



## Viewpoint

# Thrashing Downtown: Play as resistance to the spatial and representational regulation of Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>

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This paper examines the way in which public space has been appropriated by commercial real estate interests in Los Angeles and how varied forms of resistance have developed. The paper examines the serious outcomes of play in the downtown and the importance of studying human interactions in the grander narratives of urban development. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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### Introduction

A single dirt path rises between two vacant lots. One is destined to become a performing arts center. The other, with the manic recovery of the real estate market from the deep recession of the early 1990s, will sprout a block of luxury apartments. This doomed and dusty remnant of upper 2nd Street provides the only ready pedestrian passage up from the remnants of the century-old city center below, through a palisade of concrete parking garages, and into L.A.'s new hilltop compound of multinational corporate finance. Ted hangs out at the top of this path, one of the few homeless people to make the climb up from Skid Row a half-mile to the southwest. He squats on his

haunches and makes specific requests of the business-suited passers-by trying to avoid him: a cup of decaf, an herbal tea, a bran muffin perhaps? Ted is health conscious, claims to have no use for money (a claim supported by his rejections of cash offerings), and gestures to the surrounding street as he explains where he may or may not request sustenance. The forbidden zones are clearly marked by a flat, 4-inch wide bronze-tone metal strip bolted to the sidewalk, concretizing the line between public right of way and privately administered plazas. To drive the point home, a fist-sized brass plaque is embedded into the sidewalk before each plaza entrance. Each plaque is embossed with the words:

PRIVATE PROPERTY. RIGHT TO  
PASS BY PERMISSION, AND  
SUBJECT TO CONTROL, OF  
OWNERS sec 1008 CIVIL CODE.

This on-going standoff between Ted and the bronzed manifestation of the surrounding area's dominant social order concisely illustrates what happens when lifeworlds collide. This collision raises the question: What is the city, according to whom?

### Is the city possible?

The problematics of authoritatively defining the city are reflected in academic discourse about the city. Over the past decade, writings on Los Angeles have become a thriving cottage industry, engendering a subsidiary industry writing to challenge the significance of writings on Los Angeles. Much of these industries' production has been directed towards advocating or dismissing Los Angeles as paradigmatic of a new postindustrial, and perhaps postmodern, urban order (Curry and Kenney, 1999). But in the process, a deeper concern is emerging that

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amidst this conversation, the voices of Angelenos outside academia have been muted to a barely audible whisper, and the innumerable L.A.s of their everyday lives rendered all but invisible (see Dear and Flusty, 1998; and subsequent discussion in Lake, et al 1999.).

To some extent this concern has been overemphasized. There exists much work on contemporary Los Angeles that is predicated upon ethnographic, (auto)biographic, pop-cultural and even poetic underpinnings, and much more currently in progress (Theroux, 1994; some contributions to Dear *et al.*, 1996; Klein, 1997). Further, many works that adopt a more traditionally urban geographical interest in grappling with broad urban structure have not been remiss in drawing from biographies and ethnographies as a means of touching ground (e.g. Wolch and Dear, 1993; Allen and Turner, 1997). Much seminal writing on Los Angeles, however, subordinates the people and places of lived experience to characterizations of the putatively postmodern megalopolis as a more-or-less sustainable complex for regulated capital circulation and social control (Scott, 1993; Soja, 1989, chaps 8-9; and, more equivocally, Davis, 1991).

This impulse towards comprehensive political-economic description has led to a predilection for the synoptic. Such a tendency amongst those who take urban form and process as objects of investigation is hardly surprising, given these investigators' embeddedness within the arguably logical positivist realm of the social sciences. Simply, how you see determines what you look for, which in turn vectors what you get. But it also reemphasizes, here in the sphere of discourse, the question of who holds (or, perhaps more appropriately, arrogates) the authority to define the city.

This is no "mere" academic question. Mindful of the supposition that a thing becomes what it is through how it is inhabited and utilized, not only is how we see what we get, but what we get both informs and is informed by how we act within it (de Certeau, 1984). Thus, in the tacit definition of the city as something of a higher-order political-economic circulatory system, academicians and allied decision-makers act within and upon the city in ways

that reinforce it as a circulatory system. In so doing, they run the risk of inadvertently rendering conditions on the ground increasingly unamenable to the material exercise of other urban visions and possibilities.

This is not to say that explications of L.A. as a political-economic system are either mistaken or without utility. The problem, rather, is this: can anyone authoritatively assert that L.A. is an apprehensible political-economic circulatory system? Can it be authoritatively asserted that there is an L.A. to speak of at all? Harkening back to Gertrude Stein's often misplaced commentary on Oakland, is there a there here? The univocality implicit in efforts to authoritatively define Los Angeles suggests that there is, indeed.

