

The Seventh Generation

"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."

—From The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy

How Imperial Decline Contributes to Urban Decay in Los Angeles

By Dick Platkin

"If you cannot predict,
how can you plan?
The answer is clear;
you cannot;
you proceed blindly."
—Gabriel Kolko,
CounterPunch, May 14, 2012

GABRIEL KOLKO'S ARTICLE is about the United States government's endless, futile, bankrupting imperial wars. He argues that there is no end in site, and that the federal government will continue to mindlessly wage these wars. Sadly, the domestic consequences of these wars, and the public sector's parallel inability to predict and plan at the metropolitan or neighborhood level, have also become a curse on American cities.

The bipartisan, neoconservative foreign policy Kolko dissects neatly dovetails with the neoliberal approach to urban governance painfully visible in most large American cities such as Los Angeles. In both cases the quirks of market forces, whether global or local, subvert the planning process because of the economic system's uncontrollable fluctuations and periodic breakdowns into crises and conflicts.



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Photos by the author

Case Study of Los Angeles

A close look at Los Angeles, the second most populous metropolis in the United States, reveals how this downward spiral is unfolding. While the city's increased emphasis on policing and surveillance parallels the globalized militarism of the United States, so too do City Hall's business subsidies, which encourage new real estate bubbles and justify local austerity programs to subsidize pet projects and the police build-up. For example, in the past month alone, the local press has reported a \$67 million dollar tax break for a new downtown hotel, unprecedented education cutbacks and a large surge in police murders.

On the twentieth anniversary of the 1992 urban insurrection that resulted in 1,000 torched buildings, fifty people murdered, over 10,000 people wounded and another 10,000 people arrested, Los Angeles is a sad sack of a city. Despite City Hall and media boosterism, decay and decline are in the air. While the city's politicians, nearly all centrist Democrats like Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, still portray Los Angeles as a boomtown, the city is tired and rapidly aging. In reality, it perfectly reflects the broad plight of the United States described by Kolko. Imperial overreach is far from over and has already resulted in substantial domestic stagnation, with long-term prospects even worse.

Furthermore, the revival strategies of the Los Angeles business elites and their political sidekicks are comedic. Except, of course, for policing and spying, they have incrementally cut public payrolls, employee compensation, services and infrastructure to the bone.

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At the same time they are systematically deregulating private real estate investment and environmental review processes in the misguided, neoliberal perception that investors will then rush in for another building boom—a tide that will lift all ships.

To their credit, a small part of their calculation might be correct. There certainly are enough dormant piles of capital stashed around this planet to build many new shopping complexes and fortified upscale apartment buildings in the ritzier parts of Los Angeles. The city's fathers and mothers may even find a few bold investors to plunk money into the distressed inner-city neighborhoods that revolted twenty years ago in the largest urban insurrection since New York draft riot of 1863. Even today, a drive through these scarred neighborhoods reveals how little they have changed. In fact, some of the empty lots on major streets, such as Vermont Boulevard, are remnants of fires set in 1992 by local residents in their revolt against police repression and poverty.

Unlike the previous Watts Rebellion of 1965, which was a catalyst for public investment, much of it from the federal government, in the two decades since 1992 public investment has dwindled. Furthermore, the dismantling of the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), one of the few remaining sources of public investment, has further reinforced these cutbacks.

In response to these developments, local officials have never mentioned the obvious: military spending, coupled with tax breaks and bailouts for the well off, have totally undermined state and local government.

Neoliberal Nostrums

Instead, city officials have resorted to the same neoliberal nostrums associated with Reagan and Clinton: deregulation of private investment. They see a flush real estate sector as their municipal cure-all. While



Fortified residential community



there has been a minor boom in illegal garage conversions, McMansions, billboards and supergraphics and marijuana dispensaries, there is little evidence that their arsenal of programs to “unleash” the private sector has made a difference.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Los Angeles’s population has been nearly flat for the past twenty years, with many historic neighborhoods, such as Hollywood, losing population—despite the introduction of subway stations and building subsidies. As for employment, there has been no gain at all, with visible weakening in the city’s core historic industries of construction, heavy manufacturing, garment production and entertainment. In fact, Los Angeles no longer hosts the head office of any Fortune 500 company. Furthermore, the city is still one of the most unequal in the United States, with a Gini coefficient of .49 that places it fifth in the entire country. Another index of economic stagnation and decline, unemployment, has been stuck at an *official* rate of 12 to 14 percent since 2009.

