

18. Historical and Architectural Importance

The Brown Derby Restaurant

A fine-dining restaurant that became a local institution with international recognition, The Brown Derby has ingrained itself into the history of twentieth century Los Angeles and continues to assert its significance in various references to this day.

The restaurant was conceived “by Hollywood, for Hollywood” to fill a specific niche because, in the words of studio mogul Jack Warner regarding the situation, there existed “no really first-class restaurant where actors of lofty eminence could dine in relative privacy.”¹ Jack Warner became the financial backer of this new endeavor while Wilson Mizner and Herbert K. Somborn, both Hollywood newcomers, provided the novel theme and quality service. According to one version of the legend, Mizner had offhandedly remarked that if food and service were good, “people would probably come to eat it out of a hat.”² And in 1926, the new restaurant opened on Wilshire Boulevard in a derby-shaped structure. Overseeing its operation was motion picture producer Herbert Somborn, a man known for his impeccable taste and as “a connoisseur of what the elite desires.”³ He insisted on food and service of the highest caliber and viewed “the hat” as a pilot run for envisioned expansion. The restaurant fulfilled its intended niche and was immediately popular with Hollywood. Such success led to the opening of a second location on Vine Street in 1929. Financed by Cecil B. deMille, noted film producer and director, the Hollywood Brown Derby became and would remain the flagship of the chain and housed the offices of the Derby Corporation as well.⁴ In 1931, the Beverly Hills Brown Derby opened on Wilshire Boulevard at Rodeo Drive and in 1941, on property owned by Cecil B. deMille, the Los Feliz Brown Derby commenced service on Los Feliz Boulevard at Hillhurst Avenue. Together with “the hat,” these sites comprised the four main Brown Derby Restaurants, though the chain also operated from three additional, short-lived locations throughout its 59-year history (figures 1, 2). Each of the restaurants followed a similar format and, in addition to a main dining room, a cocktail room, and a Brown Derby Shop, often included a coffee shop and a special room devoted to private occasions as well. In appearance, however, each location possessed an individualized and finely crafted atmosphere that gave it a unique sense of place shared with its respective community.



Figure 1. The four main Brown Derby



The death of Herbert Somborn in

1934 put business manager Robert Cobb (of Cobb salad fame) to the fore and he would become president of The Brown Derby Corporation. The 1940s saw a dramatic expansion in the scope of operations and services offered at The Brown Derby; each successive enhancement substantially

boosted the restaurant's range of influence, first within Los Angeles and later beyond. Liquor stores were added to the Hollywood and Los Feliz locations in 1940 and 1941, respectively. The year 1947 saw the introduction of The Brown Derby Shops. Debuting at the Los Feliz location and becoming a fixture of each within the following year (with a Bronson Avenue location sans restaurant newly created as well), these shops sold a variety of gift items and household accessories. The restaurant also launched its collection of Brown Derby Specialties at this time, further expanding its range of services and exposure. Available through mail order with catalogs sent by request, customers world-wide now had the opportunity to choose from more than 200 items ranging from jewelry, playing cards, and glass and tableware, all marketed under the Brown Derby label.⁵ And just two years later in 1949, favorite recipes from the restaurant were published in *The Brown Derby Cookbook*.

The highest quality in food and service was standard, but the true popularity of the Brown Derby lay in its connection to Hollywood. "One went to the Brown Derby not so much for food as to see and be seen," notes John A. Jakle in his book *Fast Food*, adding that "the restaurant became an icon of social connection, a place to be for those seeking and pretending social status."⁶ Indeed, even the treatment of the four restaurants' interiors reflected this with signature brown leather booths specifically designed to be low for increased visibility and to encourage table-hopping (figure 3).⁷



Figure 3. Dining room, Los Feliz Brown Derby. The signature booths allowed for increased visibility. (Bison Archives.)

