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 From the Los Angeles Times

Tower Records to be scratched from Strip

Shuttered landmark has a date with the wrecking ball, angering preservationists.

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Preservation of what once was the Sunset Strip's most colorful place has turned into a black-and-white issue in West Hollywood.

Preservationists complain that city leaders blocked their application to have a former Tower Records building declared a historic resource because color photographs of the brightly painted building were attached to the paperwork instead of black-and-white pictures that officials said were required.

As activists hunted for black-and-whites to add to the paperwork, a Chicago developer planning a multimillion-dollar office and retail complex at the record store site filed his building request at City Hall.

Now the iconic music industry landmark at 8801 W. Sunset Blvd. famous for its hundreds of impromptu rock 'n' roll performances and album signings awaits demolition.

Its iconic yellow facade has been repainted somber blue.

Some preservationists are beginning to feel the same way.

"This is an important place," said pop culture historian Domenic Priore, author of "Riot on the Sunset Strip: Rock 'n' Roll's Last Stand in Hollywood" and the leader of the preservation effort. "The Sunset Strip is an international landmark, and this building has an historic cachet."

The preservation effort has even won the backing of Jerome Cleary, an actor and comic who has lived next door for 22 years. Cleary acknowledges that he hated the neighborhood "chaos" the store caused when it was in business but said the structure was important enough to be saved from the wrecking ball. Residents in the hills above the store aren't thrilled with a large development replacing the low-rise structure.

Constructed in 1971, the Tower Records building is not exactly an architectural landmark. Squat and unassuming, it is sandwiched between a tiny asphalt parking lot and a larger, nondescript office building. It even lacks the space-age 1950s look that drove earlier preservation efforts for such unlikely L.A. landmarks as "Googie"-style carwashes, motels and diners.

But for decades it was a center of activity in the Sunset Strip's vibrant music scene. The store's walls were plastered with giant reproductions of album covers. Record labels routinely kicked off new releases by sending bands there to perform.

Artists such as Elton John made ritualistic stops at the record store when in town. Duran Duran staged a reunion concert in its 40-space parking lot, and Mariah Carey was met with pandemonium when she autographed a new CD there in the late 1990s. Former teenage heartthrob David Cassidy drew a crowd for an album-signing, and crowds flocked to Tower's parking lot to see the Quidam band of Cirque du Soleil.

Hollywood's hottest young stars routinely could be spotted shopping among Tower's record racks, which in an earlier era had been the popular site of a sales outlet for inventor Earl "Mad Man" Muntz's 4-track stereo cartridge music system.

Digital downloads and iPods put an end to Tower Records in 2006, however. Its parent company declared bankruptcy and shuttered its chain of shops. The Sunset Strip site was sold for a reported \$12 million.

A Chicago developer now plans to tear down the record shop and construct a three-story, 52,000-square-foot combination office building, retail shop and health club. It would feature underground and rooftop parking for 276 cars.

Preservationists, however, hope to save the building and turn it into a long-discussed West Hollywood rock 'n' roll museum. Besides commemorating Tower Records' domineering presence on the Sunset Strip, advocates say such a museum would be an appropriate place to showcase memorabilia from the second half of the 20th century -- when Los Angeles emerged as the center of this country's recording industry.

The Sunset Strip has been an entertainment industry hot spot since the 1930s. Clubs like Ciro's, Mocambo and the Trocadero were favorite hangouts for Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Humphrey Bogart, Bugsy Siegel and many others.

But there are few historic markers left for that era of the Strip. And some historians worry that the markers of the Strip's following era -- the music scene of the last 40 years -- are quickly fading as well.

During the Strip's music heyday, the likes of the Doors, the Byrds, Frank Zappa and later Van Halen and Motley Crue performed there. The Strip's Hyatt Hotel became infamous lodging for the stars, where musicians famously "trashed" rooms.

And Tower Records was there selling their music. Clubs such as Pandora's Box and The Trip are long gone. The record company billboards that lit up the Strip at night have been overshadowed by building-size supergraphics more likely to advertise movies or cable TV series than music.

Priore said he submitted the application only after city representatives told him in person and by e-mail that color photographs were acceptable and that his paperwork seemed to be complete.

But on Dec. 11 the city informed him that black-and-white photos were required. Priore delivered them the next day to City Hall. On Dec. 13, however, the city sent him a letter stating that the application was incomplete because of the color photos and several other needed items. The letter was not postmarked until Dec. 14 and delivered until Dec. 21, according to Priore.

On Dec. 12, the city notified developer Sol Barket that his application -- which had earlier been deemed incomplete -- now passed muster. That meant Priore could not file for the resource designation which, if granted, could have permanently blocked demolition of the Tower Records building.

Priore's lawyer, Brant H. Dveirin, suggested that city officials intentionally dragged their feet on the paperwork to give Barket time to submit his. West Hollywood officials deny that.

"The city staff doesn't give development requests greater preference than designation applications," said Michael Jenkins of the city attorney's office.

Barket met last week with members of the West Hollywood Heights Homeowners Assn. who live on the hillside above the Tower Records site to assure them his project would "speak well to the environment and the iconic nature of the location." It will feature a high-end retail shop on the ground floor, the health club on the second level and offices on the top floor.

Brian Lewis, a spokesman for Barket, said the proposed building's nod to the site's iconic past might include something like rock 'n' roll-themed decorations in the gym.

"We don't want to forget that Tower Records played a role here," Lewis said.

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