



Barnsdall Art Park: Lofty Ambition Amongst the Olive Leaves
<http://www.kcet.org/social/departures/columns/lost-landmarks/barnsdall-art-park-lofty-ambition-amongst-the-olive-leaves.html>The New York Observer Says:

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When I first moved to Los Angeles, I had the wonderful fortune of living in a fourth floor apartment on Edgemont Avenue in Los Feliz. It was fortunate not because the tiny studio had big picture windows and a writing nook, but because it was right across the street from Barnsdall Art Park. I discovered the park one lonely afternoon - its beautiful trees, its crescent shaped lawn that looks over all of Los Angeles, and its art galleries and theater seemed to me a comfy, unpretentious artistic refuge in the midst of a teeming, unfriendly city. I would peek into the classrooms and watch adults at a potter's wheel and children at their finger paint. I would spy young lovers entangled on the grass and lonely men sleeping under the giant trees. Most intriguing of all was the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Hollyhock House, a foreboding, modernist temple that seemed to be forever closed.

This week I had the great fortune of touring the newly restored house with the wonderful curator Jeffery Herr. The interiors were a revelation. The green-gold walls, the beautiful custom wood furniture, the sleek angles and glasswork spoke of a time of artistic collaboration and innovation. But what we talked about mostly was the woman behind the house. For behind these elegant modernist lines was a fascinating and complicated story, and at its center, a woman whose dreams were often dashed by bureaucracy, difficult collaborators, and herself. Though it didn't happen until decades after she died, many of her best laid plans for this hilltop eventually came true.



A Female Don Quixote

Art is the soul of the people. One cannot look on visions like this without having visions of one's own. Without visions, we are only ants, and our communities only ant hills.

--Aline Barnsdall ¹

I believe I could best describe her as a sort of 'female Don Quixote' always jousting at windmills -- a dreamer.

--Betty "Sugartop" Barnsdall ²

Aline Barnsdall was born in Bradford, Pennsylvania on April 1, 1882. Her father, Theodore, was a wildly successful oilman. Her mother, Angela, was an unfulfilled artist with severe depression. It was not a happy marriage. Unconventional from the start, Aline was not close to her mother and constantly butted heads with her more traditional sister, Frances. But Aline unequivocally worshiped her father. "I love his zest for life and his great human friendliness and humor," she explained. "He always wants everything on a big scale. He is the grandest of fathers." ³ As soon as she could, Aline was traveling the world, often accompanied by her father. "I was with him more than any of the family," Aline bragged, "because I too loved to move about and travel." ⁴

And travel Aline did. She was untroubled by the traditional expectations of a woman of her class, stating: "There is a new kind of woman in the world today." Perhaps the sad life of her mother (who died in 1907) encouraged Aline to pursue her artistic dreams. She became fascinated with the experimental theater movement that swept Europe in the first decades of the 20th century and used her considerable income to give herself a first rate education. She studied theater in Italy under the great actress Eleonora Duse, went to Berlin to see Max Reinhardt's famous theater, and

frequented the small theaters of London. She had no interest in marriage and had a long term relationship with Lawrence Langer, an attorney with a similar love of the theater. Imploring Langer to live on her terms, she told him "Let's not philander -- let's be honest and direct, and live together!"⁵



In 1913-14, the couple's progressive interests brought them to Chicago and New York. A particularly inspiring haunt was the famous Fine Arts Building in Chicago. The ornate building housed Maurice Browne's pioneering little theater (which was decorated like a small Greek temple) and the offices of Margaret Anderson, the mastermind behind the influential avant-garde literary journal, *The Little Review*. She also met the revolutionary communist Emma Goldman, who became a lifelong friend and beneficiary of Aline's financial kindness when she was deported to Russia.

Aline decided she wanted to produce theater, particularly theater for children -- a novel concept at the time. With her father's backing, she teamed with Arthur Bissell to form the Player Producing Company. Together they produced experimental plays in Room 734 of the Fine Arts Building. The first season, kicked off by the satirical play "Consequences," was a great success. Perhaps her most influential production at the Fine Arts Building was "Alice in Wonderland." Aline's belief that children's theater should be for all ages was printed on the show's playbill -- "A play for all children and most grownups." She then took the play to Broadway, where it received inspired reviews.

