Victorian Sprawl
Streetcar Technology and the Suburban Ideal in Los Angeles, 1870–1920

ABSTRACT  Beginning in the 1880s, transportation innovations allowed the City of Los Angeles to expand past natural barriers and develop the vast land beyond the city’s core. The cable car and the electric trolley aided the expression of a Victorian residential ideal and urban aesthetic imported into Los Angeles from “back East” and the Midwest. Streetcar suburbs, the earliest form of urban flight, emerged on what were then the outer fringes of the city, initiating perpetual sprawl. While the city’s massive growth in the 1920s as well as extensive post–World War II suburbanization cannot be ignored, such development has obscured the much earlier origins of sprawl in the historiography. This paper argues that Victorian Los Angeles instituted trends aimed at low-density, outward growth, which the streetcar enabled, Progressive planners reinforced, and which bore many of the drawbacks associated with modern urban sprawl.  

KEYWORDS: Los Angeles, sprawl, suburbanization

FEW CONCEPTS are as central to the idea of Los Angeles as suburban sprawl. Historians have most often traced sprawl and post–World War II suburbanization to increased automobile accessibility during the 1920s and subsequent freeway building. Indeed, there is no denying the scale of those transformative forces. However, as this paper demonstrates, Los Angeles owes much of its physical form to late nineteenth-century advances in transportation technology. The cable car and, later, the electric trolley enabled the expression of a deeply Victorian residential ideal and urban aesthetic rooted against the insalubrity of eastern industrial cities. “Streetcar suburbs,” the earliest form of urban flight, emerged on what were then the outer fringes of the city and opened a sprawl-inducing relationship between residents and the natural environment. Coal-powered, smoke-producing technology allowed Angelenos to expand and escape the unhealthy hazards that outward growth increasingly created. In pursuit of a utopian “city of progress,” Victorian Los Angeles instituted the trends and policies that ensured a lasting culture of horizontal outward growth. To a degree that scholars have not sufficiently considered, the strength of American Victorianism and its use of the streetcar in Los Angeles sparked modern urban sprawl, launched its attendant
sociocultural tensions, led to environmental degradation, and created a city that would embrace the car and use it to speedily expand the cycle.

Because there is no unanimous definition of sprawl, attempting to determine its origins can be problematic. For the purposes of this study, the definition that follows is an attempt to be as agreeable as possible while retaining its most commonly cited facets: Modern urban sprawl is a cyclic process of land development on the fringes of metropolitan areas. Market demand for the pleasures of low-density living perpetuate sprawl on the fringe, decreasing the population density vital to efficient public transit, allowing the inner city to deteriorate, and compounding class-, race-, and income-based spatial segregation. The process compels, or is driven by, automobile dependence, congestion, and pollution, and burdens municipalities responsible for providing public services. Since World War II, this growth has been mostly suburban in character—resulting in the terms suburban sprawl and suburbanization—and larger in scale, hence the popular assumption that the process is a postwar, automobile-related phenomenon.

Dealing with an urban process as complex as sprawl can be difficult because nearly every study of Los Angeles has offered some explanation for its characteristic physical form. It would be impossible to cite every interpretation, but the standard narrative of the city’s outward growth posits that it was during the 1920s that Angelenos shifted their preference in mode of transit to the automobile. This shift was concurrent with both a real estate boom and a new municipal government commitment to decentralized development. Essentially, the story of Los Angeles’s sprawl is one of political commitments and technological advances that enabled a suburban ideal to drive unprecedented outward growth in the post–World War II period. The technological advance is always the automobile. But what bore that suburban ideal in Los Angeles remains murky in the historiography and is largely explained away as the product of nineteenth-century boosterism, which “sold” the city on its climate to induce the westward migration of Americans and to allow prominent entrepreneurs to profit from the land.

