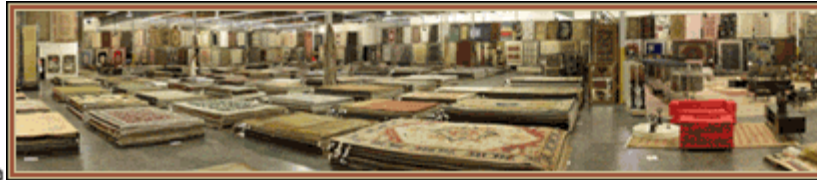


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## MODERN LIFE

### When the world roars by your door

Sirens, motorcycles, car stereos -- traffic noise doesn't defeat residents of one busy South Pasadena street. Coping has become second nature.

By Sean Mitchell

Special to The Times

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I distinctly recall how quiet Los Angeles sounded to me after returning from an extended sojourn in New York some years ago. I was living in a third-floor condo below the Sunset Strip in West Hollywood — hardly a pastoral setting, but compared to 111th and Amsterdam on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, it seemed eerily, beautifully peaceful.

There was the occasional car alarm or UPS truck, but nothing like the 24-hour cacophony of burglar-proofing that strafed my block in New York, along with the balcony boom boxes that lobbed pounding merengue music unbidden into my apartment for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

That year in West Hollywood seems like a long-ago and far-away idyll now that I am living in a house on a busy street in South Pasadena. When my wife and I were considering whether to bid on what was already on the outer rim of our price range, we sized up the rush of passing cars and thought, well, it will be *like living in New York*.

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#### FOR THE RECORD:

Street name: In Thursday's Home section, a photo caption on an article about living along a noisy street identified the South Pasadena location as Monterey Avenue; it is Monterey Road.

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Two years later, I can say that this presumption turned out to be true, in ways good and bad. Compared with our previous home in a more suburban setting, we are in the thick of things here, in walking distance of a Gold Line station and good restaurants, the public library and post office. The word "city" does not seem out of place, as it so often does in L.A. We're not next to a freeway, yet an urban hum is audible just outside the front door. We see buses and hear ambulances. When the windows are open in warm weather, bits of conversation waft in

over the hedge from the sidewalk.

The warning bells from the Gold Line have been a big issue in South Pasadena, but we're just far enough away not to hear them. The loudest sound probably comes from the fire engine horns that seem pitched to announce the end of the world, and the most intrusive noise comes from the unmuffled motorcycles and over-amped car stereo systems blaring from vehicles stopped at the light on the nearby corner. For some reason they're never playing Mozart.

We endure these occasional distractions in order to live in a well-preserved 1912 Craftsman that we would not have been able to afford if it were on a cul-de-sac or top of a hill. But as we continue to adjust to our new urban environment, the thought occurs that many people in Los Angeles live on busy streets, and as the city grows denser, the streets and neighborhoods are not going to get quieter. How do people on busy streets cope with the noise? Do they simply grow inured to it, tuning it out like the pounding surf at the beach? Or do they put in special walls, windows and doors to shut out the clamor?

The municipal code in many jurisdictions prohibits walls and fences higher than 3 feet at the sidewalk, but here and there, up and down our street, people have grown hedges tall enough to eliminate eye contact with the stream of cars. This can be of psychological, if not, physiological benefit. Shades are often drawn.

Fran, our next-door neighbor, told us she put in central air soon after moving in four years ago, so as to keep the house sealed and soundproofed year-round. Fred, across the street, has lived in his house for more than 20 years. He often can be seen in the mornings and evenings seated on his front porch, gazing out on the river of cars less than 30 feet away. When I asked him about the traffic noise, he shrugged as if it was of no concern. His bedroom, he pointed out, is on the side of the house farthest from the street. "So I don't hear it," he said. "It's never been a problem."

A longtime South Pasadena resident named Chris told me that the street got widened in the 1970s, pushing the traffic closer to the houses. "That's when the problem began," he said. "We have a den with a TV and the master bedroom at the back of the house. We try to stay back there, drink, take Xanax and relax. We have double-paned windows installed throughout the house, but they don't do much good. The traffic at 5 p.m. on a weekday can be deafening."

Still, Chris said, with housing prices what they were, he planned to stay put so that his daughter could attend the same highly regarded public schools as did he and his wife.

Marti, an educator new to the neighborhood, told me: "My philosophy so far has been that at least it's predictable background noise. Where we lived previously there was housing construction across the street for two years. Most mornings, I could guarantee getting awakened by a jackhammer or the beeping of a tractor backing up. So far, I've decided to hang heavy drapes in the front rooms even though I don't really like heavy drapes. And I've wondered how fast those cypress trees grow. I plan to play the stereo more than I'm used to."

SOUTH PASADENA, Los Angeles and the world are certainly louder now than when our house was built almost 100 years ago. Radio as we know it hadn't been invented, let alone the

500-watt, bunker-busting car stereo. As automobiles have gotten bigger, so have their tires, which apply more rubber to the pavement and raise more sound. And then there are those motorcycles.

Motorcycles, I learned, after a talk with a South Pasadena police sergeant, are noise-regulated when sold at a dealer, but some owners modify them later to be louder than legal. These noise polluters are subject to fines and can be required to fix their thunderous machines, but the sergeant said the offenders often pay the fines and then immediately restore their unmuffled mayhem.

As for the cars exploding with windows-down assault anthems: The drivers of these sound bombs are also violating the California Vehicle Code, which states that no driver shall permit the operation of "any sound amplification system which can be heard outside the vehicle from 50 or more feet." But enforcement of this law, as with cracking down on the modified Harley-Davidsons, does not appear to be a high priority in South Pasadena or anywhere else I have lived in Southern California.

Meredith, a young renter who lives closer to the street than we do in a first-floor duplex, sent an e-mail that said, "As I write this it feels like somebody's brakes are squealing inches from my head. I can feel every thump of the bass-driven jams blaring from stereos. I can hear marital fights conducted at the stoplight."

She has invested in heavy curtains ("faux suede and velvet works best") and a TV with surround sound, and also keeps an overhead fan running. But she's not thinking of moving. "I got over it. It's there, I accept. The neighborhood is too friendly, the rent too reasonable and the location (other than the traffic) too perfect for me."

Steve, an analyst for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California who recently moved to the block after 17 years in the relative tranquillity of Altadena, said: "It's been quite an adjustment. We turn up the TV if we're watching. The kids are often listening to their iPods." He has also spoken to his landlord about retrofitting his historic Craftsman with central air. "We deal with it the best we can. We're here till the kids get out of school."

After we bought our house, friends and relatives were quick to offer moral support with tales of their own. My mother reminded me that she had grown up in a house on a main street in eastern Pennsylvania where trolley cars rumbled past until late at night. Never bothered her, she said, and even helped her get to sleep at night.

A friend in Arlington, Va., said he and his family have lived under the approach to Reagan National airport in Washington, D.C., for 20 years. A resident of pricey La Cañada Flintridge told me that lying in bed at night, he can hear the trucks on the 210. Nothing's perfect, I guess.

So, we've started a hedge. We replaced the existing diaphanous lace curtains on the front windows with top-down-bottom-up shades that allow us to block out sight of the street at the eye line while leaving the upper third of the window open to the light. That's been a big improvement. It's true that we have gotten used to some of the additional sounds and don't notice the traffic as much, though we still find ourselves gravitating to the kitchen and den, the

rooms farthest from the street. We are thinking about getting central air and adding a fountain in the backyard.

But we like the house and want to stay here. Sometimes I try to imagine our lot plopped down at the corner of 111th and Amsterdam and what that would sound like. Immediately, I feel better.

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