



## Fourteen Ways of Looking at Los Angeles

*For this issue dedicated to the City of Los Angeles, arcCA sought views of L.A.'s built environment from a diverse, super-baker's-dozen of authorities. These are their thoughts, grouped under six arbitrary sub-headings: Getting Better, Getting Denser, Getting Around, Getting Down, Getting Out and Getting About.*

### Getting Better

#### What Kind of Paradise?

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I grew up during a time of tremendous growth in L.A., the 1960s. I recall playing on home construction sites in the hills of South Pasadena and collecting the metal punch-outs from electrical boxes as if they were gold coins. At that time, it felt as though we lived in a quite

rural place, happily climbing trees and roaming hidden corners of the undeveloped landscape. This was an abundant natural environment full of giant eucalyptus trees and rolling hills. For most of the time until the 1960s, this could have described many parts of southern California; the idea that it would soon dramatically change was far from anyone's mind.

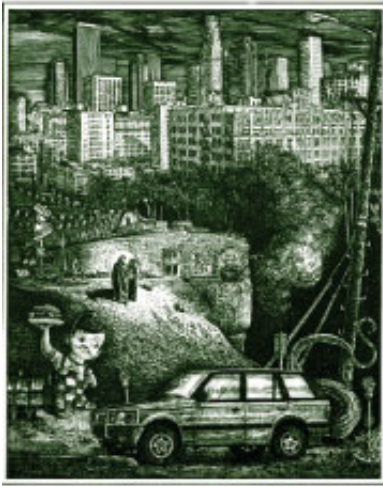
The transition from this child's paradise to a denser and grittier Los Angeles has been a difficult one, probably because no one wanted to admit it was our destiny; no one wants to change one's own version of paradise. Yet by the time I graduated from high school in 1976, there were signs of extreme crisis. We had over 150 first stage smog alerts in the year that I took up distance running with the school track team. Despite such horrors, the 1976 attempt to integrate the first HOV lane in Los Angeles was a famous political disaster, resulting in the installation (and hasty removal) of "diamond lanes" on the Santa Monica Freeway. Other hopes for transportation relief, such as regional rail transit proposals, had failed in both 1968 and 1974. By the time I graduated from college in 1980, things had further deteriorated, and we had over 200 first stage alerts. It obviously was difficult for people to make concessions to the freedom offered by the automobile and the desire to retreat to the private realm; it would require much more time for public opinion to adjust to the idea of Los Angeles as an urban place. It has taken some rather hopeless years in which Angelenos have suffered the pressures of growth. We have had to weather freeway shootings, riots, excessive pollution, and two-hour commutes in order to realize that there must be a better way to live.



Finally, we have responded. Population growth, pollution, and the cost of housing have encouraged us to build greater density, to seek transit alternatives, and to revitalize our aging downtown. The results are encouraging. By 2002, we had gone through two consecutive summers without a single, first stage smog alert. Our ailing downtown has experienced a renaissance, with nearly 20,000 residential units planned or under construction. Southern California now has a total of seventy-three miles of light rail and subway lines, nearly 700 miles of HOV lanes, and an express bus that inexpensively connects the airport to downtown. There are signs that people are finally aware that long commutes from low-density suburbs are not the only way to enjoy living in Los Angeles.

Although Los Angeles has a long way to go to become a truly integrated urban environment in terms of housing, social needs, transit, place-making, and sustainability, it is striking how far we have come. Thirty years ago, we knew there were problems but were reticent to embrace meaningful solutions. In contrast, today there is incredible optimism and an eagerness to try new approaches. Although my

pleasant childhood memories are difficult to forget, it is now possible to imagine Los Angeles as a new and very different kind of paradise.



### Getting Denser

#### The Polymorphous Polyvalent Polis or Can Sprawl Spawn Splendor?

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L.A. is a sprawling metropolis metastasizing beyond control. /L.A. is a fertile and flexible urban network supporting innovation and adaptation.

As in all clichés, there are truths in both statements. L.A. has its share of dysfunction, often observed with *schadenfreude*. It has its inequalities, its pretensions, and its noir secrets. But its other secret, particularly to those who know our city only in passing, is that L.A. is a rapidly evolving ecology, which supports innovation in the arts, science, and industry, and

which accommodates a diversity of patterns of living and working.

The overlay of horizontal sprawl (of some 1600 square miles) on a landscape limited only by mountains to the north and the ocean to the west has allowed the development of a polymorphous urban network. L.A.'s very problems—sprawl, lack of focus, lack of density—are ironically becoming its strength.

