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ginian to celebrate true Anglo-Saxon virtue against "Poles or Huns or Russian Jews," captured the hysterical tone of these fears when he wrote of America in 1891: "No rood of modern ground is more debased and mongrel with its hordes of encroaching alien vermin, that turn our cities into Babels and our citizenship into a hybrid farce, who degrade our commonwealth from a nation into something half-pawnshop, half broker's office."³⁵

As Wister's references to pawnshops and broker's offices imply, the main target of this hysteria was usually the Jews. An anti-Semitism that ranged from the genteel to the vicious was endemic in these suburbs and still has its bastions even today. Yet the habit of mind that distinguished between the pure, American suburb and the "debased and mongrel" city has survived the particular targets of Wister's fears to enter into our national subconscious.

The classic suburb has thus left a dual legacy. It is first a monument to bourgeois civilization at its most prosperous and self-confident, an aesthetic achievement in both landscape and domestic architecture that commands respect; but it is also a testimony to bourgeois anxieties, to deeply buried fears that translate into a contempt or hatred for the "others" who inhabit the city. Both elements have left their mark on American culture in the twentieth century.

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CHAPTER 6

Los Angeles: Suburban Metropolis

I see California as a deluxe subdivision—a hundred million acre project.
—STEPHEN BORNSON,
California Real Estate Commissioner, 1931¹

WITH the emergence of Los Angeles as a great metropolis, the history of suburbia reached its climax. From the earliest suburbs outside eighteenth century London to the elaborate railroad suburbs of the nineteenth century, suburbia had always been a subordinate element in the city. It was a refuge for a privileged minority, and its design stood apart from and in contradiction to the centralized structure of the modern city.

In Los Angeles, however, the single family detached suburban house escaped from the periphery to become, paradoxically, the central element in the structure of the whole city. All other land uses were subordinated to the provision of the maximum number of residential lots. The explosive growth of the city was accompanied by the decay of precisely those urban elements which had previously been the mark of a great city: a unifying, centralized downtown and a viable mass transit system. Sub-

urbia had redefined the modern city in its own image, creating decentralized urban forms that nevertheless served the needs of a vast region. Los Angeles had become the suburban metropolis.

Not surprisingly, this new city was incomprehensible, at least to outsiders. Richard Neutra, the great Los Angeles architect, describes the 1931 International Conference for Modern Building (CIAM) at Brussels, where an attempt was made to provide maps for all the world's great cities, using the same scale and standard symbols for business districts, factory zones, slums, suburbs, and so on. Not only did the Los Angeles map dwarf all the others, virtually monopolizing the available wall space, but the symbols seemed almost inapplicable. "To the puzzled amazement of European students," Neutra recalls, "business zones, for example, seemed to stretch hundreds of miles along endless traffic boulevards which cut through unoccupied or agricultural areas. Cottage suburbs and satellite garden cities . . . seemed to extend amorphously over three hundred square miles on this monster map. Multi-story slums . . . seemed anomalously absent."² The Europeans wondered, "Was this metropolis a paradise, or did there exist here a type of blight which fitted none of its classical descriptions?"³ The question is still hotly debated; my concern here, however, is not to judge Los Angeles but to understand it. For most observers, the explanation of its "monstrous" size and "amorphous" structure could be given in one word: the automobile. The ascendancy of the private car and the creation of a freeway system to support it has been the all-purpose explanation for Los Angeles and for all subsequent cities that resemble it.

I do not wish to deny the importance of the automobile in shaping Los Angeles, only to suggest that the automobile has been essentially a tool in the attainment of a deeper goal that predates the automobile era: the suburban ideal. The Los Angeles Master Plan of 1941 states, "This region can and should remain one in which the single-family dwelling predominates";⁴ but the sentiment had been the crucial determinant of the city's growth for more than fifty years. Even in the streetcar era at

the turn of the century Los Angeles already possessed many of the "anomalous" features associated with the automobile age city. The single family house was the great constant uniting the early period with the later. To open the region for suburban development, the city created the world's largest mass transit system.⁵ When in the 1920s that system appeared to threaten the viability of the single family house, it was ruthlessly sacrificed and a massive automobile system put in its place.

To the quest for the suburban ideal Los Angeles sacrificed not only its mass transit system but also the downtown area, which depended on mass transit. The massive demands for housing land swallowed up the seemingly limitless open spaces of Los Angeles County and led to the loss of that balance between agriculture and housing which had been a characteristic feature of the city before 1940. Los Angeles, which had set out to eliminate the congestion of the older industrial city, wound up creating its own novel form: decentralized congestion.

Throughout these transformations the commitment to the single family house was maintained by an alliance between the mass of recent and would-be homeowners and a civic elite so deeply involved in real estate speculation that any challenge to the single family house would have meant their ruin. For both groups, urban decentralization and the road system to support it meant the universalization of suburbia. Every man a homeowner; every man a potential customer for a building lot, a house, and a mortgage. In the quasi-Mediterranean climate of southern California, the Palladian, aristocratic ideal of the villa was to reach its ultimate expression. No longer for leisured aristocrats or even for a bourgeois elite, the villa home gave to all classes the opportunity for leisure, family life, and union with nature.

In the end, of course, the universalization of the suburban ideal proved to be impossible. Nature was virtually abolished in the endless spread of subdivisions, and not even the hundreds of square miles of California land could prevent the massive rise in land prices in the 1970s that has threatened to restrict the suburban ideal once more to an elite. In the 1980s Los An-

geles has finally been forced to confront the contradictions inherent in the idea of a suburban metropolis.

