

# The Quest to Save LA's Century-Old Batchelder Tile Masterpiece



*[The interior of the Chocolate Shop (which does not usually have a red carpet). Photos by Elizabeth Daniels.]*

On the ground floor of a run-down, four-story building at 217 West Sixth Street in downtown Los Angeles, on the block between South Broadway and South Spring, is one of the city's **greatest interior-architecture treasures**: an enchanting installation of custom tiles that renowned Pasadena artist and tile innovator **Ernest Batchelder** created for the Dutch Chocolate Shop one hundred years ago, in 1914.

Modeled after a German *bier stube* (beer hall), it was designed to be the first of a chain of soda parlors depicting different countries, but no others were built. Nearly every square inch of the deep, windowless interior, including walls, pillars, and the **groined-vault** ceiling, is covered in Batchelder's custom work. On the walls, 21 murals in *bas relief*—the larger ones are maybe six-foot by five-foot and are comprised of four-inch tiles—depict scenes of daily life in Holland. There's a Dutch boy and girl in wooden

clogs; the water gate at Hooen; fishermen with sailboats; bucolic landscapes with horse-drawn carriages; and street scenes, one of which features a storefront with the cheeky self-referential name "Chocolatte Shope."

The space, which later housed the beloved Finney's Cafeteria, was designated Historic-Cultural Monument Number 137 in 1975, and it's considered by many to be the designer's **most important commission**. "I'd say here in Los Angeles, it's the most famous installation Batchelder made," says Brian Kaiser, a tile expert devoted to research, identification, preservation, and salvage. "Every single tile is handmade from scratch by one of Batchelder's artisans."



*[The original interior of the Chocolate Shop. Photo via USC Archives.]*

The Chocolate Shop, however, is **shuttered most days behind a metal roll-up**

**door** and has been for the past two years. The frustrated proprietor, Charles Aslan, has been unsuccessful in his attempts to open up a secondary exit so that he can get a certificate of occupancy suitable for a restaurant; with the current exit, he's limited to an occupancy of 50 people.

The space's inaccessibility has roused the tight-knit and breathlessly passionate community of Batchelder **experts, tile aficionados, preservationists, and historians** who feel that such exemplary works of California design should be open and available to the public. After all, the murals were only uncovered in 2012, after having been boarded up for protection since the 1990s. (Here's [how the interior looked in 1997](#).) For years, anyone who went looking for the murals (including this reporter, in 2004) would find them hidden behind floor-to-ceiling retail displays of cell phone cases, Mexican blankets, and trucker hats.

Though its HCM status protects it from adverse impacts (any proposed changes to such properties are subject to review by the city's [Cultural Heritage Commission](#)), there's **no stipulation that a designated property remain open** to the public. Most HCMs are privately owned homes that sometimes open for tours.

