



**2015 Winner**

**Old Town Monrovia**

*Submitted by: City of Monrovia*

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### **Safe Environment that is Welcoming for All**

Old Town Monrovia is a 10 square block area spanning from Olive Avenue on the south to Foothill Boulevard (formerly Route 66) on the north and Ivy Avenue on the east to Primrose Avenue on the west. Yet, within that small area resides the heart of the City of Monrovia. From historic preservation to environmental stewardship to public art to special events, Old Town Monrovia represents the values of the community in many important ways.

Old Town Monrovia has achieved its status as a retail, dining, and entertainment destination for the San Gabriel Valley and beyond by providing a safe environment that is welcoming for all; it is truly a 100-year overnight success. Monrovia is the fourth oldest city in Los Angeles County, and the downtown area attracted businesses from surrounding communities. Downtown Monrovia was a thriving central business district from the City's incorporation in 1887, but by the early 1970's, downtown was a vacant shell of its former self. In order to compete with the sub-regional mall, the City contemplated many options; some based on the Urban Renewal ideas popular at the time.

After many discussions and several plans, through a citywide planning effort, it was decided that instead of trying to remake downtown, the proper direction was to identify, enhance and celebrate the history of Myrtle Avenue as the historic and emotional center of Monrovia. Using funding mechanisms available through the Monrovia Redevelopment Agency, the City of Monrovia embarked on a complete renovation of the streetscape along Myrtle Avenue, creating Old Town Monrovia.

The public investments helped to stave off further decline and encouraged some new businesses to open up shop in Old Town, however, by the 1990's, the community realized that if Old Town was going to thrive, it would need to become a destination, both for locals and throughout the San Gabriel Valley. A focused planning process resulted in a change in zoning regulations, creating the HCD (Historic Commercial Downtown) Zone, recognizing Myrtle Avenue's historic significance. Also out of that process also came Vision 2000, which outlined

the “soft” goals such as encouraging sidewalk dining, establishing a farmers market, and attracting an entertainment venue.

Vision 2000 ensured that Old Town Monrovia was designed with pedestrian oriented features, including curb bulb outs, mid-block crossings, pedestrian scale light fixtures and plentiful street furnishings. The downtown area is meticulously maintained, with clean streets and sidewalks, well-manicured landscaping, and vibrant lighting. Old Town extends its welcoming environment by offering free parking to visitors, an increasingly rare benefit in Southern California. Being the seat of the Civic Center, the feeling of a safe, welcoming environment is enhanced by the many police, fire fighters and City staff members that can be seen strolling in the area every day.

To add to this lively atmosphere, each Friday night from 5:00 to 9:00, Myrtle Avenue is closed to vehicular traffic and a Family Festival opens to the public. The Friday Night Family Festival is a tradition that includes a farmer’s market, unique food and craft vendors, live music and pony rides for children. It began as a farmer’s market in 1990, was expanded to a full festival in 1992 and attracts up to 5,000 people each week. In addition to this weekly event, Old Town Monrovia offers multiple retail and dining opportunities, and is home to the Krikorian Cinema, a 12-screen premiere movie house, which opened in 2000. Old Town Monrovia’s safe and welcoming environment makes it a Great Place in California.



## **Contribution to a Resident's Quality of Living, Encouraging Human Contact and Social Activities**

Old Town Monrovia contributes to the residents' day-to-day quality of living and encourages human contact and social activities. The City's civic center is seated in Old Town, with City Hall, the Community Center, the Monrovia Public Library, and Police and Fire Stations open daily to serve residents. In addition to being the center of civic services, Old Town Monrovia offers events throughout the year that cater to a wide variety of interests and enhance the lives of City residents by encouraging community engagement and social interaction. The following are some of the events that took place in Old Town Monrovia in 2014:

- Fountain to the Falls – 7 mile run/walk
- Fire Department Pancake Breakfast
- Monrovia Days Block Party and Music Festival
- Friends of Monrovia Public Library Book Sale
- Monrovia Association of Fine Arts Summer Art Walk
- Summer Concert Series
- Fourth of July Concert and Fireworks Show
- Cat and Dog Vaccination Clinic
- Street Rods Forever Classic Car Show
- Halloween Costume Contest and Trick-or-Treating
- Celebrate the Arts Event
- Native Plant Sale
- Holiday Parade and Tree Lighting
- New Year's Eve on Myrtle Avenue

These well-attended events are evidence that Old Town Monrovia represents the confluence of the many different citizen organizations that operate within the City. Indeed, the City Council, Planning Commission, Historic Preservation Commission, Community Services Commission, Monrovia Old Town Advisory Board, Library Board, Chamber of Commerce, Monrovia Historic Preservation Group and Monrovia Association of Fine Arts have coordinated efforts to make Old Town a premier local for social interaction and civic engagement. Old Town Monrovia is a Great Place that enhances the quality of life for residents and visitors alike.

## **Visually Interesting Design and Architectural Features/Unique or Special Character**

Historic preservation and visually interesting architectural features imbue Old Town Monrovia with history and capture the character of the City. When entering Old Town from the south, a decorative metal gateway spanning Myrtle Avenue announces your arrival to the district. Erected in 2010, the gateway was designed to welcome people to Old Town while blending in with the existing historic features.

One such historic fixture representing the culture of Old Town Monrovia is the Box Jewelers Clock, located at 518 South Myrtle Avenue since 1931. The 1920's lamppost type sidewalk clock, manufactured by Brown Street Company, was gifted to the Monrovia Historic Preservation Group and was designated

as a local historic landmark in early 2002. In the same year, the clock was restored and the crowning neon sign was repaired, adding to Old Town Monrovia’s unique character.

There are also several sites of historic significance in Old Town Monrovia. These historic sites richly illustrate the roots of Old Town and include the Keefer Building (also known as the Baxter Building), the Banning Block, the Neville Building, the Monrovia Savings Bank Building, the McKee Building, and the Bank of America Building Site. In 2005, the Old Town Interpretive Sign Ad Hoc Committee initiated a project to commission display signage to be installed at each site, giving a brief history of the location.

The Keefer Building (Baxter Building), located at 428 – 432 S. Myrtle Avenue, is the oldest commercial building in Old Town Monrovia, and the only historic site in Old Town that is constructed primarily of wood. It was built in 1886 for Col. Samuel Keefer and its early uses include a General Store, public meeting room, non-denominational church, drug store, grocery store, and a livery stable. In 1954, the building underwent an extensive renovation that removed the gingerbread trim and covered the building with stucco. However, in 2002, the building was restored to its original design and it remains one of the gems of Old Town Monrovia.



In 1923, The Monrovia Savings Bank Building, located at 402 S. Myrtle Avenue, a substantial brick building, was constructed to thwart the danger of fire, as many of the original wooden structures in Old Town had previously burned down. It operated as a bank for more than ten years before being divided into two storefronts. When the building was completely renovated in 2000, the historic elements on the exterior were restored. The building appears today much as it did in its original form and is a strong representation of the historic character of Old Town Monrovia.

Development that is sensitive to the character of the Historic Commercial Downtown zone has been a top priority for this district. One example of this is the 2003 addition and remodel of an Art Deco building located at 517 S. Myrtle Avenue. The building records are unclear, however, it was probably built in the late 1920's or early 1930's, when Art Deco building design was most popular. Typical features of Art Deco, such as linear, hard edge or angular details often with a vertical emphasis and highlighted with stylized decoration, were present on the building. The remodel and addition added 809 square feet to the rear of the existing building and 2,389 square foot second story that is used for offices. The decorative details of the addition were a simplified version of those on the existing building, and the remodel allowed for certain historic elements, such as the transom windows, to be restored to their original form. The addition and remodel successfully enhance the Art Deco style of the building while achieving the development goals of the property owner.