But Aline had far greater plans. In Chicago, she had met a brilliant young architect by the name of Frank Lloyd Wright. Though he had a bad reputation, both personally and professionally, Aline recognized his genius. She dreamed of creating a theatrical and artistic community -- a creative campus -- like the ones she had encountered in

Europe. She hired Wright to design the complex. She also asked him to design a home for her, to be located in the center of the campus. She told Norman Bel Geddes, a young theater designer, of her plans. Geddes was not impressed with Wright, who he found arrogant and uneducated in theater design. When he pointed to flaws in Wright's preliminary design, Wright replied: "I have improved the forms of churches and houses and office buildings, and if left alone I will give you the finest theater in the world. If you are unable to leave me alone, I will not waste my time going any further with it." ⁶

Aline was equally imperious. When Bel Geddes assumed she would want her theater in New York, she scoffed: "If the theater is again to become a great force in the world, it is going to happen here in America where we have freedom of thought and action. And that too, is why my theater must be in California rather than New York." ⁷



While Wright worked intermittently on plans for Aline's proposed community, she decamped for Los Angeles. She and Bel Geddes opened the Little Theater in the Egan Dramatic School, on 9th and Figueroa Street. Soon they had a new partner, Robert Ordynski, "a suave sophisticate" and former assistant to Max Reinhardt, who served as director of the theater (he would later be the first stage manager of the Metropolitan Opera). Aline and Ordynski quickly became romantically involved. The first season at the Little Theater was a great success and brought to L.A. a kind of experimental theater and children's theater never seen before. However, all was not well between the strong willed Ordynski and Aline. But Aline was delighted when she discovered she was pregnant. She would keep the baby -- and raise it alone.

Aline's daughter, Louise Aline "Sugartop" Barnsdall, was born in Seattle on August 19, 1917. The Little Theater had scattered, and Aline traveled the country with her friend Roy George. She visited revolutionary friends like Emma Goldman and was trailed by the suspicious FBI, who would keep a file on Aline for decades. Her beloved father died, leaving her in charge of a large fortune. Though she was consumed by her daughter and other interests, she never forgot about her dream theater community. On June 3, 1919, she bought 36 acres on Olive Hill, a beautiful tract of

land in quiet Los Feliz. Though at the time Wright was heavily involved in construction of the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo and consistently at odds with Aline, he designed a grand complex for Olive Hill. According to Wright's plans:

The private residence would be built first. It would be followed by the new theater complex to be built above an artificial lake extending from Hollywood Boulevard at the base of the hill. Reflected in its waters, the imposing main auditorium would rise upon a hillside esplanade, flanked by attendant studios and lecture halls. A restaurant was planned for the theater's roof, and other slopes of the hill would be occupied by residences for actors, artists, directors and others.¹⁰



Construction of Aline's poured concrete home, to be known as "Hollyhock House," began in late 1920. The house was a vaguely Mayan/Japanese style that Wright termed "California Romanza." Wright and Aline's battles continued, and she fired him. The architect Rudolph Schindler was brought in to finish the house. It was a disappointment to Aline. She found the rooms small, the low roofs leaky, and the walls damp. The doors were so heavy that she complained, "I need three men and two boys to help me get in and out of my own house!"¹¹ Other buildings, including a "director's house," were constructed on the property. Aline spoke freely to the media about the project, partially to quell the worries of Los Feliz locals. When asked if she was selling some of the land for hotel development, she said: "The average hotel is inordinately a vulgarity."¹² She announced Bel Geddes was to be her proposed commune's theatrical director. Aline explained:

The true director of the drama must be a designer, must be able to visualize and to make his own settings. It may seem difficult to obtain the combination of designer and director, but I think that I know the man who will be capable of realizing my plan.¹³

However, the plan met setback after setback. Litigation began with Wright over the project, Aline and Bel Geddes had a falling out, and Aline got the travel bug again. In 1923, she decided to throw in the towel. She offered "the crown of the hill," including Hollyhock House, to the city to be used as a library and a park. "I'm giving the property away as a library because I think the community out here deserves and

needs one," she explained. Amazingly, the city did not accept the gift until December 23, 1926. The gift included eight acres of land on the top of the hill. The California Art Club was given Hollyhock House for a term of 15 years, and the park was to be named in honor of Aline's beloved father, Theodore. The deed was wrapped in a holiday bow. Since Aline was in Europe, her lawyer delivered a speech to the city council:

[Aline] has a great love of children and she has in the past few years done much in this city for the children along these lines. During all of this time she has had in mind the creation in this city of an art center and recreation building and place for children, entirely different from the ordinary playground, which will develop in the children a desire for the beautiful and the noble things of life, and today she has culminated her thoughts and endeavors in the form of a most beautiful Christmas gift to the city of Los Angeles. ¹⁴

The Art Club immediately moved its headquarters into Hollyhock House, and the park became a "beehive of civic activities in art and child recreation." The Little Lattice Theater, an outdoor children's theater built in the park, was the hit of the summer of 1927:

Hundreds of women and children and not a few grown men are weekly visitors to the Little Lattice Playhouse... Since the development of this open air playhouse where the audience finds seats on the terraced turf, the programs have drawn increasing attendance to the extent that three times it has been necessary to enlarge the seating area. ¹⁵

The California Art Club had their formal opening on August 31st, 1927. Aline was in attendance and supplied 64 European posters to be exhibited outside for artists and advertisers to study. One review noted: "When you have seen all the exhibits, however, there still remains the best exhibit of all, the building itself. It is, for most people, a new experience. Go outside and walk completely around the house. There are no such beautiful walls in California as these. See how gracefully they rise one above the other and combine with swaying poplar trees. Neither age nor the imitation of age are necessary to make the walls beautiful." ¹⁶



A Municipal Muddle

Sometimes I may be wistful and lonely, the less and less as I grow older, but who that is sensitive and dreams and loves beauty is not?