In its heyday, the Brown Derby was a mecca for stars, their agents, Hollywood hopefuls, gossip columnists, and, of course, tourists. To be sure, stars patronized each of the main Derby locations but the Hollywood Brown Derby functioned as an unparalleled social center for members of the entertainment industry—a distinction that earned worldwide recognition for the Brown Derby name. The famous caricatures at the Vine Street location attested to its influential status as a gathering spot for Hollywood. Depicting various Hollywood celebrities, the caricatures were arranged on the walls in the main dining room and functioned as a social barometer of sorts. They were continuously rearranged to indicate a star's rise or fall in status and appropriately placed to suggest current romantic relations as well. Another trademark feature of the restaurant was telephone service. "In the 1930s," writes Sally Wright Cobb, "the Hollywood Brown Derby became the first restaurant to offer telephones, delivered upon request, to the tables." "To some," she adds, "the number of times one was paged was an indication of power and importance."⁸

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"Places have life cycles," writes Jakle, who further describes the process with birth, maturation, old age, and death.⁹ The maturation of the Brown Derby coincided with the golden age of Hollywood and the chain remained an important Hollywood fixture through the 1950s as renovations and remodeling kept pace with the times.

Other changes in Hollywood, however, signaled the passing of its halcyon days. Perhaps the most significant factor was “the decade-long transformation of the film industry in the 1950s.”¹⁰ “By the late 1950s the studio system would be a thing past,” effectively reshaping the way the entertainment industry operated.¹¹ Less relevant now was the “old Hollywood” nature of the Brown Derby where, in former days, the restaurant functioned as a primary destination among Hollywood society.

Prior to 1960, the closure of Brown Derby locations had been limited to the three short-lived operations.¹² In April of 1960, however, the Los Feliz location also saw an untimely closure. Following the death of owner Cecil B. deMille in the previous year, and the subsequent settlement of his estate, the property was sold and a new restaurant, Michael’s, commenced operation at the location.¹³ Left to represent the chain from 1960 onward were the original Brown Derby on Wilshire Boulevard, which since 1952 had operated independently from the other locations under the ownership of Gloria Somborn Anderson, daughter of the late Herbert Somborn, and the Hollywood and Beverly Hills locations, under the continued ownership of the Brown Derby Corporation and Bob Cobb. In 1970, Cobb, who had presided over the restaurant for 46 years, passed away and five years later the Brown Derby Corporation was sold to Walter Scharfe, a former food vending machine company executive.

Changes in the culture surrounding the Brown Derby had advanced the restaurant into old age, but real estate economics of the 1980s ushered in death for the chain. One by one, the restaurants were sold as the land they occupied represented a greater worth to developers. The original Brown Derby closed in September of 1980. The Beverly Hills location closed in 1982 and the Hollywood Brown Derby followed in 1985.

Of the structures that housed the four main Brown Derbies, only the Los Feliz location survives in an intact state, owed to its continued reuse and revitalization, first by Michael’s and, most recently, by The Derby nightclub and Louise’s Trattoria. The Hollywood and Beverly Hills locations have been razed. The hat-shaped portion is all that remains of the original Wilshire Brown Derby; it is now perched inauspiciously on the top level of a strip mall that stands on the restaurant’s former site.

Despite the closing of the restaurants, the Brown Derby remains a firmly established icon. As evidence of the Brown Derby as a dominant fixture of Hollywood culture, the restaurant has appeared in a variety of media including film, television, and literature; writers looking to portray a true sense of place for Hollywood could rely on the Brown Derby for widespread audience recognition. David O. Selznick featured the restaurant in his 1937 motion picture “A Star is Born.” Starring Janet Gaynor, the United Artists film debuted to theater audiences nationwide. In 1955,

households throughout the country tuning in to an episode of “I Love Lucy” witnessed Lucille Ball and her antics as she dined at the Hollywood Brown Derby watching for stars. As late as 2005, the Brown Derby still endures as a portrayal of Hollywood imagery. In G. E. Nordell’s 2005 mystery novel *Backlot Requiem*, characters Victor and Rose are found dining with the Zacharys at the Los Feliz Brown Derby.¹⁴

The Los Feliz Brown Derby

The Los Feliz Brown Derby officially opened for business in June of 1941, though the structure that housed it, in its original form, dates to 1929 as a restaurant called Willard’s.

