

Transit-Oriented Classism in Los Angeles

A Look at the Ghetto Blue

By Lisa Schweitzer

With its electric wires crisscrossing the horizon looking like stitches across a deep cut, the Ghetto Blue is a microcosm of the city—a huge scar running through LA that needs to be healed.

—Ben Quiñones,
“Killing Time on the Ghetto Blue,”
LA Weekly, January 22, 2004

THE BLUE LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT (LRT) Line was built twenty years ago on existing right-of-way over 35 kilometers (21 miles) between downtown Los Angeles and Long Beach. With nineteen stations, it serves what was once a heavily used transit corridor through South Central Los Angeles. The Blue Line thus covers a lot of Los Angeles real estate. It was the region’s first foray in the hyperbole that accompanies all large project development: Blue Line promoters and rail advocates made big promises for the investment to the riot-ravaged communities in Central Los Angeles. It was said that the LRT would bring development and jobs for the area. In 1996, nearly a decade after it was built, UCLA’s Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and USC’s Tridib Banerjee published their eloquent commentary,



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Photos by the author

There’s No There There, documenting how, despite the promises made about jobs and development to the disadvantaged residents along the Blue Line, Blue Line stations had not sparked much development at all, let alone fulfilled the inflated promises. The land around the stations remained stubbornly underdeveloped—and most remains so even today, a decade later.

It’s important that we look at the decade of the 1990s critically. In 1996, the data year for Sideris and Banerjee’s commentary, the region began heading towards what has now become famous as the U.S.’s real estate “bubble.” It is difficult to convey just how steep changes in home prices were, but in 1996, the median home price in Los Angeles was \$190,000. By 2007, it was \$550,000. And yet, despite all this price growth throughout that decade—the nearly frantic home building, the ridiculously priced condos getting planted on top of the region’s Westside transit darling, the Red Line—still virtually no development happened along the Blue Line, despite its high ridership levels. In A. Paxon’s 2005 pre-bust article in *Southern California Real Estate* crowing about the new, successful transit-oriented developments in Los Angeles, the Blue Line was not mentioned once. Not once.

The Blue Line remains a cautionary tale of three things: 1) land markets do not move simply because transit advocates and builders want them to; 2) classism in transit-oriented design contributes to reinforcing the notion that communities along the Blue Line are “undesirable; and 3) planners and public institutions that freely build—and then fail to deliver on—what they promise to their community partners occurs largely because planners and the powers they serve love to build and hate to deal with community development. If the Blue

Line should teach us anything, it's that infrastructure policy is not a substitute for social policy or for the deep engagement that helps communities leverage investments like the Blue Line into more than just transit.

There's Already a There There

Compton was historically an African-American enclave, but its demographics have changed, making the city roughly half African American and half Latino. And it is a city in its own right. Surrounding the downtown, the Blue Line station area includes a shopping center with national retailers and restaurants (Figure 1A). While the shopping is primarily auto-oriented, there is sidewalk connectivity. Also within walking distance of the station are a post office, courthouse, civic center and the architecturally significant Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in the town center (Figure 1C). There is also open land near the Compton Station (Figure 1B), and quite a bit of single-family housing (Figure 1D). The Compton Station, like most Blue Line stations, is packed with people every single day.

The City of Compton engaged in a visioning process with the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) as part of its Compass Blueprint Growth Vision in 2007. The Compass Blueprint program is intended to direct new regional development towards transit-accessible land to leverage new opportunities for transit-oriented development (TOD)/districts. Prepared by consultants Fregonese Calthorpe Associates (FCA) and Solimar Research Group, the document is entitled *Policies for a Thriving Compton* and it is a vision based on transit-oriented, mixed-use development. Throughout the vision, the standard ideas from form-based codes are presented for three redevelopment areas along with photos and exemplars of nothing but commercial-residential mixed-use.



Figure 1. The Compton Station Area (from top)

- A. View of shopping center, Compton
- B. Open land, Compton Station
- C. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, Compton Station
- D. Single-family housing north of open land, Compton Station

Here and there, the plan mentions the importance of industrial employment to Compton, and one of the policy recommendations is to develop mixed-use manufacturing. The Artesia Station in Compton currently has a lot of manufacturing employment, but there is no photo or specification of what mixed-use manufacturing would look like, how it would function or how it would interact with other uses. Page after page, however, of commercial and residential mixed-use appear in the plan, with drawings demonstrating how the theater would be next to the florist, and detail after detail about how to handle parking, floor-area ratios and zoning recommendations—in commercial and residential mixed-use only.

Manufacturing and industrial land exists throughout the communities on the Blue Line, from Compton Station through the Del Mar Station to the south and up through the Washington Station to the north. In “The Blue Line Blues” in the *Journal of Urban Design* (2000), Sideris and Banerjee show that the prevalence of this manufacturing acts as a barrier to development for these communities. But an examination of the station areas farther north suggest that the problem may be planners, developers and the TOD model, not the land uses per se.

Mixed-Use Industrial: Vernon, Slauson, Washington

In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson (1990) describes how the loss of industrial employment has hurt metropolitan African-American communities more than other areas in metropolitan regions. What were reasonably good-paying jobs evaporated while the U.S. economy became more oriented towards services. Brownfields are among the legacies of industrial flight, which placed inner-city communities at a competitive disadvantage.