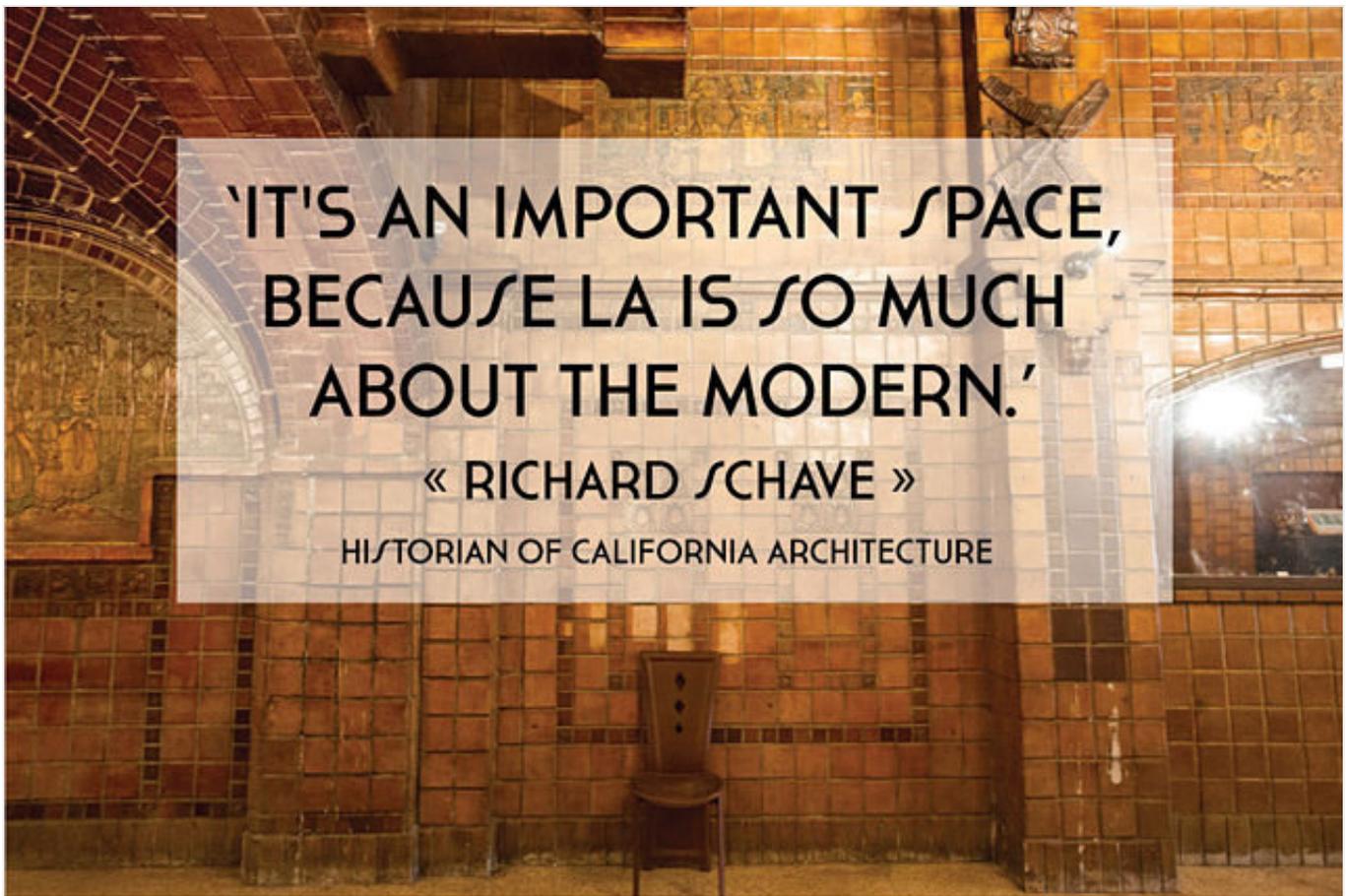
It's not the first or the only Batchelder installation under scrutiny. With the recent renaissance of Downtown and the development of buildings long out of use, a few other installations have been uncovered or newly discovered—and not necessarily preserved. Renovations to the El Dorado Hotel about eight years ago resulted first in the finding of a dazzling Batchelder lobby that had also been boarded up behind plywood—and then in the **disappearance or theft** of most of that valuable tile during the years-long construction period. The tile community was aghast: works from the Arts & Crafts movement, which stressed craftsmanship and the handmade, are particularly important to the city's architectural history, since Los Angeles is better known for its later, machine-age Art Deco buildings.

"The Chocolate Shop is really an incredibly classic space," says Richard Schave, a historian of California architecture. Schave and his wife, Kim Cooper, run Esotouric

tours and the Los Angeles Visionaries Association, which sponsors public tours of the Chocolate Shop. "It's an important space, **because LA is so much about the modern.**"

Joseph Feil, of the firm Plummer & Feil, who converted the space to a soda parlor in 1914, would go on to design the lobby of the magnificent [Oviatt Building](#) after traveling to Paris with James Oviatt in 1926. "The Oviatt lobby is a complete revolution of thought," Schave says.

That lobby, he points out, is now largely lost—more than 30 tons of etched-glass ceiling panels were sold off for \$50. It's careless transactions like these that informed preservationists are trying to prevent, and the handling of the Chocolate Shop is all too familiar, endangering one of the city's greatest architectural heirlooms.



"Clearly this is one of the most significant examples of interior tilework in the city," says

Ken Bernstein, the manager of the city's Office of Historic Resources, which oversees the designation of landmarks (HCMs). "It's **perhaps the most significant**, since we have very few designated Historic-Cultural Monuments that have been designated for the design of the interior."



Ernest Allan Batchelder was born in New Hampshire in 1875. After an arts education, Batchelder became an instructor of manual arts (metalwork, pottery, tile-making) at Throop Polytechnic Institute in Pasadena (now CalTech), where he served as the director of art from 1902 to 1909.

