

A Walking Tour in America’s Most Car-Happy City

By Hillary Richard Apr 25, 2022

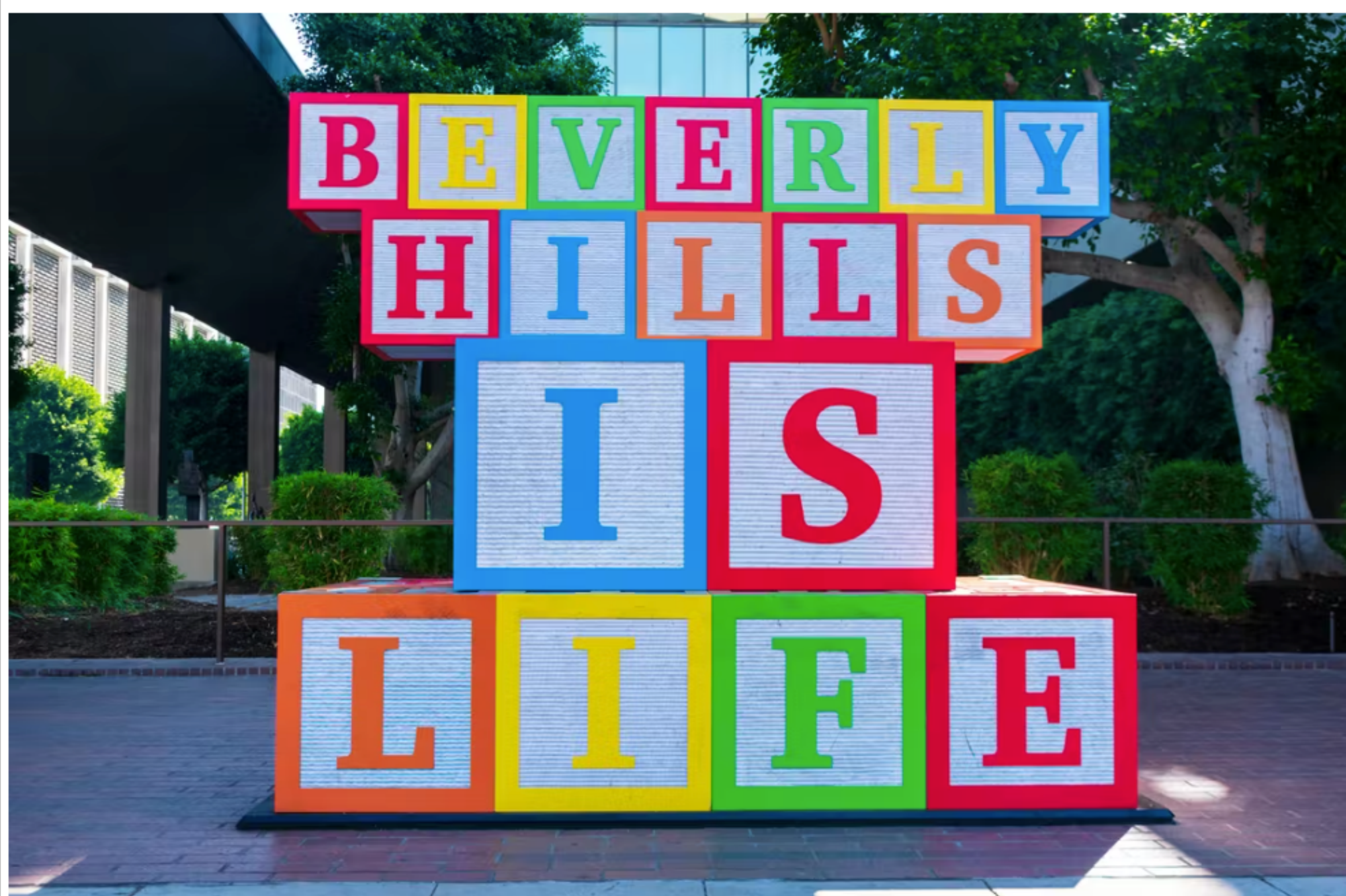


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For Banksy street-art protégé Mr. Brainwash, "life is beautiful" (and so is Beverly Hills).

Los Angeles isn’t what one might call the most walkable city in the U.S.—unless you know where to look.

From the air, Los Angeles looks like a web of roads with little toy cars crawling, zooming, crisscrossing. Los Angeles County has about 515 miles of freeways and expressways—including the infamous 405 (14 lanes wide in parts), which is one of the busiest roads in the United States and an essential artery keeping L.A. pumping.

Car culture is king in this Southern California city. But leave the freeway and turn onto Santa Monica Boulevard to discover the palm tree-lined streets of Beverly Hills, plus something even more exotic: pedestrians.

Beverly Hills has the distinction of being one of the most walkable neighborhoods in a city not known for its downtown foot traffic. Here, you could wander around perfectly manicured streets full of elegant homes that seem practically suburban . . . until you cross a few blocks. Among the designer shops, glamorous hotels, and recognizable restaurants is Beverly Hills’ public art—something I never would have noticed while behind the wheel.