This chapter, however, deals primarily with the period from 1910 to 1950, when the suburban ideal was at its height. The growth of Los Angeles was not only explosively rapid; it was also virtually unhampered by previous traditions and settlements. The city was surrounded by seemingly unlimited land, supported by a massive influx of people and capital, and led by an elite wholly committed to suburban expansion. Under these conditions Los Angeles created a new kind of metropolis.

Origins of the Suburban Metropolis

Like so many other revolutionary movements, the creation of the new city was less a conscious quest for innovation than an attempt to preserve older values under conditions that threatened to destroy them. The boulevards of the 1920s and the freeways of the 1950s both attempted to recreate the sense of space and mobility that Los Angeles had attained seemingly effortlessly at the turn of the century as a sparsely populated regional city based on light rail transportation.

Modern Los Angeles grew out of the Pueblo de Los Angeles, founded in 1781 by Felipe de Neve where the Los Angeles River emerges from the foothills onto the vast, arid plain on which early settlers tried to raise cattle and the few crops that could survive on the meager rainfall. A direct transcontinental railroad connection in the 1880s finally overcame Los Angeles's geographical isolation; and, perhaps more importantly, a simultaneous development in artesian well technology enabled farmers to tap vast sources of water beneath the dry surface of the land. Adequately watered, the land proved to be remarkably fertile, especially for citrus crops, which were still luxuries in the cities of the eastern United States.⁶

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As citrus groves and green, irrigated fields began to displace the dry brown of the old cattle ranches, the area's potential to house a great city suddenly became obvious. To the prosperous agricultural base was soon added important oil discoveries. Los Angeles had definitely displaced Santa Barbara and San Diego as the southwestern terminus of the nation's rail system, and an artificial harbor at Long Beach gave the area a major port.

This growth touched off the first of the great Los Angeles land booms in the 1880s and made the southern California city the goal of numerous settlers, especially from the Midwest. From the first, the great migration to Los Angeles was a migration of prosperity, of people with capital and skills seeking a more comfortable life. By the turn of the century the city was a relatively compact settlement set in the midst of the vast Los Angeles basin. The ocean was some fifteen miles away, and only a few rich visitors had begun to establish villas in the hills overlooking the ocean and the plain. The city was particularly successful in attracting well financed businessmen who were determined to profit from its future. The most important of them for this discussion was Henry E. Huntington.

Son of one of the founders of the Southern Pacific Railroad and briefly president of the line himself, Huntington failed in his bid to dominate the Southern Pacific and instead turned his formidable wealth and organizing talents to creating a massive light rail system for the great metropolis he foresaw. Buying up franchises or laying his own tracks, he unrelentingly pushed his "Pacific Electric" system through the still empty foothills and valleys of southern California. Within twenty years of its founding in 1901, Pacific Electric was carrying over 250,000 passengers daily on 4,000 light rail cars over tracks that totaled more than a thousand miles.⁷

Huntington, however, never forgot that he was as much in the real estate business as in transportation. Before his lines pushed out into the orange groves or vegetable fields of the region he was careful to buy up as much as possible of the land that adjoined them. On this land, now conveniently accessible to downtown Los Angeles, he laid out building plots for dozens

of suburban villages strung along the tracks. Independent developers had to pay Huntington and Pacific Electric a subsidy to ensure the all important rail service that alone could make their development a success. Many developers simply made Huntington a partner in their profits.⁸

The basic mechanism of these streetcar suburbs was the same as in the East and Midwest, but the urban structure that developed in Los Angeles was surprisingly different. In the older cities streetcar lines pushed out initially through preexisting urban areas; only the privileged few living in the suburbs at the ends of the lines were in contact with unspoiled countryside. In Los Angeles, however, the central city was relatively small and the streetcar routes enormously long. The cars moved swiftly over relatively empty countryside, making it possible to live in the midst of orange fields or on a quiet hillside and still be close to downtown.

In 1904 developer H. J. Whitley claimed that his homes nestled picturesquely in the Hollywood Hills were only twenty minutes on a westbound streetcar from the Pacific Ocean beaches, and only fifteen minutes on the eastbound car from downtown.⁹ The cars, moreover, came every half hour. Even allowing for the inevitable exaggerations, Pacific Electric certainly meant that twentieth century Los Angeles was born decentralized. Nevertheless, the fact that all the streetcar lines converged at the downtown meant that the region had a genuine center that dominated employment, shopping, culture, and government.

The streetcar suburb thus universalized Los Angeles suburbia, giving not only the well-to-do but a large portion of the population the experience of living in a small town that was at once close to nature and close to downtown. Although many of the suburban homes still resembled those outside eastern and mid-western cities, others responded in their architecture to the climate and traditions of southern California. Herbert Croly observed in 1906 that many of the suburban homes "remind one of the lines and proportions of the ranch houses [of early California] . . . and in this respect they perpetuate the best available tradition. They tend to be one or two-story buildings, with long

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low lines, and with the roof overhanging and dominating the upright members."¹⁰ Already the California ranch house was taking shape.

Prominent among the houses in the new developments was the bungalow, which Croly defined as a "picturesque variation on the type of the small suburban house." He praised the "simple and unaffected propriety" of the bungalows and emphasized that they were "within the means of all but actually poor and overworked people; and there are an inexhaustible number of charming spots, both on the sea-coast and in the hills and mountains, which are sufficiently accessible from the larger cities to invite their erection."¹¹ Thus, at a time that the automobile was still a rich man's plaything, Los Angeles had already made suburbanization a universal norm. The city had carried the streetcar concept to its logical extremes: a far-flung network of streetcar suburbs organized around a relatively compact downtown hub. For a brief moment the complementary extremes of city and country were reconciled in an urban form with benefits that were to be sought by all subsequent plans.