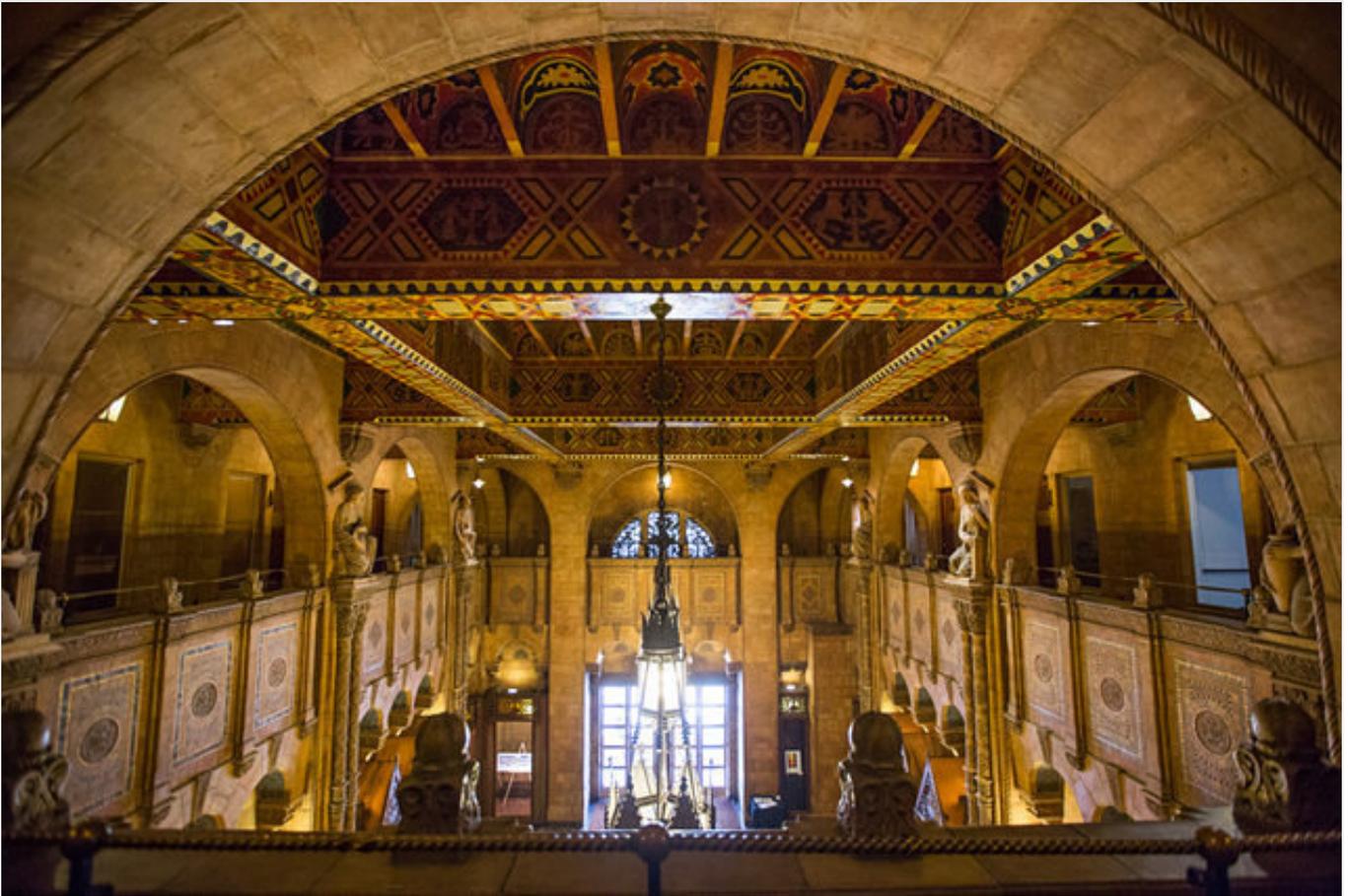
In 1910, after obtaining a permit to build a shed and kiln for \$300 behind his house, he set up a shop and school, where he fired his own tiles, including some for local architects like [Greene & Greene](#), essentially becoming the **first manufacturer of quality decorative tile** in the area.

Batchelder became known for his [distinctive style](#). First, he used a single-fire process called engobe. In engobe, a wash of colored clay slip (pale blue was popular) was applied to the surface of tile before it was fired, pooling in the recesses of the design. Excess was wiped off, and then the tile was fired. A glazed tile is fired twice—once before glaze, and once after, to seal the color. Batchelder wasn't the only manufacturer working in engobe, but his designs drew from the Middle Ages and helped set him apart: flowers, vines, and California oaks; birds, particularly peacocks; Mayan patterns; Byzantine themes; and geometric shapes.