The lived realities of the city, however, are seldom (if ever) so univocal. Rather, within the material framework of the city itself, the "hard city", are a plethora of overlapping and interpenetrating "soft cities", subjectively apprehended cities built of each urbanite's experiential perceptions of the "hard city" (Raban, 1974). Further, these "soft cities" inform urbanite's expectations, beliefs and actions, causing the hard city to be gradually and irregularly reformed in accordance with intersecting "soft cities". Thus, I suggest that there is not a there here, or at least not a consistent one. Rather, there is a multitude of coexisting, and frequently conflicting, theres that produce a Los Angeles that is fluid, contingent, and panoptically indescribable. Such a proposition has not been ignored in recent theorizing on L.A. Soja's aforementioned deconstruction of Los Angeles identified L.A. as "the aleph", a place which contains all other places (Soja, 1989 p. 222). In expanding on this supposition, however, Soja concentrated his observations upon large-scale sectors of industrial production and social control, highlighting Lefebvrian notions of spatial production at the expense of the more intimate (counter)production of places within and across that space. Such examinations of the strategic operations of city formation must be balanced by a complementary foregrounding of city dwellers' interventions within the city so as to render their various "soft cities" concrete.

To this end, I will refrain from proffering an additional L.A.-centered paradigm of the contemporary urban condition, in favor of examining concrete instances of particular, commonly ignored individuals and groups that tactically inhabit a particular urban space. Specifically, I here focus upon how highly restricted, (quasi)-public space is repeatedly commandeered for the honing and performance of unauthorized creative acts. I will further argue that these acts, although playful in their execution, function to resist authoritatively imposed conceptions of what the city is to be. In so doing, I will soften our conceptions of the city by illuminating how a multiplicity of unauthorized, coterminous worlds embed themselves within the flesh of the city and, in the process, become that flesh. My principle sources in this work are the communicated and observed experiences and agendas of some of the city's inhabitants themselves. This source material is augmented with commentary drawn largely from my own experiences as a lifelong participant/observer in Los Angeles, including a year's employment with the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles (CRA/LA). I have also drawn extensively from conversations with other Angelenos, ranging from colleagues in local planning and redevelopment offices to friends, family, and folk on the streets.

In that the applicability (and even visibility) of such intimately place-specific source material necessitates a fine-grained resolution, I eschew grappling with Los Angeles as a whole, let alone "the city" in general. Rather, I concentrate on the contended core of L.A. that Soja characterizes as the "urban citadel-panopticon" (Soja, 1989 p. 237), more commonly known as Downtown's Central Business District (CBD) or, colloquially, Bunker Hill and its surroundings. Soja's characterization, like other from-above models of L.A., is, in ways, both apt and useful. Concealed beneath both the material reality and representation of the "citadel-panopticon", however, are a plethora of interpenetrating soft cities made hard through tactics of spatial occupation.

## A fractured monolith

At the turn of the 20th century, Bunker Hill was the most prestigious 133 acres in Los Angeles, surmounted by block-fills of gingerbread manor houses overlooking a burgeoning commercial core. By mid-century, however, that commercial core had fled west along Wilshire Boulevard, and the hilltop mansions had metamorphosed into high-density residential apartments and flop houses, sheltering a population of roughly 9,500. Perceptions of mid-20th-century Bunker Hill are divergent. Some tell of a tightly-knit and multi-ethnic community, of mom-and-pop dry goods stores and corner bars where afternoons were spent listening to ballgames on the radio. The CRA/LA's archival photographs of the area, on the other hand, show disintegrating clapboard tenements, hole-ridden interiors with rudimentary sanitary fixtures, and raggedly dressed children walking along the dangerously steep hillside. It was this latter version that ultimately prevailed, leading to the hill's classification as "blighted".