The scale of postwar sprawl has obscured the origins of the process. Recently, urban historian Becky M. Nicolaides, who so astutely challenged the conventional and limiting definitions of suburbia as postwar, middle-class, bedroom communities, paints herself into a corner when it comes to technological forces. “The rise of the automobile in the 1920s,” Nicolaides writes, “enabled emergent cities to spatially disperse, transforming undeveloped land on the periphery, far from streetcar lines, into prime real estate.” Of course, more land is conveniently accessible by car than by streetcar, but whether land is prime or peripheral is a matter of context. The “heights” on which Victorian Los Angeles built its first streetcar suburbs were no less peripheral or prime real estate in their time than land up in the Hollywood Hills reached only by cars in later years. The logic oversimplifies the state of development in places that embraced cars and assumes automobilization as the point at which a city “came of age.” For its part, Los Angeles entered the 1920s, the decade of the rise of the car, on the top-ten list of most populous American cities. It had been a leader in oil and agricultural export for at least two decades, and had established the busiest port on the West Coast.

While often ignored, it was the streetcar that drove sprawl to such monstrous proportions that planners of the 1920s found little choice but to submit to cultural and political demands for automobile infrastructure. America embraced no form of transportation technology as
quickly or thoroughly as the electric trolley. And no city embraced the streetcar more vigorously than Los Angeles, which enjoyed ninety years of rail service—the largest system in the world at over 1,100 miles of sprawling trackage by the 1920s. Yet the few scholars who have written about the city’s streetcar era, contending with a pervasive popular nostalgia for the golden age of streetcar transit, have spent considerable ink dispelling the General Motors streetcar conspiracy theory, leaving little room for discussion of the emergence of public transportation in Los Angeles. Historians Martin Wachs, Robert Fogelson and Scott Bottles, who have presented the most thorough examinations of the early streetcar, do so only to deal with twentieth-century sprawl. Thus, this article seeks both to explain the emergence of the suburban ideal and to assert the importance of the streetcar age in the context of its time.

THE VICTORIAN CONNECTION

The use of the term Victorian, of course, refers most often to that period of British history from 1837 to 1901, so named for its long-reigning queen, and proves most appropriate in the context of Los Angeles’s initial urbanization. As historians David Walker Howe and Thomas J. Schlereth have convincingly argued, Victorian sociocultural concepts were not only transatlantic in acceptance, but were probably experienced more strongly and lasted even longer in the United States due to more stringent social frameworks in Britain. Victorianism is best known for its strict morality and emphasis on refined social behavior in the face of urban industrial social ills. Borne out of bourgeois British evangelicalism, Victorianism as exported to America came to dominate the social mores of the swelling urban professional middle classes that were created by industry, especially after the Civil War. Made up of liberal Protestants, American Victorians took immense pride in efficiency and municipal reform. The embodiment of sociologist Max Weber’s “Protestant work ethic,” Victorians perceived professional diligence, time thrift, and entrepreneurial spirit as the keys to social mobility, respectability, and salvation. In city growth, they distorted the Romantic enthusiasm for nature and championed a suburban residential ideal obsessed with clean air and healthful living in reasonable proximity to their urban professions. To these ends, Victorians passionately embraced technological progress—primarily in all manner of railroads, but also in newly available architectural techniques. Most importantly, they gained increasing control over the urban world around them.