Restaurateur Clinton G. Willard had operated his Willard’s restaurant in Seattle, Washington before moving to Los Angeles and reestablishing his eatery on Pico Boulevard at Beverly Drive in 1928. The restaurant was noted for its fine home cooking and, as early advertisements attest, its “far-famed chicken and steak dinners.” The success of the restaurant in Los Angeles was such that a second location was opened just one year later at the corner of Los Feliz Boulevard and Hillhurst Avenue.

The Los Feliz Willard’s, designed by architect Charles F. Plummer, was constructed in 1929. Plummer would design a number of restaurant structures throughout the city, many in conjunction with architect and interior designer Joseph Feil. Highlighting Plummer’s career are structures that include the Young’s Market building from 1924, located near downtown Los Angeles, and the Santa Monica beachfront club Casa del Mar, completed in 1926.

Located at 4500 Los Feliz Boulevard, the Los Feliz Willard’s was characterized by a large, octagonal structure incorporating a unique, domed roof formed by Lamella construction. Centrally placed at both the front and rear of the main structure were projecting portions housing the entrance and servicing areas, respectively. The restaurant’s exterior, eclectic in style, was ornamented with applied scrolls and scalloped trim, all highlighted by glowing neon tubing at night (figure 4).



Figure 4. Willard’s, 4500 Los Feliz Blvd., 1929. (Bison Archives.)

While the original Willard’s on Pico remained successful for decades, the Los Feliz location would close within ten years of opening. Following its closure, Union Oil Company briefly held title to the property and by January of 1941, an auction was held on site for the former restaurant and equipment of Willard’s. Cecil B. deMille became the next owner of the property and it was promptly converted into the fourth link of the Brown Derby chain.

Architect for the remodeling of the now eleven year-old restaurant structure was Rowland H. Crawford, AIA, who for many years served as the architectural advisor for the Brown Derby Restaurant Corporation. Crawford designed numerous public and private buildings throughout his career, his versatility reflected in such contrasting structures as the Streamline Moderne Times-Mirror Building in downtown Los Angeles and the gambrel-roofed Brentwood Country Mart, both from 1948.

In remodeling the newly acquired building for the Brown Derby, the shed-roofed extension containing the Los Feliz Boulevard entrance was removed. New construction would envelop virtually all portions of the octagonal structure, constituting a thorough remodel with new design (figure 5). The only visible exterior feature to remain from Willard's would be the domed roof.



Figure 5. The Los Feliz Brown Derby, 4500 Los Feliz Blvd., ca. 1941. (Bison Archives.)

The Crawford remodeling incorporates two contrasting design styles to differentiate the two service components of the restaurant.

Streamline Moderne styling was utilized for the car canopy at the west elevation, giving it a design that was thoroughly established and identifiable among drive-ins throughout the region by 1941. "Rowland Crawford, the architect, Edna Hiestand, the decorator, and Carl Weyl, the designer, are responsible for the streamlined innovations which have made the Brown Derby Car Cafe the most unique establishment of its kind," stated the text from promotional material appearing at the time of the restaurant's opening. Architect Wayne McAllister, well known for his design of the Toluca Lake Bob's Big Boy, also contributed to the design of the Car Café, though Rowland Crawford is the sole architect listed on the permit for the remodeling.¹⁵ The wide, curvilinear-shaped canopy is the west elevation's primary feature and was designed to shelter the parked cars of drive-in patrons. Beneath the canopy and paralleling its contoured perimeter, a wall of expansive glass windows formed the exterior of the coffee shop dining area.

An eclectic style utilizing French Colonial-inspired elements was employed for the north (main) and east façades of the traditional, indoor-service portion of the restaurant. New construction added to the octagonal structure created a generally rectangular plan. Additions to the east extended the building toward the lot line, creating an exterior wall parallel with Hillhurst Avenue. Additions to the north were comprised of two distinct sections giving the Los Feliz Boulevard elevation an asymmetrical composition.

Centrally positioned in front of the octagonal structure is a one-story addition featuring a front-facing, hipped gable. This portion incorporated an arched entryway beneath the eastern slope of the roof leading to the main entrance of the restaurant. Centered between the entryway and the western edge of this gabled section was a bay window flanked by decorative panels attached to the exterior wall. A stylized vent is centered at the top of the gable and is composed of a latticed

grid set in a frame with a scalloped sill. Extending east from the entryway and joining the east elevation at Hillhurst Avenue is a one-story, hipped-roof section.