A more careful look at the planning process in Los Angeles reveals how this decline is unfolding. It also reveals why further deregulation will compound the deteriorating conditions experienced by most Los Angeles neighborhoods.

In the boom years prior to the 1992 uprising, the Los Angeles Department of City Planning had 350 em-

ployees serving a population of 3.2 million people. In response to lawsuits from the politically powerful Canyon and Hillside Federation, local slow-growth movements in many neighborhoods and a legal mandate from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the department undertook an ambitious planning program. The first component was AB 283, an enormous zoning program that comprehensively revamped the city’s parcel-level zoning and plan designations to bring them into correspondence with each other.

At approximately the same time, many local community organizations responded to dreadful commercial projects with such sustained political pressure that the City Council adopted a dizzy array of overlay zoning districts. In addition to Specific Plans, there were HPOZs (Historical Preservation Overlay Districts), CDOs (Community Design Overlay Districts), PODs (Pedestrian Overlay Districts) and SNAPs (Station Neighborhood Area Plans). Recent additions include CPIOs (Community Plan Implementation Overlays) and RFAs (Residential Floor Area Overlays) to stop mansionization. While most neighborhoods have *not* benefited from these protective shields, many squeaky wheels did get oiled.

The final leg of this triangle was a legal directive from the EPA that forced Los Angeles to update its General Plan. The resulting plan, the General Plan Framework Element, was based on data from



Overhead wires



McMansion under construction

the 1990 Census and adopted in 1996, with a 2010 horizon year. Its intent was to politically balance neighborhoods and real estate developers through a policy of growth neutrality and program of extensive monitoring. An exemplary General Plan, the Framework was totally ignored, except for when a few policies that could be taken out of context to justify large private developments were used to do this.

Reversal of Planning Initiatives

Likewise, the plethora of zoning overlay ordinances ground to a halt because a change in governing philosophy was reinforced by staff reductions. The original impetus of many of the planning initiatives from the 1980s and 1990s was to manage market forces through carefully prepared plans and zoning rules. But, by the late 1990s until today, unpredictable market forces have prevailed. In this period the city's planning and zoning processes have been weakened to the point that the City's elected officials and their appointed managers consider the planning process to be little more than an irritating barrier to real estate investment.

For example, the General Plan Framework Element seriously overestimated the city's population, projecting 4.3 million people by 2010. Even though the U.S. Census Bureau only counted 3,750,000 people in 2010, the General Plan was never updated to reflect the new data. It has been left to languish, demonstrating Gabriel Kolko's insight that without the ability to predict, there is no ability (or intent) to plan. In the case of Los Angeles, however, both prediction and planning have been jettisoned. Old Census data, left over from the boom era, is still used by a City Planning Department whose staff was sliced in half by budget cuts. These old population numbers are now used to justify (but not predict) expansive programs of up-zoning and up-planning disconnected from the city's actual demographic and economic trends.

Instead, small neighborhoods, about 1/35 of Los Angeles, are being given zoning makeovers labeled Updates. These Updates have only the most superficial connection to the General Plan, without any

link to observable demographic trends. Instead, their role is to green light real estate speculation by allowing much larger and taller projects to be quickly approved, while ignoring plan and project monitoring or investment in public services and infrastructure, such as underground utility wires. Unfortunately, or luckily, in seven years of work on these Community Plan Updates, only the Hollywood Update has been presented to the public. Approved by the City Council in June 2012, lawsuits will tie it up in the courts for an extended period of time.

