The World Pueblo
The Evolving Urban Heart of Postmetropolitan Los Angeles

This paper examines the changes to Downtown Los Angeles in the context of the dramatic social, industrial, and geographic restructuring that has shaped Los Angeles into an archetypical postmetropolitan urban region over the past quarter century.[1] Though the paper is about the changes to the Central City as a result of this larger period of restructuring, it focuses particularly on the events of the past ten years following the economic and social tumults of the early 1990s, during which the area has rather drastically re-invented itself.

Structurally, the paper begins by developing a working definition of Downtown Los Angeles. It then sets the scene with a brief over-view of the "crisis-generated restructuring" that has helped shape Greater Los Angeles (and most "post-Fordist" urban regions), a necessary frame of reference for the more specific analysis of the following three major trends of urban restructuring in the Central City during the past 10 years: A process of *recentralization* through substantial development, redevelopment, and population growth; stark socio-spatial polarization and inequality; and the rise of new cultural politics.

Los Angeles is a strange space, really a wild conglomeration of many different spaces, each one (like each person who lives within them) with their own identity, and their own claim to LA's identity as a whole. It is hard even to tell where it begins and ends. Is it 'the Southland,' Greater Los Angeles, LA County, Hollywood? LA is a world city where 'it all comes together,' yet also a 'fragmented metropolis' of "37 suburbs in search of a center," as Johnny Carson famously referred to it. In such a polycentric urban region this identity crisis is hardly surprising, and yet there *is* a tangible focal point to the postmetropolis that, despite its ups and downs, has always been there. It is the tumults and changes to this central space that will be the subject of this analysis.

So what is the heart of *El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula?* Many place-names – often given to districts and other vaguely defined areas by government, journalists, academics, and business or neighborhood associations – seem to hold some clues: The Historic Core, the Civic Center, the Central Business District. Somewhat more broad terms include: Central City, Downtown, the New Downtown, the New Inner-City… the list goes on and on, each entry somehow limiting, and each with its own connotations and stigmas attached.   Indeed this

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[1] Soja (2000), 154

exhaustive list is only more evidence of the identity crisis from which the entire region suffers, and which is frequently the impetus behind moves to revitalize the heart of the city. I will use some of these terms interchangeably, but to avoid confusion as much as possible I will be discussing an area that I will simply call "Downtown" or occasionally "the Central City" or "the City Center," in keeping with common local terminology.

It is essentially the area bound by the ring of interstate freeways, to take a very-LA point of reference, as they converge in the center of the Los Angeles Basin.   It includes the historic Pueblo and neighboring Chinatown, running south through the Civic Center and the Historic Core, to the Flower, Jewelry, and Fashion Districts. It runs east through Little Tokyo, Toy Town, the new Artist's District, and block after block of industrial zones all the way to the Los Angeles River. On its western flanks lies the modern Central Business District along the Harbor Freeway from the Music Center through Bunker Hill down the Figueroa Corridor to the burgeoning South Park neighborhood and Convention Center.

For statistical reasons, I will define Downtown even more specifically using two of the City's "community plan areas" (CPAs), Central City and Central City North, both part of the Central Area Planning Commission *(see map at right).* Though I will aim to keep it separate statistically, the Westlake District (also a CPA under the Central Area Planning Commission) must be noted as well, because it contains the very-downtown neighborhood of 'Central City West' (the part of the financial district west of the Harbor Freeway) and other ties to Downtown.   Parts of the Southeast CPA should also be considered, as much of Downtown's garment district and accompanying sweatshops and warehouses occupy real estate south of the Santa Monica Freeway.

