Building a Regional Production Network: Oil, Cinema, and Aviation

Firms in these sectors produced primarily for export, and together they engineered Los Angeles' industrial landscape along the urban periphery during the 1910s and 1920s. Petroleum extraction and refining, motion picture production, and aviation engaged relatively large numbers of craft-based workers employed either directly or indirectly in component manufacture and assembly. These firms served as generators for the development of residential districts with associated commerce and institutions.

A dispersed set of industrial centers developed around the oil fields and refinery sites. Standard Oil and other large firms engaged directly in city-building, and in proximity to other production centers such as Brea or San Pedro, smaller-scaled entrepreneurs subdivided land and built housing in residential districts such as La Habra and Long Beach. In Vernon, land use regulations restricted residential development but many oil workers and their families chose to reside immediately adjacent in Huntington Park and Maywood. By 1917, four suburban industrial clusters, Whittier-Fullerton, San Pedro-Long Beach, El Segundo-Manhattan Beach, and Vernon-Huntington Park formed a metropolitan industrial district tied by pipelines into a cohesive regional unit.

Although the movie colony initially developed in Hollywood, a 1915 directory of manufacturers recorded other movie firms in Long Beach, Santa Monica, Mount Washington, and multiple districts in between. Subsequent censuses recorded secondary concentrations, for example, in Harry Culver's new community on the former Rancho Ballona eight miles west of Los Angeles' city hall. By 1920, Goldwyn Pictures, the Henry Lehrman Studios, Sanborn Laboratories, and the Maurice Tourneur Film Company had joined the Ince studio in Culver City. A 1927 pamphlet welcomed Cecil B. DeMille, Hal B. Roach, and the United Artists studios; they had established "plants" in Culver City. The brochure attributed a 71 percent home ownership rate to employment in the studios. A similar pattern evolved in the North Hollywood area beginning in 1915 when Carl Laemmle converted a former chicken ranch on county land into Universal City. This practice continued into the 1920s with the dispersion of firms such as Warner Brothers, which moved from a site along Hollywood's Sunset Boulevard to an outlying location in Burbank.

Industrial location for aircraft and parts fits within this model as well. The origins of Southern California's vaunted aircraft (later aerospace) industry can be traced to small, undercapitalized companies that rented space for offices and plants in warehouses and loft buildings in the East Side Industrial District before acquiring more suitable sites along the then urban fringe. Glenn L. Martin founded the first Los Angeles firm to manufacture aircraft in 1912 when the company relocated from a Santa Ana cannery into a brick loft building at 943 South Los Angeles.

Donald Douglas, an engineer and Martin vice president, formed the Douglas-Davis Company in 1920, when he rented the backroom of a barbershop at 8817 Pico Boulevard. Former Martin employees crafted components for a transcontinental plane in a second-floor loft space near Alameda and Fourth Streets. Finished parts were lowered down an elevator shaft and trucked for final assembly at the Goodyear Blimp hangar in south-central Los Angeles. In 1921, Douglas, with financial support from Harry Chandler, incorporated as The Douglas Company. The following year 42 employees relocated to a movie studio on Wilshire Boulevard in Santa Monica, a site chosen for its adjacent field. It proved inadequate for test flights, and completed aircraft were towed to Clover Field. In 1928, the company moved its entire operations to Clover Field, which the City of Santa Monica had purchased two years earlier. Municipal ownership assured continuity of operation, the requisite zoning, and eminent domain for expansion. Simultaneously, the firm opened a subsidiary adjacent to Mines Field, an airstrip the City of Los Angeles had recently leased for a municipal airport. By the time the city purchased the property in 1937, the district had become a nucleus for prime airframe contractors, subassemblers, and parts and component manufacturers.

Then, during World War II, homebuilders, anticipating an influx of defense workers drawn by these employment centers, selected sites in close proximity for community projects. Adjacent to Mines Field, four developers converted a five-square-mile parcel, owned and planned by Security Bank, into a district for 10,000 residents. A map accompanying advertisements for Westchester in the Los Angeles Herald-Express plotted prime contractors and eleven ancillary industries. The copy underscored the district's proximity to a "wide variety of employment." Broadsides enticed potential buyers who could "Live within walking distance to scores of production plants."

Conclusion

Development in Westchester, Torrance, and the Eastside can not be analyzed according to the stock suburban theses. Westchester and similar developments in Los Angeles and elsewhere were not intended as suburbs, if the term is meant to invoke economically inert bedroom communities populated only by middle- and upper-income families. Nor did these mixed-use districts represent a new type of urban landscape; their antecedents can be traced back at least a century. Finally, Culver City, Vernon, and similar zones throughout the region were not the product of indiscriminate development; on the contrary, they were the product of planning.