The Crisis of the Streetcar City

The streetcar metropolis was destroyed by its own success. It functioned well only when the Los Angeles basin was still a site for orange groves and vegetable fields. When congestion developed in the 1920s the city was forced to adopt a new strategy to preserve the advantages of the old.

The end of World War I was the beginning of a major period of growth. The movie industry had by this time firmly established itself in a region of such perpetual sunshine and mild climate that outdoor filming was possible in virtually all seasons. The oil industry expanded in response to the automobile, and many large firms—Firestone Rubber, for example—located their

West Coast plants in Los Angeles, providing an almost instant industrial base to match its strengths in agriculture.¹²

The biggest industry, however, was the business of growth itself: land speculation and house building based on the great expectations for the future. Throughout the region, developers borrowed heavily to build the roads, sewers, and streetlights that gave a piece of empty land the appearance of a community. They then sought to sell the lots as soon as possible, often to individuals who bought them for speculative resale. In 1923—the peak of the boom—714 subdivision projects were registered, comprising in all 17,300 acres and over 86,000 separate lots.¹³ Observing this mania, Will Rogers commented that realtors will “sell you anything or anybody in the world so long as they can get a first payment. . . . Your having no money doesn’t worry the agents. If they can get a couple of dollars down, or an old overcoat, or a shotgun, or anything to act as a first payment. Second-hand Fords are considered A-1 collateral.”¹⁴ Such headlong growth, however, soon threatened the conditions that had drawn people to the region.

The new developments were useless without good transportation, which at that time still meant access to the downtown area, where the bulk of specialized shopping and even jobs were still located. The Pacific Electric mass transit system was still strong, reaching its all-time peak in passenger miles in 1924.¹⁵ But, especially near the core, its “big red cars” were slowed down by the region’s automobiles. Even in the early 1920s Los Angeles had the highest ratio of automobiles to people of any city in the world.¹⁶ In spite of its vast empty spaces Los Angeles still pulled the bulk of its people on the move into the business center where crowding was intolerable. By 1924 one report concluded, “The street traffic congestion problem of Los Angeles is exceeded by that of no other city.”¹⁷ Downtown, automobiles and Pacific Electric streetcars were trapped in a perpetual traffic jam. A crisis for the whole region was at hand.

The first solution was proposed by Pacific Electric, which had separated itself from the Huntington real estate interests and was now operating as a quasi-public utility company. They

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saw that their streetcars were competing with automobiles for space on the crowded streets, and therefore put forward a plan for the construction of a system of elevated lines running along their major routes. Downtown, the lines would go underground in subway tunnels and converge in a major new terminal, which would become the hub of the region.¹⁸

Simultaneously, a group of civic leaders organized around the Automobile Club of Southern California proposed a very different plan. They called for a massive investment in new roads: north-south and east-west boulevards capable of handling three lanes of traffic in each direction, with provisions for turning lanes at all major intersections.¹⁹

Both solutions were expensive, too expensive for them to be built simultaneously. The debate between them, largely confined to a small group of civic leaders, is especially interesting because there was ample recognition at the time that the option chosen would determine the city’s future structure. The strongest point in favor of the mass transit solution was that it would save the downtown areas. Not only would congestion be largely eliminated by the extensive use of subways, but almost all travelers in the region would be pointed to the core as the natural focus of the whole system.

But mass transit tends to focus development along its corridors. One Los Angeles study of the time showed that over 80 percent of the Pacific Electric riders lived within two blocks of one of its lines.²⁰ If mass transit were to be the area’s major transportation system, and if the road system were to remain relatively undeveloped, then population would naturally cluster along the new elevated lines. Land values would rise in those areas, and the single family house would become prohibitively expensive there. Los Angeles would thus develop into a series of corridor cities of apartment houses and bungalow courts clustered near the streetcar lines. The land remote from the lines would be only lightly developed or remain agricultural.

The proposed highway system would have a very different effect. Virtually every spot in the vast Los Angeles basin would be near a modern east-west or north-south boulevard, which

would open up the whole region to immediate development. In the grid system of roads, every spot is accessible from every other spot without the necessity of passing through a central point, as in a radial mass transit system with a downtown hub. The road system thus implied a radical decentralization of the city, a threat not only to the mass transit system but to the vitality of Los Angeles's civic core.

In virtually any other city, such a threat would have met with a vigorous protest from civic leaders to save the downtown area. If they did not do so in Los Angeles, it was because the city's economy was so closely connected with real estate development that the sacrifice of the core and the mass transit system was a small price to pay for opening up vast territories to subdivision.

Indeed, the sale of lots and houses paid off in ways that were not available to developers of rental apartments. By the 1920s the essence of subdivision profitability was getting the customer to assume ownership. Most developers operated with almost no capital. They borrowed the initial outlay to construct roads, lighting, and drainage. Customers for lots generally obtained mortgages from the developers, who immediately resold the mortgages at a substantial discount to obtain cash to repay their initial outlays. The net effect of this system was that the lot owner was borrowing money from the ultimate purchaser of his mortgage at rates of 12 to 15 percent, an interest rate that drew money from around the country to Los Angeles.²¹

The system then repeated itself when the lot owner wished to build a house on his lot. Bank mortgages usually extended no more than ten years and covered no more than 50 percent of the value of the house. The homeowner paid only interest, and at the expiration date of the mortgage he was expected to repay the full amount of the loan. To raise this sum, he usually had to renegotiate a new mortgage, often on onerous terms. Moreover, these bank mortgages had to be supplemented with second and even third mortgages to cover the costs of construction. These mortgages were available from developers, but again at rates of interest that ranged from 12 to 15 percent.²²

One can now understand why owning one's home was such an article of faith among real estate developers. To the substantial profits made from converting agricultural land to building land was added the opportunity to place well secured loans at high rates of interest. The salesman selling lots or the builder selling houses was simply one element in a system the ultimate purpose of which was to sell money—in other words, to sell mortgage commitments at highly profitable rates.

