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The signs herald apartments all over Southern California — El Morocco, Starlet, Hawaiian Palms and Desert Sands. The buildings themselves are nothing interesting. Dubbed dingbats, they are artless, boxy apartments that sprang up like weeds across a rapidly growing Southern California in the 1950s and '60s. But while they may not be very special architecturally, at least one woman feels that their signs are worth preserving.

Lesley Marlene Siegel has dedicated four and a half years to photographing the romantic signs on these buildings which are vanishing fast. "I want to document a part of our built environment that is disappearing," she says.

The result of her work is a collection of 2,000 photos of signs from 1950s and '60s apartment buildings. A selection of those photos is showing now at The Art Store Gallery in West Los Angeles.

Dingbats were generally small, two-story apartment buildings cantilevered over parking areas. Today, the buildings are old and dingy, lacking amenities and sometimes poorly maintained. Built cheaply 30 years ago, they have not aged well. Many, especially in the Valley and Santa Monica area, were badly damaged in the Northridge earthquake.

Some names are misleading, such as The Unique. Others are optimistic, like Mansionette.

For the show at the Art Store, Siegel displays several groups of photographs with common names. A

Signs of a time gone by



golden tint brings out the desert feeling in Tangiers, Casa-blanca, Desert Sands, Caravan and El Morocco. A film strip ties together cinematic names.

"Palm Proof '92: Update '94" started out as a collection of 36 palm names arranged almost like a proof sheet. Today, names like Sawtelle Palms, Cahuenga Palms, Alden Palms, Palm Terrace and Twin Palms fill an entire wall.

Siegel has been able to trace the names of several buildings she's photographed. When she is able to trace a name, she puts the photo of

Siegel is not particularly interested in preserving the buildings themselves, except that they represent affordable housing for many. It is the signs that interest her.

"I've always been attracted to signage," she says. "I like old movie house marquees and any kind of sign."

Unlike the massive apartment developments being built today, dingbats were usually built by individuals who were looking for a small but promising investment. These individuals gave their buildings interesting names to attract renters.

"People were so creative with the names," she says. "That's one of the things that makes it interesting."

They interested her so much that in 1990 she started photographing them. She drives through a neighborhood in the early morning, systematically cruising up and down the streets looking for the signs. She finds them everywhere and photographs the sign for her collection.

Many buildings are named after people, some were merely picked with attractive-sounding names to pique the interest of possible renters: Camelot, La Traviata. Others were creative plays on words: Shangri Lodge, Un X ld.

the name together with a historical remnant, such as a photo of the owner, with a short description of the building's name.

The show includes the original sign from the Roshdane Palms, hung next to the framed piece about its history. The builders were a couple with four children: Roberta, Sharon, Darleen and Neil. They took the first two letters from each child's name, put them together and created Roshdane.

They added Palms to the name because there were palm trees on the lot.

Siegel was also able to get the actual sign from the owners when it was taken down because of earthquake damage to the building. She owns about a dozen signs herself and is always looking for more.

Siegel has more plans for the collection. She has several theme pieces she wants to create, like a collection of politically themed signs.

She also sees themed pairs cropping up: Rita with Hayworth Arms, The Grace with Monaco.

With more than 2,000 photographs in her collection, Siegel sees no end to her project. "There are always more," she says. "Sometimes I'll drive through a neighborhood where I've been before and see one that I missed before."

LESLEY MARLENE SIEGEL HAS COLLECTED MORE THAN 2,000 PHOTOS OF APARTMENT SIGNS FROM THE 1950S AND '60S AND NOW SHE'S SHARING HER MANIA WITH EVERYONE.

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