In no American city did this control manifest itself more deeply than in Los Angeles from the 1870s through at least the first decade of the twentieth century. Fogelson and historians George E. Mowry and Gregory H. Singleton have demonstrated the heavy influx and influence of Protestant, Anglo, midwestern, middle-class Americans into Los Angeles during this period, but only social historian Elaine Tyler May finds these immigrants to be socially and culturally Victorian. As photographic evidence reveals, Anglo newcomers increasingly mirrored popular British styles in fashion and architecture. Likewise, newspapers illustrate that, especially toward the end of the nineteenth century, the city expressed a deep connection to Queen Victoria herself, celebrating her Golden Jubilee and her eightieth birthday, and sincerely mourning her passing in 1901 in large services across the city.
Imbued with robust bourgeois sensibilities, civic boosters sought specifically to attract like-minded middle-class Anglo Americans from the East. Even the self-styled rough-and-tumble anti-Victorian Charles Fletcher Lummis, editor of the booster periodical *Land of Sunshine*, joined the methodical efforts to invite “the right kind of people” to the “Eden of the Saxon home-seeker.” Lummis and his contemporaries, so characteristically Victorian in their anticipation of utopian futures and their biblical allegories, produced colorful rhetoric about the city’s “destiny,” its “progress,” and its “future.” They valorized the city’s demographics, which they viewed to be almost entirely Anglo American with only a “small sprinkling” of non-whites—just “enough to give the place a cosmopolitan tone and finish” to attract only the “best class of immigration.” Los Angeles was to be a white, moral city of leisure, a mecca of tourism, a metropolitan “health resort.” But most importantly, as minister and reformer Dana Bartlett put it, Los Angeles was to be “a city of homes, and therefore a city without slums.” The residential ideal then—the single-family home—became a key source of pride, inextricable from conceptions about the ideal future. “Well may we point with pride to the homes of the Angel City and unhesitatingly assert that no more beautiful homes can be found anywhere than in this progressive and thoroughly Americanized metropolis of Southern California,” gushed the *Los Angeles Times* in 1899.

The link Victorians drew between aesthetics in the built environment and morality is the first key to understanding the ways in which that culture initiated sprawl. Particularly in the late nineteenth century, industrial cities saw massive growth in population. More than anything else, Victorian reformers attributed rampant crime, disease, and deteriorating living conditions in these places to high population density and poor housing conditions. “In a dark, dirty, crowded, ill-ventilated court or back street,” one social reformer explained, “…it is as difficult for health and virtue to exist as for the vegetation of the tropics to thrive amidst the snows of Iceland.” Victorian social reform invariably began with housing reform, but architects did their part to promote morality through the language of architecture. “There is so intimate a connection between taste and morals, aesthetics and Christianity,” wrote Victorian architect William Ranlett, “that they in each instance mutually modify each other.” City leaders invested heavily in grand, fashionable municipal and commercial structures. A massive Gothic courthouse, a Romanesque city hall, and Italianate commercial structures—favored revival styles of Victorianism—came to dominate the cityscape by the late 1880s. “Ugliness,” Bartlett explained, “has no commercial or ethical value.” The *Los Angeles Times* derided what it considered “godless” structures being built in San Francisco, urging an image of that city as a heavily Catholic and immoral city of regression, while it praised the virtues of its own city’s 1880s building boom: “Los Angeles is building for the future! There cannot be a difference of opinion concerning what the future will be. She will in the future, as in the past, continue to occupy the proud position and title of the metropolis of the south and the ‘Queen City’ of California.”

The nature of the metropolis to which the *Los Angeles Times* referred was to be suburban in character, and the early successes at achieving those aims provided a great source of pride. The Victorian interest in order and its distaste for conditions of the industrial city combined with medical science stressing the importance of breathing fresh air to produce a suburban residential ideal. At the same time, entrepreneurial spirit and aims of upward social mobility
led Victorians to display their social status through lavishly designed single-family homes. According to the Los Angeles Times in 1899: “As we study the architecture of our homes we find it no difficult matter to trace the impress of the higher life that has become a part of our community, and the broadening of the home idea which has given us a domestic architecture correlative to our social condition.” Through the 1880s and 1890s, Los Angeles’s suburbs saw an architectural arms race of Queen Anne “gingerbread.” Extravagant turrets, decorative gables, and fish-scale detailing aided individualist expression and served to elevate the city’s status as a whole. Intent on avoiding in their new city the filth and overcrowding of eastern industrial cities, and with a blank slate on which to draw, entrepreneurial Victorians led the building of a metropolis befitting their values.