Although the Hollywood Update was intended to be a template for the remaining thirty-four Community Plan Updates, staff shortages and a loss of expertise has continuously stalled the release of these plans. While their exact status has been carefully kept under wraps, their slowdown has, however, become an unintended blessing for many Los Angeles communities, which had braced themselves for an onslaught of new zoning ordinances permitting much larger buildings that would exceed local infrastructure capacity. Despite years of delay, they are still holding their breath in anticipation of what comes next, in particular lawsuits to block the Hollywood Community Plan Update.

New Forms of Land Use Deregulation

At the same time, the shrunken Department of City Planning has undertaken three programs to further deregulate private land use:

- Many piecemeal amendments to the Los Angeles Municipal Code (LAMC) to accelerate applications for discretionary actions from zoning regulations and avoid environmental reviews, public hearings and appeals.
- A new five-year program, recently approved by the Los Angeles City Council, to totally revamp the city's zoning code. The details of this program are still murky, but critical observers assume this is one more effort to deregulate investment in real estate.
- Transit Oriented Development (TOD). In theory, Los Angeles, one of the country's most polluted,

auto-centric cities, desperately needs sustainable development. Unfortunately, the Department of City Planning is promoting TOD on the cheap. While the successful model for TOD consists of a dense mass transit system, local amenities at transit stations, pedestrian improvements such as sidewalk widening and street trees and bike lanes, in Los Angeles TOD has been simplified. Forget the public improvements. Instead, private lots near minimalist transit stations are up-zoned in the belief that developers will then build mostly market-rate apartment houses in run-down neighborhoods.

This combination of a truly stagnant economy and drought in government investment, especially in public infrastructure and services such as education, suggests that these planning schemes are doomed. After all, when the city's air is still toxic, the highways and roads more congested than ever, the transit system embryonic and underfunded, the sidewalks and streets in deplorable shape, the overhead wires and billboards an assault on the eyes and the schools and colleges in tatters, how could most new upscale projects succeed?

While a few projects, such as USC's expansion or a new AEG football stadium in the downtown, might succeed because they are near major employment centers, most new projects will either languish or go belly-up. Local subsidies, usually in the form of the tax breaks favored by the city's elected officials, can temporarily help a few of the well-connected, but the fate of most new projects is sealed.

Private investment, no matter how large or how touted by squadrons of expeditors, publicists and technicians, cannot succeed when the public environs are so stunted and even worse cutbacks are likely.

Furthermore, there is no white knight to rescue Los Angeles. Unlike the 1960s, there are few remaining federal urban programs other than Department of Justice grants for police spying on Muslims and occupiers. As for the State of California, it, too, is in desperate financial shape, with structural deficits decimating the state's public infrastructure and public services for the foreseeable future. Even hopes that the private sector could come to the rescue, truly an idea born of desperation,

have not panned out. Rebuild LA was the business community's program for the Los Angeles neighborhoods decimated in 1992. It only lasted a few years, and its sole legacy is five oversized boxes stored at the library of Loyola Marymount University in West Los Angeles.

Prospects

With no help on the way, and with local officials who consistently manage to poorly play the weak hands they have been dealt, what are the options?

In this case the ball is in the court of the public. While the local campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s that resulted in a new General Plan, many Specific Plans and the wholesale revamping of the city's zoning have fragmented, they have not been forgotten. Los Angeles still has many active community groups and official neighborhood councils. While some neighborhood councils have been hijacked by real estate interests, many still represent highly committed local residents.

Furthermore, most of the neoliberal schemes originating at City Hall have met stiff resistance from local opponents and citywide alliances.

What is needed in Los Angeles, however, is a city-wide political force that can tackle the city's enormous problems. There are two online journalists, Ron Kaye and Ken Draper, who have provided the forum. While their efforts have chiseled at City Hall's veneer and occasionally pried it open enough to peak inside, at this point Los Angeles is, at best, only moving sideways.

For a short time many local activists had great hopes in enormous immigration marches and most recently in Occupy Los Angeles (OLA). While OLA did have hundreds of people living on the grounds of City Hall, few of them managed to successfully analyze what took place within the adjacent building. But OLA has survived, and many people hope that its tenacity, combined with LA's ongoing deterioration, will spark a serious, long-term, fully engaged and deeply analytical revival before another civil disturbance rips the city apart a third time.

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