Community Plan Areas in Central Los Angeles
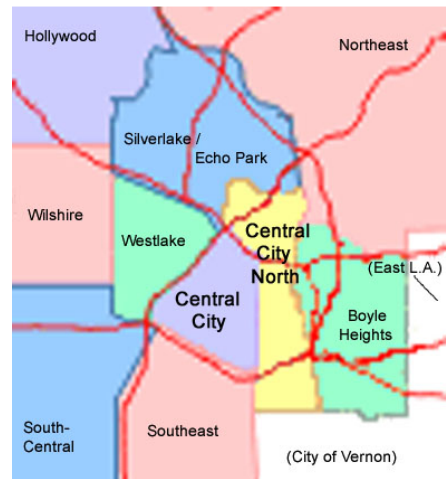
Source: City of Los Angeles. "Census 1990 Statistics by Community Plan Area," Los Angeles City Planning Dept., Demographics Research Unit, 2003.

Establishing geographical boundaries is, of course, only the beginning of defining Downtown Los Angeles. The center of this postmodern city is quite possibly one of the most culturally, linguistically, economically, politically, architecturally, and spatially diverse places on the planet – the World Pueblo. In the words of Edward Soja, "this inner ring is the heartland of the Los Angeles Cosmopolis, a special type of world city where

the very nature of urban cosmopolitanism, glocalization, and modern world cityness is currently being defined."[2]

Restructuring the World Pueblo

Los Angeles is a boomtown – *the* boomtown. Even during the economically shaky 1970s, it was America's leading job machine and has outpaced every other metropolitan area in the United States in absolute growth.[3] In fact, it was this 'post-Fordist' period of sweeping economic restructuring that shaped LA into the schizophrenic urban conglomeration that it is (and is still becoming) today.

One particular feature of this restructuring, common to many cities, has been a process of radical decentralization, poly-centricity, metropolarity, and general multiplicity. Leonie Sandercock has called it "the transformation from a modern landscape to a postmodern one."[4] The common interpretation of this is that current urban trends are "contributing to the mono-centric city eroding, fragmenting, and metamorphosing into a poly-centric metropolis."[5] In Los Angeles, changes over the past quarter century have led not so much to the large-scale suburbanization for which it is famous, but rather to "mass regional urbanization."[6] In fact, and particularly in recent years, LA has seen rather significant *recentralization* not only in "the urbanization of suburbia," but emphatically in its inner-city as well.[7]

Economically, restructuring meant the dramatic introduction of major foreign competition to US industries, particularly manufacturing, as well as large amounts of foreign capital investment. This globalization also of course involved the massive influx of immigrant labor from both Asia and Latin America. Yet unlike many other American cities, "Los Angeles was well situated to take advantage of the new international economic order."[8] While much of the United States lost employment at a rapid rate (primarily in manufacturing), the service sector in LA has boomed as did small-scale (including sweatshop) manufacturing. "By 1990, Los Angeles had developed an extremely varied economy based on a diversity of high- and low-technology industries,

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[2] Soja (1996), 443
[3] Scott & Soja, 11
[4] Sandercock, 14
[5] Woodroffe, et al., 6
[6] Scott & Soja, 11
[7] Soja writes that "Reversing decades of suburban drain (but not the "white flight" that has been an important part of the formation of Outer Cities), downtown Los Angeles and its surrounding Inner City ring has probably doubled in population since 1965 to more than 5 million." Soja (1996), 435-437
[8] Ong & Blumenberg, 315

as well as a thriving business and financial services sector."[9] What's more, a great deal of this industry, from textile manufacturing to finance, became concentrated in the Central City.

But the good times (as they were for some) would not roll forever. Beginning in the last days of the 1980s, the largest regional recession since the Great Depression hit the Southland – a result of restructuring and the rapid decline in the military industrial complex at the end of the Cold War.[10] The effects of the downturn (discussed in greater detail below) were crushing and far-reaching, and when coupled with the severe recession in Japan and the wider Asian financial crisis, LA's economy appeared ready to completely collapse. All of this, of course, had significant repercussions for Downtown, its development, and its identity. As layoffs swept through the finance, investment, and real estate companies, and many foreign firms were forced to sell (as much as 75 percent of Financial District property was foreign-owned prior to the recession),[11] business and government leaders began a frantic campaign to 'save Downtown' and preserve its floundering world city image.