GROWING WITH THE TRACKS

Meeting these ideals with physical infrastructure spurred in Los Angeles the sociocultural spatial segregation often associated with sprawl. Los Angeles leaders energetically improved infrastructure through the 1870s, inviting a major boom in the 1880s. The city straightened, widened, and began paving streets and building sewers, and it became the first American city to entirely abandon gas for an electric streetlight system in 1882. Resurfacing and widening early roads required expensive construction and often the purchase of private property. The Los Angeles Common Council, predecessor to the modern city council, managed to negotiate deals with landholders and entrepreneurs willing to help pay for improvements.
and obtained permission from the state to float bond issues for street grading. By 1880, Los Angeles had widened and resurfaced two hundred miles of road. The city initially undertook street projects on roads only where proprietors of adjacent businesses had agreed to share the cost, expecting to reap benefits of accessibility to their storefronts and increased property value. By this point, European Americans had initiated growth south from what is now known as the Los Angeles Plaza Historic District, the original core of the city, and cared more about improving infrastructure in this newly urbanized portion of town. In 1873, when the first sewage projects opened, they had been laid to barely graze the boundaries of what had become homogenous Mexican and Chinese wards just to the north and east of the Plaza. Street improvement projects followed similar, exclusively Anglo designs, leaving these neighborhoods without sewers, potable water, or graded and improved roads, which, as historian David Samuel Torres-Rouff has pointed out, reinforced the growing negative stereotypes that European Americans projected on Mexicans as primitive, unwashed, and diseased. Yet still, Victorian Los Angeles, blinded by the city’s bright and certain destiny, saw only progress. As one Angeleno put it in 1899, reminiscing about the previous twenty-five years of development: “American energy, and life, and wealth, and modern progressive ideas took the place of Spanish ease and content, which always waited for mañana to do what should be done today.”

Emphasizing style amid growing demographic tensions between Anglo and Mexican Angelenos, the city’s core began shifting southward. Still a dusty pueblo of little more than fifteen hundred when California achieved statehood in 1850, Los Angeles had not developed much of the land beyond its core at the historic Plaza, the original common space around which the town grew during the Mexican and Spanish periods. Initial development after statehood moved south down Main Street to Temple Street. Jonathan Temple, an early pioneer who came from Massachusetts in 1828, built the first market, theater, city hall, and courthouse during the 1850s, effectively establishing a new Anglo core at Temple Square streets about one thousand feet south of the historic Plaza. With continued Anglo population growth, building projects during the 1870s and especially the 1880s continued southward, establishing yet another Anglo commercial center around what is now known as downtown Los Angeles’ “historic core.” This time the city also built a new common space now known as Pershing Square, an Anglo replacement for the Plaza, by then a commons only to the Chinese ward to its east and the Mexican “Sonoratown” immediately north.

To the detriment of neighborhoods adjacent to the original core, and the marginalization of its Mexican and Chinese inhabitants, infrastructure improvements in the 1870s helped local commerce and prepared Los Angeles for the boom it would experience in the 1880s. In 1877, a railroad line finally connected Los Angeles to San Francisco and then in 1881 the Southern Pacific completed the direct railroad connection from Los Angeles to the East. In competition with the Southern Pacific, the Santa Fe Railway extended into the city later in the 1880s. The Santa Fe line further connected Los Angeles to the rest of the country, and competition drove fares down, inducing westward travel into the city. From 1870 to 1890, the population of Los Angeles grew from about six thousand to fifty thousand. But it was the local transportation infrastructure within Los Angeles that would allow for the sprawling distribution of that growing population and its residential desires.
In December 1873, Mayor James R. Toberman granted the first successful street railway operation franchise to the prominent judge Robert M. Widney. The ordinance permitted Widney to lay and maintain rail on city roads and to run horse-drawn cars for the purposes of ferrying passengers for profit. Toberman, a strong proponent of municipal progress, personally helped plan the first streetcar grid system, oversaw the initial street paving projects in the city, and flipped on the first electric streetlights.\textsuperscript{34} Widney, similarly considered an “indefatigable” civic leader, had, in 1869, founded the East Los Angeles and San Pedro Railroads from the city to the wharves in Wilmington, and he later offered these lines to the Southern Pacific in order to draw their transcontinental line into Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{35} Widney’s Spring and Sixth Street Railroad Company is regarded as the first successful street railway in Los Angeles. Opening his venture with a \$12,000 initial investment, Widney began with 8,350 feet of track from Temple and Spring to Figueroa and Sixth Streets, two cars, and four horses. Hopeful competitors to Widney eagerly applied for rival franchise grants. Many were successful and expanded rapidly, at least for a time. By the end of 1876, two competitors had broken Widney’s monopoly. The three companies combined for a total of 9.7 miles of track. By 1885, there were four horse-drawn street railways operating on about 45 miles of track, allowing continued southward growth as far as Agricultural Park (now Exposition Park) and the subdivision of Boyle Heights and what is now Lincoln Heights to the east and northeast, respectively.\textsuperscript{36}