--Aline Barnsdall ¹⁷

Sadly, the golden age of Barnsdall Park was remarkably brief. Aline became deeply involved in the fight to free Frank Mooney (he was finally pardoned in 1939), a labor leader who had spent years in jail for the bombing of the San Francisco Preparedness Day Parade in 1916. She offered financial support. She also used the ring of land around the park that she still owned (along the busy roads of Hollywood Boulevard and Vermont Avenue) to advertise his case on giant billboards. Some were designed by the architect Lloyd Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright's son, who had also worked on the construction of the buildings at Barnsdall Park. The signs were changed over the years to promote new progressive causes, much to the chagrin of city hall and the amusement of passing motorists.

Aline was also in a perpetual fight with the city. In 1931, her bid to donate more land to the park ended with several heated Parks Department meetings. She requested the return of the additional lands. Political infighting, suspicion over her liberal beliefs and large wealth, and plain jealousy kept tensions consistently high. She also infuriated many with her demand that no war memorials be built on her donated land. Aline felt enough was not being done with what she had already given, and many agreed with her. In 1940, the city finally returned one of the residences (called residence B) on the hill that she had donated for the use of working women and girls, since nothing had been done with it in nine years. The California Art Club was unable to keep up with the costs of repairing Hollyhock House (Wright's structures are notoriously fallible). By the early '40s the Club had vacated the property, and the Park buildings were in disrepair.

Oddly enough, Aline, the world traveler, spent her last years at 1610 North Edgemont, the home (also designed by Frank Lloyd Wright) that the city had returned to her.

She lived there with her twelve cocker spaniels, while Sugartop, now called Betty, lived nearby with her children. Aline and Betty had a contentious relationship. According to Herr, the double-jointed Betty had wanted to be a dancer, but Aline would not allow it, an interesting position for a "free-thinker." She had a better relationship with her grandsons. Always a lover of children, perhaps she took some comfort from the children that played in the unkempt park next door. But her fights continued with the city. In 1945, the fight took on absurd proportions when the city tried to make Aline remove barricades she had erected on her property. She had built the barricades to protect children playing on the hill above from falling into the traffic below. When she refused to take them down, the city did it for her as she protested.

You touch the barricades on my property at your own risk. They were put up to protect children playing on the steep bank in the park. The road is mine until it is dedicated. I demand this be done in 30 days and that a fence be erected along the west side on the park to protect the children!¹⁸

After the barricades were taken down, her dogs romped around the park. The city, out of spite, charged her with failure to obey the dog leash ordinance. Another man claimed one of her dogs had bitten him as he walked up to the park. In the end, Aline paid a \$100 fine. She died at her home on Dec. 18, 1946. That same year, Frank's son, Lloyd Wright, renovated Hollyhock House, saving it from almost certain demolition (a fate Residence B met a few years later).



By 1948, Barnsdall Park was so dangerous the local Los Feliz PTA stepped in to clean it up. The city reported that in the past year "50 tramps and degenerates" had been arrested in the park. It seemed Aline's dream had indeed died. But the Park saw a resurgence that year when Hollyhock House became the headquarters for the Clune Memorial Research and the Olive Hill Foundation. A temporary Municipal Art Gallery was built on the hill. After the foundation's successful residency, the city took control of the park. In 1963, it was registered as a National Historic Monument. A Junior Arts Center was constructed in 1967.

In 1971, the permanent Municipal Art Gallery, inspired by plans drawn up by Frank Lloyd Wright shortly before his death, was opened. The gallery included a theater, which no doubt would have pleased Aline. In 1975, the house underwent a \$500,000

restoration, again under the direction of architect Lloyd Wright. Numerous restorations have taken place over the years, as have numerous periods of neglect and continual infighting between different government agencies over control of the park. The park still remains a little known gem, a place where children play and the downtrodden sleep.



Information on Barnsdall Art Park and Hollyhock House can be found [here](#).

Information on the L.A. Municipal Art Gallery can be found [here](#).

Further reading: "The Oilman's Daughter: A biography of Aline Barnsdall," by Norman M. and Dorothy K. Karasick.