When neighbors complained of smoke and soot, he relocated twice, ultimately partnering with Lucian H. Wilson to become Batchelder-Wilson and expanding to a staff of 175. At the factory, tiles were hand-molded, and Batchelder's motto was "No two tiles the same"—though one employee claimed a workman was hired to scratch the factory-made tiles with a stone to ensure that was the case. Early on, at least, it seems he wasn't too precious about the process: when he set out tiles to dry in his Pasadena yard, cats

and chickens would walk over them, lending added texture.

Meanwhile, Los Angeles was booming. In the 1920s, population more than doubled, from 577,000 in 1920 to 1.2 million by 1929. Tile was in demand, and clay was plentiful; more than 100 tile companies were prospering, including collectible names like Gladding McBean, Malibu, California Clay Products Co. (CalCo), Claycraft, and Catalina.



Because he was so prolific, Batchelder also received a number of commissions, including—in Los Angeles alone—ones for the **Roebing Building** in 1913; the Stowell Hotel, now known as El Dorado Lofts (HCM #1029), also in 1913; the Chocolate Shop, 1914; and the Fine Arts Building, HCM #125, in 1925. Batchelder's partner, Wilson, was a savvy marketer who opened showrooms in major cities across the States, so tiles can be found in homes across North America and many other locations, including the 1930s Hershey Hotel in Hershey, Pennsylvania; the pool area at the 1930s [London Terrace Apartments](#) in New York; and the **1923 Chapel at St. Catherine's College in St.**

## **Paul, Minnesota**, Batchelder's largest commission.

Though the Depression put Batchelder out of business in 1932, he continued to make pottery in a small set-up on Kenneloa Street in Pasadena; he died in 1957. Robert Winter, author of the definitive 1999 book *Batchelder Tilemaker*, lives in Batchelder's Pasadena house, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1978 ([Winter's nomination application](#)). Today, Batchelder's legacy—his prized tile—adorns properties in the Greater Los Angeles area and beyond.



The Batchelder name is so recognizable, and so prestigious, that it's often mentioned in Southern California real estate listings to add cache—even though oftentimes the tile isn't authentic. "I think Batchelder-*style* is often more appropriate," says Kaiser, who became interested in tile when he bought the home of Rufus Keeler, the manager of the Malibu and CalCo Potteries.

Scott Wells, owner of Wells Antique Tile & Pottery, has been selling antique tile for 22 years, and much of it is museum-worthy from the early-California period. When it comes to value, he says, "Condition is all important. A chip or crack will take down the value. A never-set tile"—a tile that's never been installed—"is harder to find. But what matters is the condition. You could get a salvaged tile, and if you get a real expert to clean it, it'll be as valuable as one that's never been set," he explains. And he knows tile. "We have more antique tile for sale than anyone in the world. I'm an expert," he says matter-of-factly, "because I've had the most in my hands."



At his brick-and-mortar shop, Wells Tile (which is now under one roof with another business, Eric's Architectural Salvage, owned by Eric Ramos), and online at several sites including [his website](#) and an [eBay store](#), Batchelder pieces range in price by size and by rarity. Large tiles are more valuable than small, and scenic is more valuable than geometric; **anything signed Pasadena**, from the early days, is worth twice as much. Generally speaking, 4x4-inch tiles sell for about \$150; 6x6 for about \$250; and the rare 12x12 size sells for \$2,500. A tile depicting a Viking ship, two feet by two feet, recently sold for \$6,500.

"Even in South Central," says Wells, "**every third house has a Batchelder fireplace.**" He and Ramos are passionate about salvage, and make offers to buy installations in residences or at locations where there's a renovation, but often the damage is done before they can intervene. "People buy houses that have amazing tiles, and they tear them out, ruining a \$20,000 installation. To me, it's a crime, but it happens all the time."

"It's kinda corny," he says, "but I say I recycle beauty. It is recycling, but it's beautiful things. We're not recycling Coke cans."



Antique tile is so valuable that it's sometimes **stolen from construction sites during renovation**, as is allegedly the case at the El Dorado Lofts on Spring Street, also known as the the Stowell Hotel or the El Dorado Hotel. And many tile experts (though most declined to speak on record) are suspicious about the Batchelder tile that remains, believing it to be reproduction.

The tile in the building's grand lobby came to light around 2005, when developer Gilmore Associates began converting the dilapidated 1913 Gothic- and Art Nouveau-style El Dorado Hotel into condos. Plywood had previously covered access to the area, sealing it off like a forgotten time capsule. Even the Batchelder historian Robert Winter was unaware of the "**very somber but very beautiful**" tiles, as he told the *Los Angeles Times*. The tiles had been painted over but, Winter said at the time, they **could be restored**.

