

# PARK



AN  
URBAN  
STUDY

OF

LOS

ANGELES

CITY STREET

ART

AN URBAN STUDY OF LOS ANGELES



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**CITY**

El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora de los Angeles de Porciuncula was officially founded on September 4, 1781 under the rule of the Kingdom of Spain.<sup>1</sup> The initial physical features of the pueblo followed the strict city-planning laws established by King Philip II, which were based off the writings of Vitruvius. The city-planning "Laws of the Indies" created the Los Angeles Plaza which would become the social center of the pueblo, and later the center of social activism for the city.<sup>2</sup> Mexican rule came to Los Angeles in 1821, and was followed by a population increase and more economic opportunities. The new Mexican government secularized the missions set up by Spain and much of the land held by the church became public land. Land grants were given to public officials, ranchers, and various other land owners. This dividing of the newly available land was awarded almost entirely to people of mestizo or Spanish ancestry at the expense of Native Americans, which would become the first incident in a long history of racial discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

On August 18, 1846 the United States invaded the city as part of the Mexican-American War. A brief period of insurgency led to a few skirmishes and battles, including the Battle of Los Angeles, between the occupying American troops and Mexican citizens. After the war,

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California was ceded to the United States. Americans expanded the streets of the original pueblo and re-centered the city with a new civic center south of the original plaza in present day "Downtown LA". After the invasion and cession the cityscape of Los Angeles would become very racially segregated with the majority of Mexican and foreign citizens residing near the original plaza and citizens of European ancestry in the newly built parts of the city or on the fringes of the city where a large ranching industry could be found.<sup>4</sup>

During the transition period between Mexican and United States rule a Gold Rush sparked in northern California would see many people travel to and through the city. There was also an influx of Chinese, Italian, French, Russian, and Mexican immigrants looking for fortune and opportunity in America, which would help to set the tone of Los Angeles as being a multi-cultural city. Along with all this, the lack of a proper formal government led to gangs and organized crime. The homicide rate between 1847 and 1870 averaged 158 per 100,000 people, which is 10 to 20 times greater than that of New York during the same time period.<sup>5</sup> Much of this violence came from the increase in racial tensions sparked during and after the change of ruling government, and due to the influx of immigrants.

In 1876 the trans-continental railroad was completed, terminating in Los Angeles. This technological event brought with it a massive surge in population, immigration, and industry, and made the city the major transportation hub of Southern California. Much of the immigration came from China, Russia, and Korea (with Americans moving west, as well as people from all over the world) and they brought socialist and anarchist political views with them, one of the factors leading to the socially progressive and racially mixed city it is today.

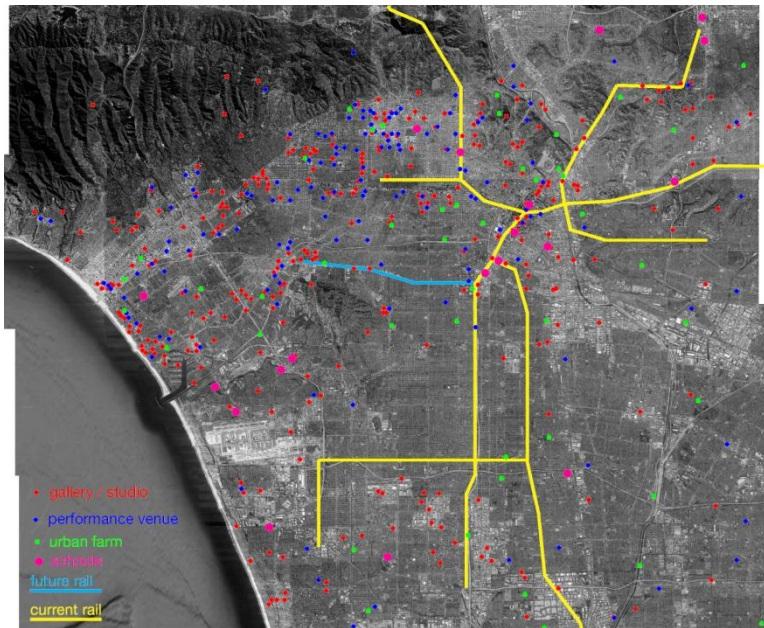
During the years leading up to and surrounding the World Wars Los Angeles grew and became an industry heavy city, as well as the center of the giant entertainment industry in America. Population patterns in the city were highly divided between ethnicities, with the original Los Angeles Plaza and neighborhood continuing to be home to minorities, immigrants, and the center of social activism. In the 1920's Los Angeles became the first city in the country to pass racial restrictions in housing, by World War II 95% of housing was off-limits to Black and Asian citizens.<sup>6</sup> The areas of east and south Los Angeles became some of the few available housing options for Blacks and Asians. In 1965 riots broke out in the South Central Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts, the effects of a long history of racial segregation and

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tension, and civic corruption. Nearly 1,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed.<sup>7</sup>

The early housing restrictions greatly affected the population trends and neighborhoods throughout modern Los Angeles history. The city is known as a city of contrasts: glamour and luxury in the Hollywood Hills, the "American Dream" of the San Fernando Valley suburbs, and the gang ridden violence of South Los Angeles. The city was one of the first in America to experience the effects of suburban sprawl, environmentally and socially. Much of Los Angeles's modern identity is synonymous with American suburbanism.