Only the lure of home ownership could induce consumers to assume the heavy burden of debt. Thus, any transportation system that threatened to raise the price of lots or to restrict the supply of land available for development of single family houses threatened the whole system of profitable real estate speculation. The civic elite had no doubt that roads served their interests better than mass transit. As the *Los Angeles Examiner* put it:

Los Angeles needs wide streets, and lots of them.
Los Angeles needs smooth streets, and lots of them.
Los Angeles needs through streets, and lots of them.
Los Angeles needs more streets, and lots of them.²³

A somewhat more subtle analysis was put forward in a report to the influential Los Angeles City Club. The report maintained that Los Angeles was basically "a single family dwelling" city and that this "desirable situation" should be "maintained and encouraged." The low density of population made it virtually impossible for a mass transit system to pay for itself. Moreover, there was no point in subsidizing mass transit because it only led to a congested downtown area, and such centralization was becoming obsolete:

Banking, industry, commercialized recreation, and even retail business are entering upon an era of decentralization. Business is pointing the way out of the intolerable congestion situation in our downtown areas. Branch banks are going out to the people, factories are seeking outside locations, neighborhood theatres are springing up all over the city, and some of our retail merchants are building, or have established branch stores in outlying sections.²⁴

The report put forward a vision of the new city that was widespread at the time. The "city of the future will be a harmoniously developed community of local centers and garden cities,"²⁵ an environment of single family homes linked by highways. A resident could live in any section and work or shop in any other. No single spot would be privileged as the core, to which all citizens must resort. It was an updated version of the original Los Angeles vision, the whole basin to become a single great decentralized city without a center or boundaries.

In 1926, after a well organized campaign by civic organizations, Los Angeles voted overwhelmingly to approve the massive bond issue that made the road system a reality.²⁶ At the same time a proposal for a new central rail and trolley station—the only part of the mass transit proposals to reach the voters—was decisively defeated.²⁷ The results were soon obvious. The Pacific Electric system began its rapid deterioration, and by the late 1930s it had become the transportation choice of last resort. The Works Progress Administration's 1941 guide to the city described the system as "incredibly slow and antiquated," and plagued by "long waits and overcrowding." Service that once competed with the automobile in speed now took more than three times as long.²⁸

The downtown area soon followed suit, growing ever shabbier as it lost its share of retail trade and commercial development to newer centers. Soon residents did not even realize that Los Angeles had once possessed a crowded, vital downtown, which had been a true center for the region. In 1922 the Automobile Club of Southern California had predicted that if the new roads were built, "the City of Los Angeles will be enabled to fulfill its destiny as a great world metropolis."²⁹ This decentralized destiny was now at hand.

The Creation of the Decentralized City

During the 1920s a group of sociologists at the University of Chicago confidently mapped the general form of the modern industrial city based on the model of concentric circles with the central business district occupying the center, industry and workers' housing in the middle rings, and suburbia forming the outermost ring.³⁰ At precisely the same time Los Angeles was creating a decentralized city that completely contradicted their assumptions. Functions were not classified by their distance from the center, which in any case was becoming increasingly irrelevant to the city. Instead, the grid system of roads made possible a distribution of formerly central elements throughout the metropolis. Where, then, was "suburbia"?

The answer, as I have suggested, is "everywhere." Developers could subdivide land at virtually any point, knowing that one of the new boulevards would allow the new residents to reach jobs and shopping anywhere in the city. Nevertheless, the different kinds of subdivisions were not evenly distributed throughout the city. The principal class distinction was no longer distance from the center—the poor living closer in, the rich further out—but elevation. The wealthy seized upon the hills as a sign of wealth and status, while more modest developments limited themselves to spreading along the endless flatlands—what Reyner Banham has called "the plains of Id."³¹ For the wealthy, the high ground offered not only splendid views and purer air but also the exclusivity that distance had provided in the railroad suburb. As one realtor put it, "the hills . . . offer the only remaining areas that can and will be free from commercialism and business enterprise. The hills make it impossible for the vital things that make a home beautiful ever to be taken away."³²

The archetypal hill suburb was, of course, Beverly Hills, perhaps the most successful (in terms of current land values) subdivision project ever attempted. It began, no doubt appropri-

ately, in an oil speculation. A group of investors that included the ubiquitous Henry E. Huntington bought the 3,300 acre Hamel and Denker Ranch, hoping to find oil. When none was discovered, the "Amalgamated Oil Company" transformed itself into the Rodeo Land and Water Company and, in 1907, brought the New York landscape architect Wilbur Cook to the site to lay it out as an exclusive residential suburb. Cook's design had a grand symmetry and simplicity. Wide, gently curving streets—soon lined with trees—followed the slope of the land upward from the streetcar station into the hills, which overlooked the whole basin. The plan was protected when the company incorporated its still virtually empty tract as a separate city in 1913, adopting the name "Beverly Hills" from Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, an exclusive suburb and summer resort north of Boston, the success of which the company wished to emulate.³³

But the magnificent sites remained virtually empty until after World War I, when Hollywood stars began to purchase homes in this exclusive enclave just west of Hollywood itself. When in 1921 Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks built their estate, Pickfair, on the appropriately named Summit Drive, the success of Beverly Hills was assured.³⁴ And, as Beverly Hills filled with houses, developers began their march along the Santa Monica Mountains to the sea: Holmby Hills, modestly named for its developer's birthplace;³⁵ Westwood, which gained the prize of the new branch of the University of California; Bel Air, so exclusive behind its massive gates that its developer, Alphonzo Bell, refused to sell to "movie people";³⁶ the Brentwood Riviera, which claimed to surpass its French predecessor; and finally Pacific Palisades—originally Huntington Palisades, but the ocean eventually took precedence over the magnate—and the beaches of Malibu.