Pomona-based Spectra Company worked with architect Rocky Rockefeller on the historic restoration and preservation. But over the course of the two- or three-year project, according to Project Manager Reuben Lombardo, much of the tile went missing.

"Interior finishes are the last thing you do," he says. The first phase is removing some tile to make way for structural stabilization, next is electrical and plumbing. "Between phase one and three years later, a lot of the tile had mysteriously disappeared."

Lombardo estimates that about 80 to 90 percent of the Batchelder tile now at the El Dorado is original. Where tiles were damaged or missing, he said, artisans made replacements using glass fiber reinforced concrete (GFRC), following the Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

Tile experts, though, don't put credence in that figure. When I first talked to Brian Kaiser, he'd said, "I have worked with thousands of original Batchelder tiles for almost 30 years. At the time that the El Dorado was built, Batchelder made only engobe-style tile. I have been in the El Dorado several times, and I cannot find any engobe tile in the entire lobby. The tile has a very strange finish that is not like any Batchelder tile I have ever seen before. In my opinion, there is not any original Batchelder tile left in the lobby."

The eccentric and revered tile cleaner Sweet Ol' Bill—"only my competition calls me by my initials"—believed the same. "Absolutely every single tile in there is reproduction," said Bill, whose full name is William Rupert Casey.

Casey's suspicions about tile theft at the El Dorado **led to his arrest** in 2007, when he showed up to inquire about a job opening at the site and found tiles buried in several mounds of dust on the floor, as if someone was hiding them to steal and resell. But before Casey—an expert at removing tiles from walls and a mad scientist whose secret formula can clean inches of concrete from the backs of salvaged tile—could report his find to a supervisor, he was apprehended. When he returned for a formal job interview a few days later, an LAPD detective was present and took him to the L.A. County Jail. He was ultimately released two weeks later, when a judge dismissed the case.



When the judge asked Casey if he had anything to say, Casey says he told him, "Something fishy is going on at the El Dorado Hotel."

The tile that remains in the lobby, according to Lombardo at Spectra, is indeed 80 to 90 percent original Batchelder—but it's **covered with acrylic** because the original engobe

was "a little eclectic" for the owner's taste. "If I went into the site," he said, "I might think 90 percent are reproduction too, because they don't have that original finish."

Bernstein, in the Office of Historic Resources, initially wasn't aware of any rumors around the tile, but conferred with the city's preservation architect Lambert Giessinger after a number of sources expressed their concerns to me anonymously. "[Giessinger's] understanding," Bernstein wrote in an email, "is that there may have been some abrasive cleaning method used on some of the tiles and, in an attempt to 'repair' the work and make the tiles more uniform...the acrylic finish was used."

In its [Historic-Cultural Monument application](#), "Batchelder tile" is listed as one of the considerable features of the interior, along with its grand staircase to a mezzanine, Grueby tile, and plaster moldings. [One real estate listing](#) states that "the ground floor showcases what is thought to be **the largest area of intact Batchelder tile in the world.**" The building was designated HCM 1029 in 2013.

Some preservationists are befuddled both by the acrylic finish—"If it's all painted acrylic," Kaiser asks, "how can they still call it original Batchelder?"—and by the question of what's underneath. "We have no way of knowing now what is really under the acrylic," says Kaiser.

The renovation of the tile was completed before the Office of Historic Resources review, but since designation, says Bernstein, "Lambert has encouraged the [owners] to consider seeking out authentic Batchelder tiles that would allow for a **more authentic replication** of the historic character of this space."



The disappointing loss of tile at the El Dorado is another reason why preservationists have a watchful eye on the Chocolate Shop, and on how the proprietor, Charles Aslan, is managing the space.

Aslan is from a family of property owners. In the 70s and 80s, Charles' uncles, Moses and Ezra Aslan, owned a great deal of property in downtown Los Angeles, including the Dutch Chocolate Shop building. Charles, an affable salesman and a high school dropout, was raised in Singapore and Hong Kong before coming to Los Angeles at the age of 13. (Aslan is actually fluent in Dutch, since his family lived in Dutch-colonized Indonesia.) He's run a number of businesses, from printing to furniture to electronics, but struggled financially after a divorce and "a nightmare situation" in family court. In 2012, at age 53, he struck a deal with his uncle to run the Chocolate Shop.

Aslan would like to **turn the shop back into a restaurant**, but he's required by the Department of Building and Safety to have a secondary exit opposite or adjacent the main one, which will increase the allowed occupancy from 50 people to around 200 (depending on a number of factors). To create this exit, Aslan wants to **reopen a passageway** that once led from the rear of his space into the perpendicular Spring Arcade shopping center, a building that connects Broadway and Spring and is owned by the powerful downtown landowner Joseph Hellen of Downtown Management (whose office declined to comment).