But in the mixed-use industrial and single-use industrial spaces surrounding some of the Blue Line, industry is still functioning, and some businesses are relatively new (as at the Washington Station, Figure 2B). Furthermore, many single-family houses are interspersed with manufacturing and industry, as in Figure 2C. People in Central Los Angeles *already* live

here among the manufacturers next to the Blue Line. The configuration is unattractive, but functionally the residents have made their own mixed-use residential, commercial and industrial community. The occupants of the house in Figure 2C have taken the opportunity to sell fruit (which makes you feel really good, like the bionic man, according to the sign). Women under the station at Slauson routinely sell fresh fruit with chili, tamales and other snacks. What has not materialized in formal economic and community development efforts, people have constructed in the informal economy.

The industries shown in Figure 2 are primarily nuisances rather than polluting or hazardous industries, with the possible exception of the junkyard. In almost all of these cases, in one block, industrial uses line the tracks and in the next block, single-family housing can be found. Thus, many of these areas are *already* mixed-use with industrial, and the poor appearance of the station is not due to derelict or abandoned brownfields, but to functioning industries that are unattractive and out of scale with the station and the streets—problems that urban design could and should be able to fix if urban designers were interested in transit-oriented design for industrial workers and existing residents rather than florists and theaters for imaginary hipsters.

Thus from the perspective of social inclusion, the problem may not be that these areas are unsuitable for TOD. Instead, the themes of standard TOD, like those presented to the City of Compton by SCAG’s consultants, are so geared towards commercial and residential areas that the models are unsuitable to the reality of economic life outside white-collar work and affluent consumption. Models of TOD are currently too classist to provide an inclusionary design vocabulary for places that rely on manufacturing, like the places surrounding the Blue Line. We have proven over and over in Los Angeles, and elsewhere, that it is possible to use TOD to develop multi-family housing and retail in expensive, booming submarkets. But there is no urban design vocabulary or TOD vision that includes the activities of blue-collar workers or handles production sites so that they are not a nuisance to those walking to the station like the green nuisance recycling center near the Slauson station (Figure 2E).

Figure 2. Industrial and mixed-use industrial at Blue Line Stations



A. Washington—older site



B. Washington—new site



C. Housing across from Vernon



D. Industry at Vernon station



E. Recycling Center at Slauson



F. Junkyard at Slauson

Much of the literature on sustainability presents case studies as best practices for the transformation of industrial sites to leisure and residential sites. In some instances, manufacturing (and its attendant freight) is simply ignored as part of sustainable cities. Jabereen (2006) does not even mention a role for industry or freight transport in his evaluation of four sustainable city models: neotraditional, new urbanist, EcoCity and urban containment. Of the many new urbanist and TOD writings and TOD hybrids, virtually no discussion occurs about industry or work in the sustainable city, except that people should be able to get to work without driving—not that communities should be able to accommodate industrial employers and small industrial businesses and still be entitled to good streetscapes and amenities near stations. Thus, within our existing visions for TOD, mixed-use industrial zones like those at the Washington, Vernon and Slauson Stations have only two outcomes: redevelop/gentrify like at the stations in Hollywood around the Red Line—or languish, be erased or, alternatively, be invisible. And because those choices take a long time, the streets around these stations remain locked out of more hospitable sidewalks and streets because those are contingent on development.

Conclusion

Every day, the Blue Line serves over 75,000 boardings. In terms of mobility, the “Ghetto Blue” provides regional access for people traveling out of South Los Angeles

to opportunities in the rest of the region. But it has provided few opportunities to its host communities. In 2007, SCAG, in its Compass Blueprint strategy for developing TOD throughout the region, produced a TOD visioning plan and policy guide with residents and leaders in the City of Compton—seventeen years after the Blue Line opened. Compton’s TOD policies were published in 2007, just as real estate prices in the U.S. tanked. After waiting for nearly two decades for redevelopment, the window of opportunity for implementing development around the Blue Line may have closed again, and we have no idea when or how long it will take for these opportunities to once again materialize. By failing to put inclusion on the top of the agenda for regional development at the outset of new TOD, these communities may wind up waiting another decade before station-area development occurs.

In conjunction with waiting for the development “powers that be” to recognize the opportunities that Blue Line communities offer, blue-collar manufacturing workers and their communities continue to wait for planning and urban design to produce a transit-oriented development that includes them, access to their workplaces and their comforts. But even as Compton residents and leaders vocalized the importance of industrial jobs to their communities during their visioning, their TOD vision wound up looking like every other one, repeating the now-familiar design tropes of TOD—the florist, the theater, the sidewalk-level

storefronts. It is not as though residents of South Central would not want to have all of the retail mixed-uses included in the Compton vision, but they also need to retain what they have, even if what they have does not fit within existing forms and form-based codes.

At some point—and we are at that point in Los Angeles—the TOD model and urban design needs to innovate for blue-collar uses or it will fail to deliver on its promises for sustainable regions. This is a region where official estimates of African-American unemployment reached 24 percent in 2012—even higher than in 1992 when regional elites promised that the Blue Line would bring jobs and businesses to the communities it serves. If there were ever a time to deliver what we promised with the Blue Line, it’s now. As the City of Los Angeles thinks about how to replace the recently dissolved Community Redevelopment Agency, prioritizing places that already have rail accessibility makes infinite sense. **P²**