A similar march of affluence advanced along the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains to Pasadena, San Marino, and Arcadia; but perhaps the most remarkable of all the hill suburbs was Palos Verdes. In 1913 the New York financier Frank Vanderlip had purchased the 16,000 acre Palos Verdes peninsula, some twenty miles south of downtown Los Angeles. The pen-

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insula juts out high over the Pacific, with magnificent views of the ocean. Vanderlip decided to develop a portion of the site as a "high class residential district" and turned to Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. to prepare a plan. World War I intervened, and Olmsted did not resume work until 1922, when Vanderlip assigned 3,200 acres to the speculator E. G. Lewis. Lewis was one of those individuals, part crank, part visionary, who seem fatally attracted to Los Angeles real estate. He soon went broke, but his salesmanship provided the impetus for his scheme of a city of 200,000 people on the Palos Verdes peninsula.

Olmsted's plan, only partially implemented, was a worthy successor to his father's Riverside, Illinois plan. The Palos Verdes design was a synthesis of the Riverside idea of community and the Llewellyn Park concept of the dramatic picturesque. Where Olmsted senior had only flat Illinois prairie to work with, Olmsted junior had a site overlooking the Pacific that far surpassed the Orange Mountains of New Jersey. He described the site as a "virgin tract of twenty-five square miles, with every advantage of climate, coast, and lofty intricacies of hills."³⁷ He had the technical means to achieve on a large scale the natural landscape of Llewellyn Park. He intended to cut curving automobile roads into the steep slopes that led down to the ocean, using as the aesthetic basis of his design the union of the house and its site. The whole development perches above the Pacific; a neat and well organized community juxtaposed with the most dramatic vistas of mountain and ocean.

What most distinguishes Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. from his father, however, is the former's careful—no doubt too careful—social planning. His aim was to create a community "planned, guided, and controlled from the very start with the sole exclusive object of making it and keeping it, as a great cooperative enterprise, the pleasantest place to live that it can possibly be made."³⁸ As the best planning theory dictated, Palos Verdes was organized into separate neighborhood units, each grouped around an elementary school and local shopping areas. Within each neighborhood there was a calculated blend of large and small houses, as well as a strictly limited number of multifamily

dwellings. Every detail was specified not only to achieve the proper residential and social environment, but also to prevent "deterioration" or "encroachment." As Olmsted wrote to the project's sales manager:

The self-contained situation of the tract, its island of hills next to the ocean, safe from encroachment from any development of an adverse source surrounding it . . . gives an assurance of *stability* and *permanence* to the character of the community such as no residential area near the metropolis has had since the rapid flux and shift and uncertainty of modern developments set in.³⁹

Olmsted even stipulated an "Art Jury" to judge all house designs and improvements in order to exclude anything in bad taste.⁴⁰ (The Jury still operates, though an examination of the approved designs shows that the Jury never discriminated against banality, especially when it came clad in stucco and a red tile roof.) Olmsted's aims nevertheless underline the irony of suburbia, especially in Los Angeles. The city was built on the possibility of instant change, of creating a community overnight where only empty land had been. Yet, once created, the new community must achieve stability and permanence, the only things the economic system that created suburbia could never provide. Like Riverside, Palos Verdes fell victim to a depression—the Great Depression—which restricted Olmsted's plan to a small portion of its original scope.⁴¹

As housing spread over the city, both in the exclusive suburbs and in the infinitely repeated lots and bungalows of the Plains of Id, industry and shopping also decentralized. Los Angeles never had an industrial zone as did the eastern and midwestern cities, and any tendency to develop one was defeated by the freedom of movement provided by the new road system. Factories were not forced to be near mass transit lines in order to attract workers. Even in the 1920s factory workers were automobile commuters, coming to their jobs from every section of the metropolis rather than from a single factory zone.⁴²

Specialized shopping, that most zealously held prerogative of the central business district, also found new locations on the

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periphery. The trend is perhaps most significantly revealed in the so-called Miracle Mile of Wilshire Boulevard. In the 1920s, realtor A. W. Ross watched as affluent residents moved steadily westward along the hills away from the city center. His idea was simple, to move the great department stores to where their customers had gone. But behind this idea was, of course, the city's centrifugal impetus: there was no point in sacrificing to maintain a downtown area that was destined to decay. Ross purchased eighteen acres along the south side of Wilshire Boulevard, eight miles west of the downtown area, which he called the Wilshire Boulevard Center. His concept was from the start that this "center" would serve primarily shoppers traveling by automobile. The stores fronted on the boulevard, but behind them Ross provided large parking lots and elaborate entrances.⁴³

Many merchants balked at the idea of placing a large department store in the middle of what was still a neighborhood of small suburban homes with open fields within sight. But Ross could show that most of the city's buying power now resided within a four mile radius of his center; that stores located there would intercept this buying power before it reached downtown. He was proved correct. The sidewalks on his Miracle Mile were deserted, but the parking lots were full. Downtown department stores hastened to establish elaborate branch stores on Wilshire Boulevard while letting their downtown stores run down. Decentralized, suburban shopping had come of age.⁴⁴