The two parties had tentatively agreed on terms for the reopening, which stipulated that Aslan would lease space in the Arcade as his family had done in the past. The lease was part of the deal, because the passageway stands to benefit the Chocolate Shop more than it does the Arcade. (The Arcade bridges between busier thoroughfares with more foot traffic, while the Chocolate Shop is on a sleepier side street.) Aslan says that Downtown Management would like to buy his family's building, but the Aslans don't want to sell.



In recent years, Downtown Management has renovated the three-story, sky-lit Beaux Arts- and Spanish Baroque-style Arcade, filling it with more upscale restaurants and converting upper floors to apartments. According to Aslan, the lease he was offered was more than what he'd heard other tenants were paying; plus, he says his credit was shot after the ordeal in family court. The two parties couldn't strike a deal.

As a result, the Chocolate Shop remains closed, but it opens occasionally for events and tours, like the ones organized by Richard Schave and Kim Cooper. Schave, who studied California architecture at Occidental College under the Batchelder scholar Robert Winter, modeled the idea on Winter's monthly bus tour, "L.A. on a Six Pack."

It was a tour of Schave's in 2012, "[The Lowdown on Downtown](#)," that led to the removal of plywood that covered the murals at the Chocolate Shop, newly under Aslan's management. Schave was standing with his tour group among the electronics vendors and reading aloud from William Morris's "[Manifesto](#)" about the protection of ancient

buildings.

"The credo is that you can't actually repurpose old buildings," he explains. "It's so stupid for downtown," he says. "Old buildings need new ideas."

At one point they noticed that the back was actually open, and work lights illuminated the area. The group of 50 pushed on, waving flashlights on their cell phones to get a better look. Cheers erupted when they saw a mural. "I told Charles what I knew," says Schave, "and next I know he was emptying the space out."



Aslan researched the building, relocated the electronics vendors to other family-owned retail shops, and began a grand plan to restore the space to its original intention: he'd become a purveyor of fine hot cocoa, open a restaurant, **perhaps manufacture tile on an upper floor**. Tile enthusiasts and historic preservationists went wild with anticipation, and the *Los Angeles Times* [ran a feature](#) on the development: "Batchelder

tile prompts dreams of sweet future for L.A. building." Aslan, it reported, was trying to "find investors and get permits" and planned to open in a few months.

But the reopening of the passageway has remained an obstacle. What was once the secondary exit—the passageway into the Spring Arcade Building—was bricked up in 2002 after a ten-year lease, during which time Ken Aslan, Charles' cousin, rented space in the Arcade.

Ken Aslan, in 1999, spearheaded the still-active [Historic Core Business Improvement District \(BID\)](#), an ambitious endeavor to improve conditions in downtown Los Angeles. But in 2003, he [was criticized](#) for his practices as a landlord in the Historic Core, where he received a number of code violations. [LA Downtown News reported](#), "Some say Aslan's neglect for his buildings represents a family tradition" because the family "... failed to invest significantly in the upkeep and improvement of their buildings."

Considering his relatives' property, the Chocolate Shop, Ken said in that same article from 2003 that if he owned it, he'd **maybe try to bring in an International House of Pancakes**.

In the 90s, Charles says, the city did take his family to court for making changes to the interiors that covered the Batchelder murals, but because of the bustling electronics vendors, it was decided, he says, "**better to cover them than leave them exposed.**"

Charles bumped heads with the city again, earlier this year, when he alarmed the Office of Historic Resources with his plans to sell one of the murals as a means to fund the building of a secondary exit other than via the Arcade passageway. The mural in question is one he'd found upstairs, boxed up as loose tile. When assembled, it's a scene of a man and a woman walking a dog, with a ship in the background.

"It's priceless," Aslan said. "It's like a Rembrandt or Picasso—worth well over one million."

"We were quite alarmed to see that message," said Bernstein, the manager at the Office

of Historic Resources, as any removal of historic features from the landmark property would require a permit. "Any violation would be subject to code enforcement by the city of Los Angeles," he said, "and failure to take corrective action could result in prosecution."

As for the estimated value of the murals—not that they're for sale—tile-seller Scott Wells asked, "How can you place a value on those?" They're custom, so the designs weren't sold to the public; it was Batchelder's first custom job; and "nothing is as dramatic," he says. "I would say **\$50,000 and up for each mural**, and that's a conservative estimate."