However, horse traction had its limitations and clashed with concepts about modernity and progress. Large-scale reliance on horses had spelled disaster in the past. Angelenos remembered the great epizootic of 1872, which killed close to four million, or one-quarter of the horses in the United States, debilitating work and movement in America and helping encourage the 1873 financial panic.\textsuperscript{37} Expensive to replace and maintain, horses required large stables, handlers, and feed, and they could not make it up hills to the desirable land west and northwest of downtown. Because of their sheer numbers in ever-expanding systems, streetcar horses soiled city streets to a significant degree. Because of the exhausting work, streetcar lines limited horses to just a few hours of service at a time. A low life expectancy of just three to five years, and the vast number of animals needed to run an efficient system, left rail magnates and citizens begging for new forms of motive power.\textsuperscript{38} Thus, Los Angeles, like every other city, heartily embraced the much cheaper operating costs, safety, and apparent cleanliness of coming transportation technology: the cable car and then the electric trolley.

One of the biggest misconceptions about Los Angeles’s sprawl is that the city’s expansion was unrestricted by natural barriers like those hemming in eastern cities such as New York. In late nineteenth-century Los Angeles, the land and “pure air” of the heights was most desirable, but the steep grade was inaccessible by horse-drawn streetcar. Land speculator Henry Clay Witmer financed the \$100,000 Second Street Cable Railroad, one of the first and steepest in the country, and many times more expensive an initial investment than any horse line. The large but feverishly undertaken endeavor opened in October 1885, finally connecting Angelenos to landholdings up and over the heights a mile and a half west to what is now Belmont Avenue. In little more than a year, Witmer and his associates sold all but fifty-two of the fourteen hundred lots they had divided along the line and got out of the transit business. Next, land developer Prudent Beaudry’s Temple Street Cable Railway opened in July 1886, negotiating the grade up Temple and west out to Belmont, producing the Angelino
Heights neighborhood. While the horse cars had certainly begun spreading the city outward, allowing for land speculation to draw a distinct separation between the commercial and the residential, cable technology revolutionized the scale of streetcar-driven growth. The city had finally conquered the elusive western heights and beyond, into lands where just two years prior only “the jack-rabbit and the squirrel held undisputed sway,” as the Los Angeles Times put it.

The first electric line opened in Los Angeles at the start of 1887, but that first line quickly suffered a catastrophic powerhouse explosion after operating for only a year and a half and closed down. Contemporary Angelenos, already conscious of the city’s outward growth, excused the difficulty in establishing a reliable electric system. As Lummis remembered ten years later, “the street railroad companies of Los Angeles have to contend with the fact that the city is spread over a large area.” But because of the pattern of growth already in place and the ideals of the city’s population, competing lines led Los Angeles to recover and pioneer electric streetcar sprawl in the United States. In 1890, Lummis explained that while the growing City of Los Angeles was only fifty-seventh in nationwide population, with fifty thousand residents, it was fourteenth in total street rail mileage.

