

Los Angeles was hardly unique among American cities in the widespread use of the automobile and in the rapid changes that use fostered. Many other cities experienced the same kind of problems with downtown congestion and rapid dispersal of business.⁴ What distinguished Los Angeles was its newness as a major metropolis. In 1880 it had been a town of about 11,000 people. The speculative real estate boom that occurred over the ensuing decade generated a 351 percent population increase, followed by one of 103 percent during the 1890s. Still, by 1900 Los Angeles had only 102,000 inhabitants, fewer than Kansas City or Denver, less than one-third of San Francisco's, one-fifth of St. Louis's, one-tenth of Philadelphia's. Then the population increased by more than five times during the next twenty years. By 1930 the city reached fifth place among those in the United States, with over 1.2 million residents. Development of the surrounding area, inextricably tied to the city in its identity and economic life, made the figures even more impressive. Los Angeles County had over 936,000 people by 1920, 2,200,000 by 1927. The more than tenfold rise within the county limits during the first three decades of the twentieth century was by far the greatest rate of increase in any major metropolitan area of the United States at that time. In sharp contrast to other places with over one million people—New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit—the shape, character, and routines of Los Angeles were primarily determined by twentieth-century forces, including the automobile.⁵

The upstart metropolis's stature stemmed not just from the number of its residents but from dramatic increases in its territory, trade, finance, and manufacture. Completion of the Owens Valley Aqueduct in 1913 ensured an ample water supply for future development, spurring annexation of the San Fernando Valley among other areas.⁶ The land encompassed by the city's corporate limits increased 300 percent during the 1910s, from 89.6 to 363.9 square miles, with another 77.8 square miles added by 1930, making Los Angeles the world's largest city in area. Development spread through incorporated and unincorporated precincts alike to encompass dozens of theretofore isolated settlements, rendering them functionally, perceptually, and often physically parts of a vast whole. These changes did not just emanate from the Los Angeles city center outward. Other communities such as Long Beach, Pasadena, and Glendale also rapidly expanded during the period.⁷

A sharp rise in the region's economic base, especially in manufacture and other forms of production, was a key stimulus both to attracting newcomers and to decentralization. By the early twentieth century, Los Angeles County led the nation in agricultural output; however, the value of manufactured goods remained relatively modest at \$15 million for the city in 1899. A concerted effort to lure industries to the region during the 1910s and 1920s, coupled with the availability of large areas of undeveloped land, abundant natural resources, and nonunion labor, contributed to altering the situation radically. By 1923, the value of manufactured goods was recorded at \$417 million for the city, \$1.2 billion for the metro-

politan area as a whole. Los Angeles ranked as the largest industrial center on the west coast and eighth in the country by the decade's end. Further impetus for industrial development came from improvements in both overland and overseas connections. The Port of Los Angeles, greatly expanded during the early twentieth century, handled almost as much freight as all other west coast ports combined, with gross tonnage transfers exceeded only by those of the Port of New York during the 1920s.⁸ Large-scale industrial expansion, decentralized from the start, coupled with a major port facility situated twenty miles south of downtown, significantly furthered the diffusion of residential growth areas.

Rapid economic development was also an underlying factor in the widespread prosperity enjoyed throughout the metropolitan area, but it was not the only cause. Unlike most large American cities, still filled with contingents of poor, foreign-born immigrants, Los Angeles was comprised overwhelmingly of U.S. natives—85 percent of the white population in 1930.⁹ Furthermore, many people came to the region after acquiring sufficient resources to enjoy the fruits of their labors. The newcomers, emphasized one observer in 1924, “had made their more or less modest stake, [and] sought not opportunity but comfort and health in a mild climate and beautiful surroundings.” Most were not rich; yet, as a journalist quipped, “Los Angeles has small use for poor people.”¹⁰ The idle life of “comfort and health” could breed restlessness. Many gained employment; others started ventures of their own; thousands invested, especially in real estate. The unusual degree of capital and skills that newcomers brought fueled the economy and fostered an optimistic, expansive mood.

A very sizable portion of the newcomers moved from central portions of the country—from northern states such as Ohio, Illinois, and Iowa, and also from southern ones such as Oklahoma and Texas. Equally important was the preponderance of this “middle-aged middle class from the Middle West” with roots in small cities, towns, and rural areas. If financial gain did not initially loom large among their goals, neither did a quest for radical change in their living patterns. The yearning to savor the fast pace, the intrigue, the cultural stimulus, or the diversity associated with most metropolises seemed noticeably less pronounced in Los Angeles. One chronicler noted that while New York held the lure of an escape from a provincial home environment, Los Angeles was often seen as a place to enrich a way of life to which one had become accustomed. The newcomer “arrives there, not out of dissatisfaction with his own, not out of a dominant conviction that he must find a new place on which to scamper untrammelled. . . . He . . . stays . . . because the physical circumstances—the climate principally—permit him to live more fully the life he has always led.” As a result, “the town is merely an overgrown boy, precocious in mechanical bent. It remains a small town in atmosphere, in outlook, in activity, in its very self-consciousness, in all those attributes that give a community character. . . . [It] has become a magnified crossing of Dubuque and Kansas City.” Thus, while one of the largest cities in the nation, Los Angeles was felt to stand quite apart from places such as New York or Chicago.¹¹