Beverly Hills doubles as an outdoor museum thanks to its Public Art Ordinance, which requires developers to either buy a piece of art for their property or donate to the city’s Arts and Culture Commission, a group established in the early 1980s to promote cultural and artistic programming and encourage permanent art installations. Since 2015, more than 70 pieces of art have been installed across 5.7 square miles. For a fun way to get to know the city, I took myself on a self-guided public art tour using the city’s free [Explore Beverly Hills](#) app.

Beverly Hills Art Walk (budget at least two hours)

Start at Wilshire Boulevard

At Wilshire Boulevard and North Beverly Drive, the larger-than-life *Unconscious* sculpture looms over the corner. Some liken this pink Franz West work to a charismatic worm, though I saw something closer to an otherworldly praying mantis.

Rodeo Drive

Then I moved on to world-famous Rodeo Drive, where Mr. Brainwash (a protégé of Banksy) created *Life Is Beautiful*, a perfectly placed, oversized cursive-lettered statue that seemed to beg people to take a photo. Sure enough, only a few feet away is a red paparazzi statue. (I feel seen, Mr. Brainwash.) Down the street, *New Piece* is a lot easier to miss. This black hexahedron (a six-sided figure) looks like a slightly off-kilter cube. Pioneering minimalist sculptor Tony Smith intended its angles to be nonthreatening and emotional. Ironically, this incredibly understated piece now sits by the Gucci Building on maximalist Rodeo Drive.

North Camden Drive

Once I left Rodeo Drive, I ventured over to the corner of South Santa Monica Boulevard and North Camden Drive. I was intrigued by Victor Salmons’s statue of an elderly couple, *Gordon and Lily*, who are perpetually trying to cross the road. At first the bronze statue suggests a symbol of love in old age. Up close, their diminutive stature and concerned looks as they hold onto each other for support appear more like a commentary on aging in the modern world. Only steps away, another piece by Mr. Brainwash underscored that point. A colorful resin sculpture of larger-than-life children’s blocks spells out “Beverly Hills Is Life” (the title of the piece) on one side, and “Smile” on another.



Photos by Hillary Richard

From left: 'Takeaway' by contemporary American sculptor Tom Friedman; building developers in Beverly Hills have to either buy and showcase art, or donate to a fund.

Beverly Gardens Park

Next, I walked less than five minutes to Beverly Gardens Park, a 22-block-long manicured green space with fountains, plaques, and plenty of large sculptures. Enter the park at the intersection of Rodeo Drive and Santa Monica, where you’ll find *Takeaway* by contemporary American sculptor Tom Friedman. Here, a man appears frozen midstride, as he balances a tower of takeout containers on his head. *Is the sculpture made of tinfoil, a nod to its subject matter?* I wondered. It’s actually stainless steel, a sort-of hardening of the balancing act. The comical piece is 14 feet tall and seems to be a lighthearted jab at hustle culture and our need for instant gratification.

Modern art by bold-faced names appears on the third block of the park. Ringo Starr created an 800-pound shiny replica of his hand flashing a two-fingered peace sign for his *Peace and Love* sculpture. Across the street is artist Ai Weiwei’s rust-colored sculpture *Iron Root*. Weiwei is famous for mixing natural subject matter with subtle political commentary. Iron root (named after a type of Chinese tree and modeled after roots of a tree found in the Brazilian rain forest) conjures up separate themes of strength, feeling “uprooted,” and a disregard for nature.

Keep an eye out for *Hunter and Hounds* by Frenchman Alfred Jacquemart, a centuries-old outlier amid the modern art. This 1866 bronze sculpture of a man and his two curious hound dogs was originally in Château-Thierry, France. Prominent Beverly Hills resident Willis D. Longyear acquired it, then donated it to the city from his personal collection as a memorial to his son, who died in the battle of Château-Thierry during World War I.

A block farther, on North Rexford Drive, is Millard Sheets’s *El Camino Real*. The mural depicts a scene from California’s Spanish colonial past, where a man and a woman on horseback travel past curious onlookers. This mosaic from 1971 originally lived in the Beverly Wilshire Hotel’s motor court. Now, the designated historic landmark sits above the entrance to the Civic Center parking lot.

Burton Way

Around Civic Center Drive and Burton Way, the art gets even more colorful. *Sisyphus* is a large red sculpture by Alexander Liberman made of salvaged steel beams, tank drums, and giant pipes, intended to evoke baroque sculpture and architecture. Alexandra Nechita’s *Love Anatomy* is a tall cubist woman, conjuring female power and love. Baile Oakes’s *Spiral of Life* looks vaguely like a brown skate ramp made of redwood. *Folded Square—Alphabet G* is a blue geometric piece by sculptor Fletcher Benton inspired by (you guessed it) the letter G.

There are plenty of other artworks outside of this itinerary. Some are silly, some are eye-catching, some blend in with the scenery a little too well. But if you take the time to stroll, you’ll start to notice a variety of styles and themes that help make Beverly Hills what it is today.