Close attention to a specific place or region challenges tidy narratives of industrial geography that begin with technology and sectoral concentration and then follow trains, trucks, and cars out to greenfield sites where industrialists constructed isolated plants. This history is important as we consider the mismatch between a "new" economy and the region's fixed investment in an outdated and aging infrastructure for production. Many of the facilities put in place during the 1920s are still in use. However, much has changed in terms of production, in the scale of manufacturing operations, and in the workforce. As several studies have shown, Los Angeles did not suffer a manufacturing decline of the type associated with Detroit, Pittsburgh, and other "rustbelt" cities. Rather, in Los Angeles, garment production and other light industry filled the space vacated by heavy industry. Lost in this transition were well-paid skilled and semi-skilled jobs with reliable benefits.

Any chance for improving workplace conditions, providing the means for improved living conditions, and increasing the likelihood that the working poor will have access to education, day care, and job training requires careful attention to actual conditions. None of this will be achieved if these workers and their families remain outside our field of vision, obscured by a discourse about a "post-industrial" society and a "service economy." These issues have enormous consequences for politics and governance, the economy, social relations, and civic culture. It is well past time to set aside long-standing myths regarding a suburban, dystopic, or postmodern metropolis. The only certainty in greater Los Angeles is the demographic future. Better to focus our efforts on comparative, historical analysis so that we might understand the city of today and plan for the city of tomorrow.

Real Estate Research Brief
Spring 2001

Industry and Urbanization In Southern California, 1900-1950

Introduction

Over the last decade an increasing number of scholars and pundits have cast greater Los Angeles as the archetype for large and growing cities in the U.S. and throughout the world. In these accounts, regional expansion is portrayed as the product of haphazard development without planning, in other words, "sprawl." Studies of manufacturing and industrial location often share these conventions. However, a historical investigation reveals that industrial development and industrial location have been key determinants for urbanization in Los Angeles and that residential, commercial, and industrial development has been coordinated, complimentary, and highly planned. Together, these coincident enterprises recast the region during the first half of the twentieth century. At that time there were three interrelated but qualitatively distinct types of industrial zones in Los Angeles: a home-market district of lofts, warehouses, and residences adjacent to the central business district; greenfield developments for mass production in Torrance, the Eastside, and Vernon; and dispersed oil, film, and aircraft satellites on the urban periphery. This finding challenges the received wisdom regarding industrial geography (a progressive narrative of technological innovation and successive production regimes) as well as the standard narratives of suburbanization or more recently, of "edge cities."

The planned dispersion of industry and associated land uses in American cities has a deep history that can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, these mixed-use districts were the norm across North America, and in Los Angeles, as elsewhere, industrialists, working in concert with land developers, realtors, design professionals, and other city builders, helped shape the precise pattern of urban expansion. The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce (LAACC or the Chamber) and other boosters touted Los Angeles as "Nature's Workshop." Through the auspices of its Industrial Department (initiated in 1918), the Chamber actively promoted the reputed advantages of Southern California for manufacturing and aggressively courted investors and financiers who might capitalize industrial start-ups or the expansion of existing firms and plants. Touting a benign climate, low-cost and abundant hydroelectric power and petroleum-derived fuels, labor costs below the national average, a bungalow-dwelling labor force, and the open shop, boosters lured investment capital to Los Angeles.

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One strategy they adopted was enticing east coast and Midwest corporations, such as Ford Motor Company and General Motors, to select Los Angeles as the site for satellite production facilities. Branch plant expansion, as well as the growth of locally owned firms, did not produce a generic industrial Los Angeles. Firms set up shop, hired workers, and manufactured products for a local market and later for export.

