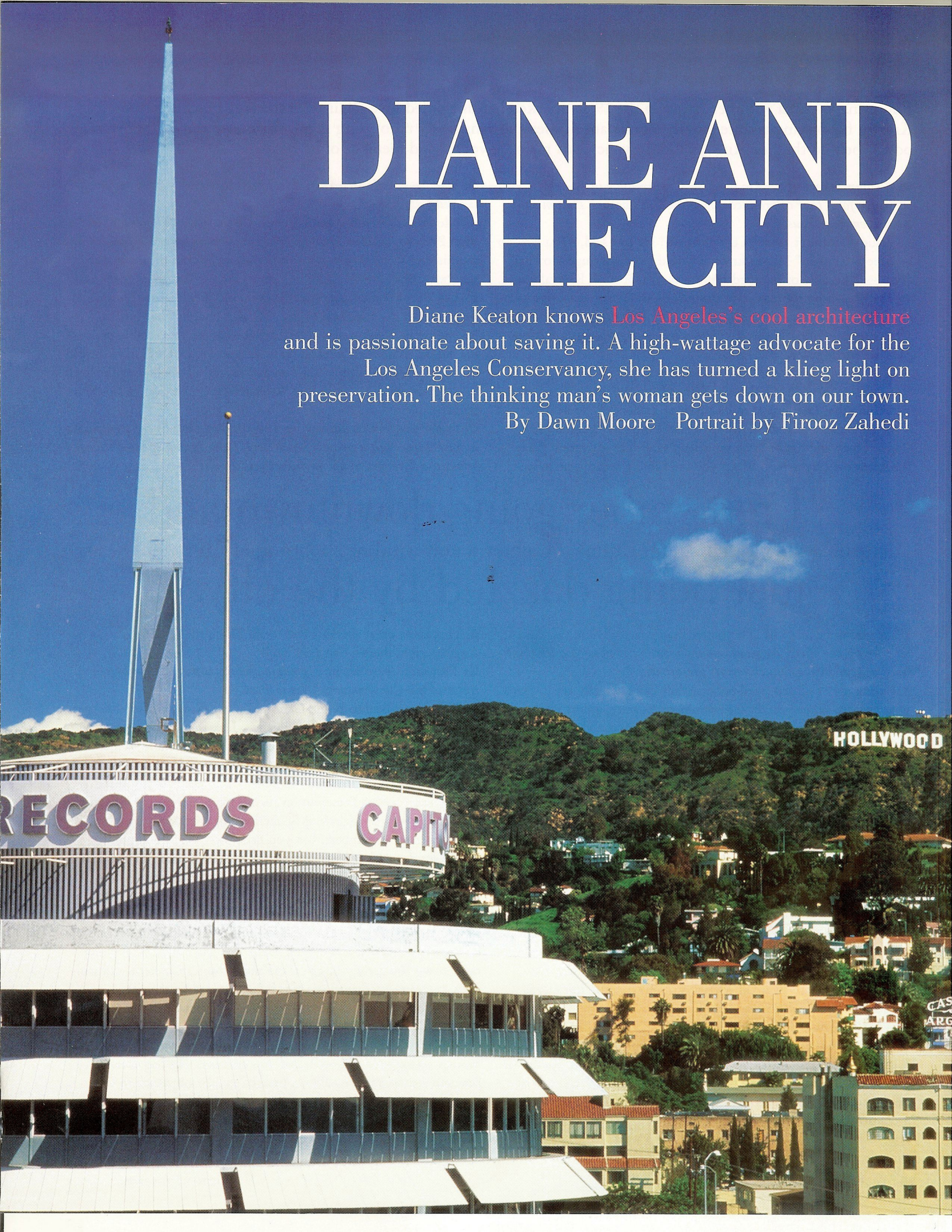


# DIANE AND THE CITY

Diane Keaton knows **Los Angeles's cool architecture** and is passionate about saving it. A high-wattage advocate for the Los Angeles Conservancy, she has turned a klieg light on preservation. The thinking man's woman gets down on our town.

By Dawn Moore Portrait by Firooz Zahedi





# Who knew?

Diane Keaton is a Southern California girl through and through. Exploring the area with her father in the 1950s sparked her unbridled love affair with the area's architecture. Known for buying architecturally significant houses and sensitively renovating them, she's now shining her star power behind the Los Angeles Conservancy as a major advocate and member of its board.

**Q:** *A commitment of time to the L.A. Conservancy in exchange for a tour of producer Leonard Hill's house? That must have been some house!*

**A:** (Laughs) I didn't know! I didn't know! He just said, "You have to become a member." I never knew it would have this huge snowball effect—all because of Leonard Hill's beautiful Spanish Revival house.

**Q:** *You're now on the executive committee, attending meetings with city officials, press conferences, and holding receptions in your home. With your work, motherhood, renovations, and pet adoption advocacy, where do you find the time?*

**A:** Well, I really feel that I have to, because this is my passion. I mean, saving all these fabulous buildings from the demolition ball is something that I am proud to be a part of. I am really so heavily involved because of Linda Dishman. She is the force behind the Conservancy and has become my friend as well as my moral guide. She keeps me on the ball! When you see Linda's commitment, it

**Q:** *Why do you think architectural preservation has been so far off the celebrity radar?*

**A:** I don't understand it at all. I really don't. Although people like Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston, when they were together, bought this astonishing Wallace Neff house and they redid it in the most stunning way. Brad Pitt—I think he's very gifted in this area. That's also true of David Geffen, who has the great old Jack Warner house, and he preserved it, so hats off to him. He also bought The Geffen Playhouse in Westwood and restored it; that is a remarkable building. So the more their interest becomes known, that will have the old snowball effect. Madonna has restored several of the houses she lived in—she owned this remarkable Wallace Neff house over in Los Feliz that she sold.