Redeveloping the World Pueblo

While it may have been vacant during the recession, at least the all-important world city skyline was still there.[12] In the decade since, even more downtown-defining additions have been given to the City Center in the boosters' tireless quest for a world-class world city.[13] In 1993, LA's first subway, the Red Line, opened to the public, followed by extensions and other light-rail lines over the next ten years. By 2003, the Red Line was carrying 112,000 passengers per day in and around Downtown Los Angeles.[14] Major expansions of the Convention Center were completed in 1993 and 1997(enabling it to boast "world class facility, world class service").[15] Other major additions to the Downtown landscape included Staples Center in 1999, the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in 2002, and most recently the Disney Concert Hall in 2003. It was the opening of this landmark structure, ten years after some of the Central City's

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[9] Scott & Soja, 11
[10] Soja (2000), 398
[11] Davis, 135
[12] Short & Kim, 99,100
[13] Soja (1996), 443.
[14] The first part of the city's "Metro Rail" system – in fact the city's first rapid transit line since the closure of the last trolley line in 1961 – had actually opened three years earlier in 1990 to surprisingly little fanfare. Metropolitan Transit Authority website
[15] LA Convention Center website

darkest days, that prompted former mayor Richard Riordan to exclaim, "We never had a downtown. We finally have one now."[16]

Now, it is important to emphasize that even in this famously scattered region of 'a hundred suburbs in search of a center,' Downtown had never disappeared. "The centrality of downtown Los Angeles has been recognizable for more than 200 years."[17] While it did experience significant neglect and decline during the 1950 and 60s, its 'resurgence' began in the mid-1970s when a consortium of business and government leaders began the process of creating a new financial and office district west of Hill Street that would become "one of the largest postwar urban designs in North America."[18]

Yet Riordan only echoed the words that Downtown advocates had been saying for years. Indeed, if the 1980s were the decade for a resurgence in LA boosterism with the successful Olympics, a triumphant Bill Bradley, and Randy Newman's "I love LA," the 1990s (particularly the years following the recession) were most definitely a decade of Central City boosterism. Manufactured identities like the "Downtown Arts and Education Corridor," seasonal gimmicks such as "Downtown on Ice," and promotional campaigns such as "Live, Work, & Play – Downtown LA!" are just a handful of the ways the area has tried to polish its image in recent years.

At the same time (and perhaps even accordingly), the Central City began to experience incredible population growth, even compared to the fast-growing region as a whole, and particularly when compared to many other parts of the city. The Central City CPA grew by 12.7 percent between 1990 and 2000, while the Central City North CPA grew by an incredible 24.6 percent – the highest growth rate in the City, which averaged a more than fair 6.0 percent overall *(see chart at right)*.

Central LA Population Growth by Community Plan Area
(With other selected averages for comparison)

Community Plan Area	Pop. 1990	Pop. 2000	% Change
Central City	22,374	25,208	12.7%
Central City North	19,318	24,071	24.6%
Average for Downtown	41,692	49,279	15.4%
Westlake	106,972	106,710	-0.2%
Southeast	238,991	254,976	6.7%
'Greater Downtown' Average	387,655	410,965	5.7%
*Westside Average**	375,525	394,671	4.9%
*Valley Average***	1,216,850	1,354,957	10.2%
*MidCity Average****	991,441	1,012,921	2.1%
City of Los Angeles	3,485,398	3,694,820	6.0%

* Includes the Westside and Santa Monica Bay communities of: Westwood 19.3%, Century City/Rancho Park 5.7%, Palms/Mar Vista 6.1%, Venice -5.7%, Westchester/Playa 6.8%, Bel Air 3.7%, & Brentwood/Pac. Palisades -1.3%