"No tiles in the history of mankind have gone for a million," he added, though at an auction conducted by Rago Arts and Auction Center in 2012, a four-tile 1910 [panel of a peacock](#) by early 20th-century potter Frederick Rhead was estimated at about \$40,000 and fetched \$637,500. The peacock panel was a 20-inch square; the Batchelder murals

are roughly six-by-five feet.

Even if Aslan gets a secondary exit, there's still the enormous cost of restoring the tiles. Charles Kibby, the president of Preservation Arts, gave an estimate of around **\$300,000-\$350,000 for a full restoration**, which would include cleaning, demo, and installation, plus new custom floor tiles appropriate for the color and style of the room. Then there's the question of restoring the tiles back to one of two versions: The owners weren't pleased with the coloration of Batchelder's original work, so they hired an artist to paint over the tiles, and he sealed his work in shellac. Though the murals seem appropriate today in shades of chocolate brown, it's actually a discoloration from the darkening of the shellac, a discovery made by Kaiser.

The space is mostly empty now, dotted with furniture and accessories for sale from Aslan's previous businesses—Indonesian imports, rustic benches, some reproductions, a sculpture of a dolphin riding a wave.

This spring, Aslan says, he pursued a number of leads to reopen the passageway. He thought the passageway may have been closed up without proper permit, but the Department of Building & Safety determined it was closed according to code. He met with Downtown Management again, to no avail. Aslan says he's embarrassed that he hasn't been able to bring his plans to fruition after so much publicity, and he seems to feel on the outs with the city decision-makers and the more powerful property owners around him.

"Maybe I'll turn it into a retail shop and shut down tourists," says Aslan, "or maybe I'll start a tile business, I don't know. I wouldn't want to have a retail business with tile exposed, so I have to cover it up so it won't get damaged," he said. "It would be a crying shame to do that—you can't imagine the followers who want to see this place."



Though it's been two years since plans for a restoration were announced, fans still seem hopeful. Linda Pollack, a curator and consultant who was involved in plans for the reopening and manages the website [Countdown to Batchelder](#), says the site still attracts readers from around the world. "I receive a few email sign-up requests a week," she says.

"It has been our hope," says Bernstein, "that Mr. Aslan would be **taking every possible step to bring the shop's interior back to its glory**, and to make it much more accessible to the public, in keeping with the exciting revitalization of downtown's Historic Core that's occurring all around it."



While the fate of the Chocolate Shop is yet to be seen, Batchelder fans are excited about the news of a never-before-recognized custom installation ca. 1913 at the Roebing Building, 216 South Alameda. [Angel City Brewery](#) has been in operation since 2012, after the red brick building had been closed for years. During an event the brewery hosted, Richard Schave led a small tour into the space through a lobby reserved for employees, and he recognized the tile immediately. Along the walls were **custom tiles depicting the many uses of wire-rope suspension cable**—an invention by Prussian civil engineer John A. Roebling that revolutionized the building of bridges. (In 1867, he began the Brooklyn Bridge.)

The Roebing building once served as a West Coast distribution hub for the cable, and a massive steel slide from the upper level to the ground floor still exists in the brewery's main area; it was used bring down large spools of steel suspension wire that were then loaded onto train cars on the tracks nearby. Another charming feature of the lobby is the handrail on the spiral stair that looks like a twisting black rope: it's made of wire suspension cables.