The north additions were originally clad in wood clapboard siding, while the majority of the Hillhurst Avenue façade received a stucco finish. The exception was the projecting bay that extends fully to the lot line, which featured a stucco finish below the window sills and clapboard siding above. Flanking this extension on either side are two bay windows with decorative support brackets and sloping metal roofs. Providing unity among all elevations at the roofline is a parapet.

The original design for the Los Feliz Brown Derby also included ornamental features, including small, dormer-shaped vents that were originally located on both sides of the front-facing gable and on the east slope of the hipped roof section. A decorative wooden finial originally adorned the apex of the hipped roof while a weather vane surmounted the apex of the hipped gable. While these features have been removed, a new vent, similar to the originals in design, has been added to the north slope of the hipped-roof portion.

Signage for the Los Feliz Brown Derby was comprised of three main components, each located at prominent rooftop positions. Surmounting the domed roof atop a metal armature was the trademark Brown Derby sign found at each of the four main locations. The words “The BROWN DERBY” in exposed neon letters were attached to both sides of a derby-shaped panel, additionally outlined in neon tubing. The word “Restaurant” in exposed neon letters was attached to both sides of a rectangular panel positioned along the roof crest at the Los Feliz Boulevard entrance. At the drive-in section, the words “CAR CAFE” originally sat on the roof edge of the canopy, outlined with neon edge lights. Curved strips of neon tubing following the contours of the canopy were originally attached to its underside, later to be replaced with round, recessed downlights.

The Los Feliz Brown Derby was updated in appearance some years after its initial opening. In contrast to its formerly white treatment, the exterior was painted a dark hue with white trim for the windows. Additionally, a sign of new dimensions, advertising the restaurant’s dining room, coffee shop, and drive-in options, replaced the original that had surmounted the gabled roof and necessitated the removal of the weather vane (figure 6). A neon cocktail glass, originally attached to the edge of this newer sign, has survived and is now located inside the Derby nightclub. In 1946, an addition was built that filled the area between the rear kitchen wing and the main building. A dining room in the addition was used for private parties and special events.



Figure 6. The Los Feliz Brown Derby, ca. 1940s. A bold paint scheme and a larger sign comprised the new look. (Bison Archives.)

Like the Brown Derby branches that came before it, the Los Feliz Derby was individualized in design. Drawing inspiration from its suburban-like setting and proximity to Griffith Park, the restaurant provided a unique sense of place—patrons could sip cocktails in the Redwood Room or feast in the dining room where portraits of cinema's great cowboys with their horses lined the walls.¹⁶

When this location debuted, promotional material informed readers that it was open for their comfort and convenience. It also informed them of the new Car Café which was “carefully planned to give them the ‘utmost’ in service.” The addition of curb service was reflective of the Brown Derby's marked growth in the scope of all of its services. The Car Café was open 24 hours daily with carhops sporting little brown derbies in keeping with the restaurant's theme. *Car Hops and Curb Service* author Jim Heimann notes “this drive-in addition became a popular spot to glimpse movie stars.”¹⁷

Noted Hollywood patrons of the Los Feliz Brown Derby included Norma Shearer, Bob Hope, Louis B. Mayer, Cecil B. deMille, Betty Hutton, Rita Hayworth, Dorothy Lamour, and Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, and their children. The restaurant was also a popular venue for parties, award ceremonies, and meetings among celebrities, politicians and community members alike. Actress Betty Hutton hosted a party in 1954 which drew Hollywood stars and even California governor Goodwin J. Knight. That same year, Victor Ford Collins, retiring president of the Hollywood Baseball Club, was honored with a dinner held by Bob Cobb and attended by more than 100 civic, social and baseball personages. Cobb invited the cast of “I Love Lucy” and the press to a party to screen a new “Lucy” episode in 1955 by Cobb.¹⁸ Elections for the presiding post of the Los Angeles County Superior Court were annually held through meetings of the magistrates at the Los Feliz Brown Derby in the 1950s. The restaurant would be the venue of choice for gatherings among such varied community groups as the Los Feliz Young Republicans, the Masons of California, the Catholic Big Sisters Guild, and the Los Feliz-Silver Lake Real Estate Brokers Association.