In the early 1960s, the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles utilized the power of eminent domain and tax increment financing to take possession of the twenty-plus blocks atop Bunker Hill, evict the entire remaining population, and raze all existing structures flat. Only a selection of Victorian mansions was spared, reassembled as a house museum a mile to the north (Parson, 1993). The hill was shaved as much as sixty feet lower. Continuing installation of numerous freeway access ramps and traffic viaducts interrupted connections between the deteriorating old downtown on the flats to the east, and plugged the hill into the US Interstate 110 to the west. The extent to which this was a strategy of intentional segregation (Davis, 1991 pp. 229-230), or merely the continuation of a trend initiated by the fact that early automobiles were incapable of surmounting the hill's steep east-west gradient, is open to question. The 1969 removal of the Angel's Flight funicular that linked the hill's base and crest is suggestive, particularly given that it was only reinstalled in 1996 following much friction between municipal authorities and

recalcitrant hilltop property management corporations. Either way, the effect was to insulate Bunker Hill from the newer immigrant and indigent populations filling the void left in the old downtown by retreating business establishments. Bunker Hill became a pristine platform of scorched earth hovering above an "obsolete" city center, patched directly into the freeway system (and, more recently, the heart of a subway/light rail network) to entice commuter colonization.

Decades later, the voided parcels of hilltop real estate were all sold or leased out by the city's redevelopment agency at "incentive" rates below projected market value. These leases were sweetened by a variety of customized subsidies to further increase the attractiveness of projects already deemed profitable (see CRA/LA, 1988, for an official view of this development process). One developer assisted in repairing and upgrading the Central Library in exchange for the right to build a tower that exceeded all previous restrictions on height and floor-to-area ratio. Another received multi-million dollar rent abatements for providing a private plaza with three unmarked pedestrian easements ten-feet wide.

Bunker Hill now constitutes a semi-permeable enclave bristling with the spikes of clustered capital accretion: "A-class" office towers, luxury hotels and corporately leased executive residential suites. Taken as a whole, it is a financial axis mundi saturated with observation cameras and pocked with publicly-assisted private plazas that are intended more as rent-leveraging tenant amenities than as remedies to the area's open space deficit (Flusty, 1994). With no significant population beyond the weekday lunch hour crowd, the (commonly chain) retailers that occupy each tower's plaza level or subterranean mall are, with few exceptions, shuttered by sundown. Fig. 1

Bunker Hill's target users, in the words of a promotional brochure for one multi-tower development, are "office workers [who] will find outdoor areas for noontime relaxation where they may choose solitude or colorful outdoor cafes and bistros" (Metropolitan Structures n.d.). Such sights, sounds and activities as may be alien to this clientele have been exor-

cised from Bunker Hill's collective program. This proscriptive dynamic is exacerbated by the need to ensure a businesslike decorum that communicates managerial competence. Thus, urban design, municipal law and private policy conjoin to preclude the potential for unpredictable or "abnormal" behavior in every street and plaza. As a result, Downtown L.A. has become an agglomeration of pretty, homogenized spaces. It is a rarefied monolith of a place, where the individual who appears unable to afford the escalating price of prefabricated recreation has no option other than to be at home, at work, or in transit between the two. This monolith, however, is rife with cracks, enabling a wide and eccentric range of unforeseen, unauthorized actions. Further, it is precisely the centrality and exclusivity of this monolith, both geographically and administratively, that invites these unauthorized acts by highlighting their insubordinate implications.

## A busker's-eye view: the city as stage.

Paul, in his forties, sports chopped salt-and-pepper hair, a bushy beard, a one-man-band harmonica rig on his shoulder that holds a smoldering cigarette, and a utility belt. The utility belt carries a diver's light, a battery pack, a flat plastic tray, a bottle of dish washing soap, and another of purified water. These are the tools of Paul's trade.

Paul claims to be one of nine professional bubblemen in the United States and, by his account, a good one. He has been practicing for over a decade, devoting himself to the making of beautiful, ephemeral soap bubble sculptures.

He displays a large repertoire of tricks, which he guards zealously from imitators and photographers. He will blow six bubbles, forming a cube at their intersection. He will then poke a straw into this cube, fill it with cigarette smoke, and highlight the play of iridescent soap sheen against swirling smoke with the beam of his diver's light. He makes flying saucer bubbles, honeycombs of bubbles, miniature rococo bubble filigrees that cling to larger bubbles, even a series of nesting bubbles with a smoke saturated center

Viewpoint: S Flusty



Figure 1 Saturated with observation cameras

that, when punctured, gives up its haze and floats to the ground without bursting.