The special character of the City of Monrovia is alive and well in Old Town, where the utility boxes are painted to match the street names. The City is also famous for its local bear population, with the occasional ursine visitor descending from the foothills in search of food and water. One such visitor, Samson, also enjoyed a good dip in the hot tub! To honor Samson, in 2011, the City of Monrovia, in coordination with local artists commissioned several fiberglass bears to be decorated and placed throughout the City, two of which reside on Myrtle Avenue and welcome visitors to Old Town, lending a touch of whimsy and character to this Great Place that is truly Monrovia in nature!

### **Sustainable Design/Open Space/Public Art**

The City of Monrovia considers environmental stewardship a top priority, so it was with great care that the Monrovia Public Library, a cornerstone of Old Town Monrovia, was designed and constructed in 2009. In 2010, the Library received LEED Silver Certification for recycling of materials, energy efficient design, water conservation, and other conservation efforts. The Library boast sustainable cork flooring, carpets that contain up to 49% pre-consumer recycled content, low-or-no VOC paint and sealants, and recyclable furniture. Additionally, the steel used in construction contains a minimum of 25 percent recycled materials. Energy-efficient lighting, a high-efficiency HVAC, a cool roof, and landscaping designed for water conservation all contribute to the Library's sustainable design.





In addition to the building itself, Library Park is one of the most popular parks in the City and provides Old Town Monrovia with an important piece of open space. The park is 13 acres, and its landscaped area is home to native plants, lush lawns, and multiple shade trees, two of which are over 100 years old. The Morten Bay Fig tree in Library Park is the third oldest of its kind in California. In addition to the natural beauty found at Library Park, public art and historic structures lend character to this corner of Old Town Monrovia.

Two notable historic structures within the park are the Band Shell at the northwest corner and the Wishing Well at the southeast corner. The construction of the Band Shell was the first civic project completed by the Monrovia Rotary Club in 1928. It features a stage with a tiled-roof overhang and backstage area. Even 87 years later, the Band Shell is utilized each year during the Summer Concert Series.

The Wishing Well was primarily constructed from split granite quarried from Monrovia's own Canyon Park. It was donated to the City by the former Monrovia Farmers' Club in 1907 and has stood in Library Park since then. At one time, the Wishing Well housed the City bell, but, in more recent years, it has served as a drinking fountain. Unfortunately in August, 2013, the Wishing Well sustained considerable damage in a car accident. Since then, the City of Monrovia has partnered with the Monrovia Historic Preservation Group to restore it. This included crafting wood beams to match the originals and finding replicas of the painted tiles that decorated the roof. Though the restoration has taken over a year and is not yet complete, the reconstruction of the Wishing Well has remained a priority and is a stellar example of the emphasis the City of Monrovia places on preserving the character of Old Town.

In addition to these historic structures, Old Town Monrovia has also more recently acquired pieces of public art to enhance the aesthetic experience of Library Park. In 2003, a bronze statue of Mark Twain was acquired through the City's Art in Public Places program. Mr. Twain sits on a bench at the edge of Library Park and looks up from his book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In 2009, in conjunction with the completion of the Monrovia Public Library, a new water fountain feature was installed at the entrance to the library along Myrtle Avenue. The 30-foot diameter Art Deco-inspired fountain features a decorative central spout pedestal and custom glass tiles in green and black. The fountain not only adds to the beauty of the park, but also contributes to the sustainable design of the park by using re-circulated water, reducing the heat island effect, reducing ambient temperatures surrounding the water feature, and masking urban environmental noise.

When you take into consideration the safe, welcoming environment; the contribution to residents' quality of life through opportunities for civic engagement and social interaction; the unique historic architecture and visually interesting architectural features; the commitment to sustainable development, open space and public art; and the opportunities for retail, dining, and entertainment, it is clear that Old Town Monrovia is truly a Great Place in California.