Cecil B. deMille: Significant Owner

Cecil B. deMille (1881-1959) is celebrated for his contributions to the film industry and is often credited with establishing Hollywood as the motion picture capital of the world. One year after forming the Lasky Film Company, later to become Paramount, he produced Hollywood's first feature-length motion picture, “The Squaw Man,” in 1914. He is perhaps best known for his biblical epics, which include such films as his 1923 and 1956 versions of “The Ten Commandments.” One of the most successful filmmakers during the first half of the twentieth century, deMille was responsible for the production and direction of over 80 films, some of which he additionally served as editor and writer, throughout his long and active career.¹⁹

While renowned as an influential Hollywood film producer and director, deMille was also instrumental in shaping one of Hollywood's own influential institutions, The Brown Derby. Both the Hollywood and the Los Feliz locations of the restaurant were developed under his financial aegis.

The original Brown Derby had been operating for two years when Cecil B. deMille became involved financially in the expansion of the restaurant. Together with the Vine Street Holding Company, deMille agreed to finance construction for a new building, completed in 1929, which would house the restaurant's anticipated flagship location and corporate offices.²⁰

It was in 1916 when deMille first purchased property in the recently subdivided Laughlin Park neighborhood. That year, he bought a stately residence for his new home. This was followed, 10 years later, by the acquisition of the house next door, which he would utilize for offices, a library

and guestrooms.²¹ In addition to his residence and business space, at 2000 and 2010 DeMille Drive respectively, deMille also came to own other real estate in the vicinity. He acquired the property at 4500 Los Feliz Boulevard when the former Willard's restaurant, occupying the site, was auctioned in January of 1941. By February, construction permits were filed for remodeling the structure and in June of that year it officially opened as the newest restaurant in the Brown Derby chain. The property remained in deMille's ownership until shortly after his death in 1959, whereupon it was sold by the late film director's estate and the Brown Derby ceased operation at that location.

Michael's and The Derby/Louise's Trattoria

Following the 1960 closing of the Los Feliz Brown Derby, a new restaurant, Michael's Los Feliz, commenced operation in the space in September of that year. As Michael's, the interior was completely remodeled and now featured the French Room, with white booths, red carpets, and crystal lighting fixtures.²² Despite the change in operations, the use of the structure as a formal dining restaurant was continued yet again. Michael's remained in operation at 4500 Los Feliz Boulevard until the close of 1992, at which time the property was renovated for combined use as a nightclub and a new restaurant. Co-owners Tammi and Tony Gower were responsible for the interior renovations. The former dining room, utilized as the main room for The Derby nightclub, now serves as a dining area adaptable as dance floor space and includes a stage for band performances located at the one end and a liquor bar near the center. The space which housed the coffee shop of the Brown Derby is now occupied by Louise's Trattoria, a formal dining restaurant, while the area beneath the car canopy of the former drive-in is utilized for Louise's outdoor patio dining.

Engineering Significance: **Wood-framed Lamella roof**

The Los Feliz Brown Derby is significant for its unique roof construction known as an engineered Lamella roof. Dating from the construction of the original structure in 1929, the distinctive, domed roof of the building's central portion is formed by one of the earliest remaining examples of this innovative engineering technology in the United States.

Lamella roof construction was invented in Dessau, Germany in 1908 by City Architect Friedrich Zollinger.²³ This construction method, as stated by the American Institute of Timber Construction, comprises:

"A roof frame consisting of a series of intersecting skewed arches, made up of relatively short members, called lamellas, fastened together at an angle so that each is intersected by two similar adjacent members at its midpoint, forming a network of interlocking diamonds. This network of lamellas forms a structure of mutually braced and stiffened units, arching over the structure between supports; with the sheathing it forms a diaphragm for resistance to vertical and lateral loads."²⁴

Zollinger applied for a German patent for this system of timber roofing in 1921. By 1924, Hugo Junkers, a German aircraft designer, applied for a patent of his pressed steel version.²⁵

Early applications for this construction method were found in factory buildings and aircraft hangers. Lamella roofs proved advantageous for their ability to span great distances without requiring obstructive supports in the form of columns or trusses. They also allowed for the advantageous use of short lengths of wood or steel in their construction.