Paul expresses a fondness for working between Bunker Hill's built geometries, although he finds the institutional opposition to bubble blowing downtown discouraging. On humid nights, when increased moisture content in the air keeps the bubbles wet and permits more time for the execution of complex stunts, he blows bubbles 10 to 15 feet across and positions them to be carried many stories aloft by the winds generated between the hill's highrises. On calmer evenings, Paul will blow a series of nested bubbles and push them into the reflecting pool that surrounds the Department of Water and Power headquarters. Then he watches as the external bubble compresses into a hemisphere against the water, while the bubbles contained within careen off one another. Usually, he completes two or three tricks before being ejected from the property by a nightwatchman, with an apology along the lines of

"What you're doing is really neat, just not here." Fig. 2

Despite "knowing where to find every security camera on Bunker Hill", Paul finds it increasingly difficult to practice his trade in public. He worries

that draconian crackdowns on street performers may eventually lead such arts to extinction. Once, Paul attempted a trick in a Bunker Hill plaza before dark, on a Sunday afternoon shortly after a humidifying rain shower. Well before the trick was complete, a blue-blazer security man instructed Paul to leave the premises, a request the bubbleman says he politely declined. Following Paul's physical removal from the property by an additional contingent of security guards, he stood on the sidewalk adjacent to the plaza, gauged wind speed and direction, and blew 15-foot diameter bubbles wafted by the breeze into the plaza. Within moments, L.A. police officers instructed Paul from the cabin of their cruiser to move on or face incarceration for loitering.

To the eyes of Mr. K., a major plaza's event director, the space under his jurisdiction does not suggest a bubble-sculptor's workshop. He offers a variety of reasons a bubbleman would be considered inappropriate. Soap bubbles breaking against 14th-story office windows might necessitate additional expenditures on window washing. Soap bubble residue might cause a passer-by to slip, fall, and launch a personal injury lawsuit against plaza management. A bubbleman may draw attention away from midday events sanctioned by management, consisting largely of mainstream music performances. Most significantly, the unannounced appear-

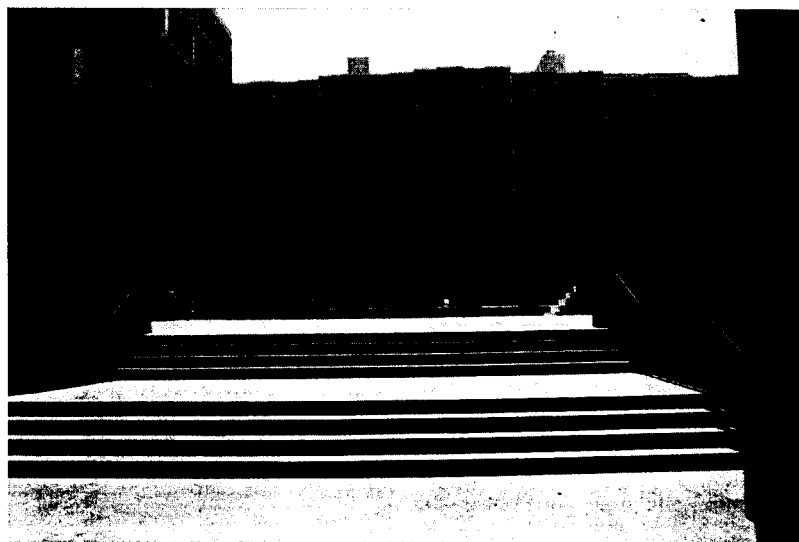


Figure 2 Bunker Hill, a great place for bubble blowing

ance of a bubbleman suggests a pass-the-hatter (which Paul sometimes is), just one notch above a pan handler and thus anathema to the image the plaza is intended to present to an upscale professional clientele.

These considerations accord with Mr. K.'s concern for modulating what management calls "user mix", the types of people occupying the plaza at any given moment. The ideal mix is considered to be Bunker Hill employees and residents, with a preponderance of the plaza area's 5,000 tenants preferred. Determination of whether any given individual fits this mix is left to plaza security and, according to guards, is made on the basis of overall appearance and behavior. While the masses of predominantly new immigrant Mexicans and Central Americans who frequent the commercial establishments downslope east of Bunker Hill, and reside across the Harbor Freeway to the west, are not actively excluded, plaza environs and events are seldom programmed to address these potential users or advertised to them. This may be attributable to management's belief that a sizable influx of lower income Mexicans and Central Americans would intimidate those business people who comprise the plaza's target market.

This well maintained target market is appreciated by plaza retailers, who claim daily earnings of over \$1,000 even during less well-attended weekend night events. Profits fluctuate minimally despite the economic tribulations of the late 1980s through early 1990s, as long-term leases have held corporate tenants on Bunker Hill. Further, discomfort with, and lack of, convenient access to the environs of the "downscale" commercial areas adjacent have kept the hill's employee population a captive market.