**Q:** *In the past you've noted a very compelling fact: Every significant architect has built a private home here. Doesn't that speak volumes about the diversity of our architectural jewels?*

**“I remember going downtown and seeing the cityscape and Clifton's Cafeteria and window shopping at Christmas—just being dazzled by the city.”**

forces you to be just a little bit better than you really are.

**Q:** *Why do you think Angelenos have been so disengaged with their architectural history, much less its preservation?*

**A:** I think they're disengaged because they can't actually see it, that's what I think. When you drive around Los Angeles, unless you're right in the center of downtown, the architecture can elude you. For example, in San Diego and San Francisco, you can't avoid seeing the city, especially if you live there—it's impossible. And that is very alluring. But in Los Angeles, so many of us live on the perimeter—you have to drive a distance to find it. You have to be willing to explore because a lot of our really astonishing buildings are residential structures. It requires curiosity.

**Q:** *To get someone engaged with the donation of time or money, they usually have to be touched by a cause, like with an illness, in some direct, personal way. How do you make architectural preservation personal?*

**A:** I think it's our cultural history that we've got to take pride in here in this city. What's happening to downtown Los Angeles is very hopeful with the reuse of many old buildings. I just feel like more and more people are aware of what a precious treasure this city is and also how profitable reuse can be.

**Q:** *What's the potential for profit?*

**A:** Well, it's how you reuse. Somebody was explaining to me about all those old hangers down in Orange County [the former Tustin Air Base] and they're turning that into a sports center. Saving the structure is more important, for the most part, than making it a museum or cultural center.

**A:** That is the most amazing fact of all. That's the treasure of Los Angeles, right there—that says it all!

**Q:** *That said, there are no big name architects on the membership roster of the Conservancy. Why is that?*

**A:** Well, I've talked to Frank Gehry—I'm working on him! I'm sure some architects have specific instances where they don't agree with the Conservancy. But someone like Frank Gehry I know is interested in preserving buildings that he thinks are significant here in Los Angeles. You know, Marmol Radziner + Associates received the Conservancy's 2005 Preservation Award for preserving in the most astonishing way this fabulous Schindler house, and they are corporate cornerstone members. But you bring up a very good point.

**Q:** *Where does this intense passion for your home state come from?*

**A:** I know exactly where it comes from and why California is so important to me. It's really about my relationship with my father. We spent a lot of time together looking at model homes—he was always looking at property—and the outdoors and the desert and the ocean. He worked at DWP back in the '50s and I remember going downtown and seeing the cityscape and Clifton's Cafeteria and window shopping at Christmas—just being dazzled by the city.

**Q:** *But did your dad also instill a sense of preservation?*

**A:** Oh no, not at all. I think that's something I attribute to my mother. My father was a Republican and my mother was a Democrat; my mother was artistic and my father was practical. She had dreams. I remember one time they almost bought a really old ranch in San Juan Capistrano but the deal fell through, and I think my mother was very disappointed. Because (Keaton, continued on page 130)



(Keaton, continued from page 98)

it was old, my dad didn't really want to get into it. He just thought, oh, it's going to be too much work. So you know, it was a yin-yang thing that I inherited. Not enough of my father, but his spirit of adventure and the sense of California and loving it.

**Q:** *Wallace Neff and Frank Lloyd Wright seem to be favorites of yours, and you've said, "I'd love to buy all the old homes in California and restore them." It seems like you are!*

**A:** I'd like to but I just don't have enough money—I'm interested in so many of them! I am more and more completely blown away by George Washington Smith. Also down in Rancho Santa Fe I saw Lillian Rice's work. And Cliff May, who I always affiliated with ranch-style homes, but actually there are a lot of very early Cliff Mays down in San Diego that are like little haciendas, which are just fabulous. He was all about those low ceilings that would kind of rise up and then dip down toward the courtyard—they're so stunning. For me right now the style that holds my heart has a general sense of Spanish hacienda, Andalusian farmhouse, even Monterey colonial. All are different styles of California ranch, which is what I grew up in.

**Q:** *I love that you rent motorhomes and drive everywhere. It's without question the best way to absorb neighborhood nuances and countryside. Do you still do that?*

**A:** I still do it as much as I can, but the truth is my car is my office and my second home. Like right now I'm sitting parked on Arden because I was actually just looking at a Wallace Neff house I put an offer on but was turned down!

**Q:** *The city of Beverly Hills may have the highest concentration of historically significant residential dwellings—including the Gershwins house, which was demolished last year—yet, unlike all of its neighboring cities, does not have a historic preservation ordinance. What needs to happen to change that?*

**A:** You know, I don't really know. That's the saddest thing of all, to me. There are streets on the flats in Beverly Hills that are just gems. It's OK with me if someone comes in to buy it and redo it and sell it—like my old Spanish, or on Sierra or on Arden—that's OK. It seems like there should be a stipulation: If you want to make money on it, fine, but don't tear it down. **D**