** Includes the San Fernando Valley communities of: Canoga Park 10.4%, Chatsworth 6.2%, Granada Hills 5.3%, Northridge 6.5%, Reseda 10.8 %, Encino/Tarzana 5.6%, Sylmar 17.1%, Arleta/Pacoima 7.3%, Mission Hills 23.7%, Van Nuys 15.9%, Sherman Oaks/Studio City 7%, Sunland/Tujunga 10.9%, Sun Valley 12.8%, & NoHo/Valley Village 10.1%

*** Includes the Hollywood, MidCity, and Central LA communities of: Wilshire 7.5%, Hollywood -1.4%, Silverlake/Echo Park -2.7%, West Adams/Baldwin Hills 2.1%, & 'South Central' (sic) 1.0%

Source: City of Los Angeles. "Total Population by Community Plan Area: 1990-2000." Los Angeles City Planning Dept., Demographics Research Unit, 2001.

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[16] Weintraub, 16
[17] Soja (1996), 433
[18] Davis, 228

Interestingly, and perhaps for the first time, this population growth Downtown represents both foreign immigration (mostly from Mexico and Latin America) – which even at such rapid rates is hardly surprising in Los Angeles – but also the beginnings of in-migration from other parts of the region as "new urban pioneers" (primarily white bohemians and yuppies) move back into the heart of the city in search of an exciting, creative, and diverse urban lifestyle.[19] In other words, the Central City is experiencing both the continuing trend of its "re-Mexicanization" and the quite new (for Los Angeles) inner-city gentrification. Research suggests that both of these factors are a good sign for Downtown LA's ability to attract new industry and development as "diversity and creativity work together to power innovation and economic growth."[20]

And we can only expect this growth to continue as, with nearly 9,000 new units currently under construction or development Downtown, the total number of housing units will rise from under 15,000 to more than 23,000 in just a few years.[21] It is here, however, that we begin to see more hard evidence of the inequalities that go along with this dramatic growth: While around 40 percent of *existing* units are market rate, of the 8,777 units currently under development only 349 are considered affordable housing. In other words, 96 percent of new residential property growth Downtown is market-rate housing for the "urban pioneers." Such socially irresponsible planning goes along with what Derek Shearer has called the 'edifice complex' within contemporary urban planning politics, which equates "progress with the construction of high-rise office towers, sports stadiums, convention centres, and cultural megaplaces, but often ignores the basic needs of most residents."[22]

Of course, this is nothing new. The story of inequality in Los Angeles is nothing if not long and sadly rather repetitive.[23] Suffice it to say, throughout its history the city has been the locus of plenty of racial tension, cultural polarization, economic segregation, and socially irresponsible politics, initiatives, and development. While overt racism may have lessened and the politics improved following the 1965 Watts Rebellion, the period of economic restructuring did nothing to stem many of the inequalities.[24] Economic growth "was not synonymous with rising wages," and even as the overall economy generally continued to prosper, "income was more unequally distributed in Los Angeles

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[19] Florida, 245
[20] Ibid., 262
[21] Downtown Center BID report
[22] Shearer, 289
[23] For further discussion of inequality and racism in Los Angeles, see Ong & Blumenberg, 311-331; and Davis, 161-164, 305-309
[24] Ong & Blumenberg, 312-314

than in the United States as a whole."[25] When the recession hit, the sweeping layoffs and dramatic increase in poverty were too much for the already tense and socially-fragile postmetropolis. Decades of growing polarization, racism, and general inequality boiled over in "restructuring-generated crisis"[26] – the devastating Justice Riots of 1992.

Repolarizing the World Pueblo

Both before and since 1992, Downtown Los Angeles has been a space where the starkest contrasts of the polarized postmetropolis have been on display. It is a world marked by simultaneous juxtapositions between "the corporate elite of the 'network society' and the informal sector workers who service them; between citizens and non-citizens; between a dominant culture and minority cultures."[27] Social and economic lines have become as fragmented and hard to draw as their geographical counterparts in postmodern Los Angeles, as this "polychotomous segmentation and repolarization" has pushed both wealth and poverty to new extremes.[28]

The most devastating extremes of these inequalities in Downtown LA can be seen in its massive homelessness problem. Largely as a result of deinstitutionalization, economic restructuring, and the collapse of affordable housing – and the failure of local, state, and federal welfare services to respond – "Los Angeles became the homeless capital of the United States in the 1980s."[29] While the homeless population (much like urbanization itself) became spread out across the entire Los Angeles postmetropolis during this time, the largest single concentration of homeless people was, and remains, the Skid Row district on the east side of the Central City.