In 1925 the technology was introduced to the United States and, as in Europe, it was governed by a proprietary system. Holding the United States patent was the Lamella Roof Syndicate in New

York City. Two firms sharing the name Roof Structures, Inc., though unrelated, were major Lamella promoters located in New York City and St. Louis, while Summerbell Roof Structures, of Los Angeles, and Timber Structures, Inc., of Portland, Oregon, were primary distributors on the West Coast. Summerbell Roof Structures was for many years the exclusive Lamella licensee in California.²⁶

Lamella construction is believed to have been introduced to southern California in 1926. In March of that year, an automobile showroom utilizing the novel roof construction in timber was completed for Penfield & Forsythe in North Hollywood.²⁷ Soon thereafter, additional automobile showrooms and various other spaces ranging from skating rinks to grocery stores adopted this construction method as well. The Ralphs Grocery Company chain began using Lamella construction as early as 1929 and would continue to incorporate that construction method into their new buildings in southern California through at least the early 1940s.²⁸ The Los Angeles Times reported on the advantageous nature of Lamella construction in an article describing Ralphs' newest market at 3635 Crenshaw Boulevard in 1939:

"One of the most unusual architectural features in the new Ralphs market, and one that has proven its worth in other Ralphs outlets, is the Lamella trussless roof which eliminates both view-obstructing columns and unsightly trusses. Its high-arched character makes for greater clearance and imparts an air of roominess to the interior. Secret of this novel roof construction is the diamond-shaped bracing formed of short lengths of lumber so arranged as to brace each other against forces from any direction. These roofs are said to be unusually resistant to wind and earthquake stresses. Nearly all Ralphs markets incorporate this type of roof construction."²⁹

Lamella construction utilizing timber proved to be a popular innovation throughout the country. In addition to the advantages gained by its non-obstructive nature, its "easy handling and assembling" was equally attractive, as noted by Carl Condit in *American Building Art*, his history on twentieth century American building techniques.³⁰ Because the system relied on "a great number of small elements," generally mass-produced, "rather than a few large ones," he continues, assembly could be accomplished through "simple hand-and-tool technique[s] such as bolting."³¹ "Hundreds of Lamella roofs have been built in this country," stated an article appearing in *The Architect and Engineer* in 1931, adding that "this type [of construction] is economical and offers a remarkably low fire hazard, damaged members being easily replaced."³²

As testament to the system's widespread popularity, wooden Lamella construction was used in a variety of building types, representing an equally varied range of uses. The Long Beach Skating Palace, in Long Beach, California, and the Silver Dome Ballroom and Eagle River Stadium, located in Hewett and Eagle River, Wisconsin, respectively, each took advantage of the wide spans made possible through Lamella construction that were ideally suited to their uses as recreational venues. The Ralphs Grocery Company chain favored Lamella, as did the Columbia National Guard Armory in Columbia, Missouri. Architecturally, structures utilizing Lamella construction ranged from the vernacular, such as the Valley Fruit and Vegetable Company building, an agricultural processing plant in Pharr, Texas, to the skillfully designed, as in architect Julia Morgan's Chinatown YWCA in San Francisco, the exterior of which integrates Chinese motifs with Western architectural forms.

Steel-framed Lamella construction was also utilized in the United States. The first structure to incorporate a steel-framed Lamella roof on the Pacific Coast was a warehouse for the Coca-Cola Bottling Works in Los Angeles, debuting just five years after timber-framed Lamella was first used in the area.³³ Two notable structures utilizing steel-framed Lamella include the Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans and the Astrodome in Houston. While Lamella construction utilizing steel had advantages over timber, namely in fireproofing, the steel shortage brought about by WWII increasingly stimulated the use of Lamella construction in wood.³⁴

As years passed, however, it became evident where the wooden Lamella system's weaknesses lay. "There were major stability problems with Lamella framing and many roofs collapsed,

especially under unbalanced snow and wind loads,” writes Andreas Jordahl Rhude, historian of Lamella and structural glued laminated timber. “By the early 1960s,” he adds, “the wooden Lamella technology was no longer utilized.”³⁵ A much more versatile technology was glued laminated timber, which “may have helped to ease Lamella into the extinct genre.”³⁶ And improving upon steel-framed Lamella construction was the geodesic dome, patented by R. Buckminster Fuller in 1947.³⁷