The city seems to be at a point of inflection, where local densification is creating viable mixed-use communities within the larger network. Like a neural network, new pathways are formed where energy circulates, and the accumulation of these formations leads to a densification of activity and use. One urbanist has referred to Los Angeles as polynucleated. We are beginning to see that the lack of a single downtown has not inhibited the formation of lively neighborhoods and communities of varying scales, functioning in both complementary and independent fashion. From Pasadena to Chinatown, Los Feliz, Hollywood, Culver City, Mar Vista, Santa Monica, Inglewood, and beyond, densifying neighborhoods are creating greater opportunities for choice in living, working, and cultural life. (See "*Many Theres Here*, p. 40.)



Twenty years ago, I wondered how young architects joining our office would be able to afford to live in Los Angeles. By then, they had been priced out of many parts of the city. Yet, in successive waves, they and others found new niches in evolving communities. When priced out of Santa Monica, they found refuge in Venice or Hollywood. When priced out of Venice

or Hollywood, they moved on to Culver City or Los Feliz. Now, they might be finding

reasonable housing near Mt. Washington, Chinatown, or Inglewood. With each of these waves, more neighborhoods become focal points for densification and cultural amenities.

In addition to the spatial diversity, there is a marvelous overlay of ecological diversity. We recently visited an architect-chef who had found her perfect nest in an affordable rental of a mid-century house, nestled in the hills of Silver Lake with spectacular views and connections to the land. Within sight of this house, we dined with an architect-writer north of Chinatown, whose urban setting allowed guests to drive into his converted factory loft, guided by candles like the lights on an airport runway, to arrive at a dinner set alfresco in this capacious factory. Both of these friends spend part of their time working from home.

The mutability and even the much derided disposability of a great deal of Los Angeles's "provisional" architecture has allowed fragile and sometimes marginal initiatives to take hold, as well. For years, small entrepreneurs have been able to rent out bare-bones quonset huts and lofts adjacent to the Santa Monica airport. The derelict lofts of Bergamot Station have become an economical setting for a vibrant art and design center.

Such renewal is happening not only in the more affluent Westside, but is sprinkled throughout the city in such places as central L.A., the site of the new L.A. Design Center by John Friedman Alice Kimm Architects, the “Brewery,” an artists collective north of downtown, or the many conversions of early twentieth-century downtown office buildings into work-live lofts.

For years, L.A. has been a place of private opportunity and occasional splendor counterpointed by public apathy and occasional squalor. We’re all aware of the welcome increase in iconic architecture, from the Getty to Disney Hall to the new Cathedral and the Cal-Trans Headquarters. A less known and perhaps ultimately more powerful trend is occurring in the fabric of the city. Throughout the city, we see small and large initiatives in the improvements of streetscapes. Mass-transit, while it sputters, is gaining traction with major initiatives in clean and sophisticated bus systems, which add to the progress of light rail and metro transportation. To the surprise of many skeptics, new zoning initiatives that encourage mixed-use, transit-oriented development are being realized from Pasadena to Hollywood and beyond.

Developers who might never have considered taking on urban infill, mixed-use, or street-oriented retail projects are gravitating to the city in numbers we have not seen before. While the classic urban problems of traffic, environmental quality, affordable housing, good schools, and social and economic equity are all clear and present challenges, Los Angeles appears to have a real chance of evolving into a city not only of private choice, opportunity, and creativity, but of diverse and dynamic public opportunity and urbanism.

### **Los Angeles: Density with Intensity?**

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From the air at night, Los Angeles is as stunning as a pointillist painting—millions of separate dots adding up to a luminous tapestry. But on the ground, the dots atomize into an often disappointing landscape of parking lots and drive-ins. In Sondheim’s musical, *Sunday in the Park with George*, a jealous rival points to a painting by the pointillist Seurat and mockingly says: “It has no passion, no life—just density without intensity.” Critics of Los Angeles have often said much the same thing, except they have assumed the density was missing as well.

No more. According to the Washington Post, the 2000 census shows that the Los Angeles urban area is now the densest in the country. At 7,068 people per square mile, L.A. outdensifies metropolitan New York by 25 percent, doubles Washington, quadruples Atlanta. So the density exists—but what about the intensity? Is there passion and life in the streets of Los Angeles? Even with all those people packed together, is L.A. urban yet?

The conventional benchmarks for such urban intensity—tall buildings, tight spaces, honking taxis, and sidewalks packed with people—can be found in certain L.A. districts, but, like Seurat’s dots, they tend to be disconnected (at least for those on foot), leaving stretches of dead space in between. The discontinuity and fragmentation are due in part to the city’s vast expanse (a vastness actually exceeded by New York’s); to the still strong allure of the verdant suburbs and their laidback lifestyles; and to more than 100 years of nearly hypnotic accommodation of anything the automobile demanded from an entranced population and its civil service engineers. This too is changing.