From the viewpoint of the Bunker Hill businesspeople, staged events and user mixes are of little relevance. With the entire business community taking a simultaneous 45-minute lunch break, or less as "rightsizing" generates heavier work loads for the remaining staff, employees complain that by the time they emerge from line with their meals there is barely enough time to left to eat before sprinting back to the office. Despite this, there exists a consensus

that it is nice to know Bunker Hill boasts landscaped plazas, even if there is insufficient time in the workday's schedule to loiter in them. One security guard believes that the mere presence of such greened places has a calming effect, even for those consistently denied passage over the property line.

Paul, however, remains less than calm when savoring the prospects Downtown's architecture and aerodynamics holds for his craft. Thus, under the occasional cover of a sufficiently humid night, Paul still straps on his utility belt and makes his way downtown to stealthily claim his stage atop Bunker Hill's summit.

### **A skater's-eye view: the city as playground**

From deep within the bowels of Bunker Hill, Pablo, Juan, Julio and Bob come rumbling out of the Third Street tunnel. Confronted by a red light and a river of one-way traffic at Hill Street, they kick up the noses of their skateboards in unison and, tails scraping against the sidewalk, come to a dead stop inches from the curb. Dressed in Chinos and baggy knee-length shorts, T-shirts and tanktops emblazoned with skate team and band logos, visored caps askew on their heads, these four comprise the core of Mad Dog Skate. Mad Dog is one of a multitude of loosely constituted amateur skateboard teams. These teams, commonly formed of 13- to 18-year old Latinos (and, very occasionally, Latinas), inhabit the fringes of downtown. They come over the Harbor Freeway from their densely crowded apartments to the west, just past an expanse of dirt lots punctuated by crumbling concrete stairs and foundations. These derelict architectural remnants mark the lacuna of another "blighted" community, razed in the early 1980s for the now stalled development of a high-rise Central City West.

Mad Dog's staple skate turf is in the decrepit warehouse district fringing Little Tokyo, east of Bunker Hill and the old downtown. This area, hard-up against the increasingly disutilized rail yards adjacent to the concrete coated banks of the Los Angeles River, is designated an artists-in-residence district. Artistic presence, however, has

been long stunted by the premature mass incursion of real estate speculators, and rents to match. Thus, the area is ripe with such skater's amenities as empty streets, open lots, loading ramps, wide curb cuts and — as continuing deindustrialization begets continual demolition — a fluid inventory of tilted concrete planes and exposed monolithic drainage culverts. Demolition sites make for problematic skating, however, as demo firms (particularly those following the Japanese model) have taken to pulverizing old concrete into mountains of recyclable sand. Sand is a skater's enemy: should it penetrate the inner workings of a skateboard's polymeric wheels, it quickly grinds precision ball bearings into nicked and scored paraboloids. Damaged equipment is no small concern, as a good composite deck with stainless trucks and high grade wheels can cost in excess of \$100. Mad Dog does not have that kind of money. Fig. 3

In time, Mad Dog hopes to enter formal competition with counterpart teams from as far away as the San Fernando Valley and the harbor town of San Pedro. For now, they practice. Even with practice, money is an issue. As with much else in Los Angeles, skating is fast becoming a two-tiered culture. A good competition skater can earn a position on a professional team or superstar status and concomitant product sponsorships, with potential for lines of signature clothing, equipment, videos and assorted merchandising tie-ins shortly thereafter. To attain this level of proficiency, however, a skater must practice relentlessly.

For children of affluent families, practice is relatively attainable. Those few private skate parks that have not closed out of liability concerns charge admission fees, and are located in the suburbs where lower built densities permit such extensive uses of space. Access to far-flung skate facilities and other skateable open spaces is facilitated by the two-parent, single wage earning family, commonly charging one parent with the rôle of chauffeur to younger teens. With a sufficiently large yard and cash outlay, these future champions can construct personal, professional quality obstacles like 11-foot tall, 36-foot long plywood halfpipes and bowls (see Thrasher Magazine,



Figure 3 Warehouse District: rails to nowhere

1990). Those of Mad Dog's parents who are present work long hours at poorly recompensed jobs, some minimum and sub-minimum wage. They are largely transit-dependent, thus precluding ready transport to and from skate parks. They live in apartment buildings wedged onto small sites that leave no space for the installation of large obstacles, even if the required raw materials were affordable. So Mad Dog's members look to the streets and, in the process, have contributed to the evolution of a "street style" of skating.

