

blocks, each with an 1,800-car parking garage through its core.¹ Bold proposals failed to materialize as instruments of change, however. Downtown Los Angeles was much like others in the United States in its function, form, and dependence upon uncoordinated, incremental, and expeditious responses to space pressures wrought by widespread automobile use. The spectacular rise of downtown Los Angeles, and the success it enjoyed, brought with it a problem that seemed insoluble.

SKYSCRAPERS

20

SKYSCRAPERS

While Angelenos took pride in their city's abundance of low-density residential areas and understood the automobile's pivotal role in shaping their routines and environment, they likewise placed great value on having a large commercial core as the metropolitan centerpiece. The *Times* reflected broad sentiments in championing at once the freedom of the motorist and the growth of the business center, which was continually used to illustrate the city's achievements and potential. Downtown development during the first three decades of the twentieth century seemed as





spectacular as any advance Los Angeles had made. The small-city character that still prevailed around 1900 was replaced by that of a great city center, with new primary retail and office locations created in what had been peripheral, low-density areas (figure 9).² Despite ongoing traffic problems, downtown building construction continued at a fast pace during the 1920s. Sixteen buildings reaching the maximum allowable height limit stood downtown in 1918, seventy-two in 1925, one hundred three in 1929. At the decade's end, Los Angeles boasted one of the most extensive business cores of any American city, exceeded only by those few with larger populations (figure 10).³

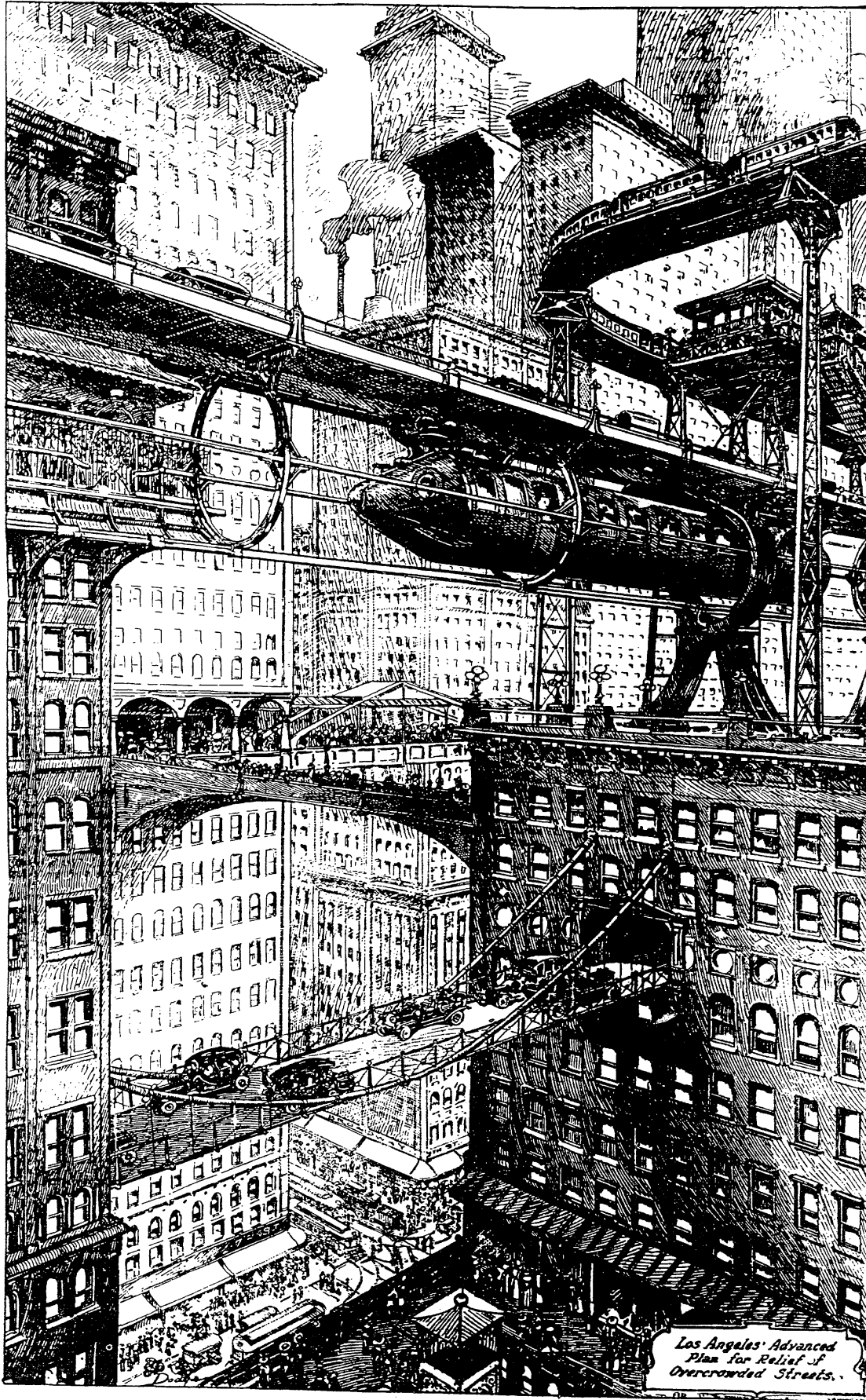
For members of the business community and no doubt for many others among an intensely boosterish populace, downtown was the most visible and impressive image of collective attainment. Well before 1920, visions of the future city were fashioned after those of New York, including extravagant fantasies presented as means to alleviate nascent traffic problems (figure 11). Similarly expansive images of a giant skyscraper metropolis were advanced until the depression.⁴ Tall buildings—planned, under way, and completed—received foremost attention in issue after issue of the *Times* real estate section as well as in dozens of promotional publications of the 1910s and 1920s. The incantations of Irving Hellman, one of the city's prominent financiers and real estate investors, were typical: skyscrapers “express in the spirit of our city a challenge that invites us to time progress to the needs of the hour, to build on and on . . . [they] stand impressively as monuments of principal progress and as strongly reflecting our faith in the city's future.”⁵ Hellman's view, of course, was shared by

9

Broadway between Sixth and Seventh streets, Los Angeles. Photo ca. late 1920s. (Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.)