The system of streetcar-directed land speculation and subdivision that Los Angeles developers instituted continued well into the twentieth century, with “interurban” service to much farther-flung places than ever before. In 1898, Henry E. Huntington, nephew of railroad magnate Colis P. Huntington and former executive of the Southern Pacific, bought and expanded the Los Angeles Railway (LARy) electric line. Then, in 1901, he incorporated the Pacific Electric Railway Company (PE) for interurban service, connecting Los Angeles to San Bernardino and Newport Beach, both distances of over forty miles. In 1904 Huntington neatly explained his program:

Railway lines have to keep ahead of the procession. It would never do for an electric line to wait until the demand for it came. It must anticipate the growth of communities and be there when the home-builders arrive—or they are very likely not to arrive at all, but to go to some section already provided with arteries of traffic.

By 1911, LARy and PE dominated local and interurban public transit in Los Angeles. The lines crisscrossed the region, running more than twelve hundred cars on well over one thousand miles of track. The city had ostensibly achieved its aims at low population density and suburban-style growth by 1900. Even with massive population increases from 11,200 in 1880 to 30,400 in 1890 and then on to 102,500 by 1900, building kept up with the procession. Through those years Los Angeles maintained a persons-per-dwelling-unit average of four to five, compared with New York City’s eighteen to twenty-six, and in 1900 a persons-per-acre density of 3.7 to New York’s 51.2, Boston’s 15.7, or Philadelphia’s 15.6. But extreme low density was short lived. While the city annexed more and more territory, doubling its square mileage in the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries, density increased to 9.3 persons per acre in 1914. As automobiles slowly rumbled onto city streets, mixing with streetcar, pedestrian, and horse-drawn carriage traffic, hellish congestion in the core abounded and something seemed terribly wrong with the city’s model of growth.
Additionally, the hasty shift in power reliance from horse to electric traction only added to what the press began calling a “smoke nuisance” as early as 1893. Until the city opened hydroelectric plants on the Los Angeles Aqueduct in 1917, electricity came from coal-fired plants belching smoke in and adjacent to downtown. And as urbanization and boosters invited industry into a city obsessed with its air but without zoning regulation, heated debates about land use ensued. While engineers advised of the care necessary to take in the burning of cheap and dirty bituminous coal, the expensive mechanical stokers and expertise required precluded effective smoke abatement.47 One complaint summed up the problem:

Every afternoon at the corner of Second and Spring streets there arises a tremendous volume of black smoke which must do a considerable amount of damage where it is deposited. It is stated that Kansas City, Denver, Chicago and St. Louis have all passed anti-smoke ordinances. . . . Los Angeles, which depends so largely for support upon its attractiveness to health and pleasure-seekers, should certainly not be behindhand in this respect.48

Thus, Angelenos began agitating for the legal removal of industry to remote portions of the city. “There is a place for everything and everything ought to be in its place,” exclaimed the Los Angeles Times. “While all patriotic citizens of Los Angeles are anxious to see the city thrive, and prosper, and progress,” wrote another reporter, “there are many of us who would regret to see our sunny sky obscured by clouds of thick smoke.”49 Over the years, suggestions ranged from limiting factories to “a section that is bounded by Third street, Alameda street, the southern city boundary and the river,” or to San Pedro or Wilmington, and in 1910, the Times even issued a proposal to forbid the burning of bituminous coal within city limits altogether.50 Angelenos and the city that had “sold” itself on its climate struggled to cope with the increasingly industrial nature of their city. Complaints about air quality, crime, vice, and—after Edward Doheny struck oil in 1892—the oil derricks that blossomed in every free crevice of land filled the pages of the Los Angeles Times. Angelenos came to loathe even the telegraph, telephone, and overhead electric streetcar wires powering their expansion. As early as 1885, the Los Angeles Herald denounced the proliferation of overhead wires as “hasty and neglectful of aesthetic and even more practical considerations,” and decried the “increasing network of wires which is spreading throughout the town like the webs of spiders in a deserted barn.”51