Increasingly, street skating obstacles are built more of legalese than of wood and concrete. The profusion of "skateboarding is not a crime" T-shirts and bumper stickers notwithstanding, skateboarding redefined as trespass or pedestrian endangerment has earned two members of Mad Dog rides in Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) patrol cars. This happened despite the fact that the incident of "pedestrian endangerment" occurred in a deserted light industrial district long after dusk. Ignoring the assertions of Mad Dog and

like skaters that they're not "jacking people up or using crack, just skating or sometimes tagging or downing some beer," civic authorities have been working at break-neck pace to criminalize skating outside the boundaries of distant and expensive private reserves. Public streets, sidewalks, parks and boardwalks are infested with the red circle-and-bar international symbol for "no", superimposed over a stylized skateboard. Infractions can merit fines, hours of community service and/or short sentences in juvenile detention facilities.

In response, street skaters have evolved into "pavement commandos", developing ever more aggressive hit-and-run tactics to claim the only space available to them, evade capture and, not incidentally, irritate authority. Foremost among Mad Dog's tactics is the late night "blitz" of Bunker Hill.

The hill is "prime 'crete", an agglomeration of low curbs, wide expanses of pavement, flights of gentle steps, and networks of handrails ideal for slides and grinds. The hill is rife

with long handicap access ramps for picking up speed, and retaining walls that protrude from plaza surfaces out into open air as the hill falls away beneath. Mad Dog shreds this landscape hard, pummeling the pastel-tinted concrete, wagging their backsides in front of observation cameras and twisting high speed just beyond the reach of security guards. According to Pablo, those team members who come closest to physical contact with plaza security agents, without breaking pace, are accorded tremendous respect. This valorized tweaking of authority's nose, embodied in the persons of uniformed guards, is a particularly clear indication that the opportunities for serious play afforded by Bunker Hill go well beyond its topography. Fig. 4

In a ranking of plaza occupant desirability, Mr. K., the plaza event director, sees skaters as falling well beneath the homeless. Skaters, according to management's perspective, are "noisy", "disruptive", and engage in high velocity maneuvers that physically endanger "legitimate plaza users", again raising the specter of costly personal injury litigation. Most damning, though, is Mr. K.'s allegation that the skateboards' incursions "scar" architectural surfaces, depositing dark rubber skid-marks across the plaza's face. Although such marks have usually proven impermanent, as Mr. K. sees it, outdoor fixtures and pavement finishes are not there to be transformed into skate-furniture. It is this view that necessitates the exclusion of Mad Dog's members, which further whets their appetites for repeatedly transforming Bunker Hill's plazas into playgrounds.

### A poet's-eye view: the city as soapbox

With the final dismantling of L.A.'s legendary trolley system in the 1960s, the reappearance of relatively expensive fixed-rail mass transit (also known in local parlance as "serious" mass transit) was considered a utopian prospect. A Los Angeles subway, according to popular belief, was as improbable as the sudden demolition of the Berlin Wall. By the end of 1990, one of the last intact segments of the Berlin Wall was being installed for permanent exhi-



Figure 4 Bunker Hill, "prime 'crete"

bition immediately northeast of L.A., at Simi Valley's Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Simultaneously, the L.A. Metro Blue Line light rail had entered service at a terminus buried deep beneath Bunker Hill's southern fringe. Two years later, this Blue Line was spliced onto a Red Line heavy rail subway. Emerging from a hub in the municipal government's Civic Center, the rail-cabs run adjacent to Bunker Hill and, predictably, dogleg around the old city center.

Sitting in one of these cabs, Guillermo's chin rests in his hand, bouncing against his palm in tempo with the train's rhythmic passage over rail cross-ties. A slight man in his early twenties, with slicked back black hair and a small jutting goatee, he sits packed into the train with a score of his associates. Together, they all concentrate on a young man who stands in the aisle while belting out poetry at the top of his lungs. The reader, Marlon, performs a piece composed specifically for this event, the third "impromptu" Blue Line open poetry reading in as many months. Gesticulating wildly, long hair flailing, Marlon employs verse to lambaste L.A.'s Cardinal Roger Mahoney for traversing the city in a donated helicopter and then-Mayor Tom Bradley for traveling in a city limousine (a Town Car, in fact) while the common citizen is obliged to ride "the thin blue line":

The line that the mayor says is the color of me and you. I wonder if he

thinks it's the color of him, too? Will he ride, or will he drive? More than likely, he'll just fly while you and I draw big blue lines . . . streaks across the concrete streets. Take me home, take me home, on the blue line.

Marlon finishes to enthusiastic applause and takes his seat, as the audience chants for another reader. Every member of this audience writes poetry, and each will have read at least one composition by the time the train rounds Long Beach and returns the roughly 18 miles to downtown's Seventh Street "Metro Center" station. Nor is reading restricted to the poets. Occasionally, unsuspecting commuters are dragooned into the role of reader, good-naturedly cajoled into the aisle with a poem pressed into their hands.