The domed roof of the Los Feliz Brown Derby incorporates timber Lamella construction in a circular format, which was a seldom seen configuration for that type of engineering. Barrel-roofed forms and their variants were much more common. Equally unique was its application on a structure built to house a restaurant. Having been constructed just four years after Lamella technology was introduced to the United States, the Los Feliz Brown Derby represents an early surviving example of this type of engineering. Summarizing the importance of Lamella technology, Rhude states that “it was a roof framing fairly unique to begin with,” and “it helped bring ‘engineering’ to the wood roof structures business.”³⁸

Embodies distinctive characteristics of a type:
Drive-in component

The Los Feliz Brown Derby is an example of a hybrid building type, combining a formal dining establishment with a drive-in component. It is one of the last remaining restaurant structures within the City of Los Angeles that retains architecture expressive of curb service: the car canopy.

The Los Feliz Brown Derby, established in 1941, was the only location of the chain to incorporate a drive-in component with curb service. The primary feature of the west façade, the “Car Café,” as it was termed by the Brown Derby, features a wide, curvilinear-shaped canopy intended to shelter the parked cars of drive-in patrons (figure 7). The addition of this drive-in component reflects the growing prominence of the automobile on the social culture and built environment of Los Angeles at that time. Drive-in markets, shopping centers, auto courts and motels, and drive-in theaters were all being developed and they “responded to the same technological and commercial phenomenon, the widespread availability and ownership of the auto.”³⁹ From its emergence in the early 1920s to the years preceding WWII, the drive-in restaurant’s presence in Los Angeles culture had become well established. Indeed, the New York Times took note of this trend and reported in 1941 that “there are more than 200 of these places in and around Los Angeles and...it is conservatively estimated that about 100,000 Angelenos dine each day at these sit-and-sup establishments.”⁴⁰ The majority of these drive-ins were freestanding structures of octagonal, and later circular form. They most often occupied corner lots to take advantage of passing traffic, and usually had short life spans corresponding with rising land values.

Amidst increasing popularity and competition, drive-in design evolved as a means to provide quick recognition for the passing motorist. Simple roadside stands with generously placed sign panels gradually gave way to innovative forms blending signage and architecture as one. Architect Wayne McAllister (1907-2000), whose influential career included the design of numerous automobile-oriented restaurants, was instrumental in establishing the circular, streamlined model for the drive-in. His pioneering 1935 design for a new unit in the Simons chain ushered in this new aesthetic, while commissions from additional chains fostered its spread. Though other forms and older styles coexisted, streamlined drive-ins would become a dominant feature of the Los Angeles streetscape. Their influence is seen in the streamlined treatment of the Car Café at the Los Feliz Brown Derby, the design of which was developed in consultation with McAllister in 1941.⁴¹

The car canopy also emerged at this time as part of the architectural vocabulary of drive-ins. Early drive-ins occasionally sported a short overhang canopy, though this feature had not yet developed into an automobile-oriented form. Rather, it was primarily an element of the building’s



Figure 7. The Car Café at the Los Feliz Brown Derby, ca. 1941. Designed with the automobile in mind, the car canopy enhanced the comfort of the curb service experience. (Bison Archives.)

visual design and could provide support for sign lettering above and incorporate lighting for illumination beneath. By the mid-1930s, however, the dimensions of the canopy overhang expanded dramatically as design considerations increasingly looked toward the automobile. Exemplifying this trend was a McAllister-designed unit for the Roberts Brothers chain in which “the canopy overhang now extended eighteen feet beyond the building to cover car and server.”⁴² Having evolved into a wide, cantilevered eave integrated with the building, the car canopy was a truly functional built form; it enhanced the comfort of the curb service experience, thereby encouraging business.