CITY BEAUTIFUL: "TO FIT LOS ANGELES FOR HER DESTINY"52

It is into these changing times that Los Angeles realized the drawbacks of unregulated, profit-driven sprawl and commissioned a host of City Beautiful planners to reset the city onto its rightful course into the future. The City Beautiful, a planning movement borne out of Progressive urban reform by architects involved in the construction of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, sought to improve cities suffering from the ills of industrial growth. Progressive planning became far more technical and comprehensive than what would be most aptly described as the simple aesthetic guidance of the Victorian era. City Beautiful planners urged the Beaux-Arts and Neoclassical styles, supplanting the Victorian Gothic, Romanesque, Italianate, and Queen Anne, but their objectives, albeit far less religious in tone than those of the Victorians, remained the same: to instill civic pride and social morality through
impressive structures and imposing aesthetics. As planning historian Jon A. Peterson has shown, City Beautiful catapulted the individual architect to a status of celebrity as never before, establishing city planning as a profession and the “comprehensive plan” as the standard for municipal growth. Across the United States, City Beautiful produced no less than eighty comprehensive plans as municipalities, frantic not to be left behind their peers, shelled out exorbitant fees to hire outside “experts” to solve their deficiencies. City Beautiful reports for Los Angeles serve as excellent sources about the values of those that commissioned them and the state of the city. In 1907 and 1911, respectively, Charles Mulford Robinson, the most prolific of City Beautiful planners, and a transportation planner named Bion J. Arnold, caught in the whirlwind of the movement, produced the two most influential, yet underexamined, plans for the city. A brief examination of their reports illustrates a continuity of Victorian values and the conflict between aesthetics and progress as the city prepared to embrace the automobile. More than anything else, the struggle evident in both plans to deduce workable solutions for Los Angeles illustrates the degree to which the streetcar had already sprawled the city out of control.53

At the end of 1907, Robinson submitted his grandiose, but suspiciously fragmented, plan to the city for review (published for the public in 1909). Robinson found in Los Angeles a problem “a little out of the ordinary,” by American municipal standards. “Sprawling, rambling, disjointed,” Robinson observed, Los Angeles was a city “not unlike a child who has outgrown his clothes. The old garments are uncomfortably filled, crowding and cramping him, and beyond them he stretches out in long sprawling legs and arms.”54 Los Angeles had indeed grown uniquely and this clearly perplexed Robinson. Comprehensive planning to rectify the problems that most American cities shared
usually called for the same things, merely to varying degrees. Robinson shoved into the plan the customary City Beautiful prescription: scenic parkways, grand boulevards, and perhaps the only lasting legacies of the movement in Los Angeles, a “union” railroad station, a civic center, and beautified bridges over the river. Yet, together, his ideas reflect little unity. Robinson clearly saw great potential for Los Angeles’ future as the “Paris of America,” a tourist mecca of outdoor leisure and health. But while he noted the sprawl and congestion problems, the considerable space in his report dedicated to inconsequential aesthetics like streetlight ornamentation, curbside parking, and waiting stations illustrate his inability to deduce any real solutions, leaving Angelenos puzzled. In response to Robinson’s report, the Los Angeles Times quipped, “He forgot to tell Los Angeles the only thing it wanted to know which is this—Where shall the factories be?”