By the end of the 1920s a new urban structure was in place in Los Angeles. Crucial metropolitan functions had exploded over the landscape, their scattering supported by an extensive network of roads that permitted multidimensional travel. This new sense of unlimited urban space was well illustrated in an article by E. E. East, the chief engineer of the Automobile Club of Southern California. Based on the club's research, he illustrated the day's driving of an affluent Beverly Hills family of four:

The day for the X family, automotively speaking, starts at 7 AM with the arrival of the Mexican gardener from Belvedere. At 7:30 AM the

milkman arrives on his daily round from Culver City. Breakfast over, at 8 AM the son departs for classes at USC, and the daughter for a fashionable Pasadena school. At 8:30 the husband sets forth for his office in the Central Manufacturing District at Ventnor. At 11 o'clock the wife leaves for a shopping tour [of the Miracle Mile at Wilshire Boulevard]. . . . By 6 o'clock husband, son and daughter are back home. By 7 Mr. and Mrs. X have left again for dinner at the California Club, and an evening at the Hollywood Bowl. After dinner the son dashes over to consult a school mate in Hollywood, and the daughter scurries to Long Beach for a dance.⁴⁵

In all, the family has covered more than 500 miles in their four cars. As East observes, none of these trips comes under the rubric of traditional commuting. None has its starting or ending point downtown. Instead, the family "has described a dizzy pattern" as their "paths crossed" and they "intercepted the journeys of countless thousands of others bent on similar missions." Traffic had become not only wide ranging but multidirectional. Each family was its own "core" in a decentralized city.

Freeways and Tract Houses: The Mature Suburban Metropolis

Los Angeles did not escape the Depression, which hit particularly hard at its main engine of growth: land speculation and house building. The underlying economy, however, remained strong, with agriculture, oil, and motion pictures as its mainstays and with aviation establishing itself as a significant new presence. The 1930s was thus a planning decade. Confidence in the future remained strong though actual growth slowed, so the new forms that were to dominate the 1940s and 1950s had time to mature. In particular, the two great symbols of postwar Los Angeles—the tract of endlessly repeated suburban houses and the freeway—were developed in the 1930s.

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Both the tract house and the freeway were conservative in their inspiration. They attempted to maintain under changing conditions that commitment to a single family home and a decentralized environment which had characterized Los Angeles since the turn of the century. They carried to its logical, technological conclusion the premise that the whole metropolitan area must be amenable to single family houses, each with rapid automobile access to every other part of the city.

This impulse can perhaps be seen most clearly in the early history of the Los Angeles freeway system. In the 1920s the city had built the most extensive series of roads for its size in the world. They had their effect, but less than a decade later they were falling prey to the grave threat of congestion. The Automobile Club showed that each year the time required to reach virtually any destination was increasing. In what E. E. East called a "great, far-flung community that long since learned to depend on the automobile as its principal means of transportation,"⁴⁶ such delays could lead to a reconcentration that would drive up land values at the center and make the undeveloped land too remote for sale as housing.

If the Automobile Club was the first to document this threat, it was also the first to propose a solution. Continuing its status as the true planning organ of the city, the club's engineers devised a remarkably elaborate transportation plan based on a new form of road, the limited access, high speed expressway. Los Angeles did not invent the freeway; but in the 1930s such roads were new to the theory and practice of highway engineers. The limited access superhighway had evolved from the purely recreational parkways, like those which Robert Moses planned in the 1920s for Long Island, as well as from expressways designed to speed commuting to and from the central city. The Automobile Club's freeways resembled these predecessors in detail, but the overall purpose and conception of the freeway system were unique.⁴⁷

The Los Angeles freeways were not intended to deliver traffic to a central spot. Instead, they were to be organized into a large grid superimposed over the denser 1920s grid of surface roads.

The freeways were truly to unite the whole region into one decentralized city, permitting rapid travel in any direction and between any two spots on the map. Once these high speed corridors were in place, even the vast distances of the Los Angeles basin could be covered in minutes. The traveler would then descend to the older grid of surface roads, which would deliver him to his destination.

What made the Automobile Club's plan—first presented in 1937—so remarkable was its completeness. It depicted more than five hundred miles of limited access freeways along with elaborate interchanges, a system that dwarfed the 1920s road plan. Nevertheless, the power of the automobile lobby and the fear of congestion were so great that this massive plan was officially adopted by the municipal and planning offices only two years after the Automobile Club proposed it. The only significant change involved a last-ditch effort by downtown interests to create a point of convergence—a modified hub—at the core.⁴⁸

Unfortunately for downtown boosters, they were unable to suggest any way of handling the massive influx of automobiles that the convergence of offramps promised to deliver to their doors. One desperate plan pictured elevated highways running directly through specially constructed downtown skyscrapers, each with several floors of parking. The final plan omitted these odd visions. Although it did provide some convergence at the core, this expedient did nothing to halt the area's precipitate decline.⁴⁹ Mass transit, needless to say, was virtually ignored. One plan envisioned high speed buses traveling along the freeway, but where and how these buses would stop to pick up passengers was not considered.⁵⁰