The land has pretty much run out, as the city hits the walls of the Santa Monica and San Bernardino mountains, and the talk is everywhere of “infill,” which is code for packing more people onto existing urbanized land. The talk is also of “mixed use,” which means there’s a growing market of people willing to live above the store, trade a backyard for a balcony and, god forbid, occasionally take the bus or train.

Does this mean a sudden explosion of intense urbanity? No—you have to go to China for that. It does mean that L.A. is palpably intensifying within its existing frame. While residential neighborhoods are limited to modest increases in density, the boulevards are springing to attention. Typically undercooked, with low-rise commercial buildings and parking, boulevards are sprouting ingenious new building types from three to fifteen stories, well crafted architecture with urban ambitions, much improved signage and streetscapes, and even, in

some segments, a bunch of people actually walking around. Where two boulevards cross and produce one of the “nodes” so beloved of planners, bus and rail stations are appearing next to mid-rise apartment buildings with shops, producing a subtle but perceptible uptick in sidewalk activity.

In the big momma of nodes, “Downtown,” several billion tax dollars have produced a credible hub of regional mass transportation. Long neglected, steel-framed, terra-cotta clad treasures on the avenues are being converted into lofts, bolstered by a clutch of shiny new housing soaring to fifteen, thirty, or even fifty stories, either planned or in construction. They’re grounded by streetfront shops and even a new supermarket—the first in a generation.

Whether all of this intensified density and sporadic urbanity means that passion and life will spill onto L.A.’s boulevards in some form other than the scenes in *Crash* remains to be seen. The next generation of screenwriters will surely let us know—stay tuned.

### **The Los Angeles River: Our Future**

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The Los Angeles River is a western river, flashy with winter rains, most of the year a dry bed. Flooding and development pressures led to its channelization in the 1930s and to its current condition as an ignored water right-of-way, which passes by the backs of property, offering almost no civic value other than flood control. The alignment of many interests has led to the current effort to master plan a revitalized river through the City of Los Angeles and to reclaim this resource for the region. I am fortunate to be helping to lead this effort.

Touring the Los Angeles River by helicopter is, at this moment in time, the best way to imagine the linear park—the green spine—that would connect the city’s neighborhoods and eventually extend through neighboring cities to the south to the ocean in Long Beach. As the helicopter circles downtown and comes up from the south, the historic Merrill Butler bridges in the downtown reach are spectacular examples of “City Beautiful” infrastructure that have been aesthetically isolated in the barren, concrete-lined flood channel, with railroads and warehouses lining the river. At Chinatown, the open site commonly known as the Cornfields is full of potential as a new state park in a “River District” that could extend from Chinatown to the river to the east, and could recall the origins of Los Angeles, as the city’s first water infrastructure (the Zanja Madre) passed through this area, drawing water from the river.

At the confluence of the Arroyo Seco and the Los Angeles River, the amount of publicly-owned land allows one to imagine greened open space, new housing, and community facilities. A connection across the river here to Elysian Park could join to a bikeway that would extend up the Arroyo to Pasadena.

At Taylor Yards, the remaining rail land adjacent to the river would permit the river to widen, supporting restored wetlands that could provide natural habitat in the heart of the city. Just to the north, you fly over the soft-bottomed stretch of the Glendale Narrows, which already attracts birds and supports in-channel vegetation. The adjacent industrial uses have traditionally turned their backs to the river, but the local residential neighborhoods have understood the value of this piece of nature. A river walk along this area could connect via pedestrian bridges across to Griffith Park and build a green river edge with cafés and lookout points.

Around the corner in the San Fernando Valley, existing open spaces could be reconfigured to address the river and to embrace water during high flows, recreating the natural attributes of the river. As the river passes through mostly single-family residential fabric in the San Fernando Valley, it is possible to preserve this residential fabric and to green the channel and the adjacent easements.

Underused commercial property next to the river could be new development facing a reconfigured river walk.

These are just a few of the opportunities being discussed, and, with the cooperation of the Army Corps of Engineers, the Department of Water and Power, the County of Los Angeles, and others, our dialogue has been amazingly open and visionary. The helicopter tour brings home the potential of the riverway to knit the city together, to reinforce existing urban neighborhoods, and to create new river-

focused environments that would add richness to our city. We have seen this happen all around the world with other river projects, and our opportunity to transform our waterway is coming.

There is a river in Los Angeles, and in my lifetime it will be transformed.

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