10

Downtown Los Angeles, looking south from City Hall. Photo ca. 1930s. (Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.)



many Americans who considered the urban core the primary emblem of their cities and the skyscraper its ultimate manifestation. In their determination to make Los Angeles a great metropolis, businessmen and the general public alike were especially conscious of having an enormous downtown, filled with tall buildings. Low-density residential districts were considered a great asset, not in isolation but as part of the support system for a big city, the heart of which must emulate Chicago and New York rather than suggest a Dubuque or an Omaha.

At the same time, there was a conspicuous distinction between downtown Los Angeles and many other American cities: the height of buildings was restricted to 150 feet, or about thirteen stories. The limit was not quite as low as Boston's 125 feet or Washington's 130 feet but was much less than Chicago's 260 feet.⁶ The Los Angeles "skyscraper" thus was a height-limit building, not a towered mass but a blocky one whose verticality often was self-consciously emphasized. The restriction was first enacted in 1905 as a precaution against the dangers of being in a seismically active zone. The maximum height was changed in 1911 from 130 to 150 feet and then remained steadfast until the 1950s. Maintaining the height limit became a concern among the business community after World War I. Most leaders opposed increases, arguing that the status quo encouraged the lateral spread of the commercial center, increasing the value of more land. Economic factors were also cited: construction costs were lower, rentals on floors near the street higher. There was also a mounting fear that the now large stock of height-limit buildings would plunge in value were taller ones allowed. The need to avoid even greater traffic congestion than currently existed was yet another argument. The business community wanted the urban core to look metropolitan; however, spokesmen seldom failed to remark that the height limit made their downtown a better place than those of most cities—more conducive to human occupancy and more profitable to property owners.⁷

The area occupied by downtown ranked along the height limit's most dramatic effects. In 1900, the core was modest in size and scale, covering less than twenty square blocks. Main Street was the city's thoroughfare. Retail activity concentrated along Spring Street, although some merchants remained in their older Main Street locations and a number of the most prominent stores had recently relocated to Broadway.

By 1920, large business buildings rose far to the south and west of the old center, covering over fifty square blocks. A pronounced shift in the siting of key functions had also occurred. Third Street, which had crossed the heart of downtown, now stood at the periphery. South of Third, Spring Street was now the spine of the financial district, Broadway the retail and theater core. Other sizable buildings were situated further west, facing both north-south and east-west arteries. Among these, Seventh Street was the most prominent for stores as well as for office buildings. The intersection of Seventh and Broadway was considered the hub of the metropolis.

The height limit worked in conjunction with topography. The downtown that emerged during the late nineteenth century was configured like the neck of an hourglass, bounded to the east and northeast by lowlands and railroad tracks and to the immediate west by the precipitous slopes of Bunker Hill, which extended south to Fifth Street. Expansion to the north would have to overcome a narrow, irregular street pattern and rolling terrain. To the south and southwest, on the other hand, the existing grid of streets was straighter and wider, the land nearly flat. These distinctions continued for a considerable distance: hilly terrain lay to the north and northwest of the established city while seemingly limitless flatlands extended in a broad arc from south to west. After 1900, the first great thrust of residential development occurred within this latter sphere, where the terrain enabled lower costs for the construction of houses and, most importantly, of streetcar lines. Barring unusual circumstances, downtown was likely to grow in the same direction as the city itself.

DEPARTMENT STORES

Beyond the limits of height and direction, a factor that proved key to the specific form of downtown's expansion was the rise of the large department store. No other kind of business activity and no infrastructural project appears to have matched the impact of this commercial enterprise in setting the main paths and parameters of downtown into the mid-twentieth century.

Department stores in the modern sense did not exist in Los Angeles until the century's end, and even then they were of relatively modest size. The process began in 1890 when a dry goods emporium, A. Hamburger & Sons, expanded its operation by moving into the four-story Phillips Block (built 1887) at Spring and Franklin streets. One of the largest, most ornate business buildings then in the city, the latter contained around 40,000 square feet. Fifteen years later, Hamburger's had more than trebled in size, adding to the rear and acquiring the use of an adjacent building (1896, 1899). The store's only rival was the Broadway, founded in 1896 as a small enterprise situated close to the then southwestern edge of downtown at Fourth Street and Broadway. That store was enlarged in 1901 and twice in 1905 to encompass over 145,000 square feet, likewise by adapting contiguous space. These were the sole full-fledged department stores in 1906. Only seven other retailers occupied more than 50,000 square feet: four dry goods houses (Coulter's, Ville de Paris, Boston Dry Goods Store, and Jacoby Brothers) and three furniture stores (Barker Brothers, California Furniture Company, and Los Angeles Furniture Company), all of which likewise had expanded in recent years. The average store size remained much less; most occupied under 5,000 square feet.⁸

Department store growth between 1890 and 1906 was very modest compared to what occurred over the next decade, when four enormous buildings were erected. In appearance and appointments, they