Metro Rail's managing authority neither supports nor opposes these monthly poetry readings. This is largely due to the fact that the authority does not know about the readings. Guillermo and a few friends settle on a date and time for a reading in consultation with a Blue Line departure schedule, then pass word through friends and an informal poets' network de-centralized at various metropolitan area coffee houses.

These coffee houses serve as a pseudo-public analog for "living rooms" in neighborhoods where young, downwardly mobile, underemployed professionals (or dumpies) manage rent payments by doubling- and tripling-up in one- or two-bedroom apartments.

Thus, with simultaneous rises in rents and declines in average earnings amongst the young, the coffee houses have swollen in number from two to dozens throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Some of them have long-standing presence, others have closed and occasionally reopened under different names and at various locations. Some offer complimentary screenings of rare films and homemade videos, others tabla and pipa players, yet others invite customers to draw on the walls. All but the Johnny-come-lately chain coffee boutiques permit the patron to linger indefinitely for the price of a cappuccino, and provide venues for uncensored and casually scheduled live performances that include poetry and storytelling.

Guillermo and his fellow instigators, however, prefer the train. They see mass transit as an ideal venue for taking live poetry to a broader audience beyond the coffee house "poetry ghetto". The train, Guillermo believes, is inherently exciting by virtue of being in motion. Further, it provides a captive audience, and is readily affordable with round trip tickets for the Blue Line costing just over \$1.

The Los Angeles County Sheriffs, entrusted with Metro Rail security, occasionally stumble into the readings. Despite apparent suspicions that something is not right, however, they are unable to determine the precise nature of the infraction and are thus unable to enforce corrective penalties. The poets are careful to provide no excuse for police intervention. They refrain from drinking, smoking, or eating so much as a hard-candy, and keep their tickets with them throughout the trip. One sheriff, after commanding a reader to "keep it down", turns to his partner and comments that he lacks the authority to punish a passenger for public speaking.

"Decent" poetry, Marlon asserts (without engaging the question of how such decency is determined), is immune to suppression in any society with pretensions to civility. As he sees it, this is because the spoken word as artform may "twist the mind", but is incapable of damaging property or "breaking bones". The trouble-free experiences of the Blue Line poets support Marlon's observation, indicating that the reading of poetry, decent or

otherwise, does not pose a clear-and-present enough threat to provoke official proscription. Thus, the mass transit readings have continued and proliferated, temporarily refashioning subway cars into soapboxes from whence poets launch aural assaults on commuters and convention alike.

### Theory is good, but...

Mike sits hunched on an island of concrete at the furthest southern boundary of downtown, his back pressed against one of the US Interstate 10's massive support columns. Before him is a broad sheet of white paper perched atop a portable stand. At first glance, it might easily be assumed that Mike is one of the city's innumerable (and ill-numerated) homeless. First glances, however, can deceive. Mike's sign is not boldly handlettered to read "WILL WORK FOR FOOD" or, in keeping with more recent trends, "WHY LIE, I NEED A BEER". Rather, its outer face is blank, its obverse printed with bars of musical notation. And Mike's hunching is less a product of hard living than it is an accommodation to the tenor saxophone cradled between his legs. He serenades lanes of traffic to either side, packed with late afternoon commuters vacating the CBD.

Mike asserts that he has explored a variety of practice locations, but found each one problematic. Neighbors vociferously objected to his practicing off the balcony of his apartment. Attempts to play late at night in a nearby parking garage attracted a modest audience of LAPD patrol officers with guns at the ready. Amidst the traffic, however, nobody objects. While the site is not the quietest for his purpose, the ambient noise is well made up for by the resonance of the freeway's underside. Further, the site affords opportunities to riff off fragments of music emanating from the stereos of automobiles queued for the adjacent on-ramp. While these "freeway gigs" were originally an accommodation to resource limitations, Mike has come to cherish how his performances gently startle motorists. In so doing, Mike believes he creates a brief interpersonal connection that "makes life worth living" in a city where spatial diffusion often engenders social alienation.