1991 estimates put the total number of homeless in LA on any given night at between 38,000 and 69,000 people, and the number on Skid Row at between 10,000 and 15,000.[30] After the riots the following year, "the streets of Los Angeles became even more densely filled with the homeless, the unhealthy, and the starving."[31] Estimates from the mid-1990s upped the total homeless population to between 75,000 and 84,000 (an estimated 40,000 in the City),[32] while a most recent (2002) study for the

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[25] Ong & Blumenberg, 319
[26] Soja (1996), 426
[27] Sandercock, 13. The concept of the 'network society' owes to Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996.
[28] Soja (1996), 445
[29] Wolch, 390
[30] Shelter Partnership report
[31] Soja (2000), 400
[32] These estimates are generally for Los Angeles County excluding the cities of Glendale, Long Beach, and Pasadena. The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority estimates that around 50% of the County's total homeless reside within

City estimates "approximately 90,000 homeless people at any one point in time in the City of Los Angeles."[33] Even with homelessness figures as varied and infamously hard to gather as they are, this is clearly a dramatic increase. With such a number, most estimates would put the number of homeless on Skid Row today at some 20,000 people.[34]

Inequality in Downtown LA since 1992 has also been encouraged by a continuation of the trends of exclusive and socially-irresponsible development that defined the 1980s in books such as Mike Davis' *City of Quartz.* In many ways, the physical disconnection of his "fortress LA" has been taken to new heights by information technology in a fully 'wired' city core with its dedicated fiber-optic network creating a digital city wall *(see map at right).*[35] This infrastructure is organized not only to "maximize the ease of connecting to other global city cores around the world," but also to "filter out unwanted connections with the surrounding metropolis – those that are judged to be 'threatening' or deemed to be irrelevant to the direct needs of the glocal enclave."[36] In that sense, financial districts like LA's are finding new ways of "delinking themselves from their social and territorial environments."[37]

The Digital City Wall
Fiber Optics in Downtown LA
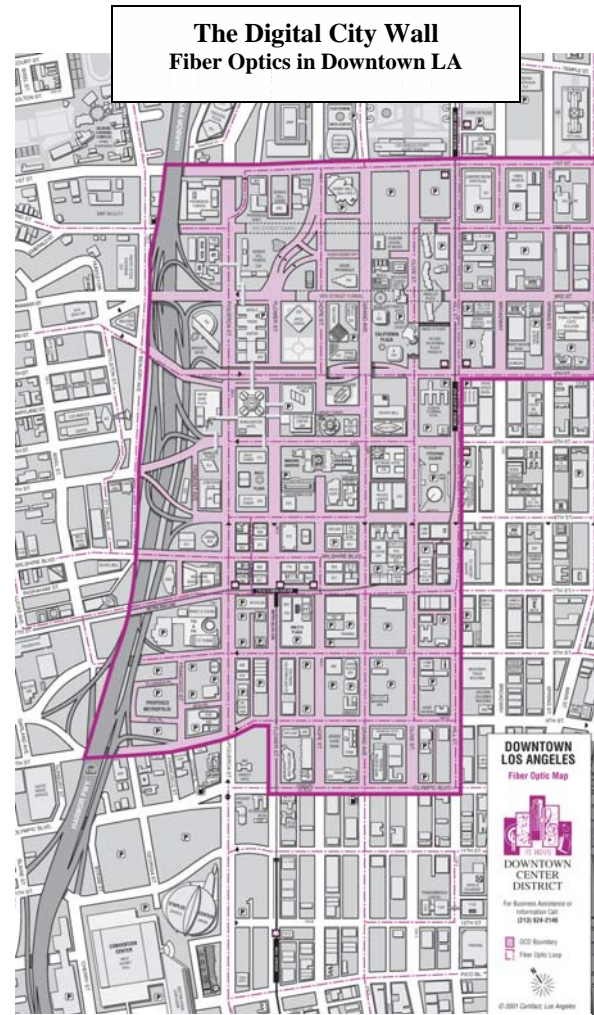
Source: Downtown Center District, "Downtown Los Angeles Fiber Optic Map." Cartifact, 2001.