The proposed freeways were the most spectacular indications of planning for a substantial influx of population. Changes in the building and real estate industries were more subtle but perhaps even more decisive in maintaining the supremacy of the single family house. The Depression had dealt a mortal blow to the old system of underfinanced speculators and builders operating on a paper-thin margin of high priced credit. To save

homeowners threatened by foreclosure, in 1933 the Roosevelt Administration created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation which refinanced over a million short-term mortgages and replaced them with a new form of home loan: the long-term mortgage whose equal payments spread over twenty to thirty years not only paid the interest but paid off (amortized) the principal as well. This crucial innovation was at the heart of the National Housing Act of 1934, which created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Title II of the Act authorized the FHA to insure mortgages, and its policies made the self-amortizing 25–30-year mortgage the norm throughout the nation. Whereas banks of the 1920s had limited their mortgages to no more than 50 or 60 percent of a home's value, the FHA insured mortgages of up to 90 percent of the value. No longer was a homebuyer forced to supplement an inadequate first mortgage with a high-interest second mortgage.⁵¹

These innovations rationalized the crazy quilt structure of mortgage financing left over from the 1920s. Moreover, the National Housing Act also created a stable and insured network of savings and loan institutions, where the deposits of small savers could flow directly toward home construction and mortgages. Nor were builders forgotten. They could draw upon FHA mortgage guarantees to get working capital to complete their projects. Developers, instead of struggling from one short term loan to the next, now had an assured supply of capital to undertake their initial work of street building, as well as assurances that customers for houses could find ample mortgage money with which to pay for their houses. This program, which was designed to stimulate modest growth for a moribund industry, in fact created the conditions for explosive suburban growth when the economy improved.

In particular, it allowed the subdivider to look beyond the rapid turnover of lots and make a longer term commitment to both subdividing the land and building the houses on it. A few developers in the 1920s, such as Harry Culver of Culver City, had taken that route, but relatively few possessed both the capital and the staying power to see it through. Instead, they re-

duced their risk by turning over the house building to other entrepreneurs prepared to take those risks on a house by house basis.⁵²

The Federal Housing Administration loan guarantees made it possible for a single organization to undertake the complete task of turning an empty plot of land into a neighborhood of streets and houses. This change introduced both economies of scale and economies of speed into the suburbanization process. Lots could now be designed to fit the house built on them. A single crew of workers, using identical or highly similar plans, could rapidly erect a series of houses, utilizing wherever possible precut and prefitted elements that minimized labor costs on the site. Using this method in the late 1930s, a single developer in the City of Bell was able to build and sell 236 houses in twenty months.⁵³

To suit this rapid pace of building, developers needed a simplified house design that would be both attractive to buyers and uncomplicated to build. The result was the California ranch house, which evolved from many different sources in the late 1930s. It was basically a throwback to the low California bungalow that Herbert Croly had seen and praised at the turn of the century. But the bungalow was now turned parallel to the street, its apparent size exaggerated by the addition of a connected garage. (In the automobile age there was no need to economize on street frontage.) The most prominent feature of the ranch house was the overhanging roof, a dominant motif in turn of the century ranch houses and bungalows, now brought back to prominence after the pseudocottage roofs of the 1920s. Some of the facade's details might lean toward colonial, Spanish, or American western styles, but the dominant impression was one of a modern simplicity. Within the house the open plan necessarily prevailed. A single, largely undifferentiated space included living, dining, kitchen, and recreation areas, while the bedrooms formed a right angle to the main space. A small patio was placed near the front door, while a much larger one sat at the back door.⁵⁴

Through simplification, the "small California house," as

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builders originally called it, had absorbed the main lessons of twentieth century modernism: forms and structure are one; inside and outside merge; and space within is open. (Frank Lloyd Wright, then an isolated figure, was building surprisingly similar "Usonian Houses" at the same time.) For a brief moment modernist architecture, populist aspirations, and the requirements of the market came together. For these houses were undoubtedly cheap. In the late thirties developers sold them for \$3,000 to \$4,500 each; with a Federal Housing Administration mortgage, this price meant a \$50 down payment and a \$30 to \$50 payment each month.⁵⁵

Housing reformers of the 1920s, like Lewis Mumford and Catherine Bauer Wurster, had seen an inherent contradiction between the requirements of modern building and living and the procedures of speculative house building. Bauer proclaimed that "the jostling small builders and the front-foot lots and the miserable straggling suburbs and the ideology of individual Home Ownership must go. And in their place must come a technique for building complete communities, designed and administered as functional units and constructed by large-scale methods."⁵⁶ It was not the communitarians but the speculators themselves who must successfully adopt the "large-scale methods" that Bauer had called for, and they used them not to build the modernist collective dwellings Bauer and Mumford advocated, but more efficiently constructed versions of that monument of "individual Home Ownership," the single family suburban house. The collective architecture and planning of the New Deal "Greenbelt Towns" remained a curiosity, while the suburban house gained new impetus from the most modern methods of functional mass production.

Los Angeles thus emerged from the 1930s still in touch with her original goals. The Los Angeles Master Plan of 1941 showed that 31 percent of the city's land was devoted to single family houses, with only 2 percent to multiple family dwellings.⁵⁷ With widespread automobile ownership—1.16 million cars in 1940, or 2.4 persons per vehicle⁵⁸—and with the proposed freeway system (25 percent of the city was already given over to streets

and highways), it still seemed possible to place these houses within a decentralized environment. The city plan predicted massive growth, but it also predicted that new residents coming to Los Angeles would continue to be accommodated in new suburban homes.

Apogee and Decline of the Suburban Metropolis

Los Angeles has never lacked publicity, but after World War II the city entered a new era as a symbol of postwar American culture. It became, in Asa Briggs's phrase, a "shock city," a city like Manchester in the 1840s, so new that it came as a shock to visitors and caused them to reconsider the meaning of a city.