Not everyone found such an atmosphere agreeable. By the 1920s numerous critics caricatured Los Angeles as a haven for farmers and boosters, a place possessing no semblance of sophisticated culture. One of the best-known accounts of the period was written by Morrow Mayo, whose acerbic prose surely delighted eastern urbanites. Mayo cast Los Angeles as an artificial city which has been pumped up under forced draught, inflated like a balloon, stuffed with rural humanity like a goose with corn. . . . It has never imparted an urban character to its incoming population for the simple reason that it has never had an urban character to impart. On the other hand, the place has retained the manners, culture, and general outlook of a huge country village . . . of a million population, a remarkable sociological phenomenon; and that is precisely what Los Angeles is.¹²

To some observers, attitude was as much a problem as size. One account showed no mercy:

The new Greece has its own established values. What it reads in Mr. Coolidge's column is Wisdom. What it sees in the spectacular super-production is Art. The combination of these is Culture.

The new Greece is an amalgam of the Middle West and the movies—each, whether we like it or not, a dominant element in contemporary American life.¹³

Many writers admitted that “of all American cities [Los Angeles] is the easiest to poke fun at.” Yet even some of those who scorned its cultural aspirations could admit that “Los Angeles is the most ‘American’ city.” Whatever the subject of disdain, it probably could be applied to much of the nation. One observer saw virtue in Los Angeles as “the great American mirror,” asserting that “as New York is the melting-pot for the peoples of Europe, so Los Angeles is the melting-pot for the peoples of the United States.” The city “is unique by virtue of her very universality, of the fact that she is typical of us all. Nothing is so rare as a perfect type.” That type was filled with contradictions:

Its mushroom growth, its sprawling hugeness, its madcap speed, its splurge of lights and noise and color and money; and, against all this boisterous crudity, the amazing contrast of its cultured charm, its mature discrimination, its intellectual activities—this is sprung from American soil, and could come from no other. If we are a nation of extremes, Los Angeles is an extreme among us.¹⁴

By the 1920s Los Angeles was at once typical and atypical. Like any other city, it had no shortage of prosaic people bent on pursuing limited, predictable routines. It had eccentrics and banal figures, who captured more than their share of the limelight in the press. But the incessant typecasting belied the city's complex nature and, most importantly, the dynamics that made it far more than an inflated town. Southern California proved fertile ground for many persons capable of distinguished achievement—from the business figures whose cumulative endeavors became a major force in the national economy to professionals who gave Los Angeles national and international renown in fields as varied as film, architecture, and women's apparel. Even critics who assailed the local tendency to conform often focused on aspects of the city's life and landscape that resisted conformity. Angelenos in fact wanted their city to be like and unlike others at the same time.

The interplay of opposites was evident in many components of the urban fabric. The city's basic development patterns derived from well-established models, yet the scale, the combination, and an array of unconventional departures yielded results that made Los Angeles seem unique. The product often was heralded as preferable to the norm elsewhere, and often, too, had a significant influence on national practices.

SETTLEMENT

Perceived and actual differences played a major role in attracting newcomers. Accounts depicting the region as an Eden—salubrious in climate, lush in vegetation, abundant in space, dramatic in scenery, absent the crowding, the filth, the slums, the poverty, the corrupt politics, the crime associated with large American cities—had proliferated for decades. The selling of southern California as a superior place became a standard practice during the boom of the 1880s. Half a century later, the promoters' hyperbole was so integral to how visitors and residents alike viewed the region that it was widely assumed to be a self-evident truth: here even a person of modest means could settle in agreeable surroundings—very likely a house with a yard and garden—partake in an outdoor life amid almost perpetual sunshine, and still have all the amenities of a city. For many, Los Angeles was the essence of the American dream.

In southern California the dream was realized on a large scale. Carey McWilliams, outspoken in deriding what he considered the prevailing parochial aura, nonetheless saw merit in Los Angeles as the least cityfied of American cities—a place that was “neither city nor country, but everywhere a mixture of both.”¹⁵ What made the region so unusual in this respect was not the particulars of its urban form but the extent of low-density settlement. Newcomers could tour the metropolitan area for days and see the freestanding house as the predominant residential type. Ample space existed in which to build more. In 1930 over 50 percent of the lots in the county remained vacant, and vast acreage had yet to be platted. The opportunities for development seemed limitless. The ways in which this space was used reflected both the prosperity of the populace and the time in which expansion took place. Occurring at a rate experienced decades earlier by most large cities, Los Angeles's growth during the early twentieth century was shaped by new forms of transportation. Widespread use of the streetcar beginning in the 1880s, then of the automobile beginning in the 1910s, induced low-density development. As a result, the number of persons per square mile was markedly smaller than in other places of equivalent size.¹⁶

The freestanding, single-family house dominated the landscape of Los Angeles as it did no other American metropolis, continuing a pattern established well before 1900 when the community functioned more as a seasonal retreat.¹⁷ By 1930, single-family residences comprised 93 percent of the city's residential buildings, almost twice that in Chicago and sur-