, 49-unit community also will serve homeless and low-income individuals, including those living with mental illness, CBH executive director Jim Bonar told an audience of dignitaries at the opening of the 28th Street Apartments today.

“With this milestone, we are witnessing the culmination of our shared dream to celebrate our rich history, develop quality housing for our young people and create a space in which they can grow and thrive, said Councilwoman Jan Perry (9th District) who worked closely with the developers to ensure this historic landmark was brought back to life and would continue to serve the community. “By reinventing this iconic Paul Williams building in the Vernon-Central community, we are moving our community forward, and I thank both CRCD and Clifford Beers Housing for investing in our youth and their future.”

Referring to the project, CBH’s Bonar said, “This building is far more than just an early design by the legendary Paul Williams. It was an integral part of life in the robust African American community which dominated Central Avenue from the 1920s to 1960s. Our plans for the
renovation of the existing building and the new wing were guided by two imperatives: to honor the history of the building and revive its service to the community in the 21st century.”

In its new incarnation, the original YMCA accommodations have been transformed into 24 units including kitchenettes and private bathrooms—a far cry from its former configuration with 50 rooms, shared bathrooms and a common cafeteria. The new wing, comprised of 25 studio apartments, will accommodate low-income and formerly homeless individuals. Eight units are set-aside for 18-24 year-olds. Recreation amenities include a restored gym and a rooftop garden.

On the ground floor of the historic building CRCD will operate the new VCN City of Los Angeles YouthSource Center, which will provide educational and job training opportunities for young adults.

“The project and partnership with Clifford Beers Housing demonstrates our commitment to affordable housing and supportive services for our city’s most vulnerable populations and further affirms the mission and vision of CRCD and its work in this neighborhood,” said Mark Wilson, CRCD Executive Director.

Also playing a major role will be Kedren Community Health Center, a provider of mental health services. “We can’t over-emphasize the importance and need for affordable supportive housing for the community, noted Dr. John Griffith, President and CEO. “Kedren is excited to partner in this endeavor. The services provided to the residents will make the important difference in helping to transform lives of the persons in recovery.”

Designed by Koning Eizenberg, the project was built to LEED Gold criteria.

“The design goal was to clarify the original 1926 work by Williams while also defining a complimentary addition that strengthened the overall development,” said architect Brian Lane.

New units are housed in a separate five-story wing behind the original building. The south facade is shaded by vertical photovoltaic panels and wrapped to the north with a perforated metal screen that reveals a pattern abstracted from the building’s historic ornament. An elevated roof garden provides outdoor social space that links old and new.

Funding sources for the project came from the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles; Corporation of Supportive Housing; Wells Fargo Bank; Los Angeles County Community Development Commission; Mental Health Services Act/Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health; California Housing Finance Agency; Los Angeles Housing Department; Community Development Block Grant (through the City of Los Angeles Community Development Department); California Tax Credit Allocation Committee.