The popularity of drive-ins, owed to their convenience in a time of surging car ownership, would lead to the introduction of variants that paired car service with coffee shops, cocktail lounges, and, as in the Los Feliz Brown Derby, formal dining establishments. These hybrids provided a broader dining environment within which drive-in service could exist. “This model was a logical extension,” writes Jim Heimann, prominent historian and author of several books chronicling American popular culture and roadside architecture. “Many of the owners had ‘regular’ restaurants before they added car service so it was natural to combine both for the additional service and as a revenue builder,” he adds.⁴³ Other local eateries that combined carhop service to already established formal restaurants included Carl’s, Eaton’s, and Melody Lane, all of which no longer exist.

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A variety of factors led to the decline of drive-ins and curb service in the 1950s and 1960s—ironically, the very period perceived as its golden age.⁴⁴ Rising land values eliminated the majority of freestanding drive-ins while technological advances such as speaker systems and drive-through service rendered carhops economically impractical. The growing popularity of drive-ins with rowdy teens as social hangouts and cruising spots further contributed to the elimination of curb service. The adaptable nature of operations incorporating drive-in components with other dining options allowed them to phase out curb service when it was deemed nonessential for business.

The complete Los Feliz Brown Derby operation saw an untimely closure in April of 1960 following the death of owner Cecil B. deMille in the previous year. Sold by the estate of the late film director, it was followed by the arrival of a new restaurant, Michael’s, in 1960. While the formal dining use was resumed, curb service at the former Car Café was not. Louise’s Trattoria is the current restaurant located in the former drive-in component and the space beneath the car canopy is now utilized for outdoor patio dining.

Restaurant structures reflecting the twentieth century phenomenon of curbside service, once a common sight throughout Los Angeles County and indicative of the automobile's growth in influence, now number approximately a half dozen countywide. No freestanding drive-in restaurant structures remain. The Los Feliz Brown Derby is the sole remaining example of the hybrid building type comprised of a formal dining establishment paired with a drive-in component in Los Angeles County. Within the City of Los Angeles, it is one of the last extant examples of a restaurant structure integrating a built form designed for curbside service: the car canopy. Noting the significance of the Los Feliz Brown Derby as the last of a type, Heimann concludes, "I am afraid we are dealing with an extinct architectural form."⁴⁵

Endnotes

- ¹ Heimann, Jim. Out with the Stars: Hollywood Nightlife in the Golden Era. New York: Abbeville, 1985: 44.
- ² Cobb, Sally Wright and Mark Willems. The Brown Derby Restaurant: A Hollywood Legend. New York: Rizzoli, 1996: 15.
- ³ Heimann, Out with the Stars, 45.
- ⁴ Southwest Builder and Contractor, June 29, 1928: 57
- ⁵ Brown Derby Service Corporation. The Brown Derby Cookbook. Garden City, NJ: Country Life-Doubleday, 1949: 10.
- ⁶ Jakle, John A., and Keith A. Sculle. Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999: 279.
- ⁷ Cobb and Willems, 20.
- ⁸ Cobb and Willems, 44.
- ⁹ Jakle and Sculle, 14.
- ¹⁰ Schatz, Thomas. The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era. New York: Pantheon, 1988: 463.
- ¹¹ Schatz, 440.
- ¹² Operating at separate times, their closures reflected wise decisions on behalf of the management when lackluster business became evident. First to close in the early 1930s, under Somborn's leadership, was the Wilshire Boulevard location in the Bilicke building, after operating less than two years. The Bronson Avenue location, housing a Brown Derby Shop and the restaurant's catering department but no actual restaurant, was closed in early 1951 after three years. The Crenshaw location, opening in 1955, was closed by 1959.
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- ¹⁴ Nordell, G. E. Backlot Requiem: A Rick Walker Mystery. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2005: 105.
- ¹⁵ McAllister cited the Los Feliz Brown Derby Car Café among a list of restaurant designs for which he was responsible in a 1998 interview with Chris Nichols, historian of Los Angeles architecture and popular culture.
- ¹⁶ Cobb and Willems, 125.
- ¹⁷ Heimann, Car Hops, 103.
- ¹⁸ Cobb and Willems, 145.
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- ³³ "Los Angeles Has First Steel Lamella Roof on Pacific Coast." The Architect and Engineer 107 (Oct. 1931): 67.
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