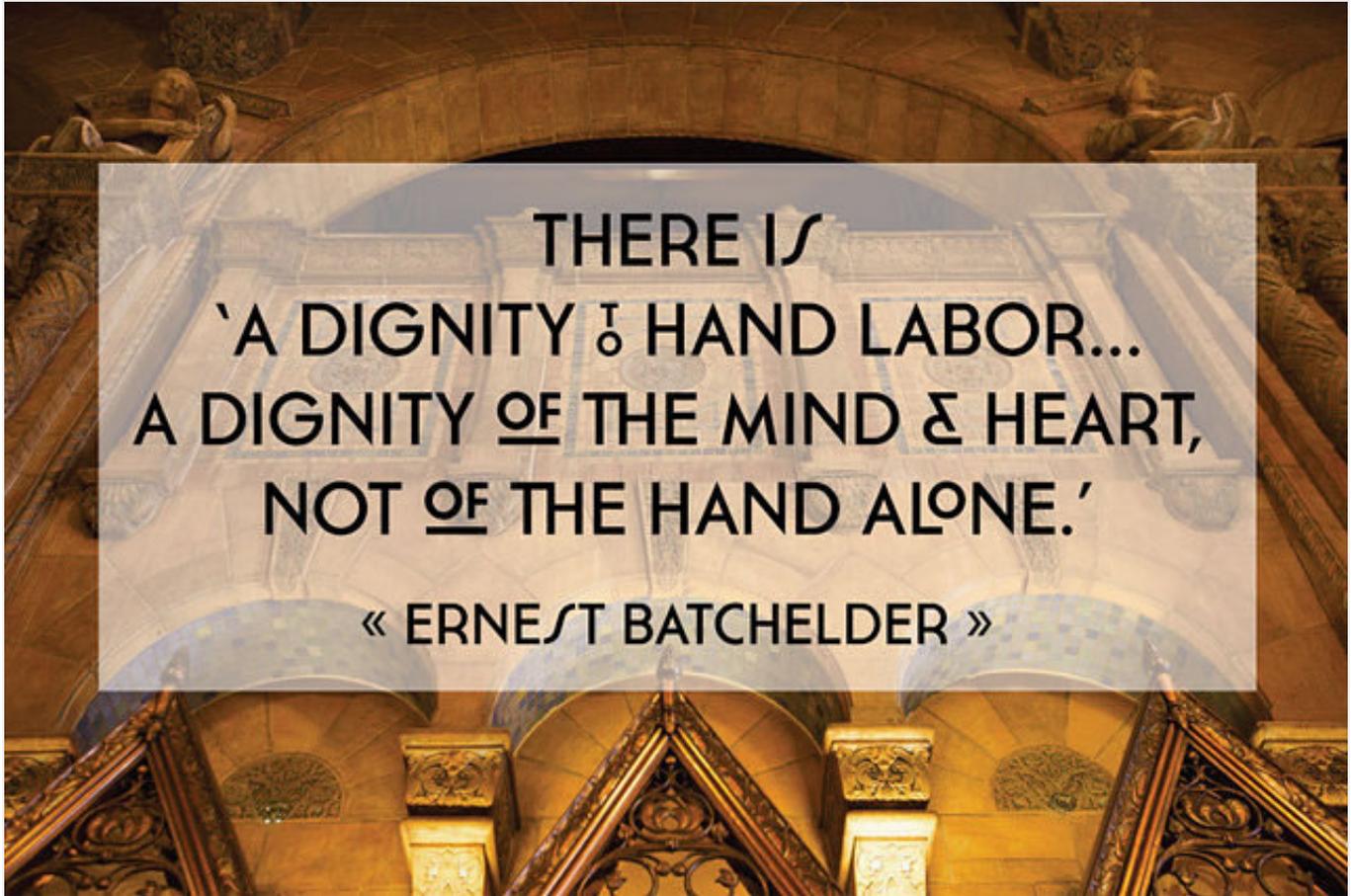


"I was always fascinated by the tiles but didn't understand their significance when we took over the building lease," says Brewery Director Alan Newman. "We've tried to figure out how to make them more visible to foot traffic, but have not yet been able to make that happen," he says, adding that he would continue to show them to anyone interested or who wants to give a lecture about them. A tour hosted by Brian Kaiser and Richard Schave drew about 35 people.

Batchelder is popping up elsewhere, too. Tile designer **Cha-Rie Tang** of [Pasadena Craftsman Tile](#), who makes what she calls "**Batchelder Revival**" tile from original **Batchelder molds** and with her own glazes, won a commission to design a tile installation for the Monrovia train station, scheduled for completion in 2015. For the vertical surfaces of the outdoor column bases, her vision is to make "almost like a Noah's Ark" of Batchelder tiles.

"I'm trying to gather a lot of his designs to preserve them and have as a sort of museum,"

she says. "It's a representation of the passage of human time using architectural tiles."



*[Graphics by Suze Myers]*

Tile might be on the verge of a comeback, if the increased demand Tang is seeing for the Batchelder look is any indication.

"It's not just the old people being nostalgic," she says, noting that she's recently been commissioned for tilework on four homes for families just starting out. "A lot of young people like the mix of modern and old. I think I'm at the beginning of a new movement where we're combining the rustic feel of Arts & Crafts tile with the clean modern look."

"People want to be back to using their hands," she continues. "There's a whole movement of DIY and back to nature. People want to feel at home, rooted. It's not all virtual reality, it's real reality."

During this digital age, a renewed interest in the handmade parallels the Arts & Crafts movement of Batchelder's era, itself a response to the Industrial Age. As Batchelder wrote, there is "a **dignity to hand labor**...a dignity of the mind and heart, not of the hand alone."

- [Batchelder](#) [Curbed LA]
- [Curbed Features](#) [Curbed]