Such single-minded thinking has been abetted by changes to Downtown's power-politics during the period. The political fallout from the upheaval of 1992 led to resignations, electoral defeats, and a general retreat of city hall that left a vacuum in city government for much of the 1990s. The most immediate impact of this Downtown was

the City. Sources: Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty at the Weingart Center website; LA Homeless Services Authority website
[33] City of Los Angeles report (2002)
[34] Central City Association report
[35] Downtown Center District report
[36] Graham & Marvin, 313
[37] Ibid.

the trend of powerful business and other local non-governmental organizations filling the void. Many observers have argued that urban redevelopment requires active state intervention to change the existing space,[38] but this has not been the case in Downtown Los Angeles. Instead, a complex network of public and private groups, business improvement districts, and private investors have worked to redevelop the City-Center and in so doing have become a "key imperative of urban governance."[39]

However, "the life of major cities cannot be simply programmed like some computer by powerful socioeconomic or political interests," write Graham and Marvin, adding that "the practices of urban life, and the organizing power of social and cultural movements, offer channels through which logics of splintering urbanism can be resisted and transgressed."[40] A hugely important question, therefore, is one eloquently posed by Stefan Kipfer: "Can local activism and democratic and socially inclusive policy experimentation really work to counter significantly the broader shift towards a kind of global Social Darwinism that shapes the wider forces of contemporary urbanization with its premium network spaces and intensifying social and geographical partitions?"[41]

Reclaiming the World Pueblo

In an era characterized by social fragmentation and economic exploitation, in a city defined by its many disparate metropolarities and great inequality, social organization for the under-represented may appear as much an impossibility as it is a necessity. Older forms of social organization (much like the highly structured Fordist production mode from whence they came) lack the flexibility to build broad-based social movements. As Stacy Takacs writes, "What is called for instead is a de-essentialized identity politics that mobilizes a variety of interests across lines of race, sex, class and nation in order to attack capital on all fronts (economic, political, cultural and ideological). This would be an open-ended, contingent, coalitional politics informed by a Gramsciian conception of power as an ongoing process of negotiation and contestation…"[42] It is thus quite uplifting to note, as Leonie Sandercock does, that "In practice, the emergence of all sorts of coalition politics over the past decade … indicate that this ideal of togetherness in difference is far from unachievable."[43]

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[38] Sandercock, 169
[39] Graham & Marvin, 310
[40] Graham & Marvin, 392, 394
[41] Kipfer, 173
[42] Takacs, 607
[43] Sandercock, 199

Indeed, one of the most incredible changes to come about in Downtown Los Angeles over the past 10 years has been the rise of new cultural politics. Social movements have developed for immigrant rights and homeless rights, environmental protection and job protection, business empowerment and community empowerment, bus riders' rights and civil rights. The unionizing of 74,000 home-care workers in 1999 was the largest successful organizing drive in the US in more than 60 years, and ever since the revolutionary 'Justice for Janitors' movement in April 2000 (largely based in the City-Center), Los Angeles has become "a major focal point of the new American labor movement."[44]