The city’s next comprehensive plan aimed at solving street congestion but represented the bridge in planning ideology from a focus on the streetcar to a focus on the automobile. In 1911, Harbor Commissioner Thomas E. Gibbon convinced the city to spend $2,500 to hire Bion J. Arnold to devise a transit plan for Los Angeles. Arnold, an electrical engineer by trade, had made a name for himself as a “doctor for sick railways,” advising municipalities on electric traction and effective streetcar-route planning over the previous two decades. By the time of Arnold’s visit, the automobile, which had been energetically anticipated since the late Victorian period, began to make its way onto city streets and mix with streetcars, horse carriages, and pedestrians. With the population soaring past 350,000, Arnold planned for a city of more than one million, proposing sweeping solutions to what he saw as the worst congestion in the United States. The key to his plan was the elimination of at-grade crossings between different modes of transportation: subways under the business district, elevated trains everywhere else, and freeways for the automobile and the motor truck, which was beginning to display its commercial utility. However, streetcar-based expansion had dispersed residential settlement so substantially that the city determined population density to be too low to justify building expensive subways. Meanwhile, depictions from “back east” of elevated trains diminishing property values as they jangled along above otherwise pleasant streets, creating a “perpetual city of night,” had made their way to Los Angeles—a prospect that would clash mightily with the city’s culture of growth. Instead, the city adopted the path of least resistance to solve the problem. As E. W. Bannister, assistant engineer for the Board of Public Works, urged in 1915: “[Los Angeles] has an opportunity to solve its congestion problem simply by the gradual extension of its business area.” In other words, continued sprawl.

Most scholars, notably urban scholars Mark S. Foster, Martin Wachs, Greg Hise, William Deverell, and Scott Bottles, have looked to the 1920s as the critical decade of transportation planning that determined the current physical and social landscape of the city. However, the substance of plans from this time reveals that Robinson and, especially, Arnold set conceptual precedents. Planners of the 1920s simply cherry-picked Arnold’s ideas to suit their needs: the separation of grades for different types of vehicles, viaducts to keep traffic flowing, highways, boulevards, and a scientific approach to movement generally. Cultural, technological, and economic forces had, starting in the 1870s, spread the city outward and overstretched the streetcar lines on roads that, by the 1920s, proved insufficient to accommodate the traffic increase. The discussion to address these
inadequacies boiled down to a simple choice over which mode of transportation to plan for moving forward: the automobile or the streetcar. The press, the city, and market demand reacted as they always had—they chose the next advancement in technology, the car. Indeed, Angelinos had been looking forward to the automobile since the late nineteenth century. Through 1899 the Los Angeles Times wrote extensively and optimistically about the benefits of the “coming vehicle,” envisioning electric battery–powered cars moving people on noiseless and clean streets free from the clomping hooves and refuse of horses, and the eradication of diseases communicated by contact with horses altogether. When it eventually became affordable, the automobile revolutionized the refuse of horses, and the eradication of diseases communicated by contact with horses cars moving people on noiseless and clean streets free from the clomping hooves and altogether.

NOTES


8. In perhaps the strangest example of studies of Los Angeles’s street-rail history, Reyner Banham devotes an entire chapter to the “transportation palimpsest” only to dismiss what remains of Los Angeles’s past and


24. The Los Angeles City Archives maintains a seemingly disproportionate array of land settlement documents through the 1870s, highlighting the municipal accrual of property for street projects.


26. Ibid.


37. For more on the 1872 epizootic, see Schlereth, *Victorian America*, 21.


“The New Cable Road: The Board of Public Works Will Recommend It,” Los Angeles Times, November 7, 1886, 8.


Ibid., 35–36.

Quoted in Bottles, Los Angeles and the Automobile, 29.


E. W. Bannister, Study of Street Traffic Conditions in the City of Los Angeles and the Practicability of Subsurface or Elevated Construction for Urban and Interurban Transit Facilities (Los Angeles Engineering Department, 1915), 34, 30.


“Smokeless Factories,” Los Angeles Times, October 22, 1902, 6.


As quoted in Henry Winfred Splitter, “Los Angeles as Described by Contemporaries (Concluded),” The Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly 37, no. 3 (September 1955): 275.

“Plans to fit Los Angeles for Her Destiny Submitted: Traffic Expert Arnold’s Report, Result of Six Months’ Work, Presented to City Council,” Los Angeles Express, October 24, 1911.


Bannister, Study of Street Traffic Conditions, 27.