Post-1945 Los Angeles was not so much a departure from the past as a fulfillment of its basic structure, a use of new means to safeguard the original end of a great city based on the single family house. The development of Los Angeles from 1940 to the present has meant the fleshing out of the bare bones constructed in the 1930s: the transformation of over 900 square miles of agricultural land into suburban tract developments, and the construction of almost 500 miles of freeways to forestall the congestion created by the new homes.⁵⁹ The city has thus seen a massive race between growth and congestion; each new freeway temporarily averted traffic paralysis, only to create new areas for growth that overwhelmed the freeway system anew.

It is an irony that the ideal of the suburban metropolis was perhaps most closely approximated in the very beginning of the period—1940—before the first freeway had been completed, and before the massive construction of tract houses had begun. Los Angeles then possessed a remarkable balance of urban and rural environments; it was the nation's leading agricultural county and ranked eighth in industrial production;⁶⁰ citrus groves and irrigated fields punctuated the landscape within

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sight of most homes. To the oil industry Los Angeles could add a significant proportion of the aircraft industry, as well as the movie studios at the height of their powers. The European war brought a remarkable group of cultural leaders to the city. At least temporarily, Los Angeles could claim to be at the center of western civilization.

Yet the city remained as its founders had wished: a collection of villages, devoid of the slums and overcrowding of the past, offering to almost everyone a suburban home on its own land. Spread out among the fields and groves, the houses provided access over a still uncongested road system to all that the region possessed: employment, entertainment, education, as well as miles of beaches and vast expanses of hills.

Postwar growth inevitably shattered this fragile equilibrium, swallowing up open space, congesting the highways, even poisoning the air (the first smog attack came in 1943).⁶¹ Yet the process had attained a momentum of its own that accelerated in the years of prosperity. The San Fernando Valley, still largely rural in the 1940s, was the most prominent scene of hectic growth. Developments larger than the Levittowns of the East were easily accommodated within its vast plain. In 1950, for example, Louis H. Boyar bought 3,375 acres of farmland to build a new community which he called Lakewood Park. He built 17,000 houses for more than 70,000 residents.⁶²

Growth had become a giant machine operating out of control, creating endless expanses of development that foreclosed forever the original vision of a community of homes set in a still verdant environment. Yet, for almost thirty years, the abundant space of southern California absorbed the increases. When the San Fernando Valley was filled, the focus of development shifted to Orange County, the original home of the citrus industry, or east along the foothills toward San Bernardino and the desert. Land remained relatively cheap, as the new freeways made more and more distant sites available for building; capital remained abundant, as a nationwide system of Federal Housing Administration financing poured savings deposits from across the country into the Los Angeles home building industry.

As late as the 1960s, the suburban metropolis appeared to be working.

The Watts riots of the mid 1960s were the first sign of serious trouble, proving that Los Angeles had indeed created a new form of slum: not the dark tenements of the older cities but the low density bungalow areas of the streetcar era that had been abandoned both by their original residents and by public transportation. In the late 1960s freeway building ground to a halt due to rising costs and opposition from homeowners "in the path of progress."⁶³ The energy crisis of the 1970s undermined the viability of a transportation system for a great city based so completely on the private automobile.

Gasoline shortages could be overcome, but the shortage of land could never be. As outward expansion reached its limits in the 1970s, desirable areas toward the center experienced an explosive boom in land values, which sometimes increased eight to ten times over the decade. This inflation would no doubt have gratified the salesmen who sold those lots in the 1910s and 1920s, but its effect was to eliminate the possibility of a single family home for every Los Angeles family. The two great safety valves of low density expansion—new land at the outskirts and more roads—had reached their end. There was no escaping congestion.

The recent history of Los Angeles has therefore been a history of reconcentration. Tract houses have given way to apartments and condominiums. High-rise buildings line the major boulevards. Perhaps inevitably, the downtown area has been reborn as the most logical site for a concentration of high-rise towers. E. E. East, the Automobile Club engineer, had concluded in 1941 that the "vision of a skyscraper city" downtown was dead forever.⁶⁴ In the late 1970s and 1980s that vision was restored as business and government leaders recognized the need for a centralized point of communication not dependent on long trips on congested roads. With the skyscraper city was also revived the idea of mass transportation. In September 1986, Los Angeles broke ground for the first four miles of a projected 150-mile subway system running out from old core through Hollywood

and West Los Angeles and then to the San Fernando Valley. If this "Metro Rail" system is completed—funding for even the first small link remains in doubt—it would be only a small part of the same plan that had been advocated and rejected in the 1920s.⁶⁵ Los Angeles was, at tremendous cost, reinventing the wheel; or, more precisely, reinventing the centralized city based on a downtown hub and mass transit spokes.

If other great cities have come more and more to resemble Los Angeles, Los Angeles in turn has begun to resemble them. In Los Angeles the quest for a city based on the single family home came into conflict with the city's plans to be a great metropolis, a world center for finance, industry, and culture. Not even the great spaces of the Los Angeles basin could reconcile low density residential development with the centralizing, congesting tendencies of metropolitan growth. The suburban metropolis proved to be a contradiction in terms.

Yet the vision of a decentralized city that Los Angeles offered the world is by no means dead. It survives beyond the metropolis, not only beyond the densely built areas of the old cities but beyond the old suburban belts as well. In the newly developing sunbelt regions as well as in the areas of new construction on the periphery of eastern and midwestern cities, a new kind of city is taking shape. This new city—neither urban, nor rural, nor suburban in the traditional sense—is the true heir of the innovations introduced by Los Angeles in the 1920s and 1930s. It will be the subject of my concluding chapter: beyond suburbia.