Mike's efforts to claim a space for himself in the face of systemic neglect and even opposition, like similar efforts by Paul the Bubbleman, the personnel of Mad Dog Skate and the Blue Line poets, could be read as signifying nothing more than the poignant melancholy commonly attendant upon lost causes. More extremely, it could be suggested that to celebrate such ephemeral spatialized tactics of rebellion is to fall prey to a demobilizing romance with the flashy, frivolous, and ultimately futile, while the city at large proceeds with the business of crushing its citizenry en masse. It could be argued that the activities I have narrated show no clearly articulated opposition to (or even consciousness of) capitalism, patriarchy, or hegemonic metanarratives, entail no apparent attempt at mass organization, and certainly do not indicate any sort of revolutionary vanguard. Underpinning such interpretations, however, is the assumption that small deviations average out over time. And, at least in the case of Los Angeles, there is evidence to suggest that such an assumption is mistaken.

The practices I have documented are inarguably those of relatively eccentric individuals and small groups who are engaged primarily in expressing themselves through activities they enjoy. As such, they are engaged not in "serious" oppositional endeavors. Rather, they are engaged in play. Seen in relation to a downtown comprised increasingly of tightly restricted quasi-public spaces, however, this persistent and highly visible play becomes a stark refusal to disappear beneath the imperatives of spatial regulation that favors select target markets. In this refusal to disappear is an insistence on a right to claim, and remake, portions of the city. And in the playing, this right is not merely asserted. It is acted upon in creative and highly visible ways.

Forms of resistance need not be overtly serious, a fact alluded to by Marion's observation of poetry's relative invulnerability to suppression. Conventional forms of protest in downtown L.A. would draw, and have drawn, a quick response from helicopter-backed riot police. But the playfulness (and even outright absurdity) of bubble-blowing, skating, poetry read-

ing or a saxophone serenade in the face of official censure ensures that attempts to forcibly curtail these activities will ultimately recast authority as an ill-tempered curmudgeon, entailing a loss of face and a corollary degradation of legitimacy. Thus, such resistances are ideally suited to persist, propagate and, eventually, bring about degrees of officially sanctioned coexistence. Fig. 5

By way of example, the near-criminalization of skateboarding, and the subsequent radicalization of street skaters into pavement commandos, has impelled innumerable skaters to coordinate effective agitation for a right to skate free. Their efforts, carried out in person and across the internet, have to date resulted in the construction of numerous municipal skate parks nationwide, including three in the traditionally working-class, L.A.-adjacent city of Huntington Beach (RC's Skate Shop). L.A.'s buskers have witnessed analogous successes. They have gone beyond simply asserting their presence, and are now central players in creating self-management policies. These policies have successfully secured freely accessible street entertainment venues throughout such open-air pedestrian and shopping areas as Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena, and Venice Beach Boardwalk. Similarly, local poets have formed alliances like Hyperpoets which, in conjunction with shoestring-budget cultural institutions, secure both funding and venues in L.A.'s streets, store windows, and parks. Even Mr. K.'s plaza itself is now the occasional site of edgy after-hours performances that combine poetry with dance and multimedia technologies. Thus, the "soft cities" of the bubbleman, the skater, and the poet establish themselves within the "hard city" of pavement and office-towers, of the real estate financiers and the traffic planners. Subways are transformed into soapboxes, plazas viscerally reconstituted as playgrounds, and places of commerce become stages for the display of soap bubble confectionery.

These proliferating, concrete impacts of "soft cities" upon the "hard" suggest that no matter how restrictively space is programmed, no matter how many "armed response" security patrols roam the streets, and no matter how many



Figure 5 Old Downtown and new watcher

video cameras keep watch over the plazas, there remain blindspots that await, and even invite, inhabitation by unforeseen and potent alternative practices. Even in a totally rebuilt and totalizing environment like Bunker Hill, panopticism fails. This failure enables resistances to persist and even make themselves at home. The inevitable selectivity and positionality of any surveillant eye's view entails the simultaneous production of blindspots harboring spaces that must remain less well attended to. In Mike's words, "So long as there's a space nobody's paying attention to, I've got a place to play".

As with the material fabric of the city, similarly, there exists no privileged vantage point from which to attain panopticity in representations of the city. Attempts to describe the urban condition exhibit a taste for the "hard" stuff, downplaying the "soft" for the sakes of parsimony and generalizability. As a result, comprehensive visions of the city are advanced that unwittingly await, and even invite, undermining by contradictorily diver-

gent realities that are presumed too insignificant, intimate, eccentric, or mundane to warrant attention.

While what we look for is what we get, this in no way prevents what we did not think to look for from finding ways to exist, thrive, and make its presence felt. Differences persist, despite being unaccounted for in overarching narratives of the city. We ignore this at our peril, and to the extreme detriment of our conceptions of, and discourse about, the city.

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