Due to the vast economic contrasts, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural identities of the more than three million inhabitants of Los Angeles, the city has become a center of cultural production. Immigration has provided a diverse background and context for the art, theatre, film, music, and creative events and industries that take place in and around the city, and the economic and social disparities throughout Los Angeles's history have provided artists, designers, and activists with inspiration for the provocative and the critical.



[More Maps](#)

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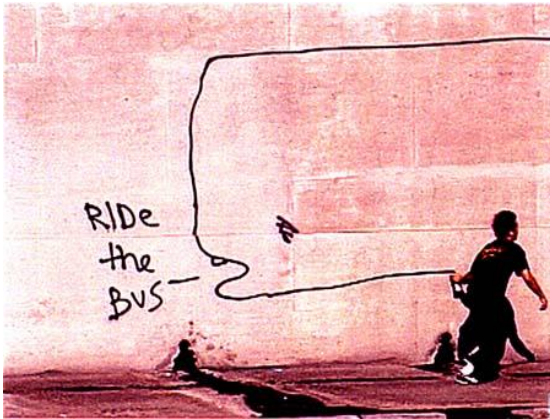
### **STREET**

According to the 2009 Otis Report on the Creative Economy (by the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles) one in every six people in the Los Angeles region are employed in a creative field. Los Angeles is filled with galleries, studios, performance spaces, music venues, and schools that focus on design. Art is part of the identity of the city. So it makes sense to think that the city played a role in the creation of the global movement called "street art." In a city where gang culture matured into nationally syndicated criminal organizations, graffiti matured into an art form.

Street art is any number of things, expressed any number of ways. But the key ingredient is public space. Partially influenced by the informal, do-it-yourself, attitude of the punk movement combined with its origins in gang culture "tagging," street art represents a new generation and is often completely at odds with the status quo. By invading the public space with unexpected, unsolicited art, the artist inhabitants of the city attempt to take back the public realm at a point in time where public space is disappearing.

Street art is the new medium for counter-cultures. The art can express a number of views, but more often than not, the act of producing public

art (which is in most cases a crime) is a critique upon the current or local social and economic order. What is interesting about this movement, though owing much of its origins to the city of Los Angeles, is that street art is a global movement.

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Because of this connection to a global movement (and a global generation) the messages can often vary from artistic and [whimsical pursuits](#) to ideas like [culture-jamming](#) and [political statements](#). Just as culture jamming attempts to subvert brand and institutional identities and ethos, street art attempts to subversively remind citizens that the public realm is public.

Tagging a wall with spray has become the inspiration for using the entire side of a building as a canvas for digital ink. This art is not civil and confined to museums, it is civil in a new way, in the civic space. This new generation of artists and creators is one that embraces the open-source, free-for-all, culture. One of these subversive creators is ex-NASA programmer [James Powderly](#). A director at F.A.T ([Free Art & Technology](#)) and a creator of the world-wide [Graffiti Research Lab](#), Powderly's work explores the relationship between public space, art, and technology. The work and creations that go on at these two research syndicates and networks culminate in programs and hardware solutions that bridge the gap between creativity and high-technology. These projects range from writing software for

projecting graffiti on buildings to utilizing eye tracking software and fabrication techniques to remotely create art.

The open-source paradigm has simultaneously risen with the introduction of blogs and Wikimedia. Apply these events with a move back towards urbanism and an appreciation for public space, and it is easy to see why Los Angeles is relevant in this discussion. The software and hardware advances made by collaborative groups like F.A.T., along with the ever-increasing presence of the internet on our daily lives, has brought new opportunities to a whole new generation of thinkers which acting as the spark to a wave of creativity.

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### NOTES

- 1 Theodore E. Treutlein, "Los Angeles, California: The Question of the City's Original Spanish Name", *Southern California Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 1–7.
- 2 William David Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).
- 3 Michael J. Gonzalez , "The Child of the Wilderness Weeps for the Father of Our Country: The Indian and the Politics of Church and State in Provincial Southern California," *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
- 4 William David Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).
- 5 Eric Monkkonen, "Western Homicide: The Case of Los Angeles, 1830—1870," *Pacific Historical* .
- 6 Peter P. F. Radkowski III, *Managing the Invisible Hand of the California Housing Market, 1942-1967* (2006).
- 7 Jeffries, Vincent & Ransford, H. Edward, "Interracial Social Contact and Middle-Class White Reaction to the Watts Riot," *Social Problems* 16.3: 312–324.

\* All maps in final report and [blog](#) are original productions by Ryan Withrow unless specifically noted otherwise.

\* All images were sourced from the internet. Links to original content can be found next to each image.