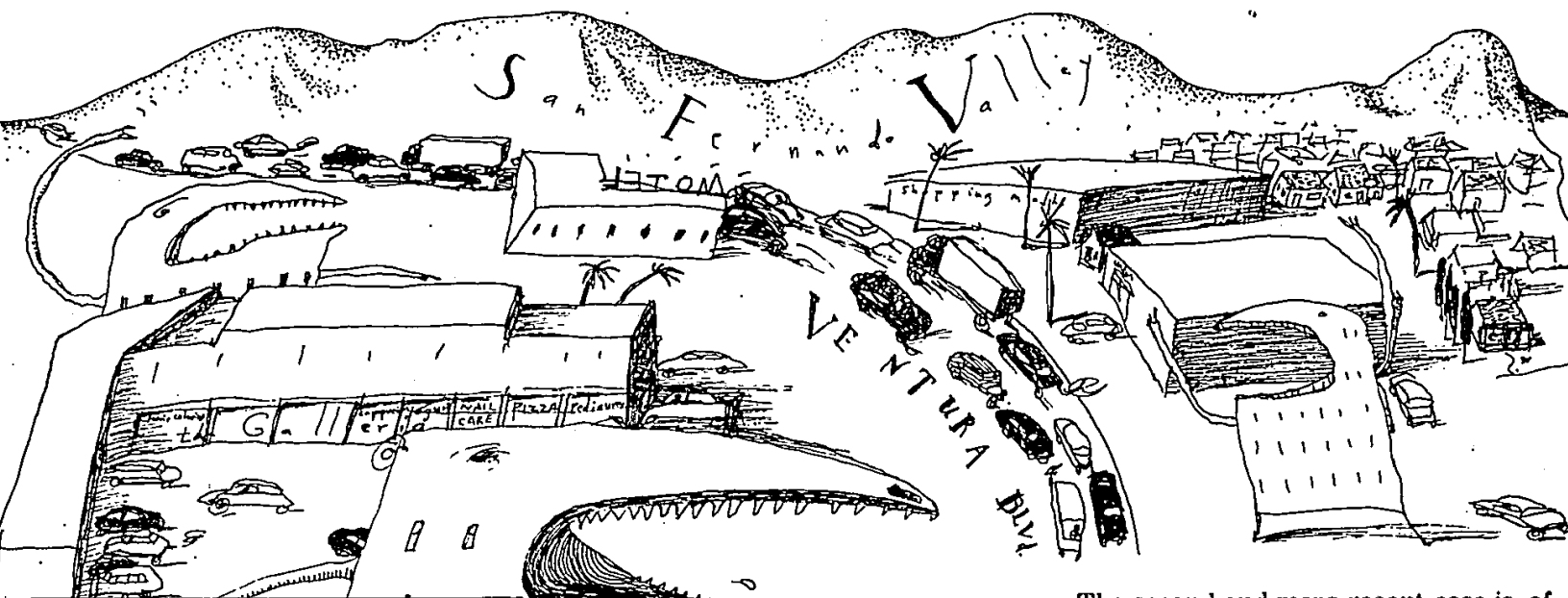


THE DARK SIDE OF DEVELOPMENT

Without real planning,
L.A. borders on chaos



By Mike Davis

In the dark attic of Los Angeles' past, amid the relics of long-ago water conspiracies, real-estate swindles and the Open Shop, are two particularly troubling and persistent shadows. The first, of course, is the frustrated struggle, dating back to the labor wars of the early 20th Century, to make our police and sheriffs heed the Constitution and its guarantees of freedom of speech and equal protection under law. Here, the Rodney G. King case, Los Angeles' latter-day counterpart to the *L'affaire Dreyfus*, has forced a reluctant city to acknowledge aspects of a guilty history.

Yet Los Angeles should be equally concerned about the skeletons rattling around in the closets of the Department of Planning. Indeed, to use a *noir* metaphor, the venalities of planning have tended to play the "Two Jakes" to police abuse's "Chinatown." Consider the sobering examples of the city's two major historical attempts to impose a coherent design on runaway urbanization.

The first was in 1945, just a month before Hiroshima. Planners foresaw that V-J Day would bring a huge land rush of developers and house-hunting ex-GIs to the still-agricultural San Fernando Valley. The president of the city planning commission, respected architect and public-housing advocate Robert E. Alexander, believed it was urgent to prevent suburbanization from completely destroying the Valley's rural character.

