

Rotary Club

Q: I was riding in a helicopter above downtown recently and saw giant numbers, most of them “10s,” in circles on the helipads of the buildings. What do they represent?



A: If you owned the building and your chopper wasn't loaded with lead, you could have landed on one of those pads—the numbers indicate the weight limit (“10” is shorthand for 10,000 pounds). An ordinance passed in 1974 mandated landing pads for any new buildings more than 75 feet tall (to accommodate helicopters fighting fires). Only executives, building owners, and dignitaries can use the docking stations, though getting around by helicopter might seem a bit gauche. A wayward machine touching down at a private port “would be like somebody parking their car in your front yard,” says command pilot Glenn Smith of the L.A. Fire Department.

Q: Is the 18th Street gang really on 18th Street?

A: Yes, and on 11th, 12th, and 17th, too. Rather than swing by for a visit (Ask Chris isn't one to pack heat), I consulted with Alex Alonso of the Web site streetgangs.com. The gang (an offshoot of the much older Clanton 14) formed more than 40 years ago on 18th Street in Pico-Union, the neighborhood bordered by the Santa Monica Freeway to the south and the Harbor Freeway to the east. It still has a stronghold there, but countless gangs outside L.A. and cliques all over the city have poached the moniker. “With that brand name,” says Alonso, “they get instant recognition.”

Q: For years somebody has been scooping out massive amounts of earth at La Cienega and Jefferson. I heard that the digging was a huge unknown public works

project to build a sewer tunnel from the Valley to the ocean.

A: Turns out there's already a major sewer main underneath that intersection, but frankly it stinks. So the city has cracked open the land to install a giant air freshener of sorts. The new Air Treatment Facility will use carbon filters and ravenous bacteria to gobble up those fumes traveling downstream from Toluca Lake. As for all the dirt they're digging out, you may notice another crew piling it high to build a stretch of the Metro Expo Line, the latest addition to our lightrail system.

Q: There's a great mod building at the top of Topanga Canyon that looks like a church. Was it once a nudist camp?

A: Modernism + bare necessities? Clearly this was some-

thing I had to investigate in person. Alas, aside from one senior seniorita in a bathing suit, everyone was fully clothed at Top o' Topanga, a deluxe mobile home park built in 1964. That enormous A-frame looming over the hillside is a clubhouse located next to the pool. Perhaps a little skinny-dipping occurs on triple-digit afternoons (not that I'm starting rumors), but the real nudist colony action happened four miles down the road at Elysium Fields, the famed clothing-optional resort that opened about the same time (and closed in 2000).



» Has the city got you stumped? E-mail your questions about life in L.A. to askchris@lamag.com.

Chris's Pick



See you there? Los Angeles history is notoriously low-profile, but the Archives Bazaar seeks to enlighten us about lesser-known collections of Southern California. Founded by the Getty and USC, the “L.A. as Subject” project hosts an annual conclave and publishes a guide to places like the Carl Jung Institute and the Black Surfing Association. This year curators from 75 organizations will put on the white gloves and unveil their treasures at USC's Davidson Conference Center on October 17.