

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-

passing those found in Philadelphia and Washington. Well under half as many families lived in apartment buildings as in houses despite the substantial increase in multiple-unit construction during the 1920s. At the decade's end, single-family houses stood on more than 60 percent of all occupied lots within the city limits.¹⁸

Equally important to the character of the area's residential districts was the sense of openness they imparted. Attached dwellings were almost nonexistent. Many houses were low in mass, containing one or one and a half stories. Yards tended to be more generously dimensioned than those common to large eastern or midwestern cities; so were setbacks. Lots with a 40 to 50-foot frontage and a 130 to 150-foot depth were the norm in many parts of the city. Except in a few concentrated areas, apartment buildings were modest in scale and scattered intermittently, even along arterial routes, rather than forming the dense corridors characteristic of numerous major urban areas of the period. Many had a few units on two levels set off by a sizable yard on at least one side. The ambience projected by these tracts was much like that of a small city or town in one of the central states whence so many newcomers came—no doubt a key reason Los Angeles was so stereotyped by outsiders. The vastness far more than the character of its domestic territory differentiated Los Angeles from communities in the heartland (figure 2).¹⁹

Among the most striking contrasts between residential areas of Los Angeles and those of most other large cities was afforded by the tracts of workers' housing developed to serve the large, decentralized industrial districts, begun after the first world war, that lay to the east and south of the city center. In communities such as South Gate, Maywood, Belvedere,



WHERE WILL THE WORKERS LIVE?

LOS ANGELES is fast becoming an industrial metropolis. During the present year more than sixty industries a month have come. Eighth city of the nation today in value of manufactured products, Los Angeles ten years from today will be third...according to accepted authorities. Hundreds of thousands of workers with their families will make their homes here.

Where will these workers live? The factories are coming to the East Side. Will the workers live there, or will they live in the residential districts of the West Side?

Even should they wish to live on the West Side, it would be utterly impracticable for them to do so. It is ten miles from the Union Pacific and Central Manufacturing Districts to suitable and uncrowded residential areas on the other side of town. This is too far for a worker to go by street car every morning and every evening of the year.

If he tries to go by automobile, he will have to traverse the business section of downtown Los Angeles where traffic conditions are becoming worse every day. During the congested morning and evening rush, it would take at least an hour—probably more—to make the trip from the factory to any appropriate residential district on the West Side.

Under these conditions, it is reasonable to conclude that the bulk of these workers will live on the East Side—as close to their places of employment as they can find desirable homesites. There they will not have to spend time and money traveling back and forth. There they can enjoy their leisure hours happily at home.

By all odds, the most desirable living place on the East Side from the standpoint of general accessibility, beauty of locality, nearness to the industrial districts and advanced modern development is

Montebello Park

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2
Residential area, Hollywood district, Los Angeles, looking southeast from Rosemore and Rosewood avenues. Photo C. C. Pierce, ca. late 1920s. (California Historical Society Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

3
“Where Will the Workers Live?” Montebello Park advertisement. (*Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 1925, V-4.)

and Montebello, the freestanding house set in a verdant yard along a quiet street, rather than the tenement or flat, became the standard. Realtors promoted the difference strenuously and sometimes with élan (figure 3). Yet the idyllic image advertised often did not stray far from the actuality. A significant portion of the skilled blue-collar populace could live much like their white-collar counterparts—more modestly but otherwise in the same mode, partaking of a spacious environment, tied to municipal services, often agreeably removed from the workplace, commuting by streetcar or by automobile.²⁰

Patterns of residential development and automobile use acquired a symbiotic relationship by the early 1920s. As Los Angeles grew into a major city, maintaining a high percentage of single-family houses and modestly scaled neighborhoods necessitated a reliance on cars for routine transportation. Southern Californians' early acceptance of motor vehicles gave impetus to yet further decentralization. As the automobile began to play an integral role in people's lives, real estate interests were forced to make hard decisions in meeting the appetite for buildable land. The region's municipal and intercity streetcar systems had created the initial matrix for de-



centralization between the 1880s and 1910s by extending over much of the Los Angeles basin. The size of this network now led to its obsolescence as the primary carrier. Streetcar line construction incurred so great a debt by 1914 that scant capital could be raised either for expanding lines or for building new ones.²¹ Limited funds, combined with what seemed to be unending operational problems, fueled public dislike for the Los Angeles Municipal Railway in particular. During the 1920s many Angelenos came to see mass transit as a nuisance more than a transportation lifeline. The *Times* and other influential organs repeatedly cast streetcars as relics whose demise would not be mourned (figure 4).²²

Before World War I, real estate development was closely tied to the streetcar in Los Angeles no less than in other cities; yet by the decade's end, many of the choicest locations, convenient to streetcar lines, had been consumed. To meet the swelling demand for housing during the 1920s, two basic options were available. Established areas could be more densely developed, but the cost would be high and the process difficult, especially as most of the building stock was of recent vintage. The results

would destroy the openness that made the region so appealing and would rely on a disliked mode of transportation. The other choice was to continue to build at a low density by breaking the bond between land subdivision and rail transit. Scores of developers did just that by the early 1920s, opening tracts distant from existing streetcar lines.²³ The abundance of vacant land combined with the soaring market afforded ample temptation to initiate such projects, despite the risks. The proliferation of these tracts indicated that a substantial number of people were in fact willing to drive on a daily basis.

AUTOMOBILES

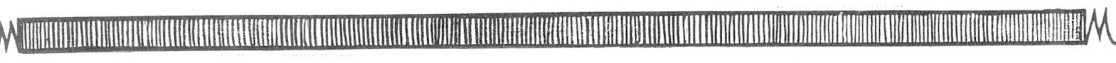
"The automobile," proclaimed one local car dealer in 1921, "is 10 per cent pleasure, 90 per cent utility and 100 per cent necessity." His perspective, while clearly biased, was not much of an exaggeration. Growth in car ownership ranked among the most striking of many such trends in Los Angeles. Countywide, automobile registrations soared from about 16,000 in 1910 to 110,000 in 1918; by 1923 they had increased by another 300 percent to 430,000; and several years later more cars were registered in the county than in any one of thirty-nine states. One car existed for every 8.2 Angelenos in 1915 (compared with one for every 61 Chicagoans and one for 43.1 people nationwide). By 1920 the ratio stood at one for every 3.6 Angelenos (versus 30 Chicagoans or 13.1 people nationwide), an average

4

"More Rerouting," editorial cartoon by Gale. (*Los Angeles Times*, 11 May 1920, II-1.)

5

"Madam—how do YOU get around?" advertisement for *Los Angeles Times* want ads. (*Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 1928, I-14.) Copyright 1928, Los Angeles Times. Reprinted by permission.



Madam—how do YOU get around?

Nine-thirty in the morning. The family car somewhere downtown. A day's round of marketing, social duties, club meetings . . . What a comfort--what economy--to have a car for yourself! And why not? Excellent used cars, ideal for women drivers, are offered by local dealers at prices and terms that enable any average family to enjoy two cars instead of one. And Times Want Ads show you the choicest, selected offerings. Dealers advertising in *The Times* welcome feminine car buyers. You are assured considerate service, help in making a wise selection--and you will be given courteous demonstrations without being urged to buy. Study the used car columns in today's *Times*--if hubby cannot go with you, go by yourself and ask for a demonstration of any car advertised in

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