The comprehensive zoning ordinance adopted in July, 1945—and ratified by the City Council in early 1946—therefore proposed to concentrate postwar growth in compact master-planned "garden cities," separated by agricultural greenbelts that preserved farms and orchards. If implemented as intended, Alexander's idyllic plan would have allowed the Valley—with a land area equal to Chicago's—to absorb several hundred thousand new families while ensuring that their children—and, indeed, their children's children—could still smell alfalfa in the fields and play hide and seek in orange groves.

Developers, however, immediately recognized that the plan could be subverted to their enormous profit. Buying up the cheapest agriculture-zoned property, they exploited the hysteria of the housing crisis to get it rezoned as more valuable residential land. As Alexander recalled in a memoir, the developers would appear at City Hall "accompanied by a veteran wearing an American Legion hat," ready to denounce opponents of rezoning as "communists."

Although Alexander stood firm—"I did not become president to preside over the dissolution of the Valley"—the rest of the planning commission capitulated to "patriotic pressure." Like a colony of termites devouring a log, the developers used exemptions as sharp teeth to whittle away the zoning ordinance. By 1960, as a result, the proposed greenbelts had become dense housing tracts and the rural Valley was lost forever.

The second and more recent ease is, of course, Proposition U. Five years ago this November, Angelenos voted overwhelmingly to eut developable commercial density in most of the city by half. Outraged by skyscrapers in their front yards and torrents of commuter traffic on their streets, neighborhoods from Westchester to Lincoln Heights rose in revolt. Despite warnings that Prop. U ("Initiative for Reasonable Limits") would kill the boom and further polarize the city between haves and have-nots, a 70% majority, including most Chicano and black homeowners, approved slamming the breaks on commercial overdevelopment.

What has been the result?

As Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky—the initiative's original co-sponsor—argued in a recent interview, it is probably true that Prop. U has helped tame high-rise strip development and forestalled the destruction of the boutique renaissance

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on Melrose and La Brea boulevards. It also mobilized the grass-roots pressure that forced reluctant city officials to approve new controls on minimalls, a landmark parking-conformity ordinance and a growth-moderating "specific plan" for Ventura Boulevard.

On the other hand, Prop. U—like Alexander's Valley greenbelt plan before it—has become so much Swiss cheese, as its restrictions are nibbled away by exemptive maneuvers. Not surprisingly, this is fine with most council members, who relish their power to broker the dilution of Prop. U—justified, predictably, as "negotiating amenities" for the community.

Moreover, Prop. U applies only to existing commercial zoning outside the biggest high-rise centers. It provides no relief against the blobs currently invading Hollywood and the Miracle Mile. Nor does it provide any mechanism to translate commercial downzoning into encouragement for affordable, medium-density residences that the city so desperately needs.

Prop. U has also failed as a catalyst of political realignment. Councilwoman Ruth Galanter, who used Prop. U to topple the mighty Pat Russell, has disappointed expectations that she would become the citywide tribune of growth control. At the same time, the neighborhood ground swell behind Prop. U has largely subsided into the selfish parochialism of homeowner associations, insensitive to the housing crisis in the rest of the city.

At City Hall, meanwhile, faith in comprehensive planning seems near collapse. Explaining why Galanter has abdicated a larger leadership role, one of her chief

deputies argued, "Los Angeles is simply not amenable to citywide policies or solutions." The mayor's planning deputy, Jane Blumenfeld, warned that the city had fallen 10 years behind in land-use planning for its new Metro Rail system, and even further in the provision of new affordable housing.

For his part, Yaroslavsky was predictably colorful: "Los Angeles makes the U.S.S.R.'s problems look simple. Like the Soviets' dying empire, we also have secessionist republics, a collapsing center and vacillating leadership. We need an overhaul every bit as sweeping as Russia's."

But what kind of overhaul? Surprisingly, both Yaroslavsky and his occasional antagonist, Deputy Mayor Mark Fabiani, express last-ditch hope in the appointment of a superplanner—a "gutsy, butt-kicking" (Yaroslavsky), "fearless and independent" (Fabiani) director of planning to rescue that agency from total demoralization. Yaroslavsky insists the current search for a successor to Kenneth C. Topping "is every bit as important as finding a replacement for Chief Daryl Gates. Landscaping may not seem as significant as chokeholds, but a mediocre police chief is not as dangerous to the city as another mediocre planning director."

Be that as it may, it is still difficult to imagine that the Moldovians in Eagle Rock and the Uzebeckis in Tarzana—not to mention the developers and their lobbyists in City Hall—won't eat alive any planning director ever made. The implacable history lesson that Prop. U seems to reinforce is that the micropolitics of planning—that is to say, the incessant erosion of general principles by special-interest pressures—is antipathetic to both vision and democracy. As Jake Gittes learned the hard way, that's simply how it has always been in "Chinatown." □