Perhaps more simply, Steven Flusty has shown how skateboarders, beggars, and street-performers refuse to "disappear beneath the imperatives of spatial regulation" by working to disrupt, exploit, and control the impossibilities of urban panopticism.[45] These people prove that sub-culture and unabashed humanity are still possible even in the heart of the postmetropolis, by realizing that "no matter how many 'armed response' patrols roam the streets, and no matter how many video cameras keep watch over the plazas, there remain blind spots that await, and even invite, inhabitation by unforeseen and potent alternative practices. Even in a totally rebuilt environment like Bunker Hill panopticism fails."[46]

What is happening here, in all of the above examples and countless more, is that people are asserting themselves and becoming more conscious not only of tenants' rights or workers' rights, but of *spatial rights.* We are beginning to recognize that when we change the function of a space, we implicitly change its social content, something that cannot be aloud to simply go unnoticed. The Central City is an incredibly diverse place with multitudes of difference among everything from occupation to living environment to native tongue, and all of these people must have some claim on its space. As Andy Merrifield writes, "they aren't mere passive pieces on a chessboard that big capital can move around or exclude at whim. Invariably, new forces of disintegration can be and are used as the medium for new forms of integration and affirmation. That is how and why people survive in cities and rebuild their lives out of so much rubble, injustice, and disappointment."[47] Growing consciousness of these spatial rights is leading to the

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[44] Kent Wong, as quoted in Greenhouse article
[45] Flusty, 156
[46] Ibid., 157
[47] Merrifield, 67

formation of new spatial politics, perhaps nowhere more acutely than in Downtown Los Angeles.

Conclusion: Opening up the Streets or Fortifying the Fortress?

Thirty years of economic restructuring, including a decade of phenomenal Central City growth, boosterism, conflict, and social change, "have recentered the Los Angeles postmetropolis, as well as the local urban imaginary, around a materially and symbolically assertive downtown."[48] Where this vibrant space will go from here is uncertain, but whatever its path no city can ever choose to stay the same. Photos from the 1920s show incredibly diverse crowds of pedestrians mingling on the streets of a thriving Downtown – heterogeneity that more cynical observers claim has been made permanently impossible by contemporary urban design.[49] Yet, while there is no doubt that many crude and classist (if not racist as well) divisions exist in today's Downtown, from housing development to the 'digital divide,' the reality during the 1990s has not been entirely consistent with the 'Fortress LA' of the 1980s that Mike Davis seems to expect to continue forever. Just as the McCone Commission was famously wrong to predict a Central City inhabited entirely by blacks by 1990,[50] Davis is on equally shaky ground on the other extreme with his utter lack of faith in the ability of Downtown to once again become a heterogeneous space.

Even if it is due primarily to the spread of gentrification, there *are* more connections between Bunker Hill and Broadway today. With the steady eastward expansion of the Artists' District and trendy lofts opening up in the Historic Core, the problem of homelessness is as big of an issue as ever, but at least it has made the front page as a human problem, rather than simply a business one.[51] When compared with decades of 'edifice complex' development on Bunker Hill, the proposed Grand Avenue Project (with its promise to open up the street and create a new 16-acre 'central park' for the city), immediately appears a more populist way to "create a vibrant city center" that *all* Angelinos could benefit from, than do exclusive corporate plazas.[52]

The economic and demographic restructuring of Los Angeles into the postmodern conurbation that it is today has made necessary a parallel restructuring in

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[48] Soja (2000), 251
[49] Davis, 231
[50] The commission's exact prediction was "that by 1990 the core of the Central City of Los Angeles will be inhabited almost exclusively by more than 1,200,000 Negroes." as quoted in Davis, 126
[51] Blankstein article
[52] Kaplan article

our thinking.[53] We need to recognize that when we change the function of a space, we implicitly change its social content as well. Accordingly, perhaps the greatest sign of better things to come for the Central City is the growth of new social organization and spatially conscious political movements. If the under-represented can continue to build their organizing power, they can work *with* the "urban pioneers," business interests, and local government to once again create a thriving and truly heterogenous space that even Mike Davis could be proud of.

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[53] Sandercock, 14

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