

FRITZ B. BURNS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOS ANGELES: *The Biography of a Community Developer and Philanthropist*. By James Thomas Keane. (Los Angeles: The Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University and The Historical Society of Southern California, 2001. 288 pp. \$25.00.) Reviewed by David C. Sloane.

By the time that Fritz B. Burns migrated to Los Angeles in 1921, the foundation for that modern metropolis had been laid. The tiny town of 1880 had become a booming city. Burns and his contemporaries built upon that foundation a vast metropolis considered by many to be the emblematic twentieth-century place. A small group of influential real estate developers, including Burns, played an important role in that expansion. James Thomas Keane's biography of Burns, which is a publication of the Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles at Loyola Marymount University and was partially supported by the Historical Society of Southern California, is a fascinating narrative of his life and achievements.

The book is particularly helpful in providing a rich analysis of Burns' land development strategies and processes for both residential housing and resort hotel construction. In recent years, historians have come to recognize that real estate and tourist destination developers stand with political and other economic leaders as critical partners in the development regimes that have guided urban/suburban growth, especially in the twentieth century. Keane's study introduces readers to an important trendsetter and national industry leader located in one of the great boom regions in American history.

Burns proudly proclaimed that his primary talent was selling, and he spent much of his life perfecting his pitch. Although the biography highlights his activities as a philanthropist and his avocation as a poet, it rightly focuses on his career as a real estate developer. Starting as a lowly runner for his uncle in Minneapolis after his father died, Burns eventually teamed with partners such as Fred Marlow and Henry Kaiser in multi-million-dollar building projects. As an innovator in standardized building practices, he played a crucial role in the development of Los Angeles' Westside and San Fernando Valley (including Westchester and Panorama City) and a pioneering part in the modern tourist industry of Hawaii.

The biography succinctly describes Burns moving from project to project, accumulating land, envisioning the project, developing the property, and selling it. However, the author argues persuasively that Burns was important not just because he built thousands of homes lived in today by many thousands of Angelenos, but also because he was an innovator in the real estate development industry. He was an early proponent of standardized building practices and research. A decade prior to Levittown, Burns was already constructing houses in assembly fashion. In 1946, Burns' Research Division opened its living laboratory, the "Postwar House," for which over 100 hundred manufacturers supplied products. The house highlighted a series of firsts, an electric garbage disposal, "large-screen" television (in this case, enlarging the screen from a few inches to a foot), "washable walls," and room-length closets called "storage walls" (105).

Burns was a national leader in the industry's professional and lobbying associations. Increasingly, the federal government was an important regulator and funder of housing

through such programs as FHA standards and the G.I. Bill. As the national government's activities became more prominent, developers such as Burns responded by organizing to support their interests and influence government programs. As Keane portrays, Burns played an important role in persuading the industry's leaders to join the National Association of Home Builders that provided a powerful voice for their interests.

In that role, Burns was an impassioned defender of private real estate development and promoter of real estate interests. The book is a stark reminder of Burns' role in limiting the public housing movement in Los Angeles, and the more general defense by real estate developers of their interests against the government's intrusion into the housing market. For Burns and his fellow contemporaries, the market was the mechanism of development, not government housing. Even as they, as Keane repeatedly shows, were more than willing to accept government programs that enriched them, they were bulwarks against the creation of an effective public housing program that they termed socialism.

Burns was particularly effective in battling public housing in Los Angeles. The city's political elite was a reluctant supporter of such programs anyway, so they not surprisingly quickly retreated from early commitments when pressured by the real estate industry and its red scare tactics. The symbol of the defeat was the shift of Chavez Ravine from a site for public housing to the home of the newly arrived Los Angeles Dodgers. An infamous incident in the city's history, here it is told through the eyes of a proponent of the shift. Burns even made money on the deal.

At times, Keane is overly enthusiastic about the pioneering part played by his subject. He argues that Burns constructed property near jobs, a practice unlike the previous development model in which transportation was crucial. While Burns and Marlow were adept in connecting jobs and homes, they were using a time-honored model. Worker housing near downtown, residential subdivisions in Hollywood and Culver City tied to the movie industry, and other sites had previously exploited the link between home and work in southern California, not to mention the broader history of company towns and other job-related housing.

The biography at times sometimes is so focused on Burns' activities that it misses opportunities to place him in a broader historical context, and help the reader fully understand his importance. I wished that Keane would have made Burns' life more of an American story. Burns was a leader in the real estate lobby's politics of housing, but we get little sense of the national trends that accompanied his involvement. Even at the local level, a discussion of how Burns' activities compared to other developers would have placed him in a wider historical context.

Even given these limitations, Keane has written an effective biography of one of the region's city shapers, to borrow a phrase from Spiro Kostof. Burns and his contemporary real estate developers helped fashion the city in which we live. Keane's evocative biography helps illuminate the methods they used, the influence they had, and their personal stories.

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