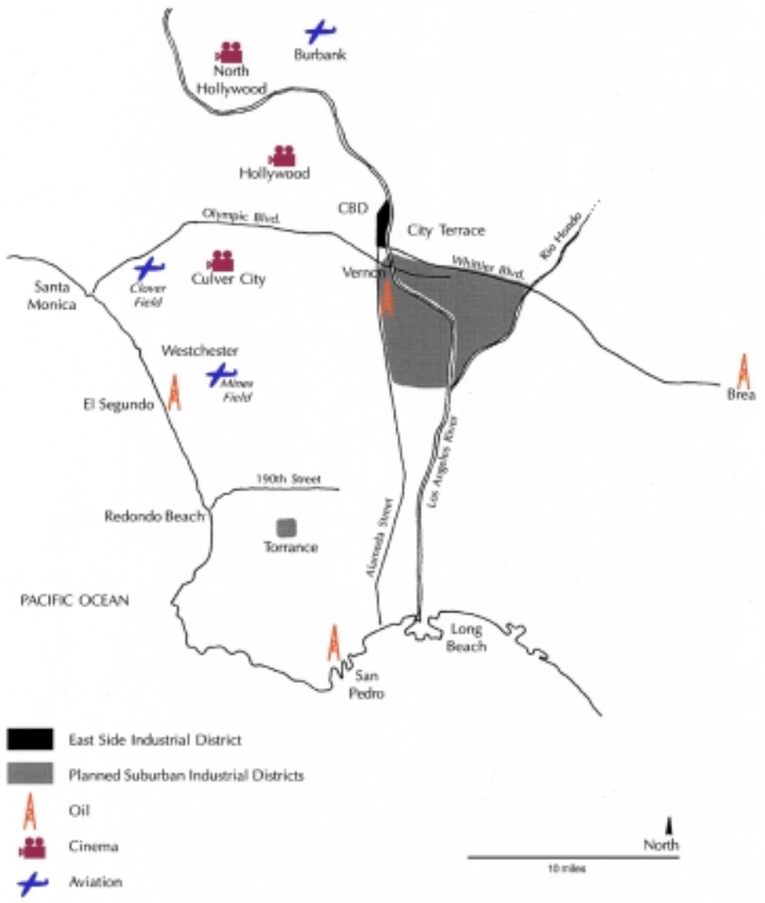
It is important to consider how these processes unfolded. The timing of this development and the specific urban patterns that resulted are the product of interlocked factors, such as taxes and municipal ordinances, labor requirements, and intrametropolitan competition. Growth and urban expansion depended on a contingent set of variables, such as land values, the availability and cost of financing, infrastructure, zoning, and the individual choices made by workers and their families. To cite but one example, developers and industrial realtors capitalized on variations in tax structures among municipal jurisdictions as fundamental differences that made property in one location more attractive than the parcels available in another. In the case of City Industrial Tract, which straddles a city-county boundary in East Los Angeles, the Walter Leimert Co. advertised the tax advantage industrialists would gain in the county, while fixing the housing on the city side of the jurisdictional divide and trumpeting the advantages this location afforded lot buyers in City Terrace.

The East Side Industrial District

"As recently as ten years ago, in discussing the future of Los Angeles, the most enthusiastic boomer would never claim that it was ever likely to become an important manufacturing center. . . . Today, in the main city thoroughfares, he beholds the business bustle of New York, along the old river bed a small Pittsburgh of factories and workshops[.]" **Los Angeles Times**, 1 Jan. 1905

This is a surprising depiction of turn-of-the-century Los Angeles, an image at odds with our sense of the city as an American Mediterranean, the antithesis of New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and other cities in the great industrial belt stretching from the Atlantic seaboard to the Great Lakes. In making this unlikely comparison, the Times was, in effect, calling for industrial development of a magnitude that would increase Los Angeles' ranking in the national hierarchy of cities.

Angelenos knew the area of factories and workshops along the river as the East Side Industrial District, a mixed-use zone that paralleled the trunk and spur lines of the national railroads. In many ways the district was similar to the central cores in cities like New York and Pittsburgh with its diversity of land uses, activities, and people: foundries, canneries, and patternmakers' shops; stores, restaurants, and saloons; single-family dwellings, apartments, and furnished rooms. East Side manufacturers produced for a local market, and Angelenos owned the majority of firms. The Los Angeles Soap Company, representative of a mid- to large-size firm, was founded in the 1860s when John A. Forthmann moved his soap business to an open site adjacent to the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake railway. Over time, he expanded the product line to 75 brands, increased output, and incorporated. In 1898, Forthmann secured a parcel on East First Street and contracted for the construction of a brick plant with business offices on the second floor. The firm repeatedly acquired neighboring parcels and conducted an on-going building campaign that culminated in plant and yards occupying 20 acres, employing 500 workers, and producing bar, laundry, and toilet soap shipped to "Hawaii, the Orient, and the Gulf of Mexico." Since then, the district has been a center for apparel, furniture, and food processing, as well as a prime location for jobbers, wholesalers, and associated warehouses. The majority of firms in this district occupied small lots and produced irrigation machinery, chemicals and pharmaceutics, machine parts and ornamental ironwork, paint, furniture, and bakery, confections, and other household goods.



What factors did manufacturers like Forthmann take into account as they made locational decisions? And how did their decisions shape processes of urbanization in the region? Land use regulations were a critical variable. Los Angeles residents enacted nuisance codes and then zoning in response to the noise, filth, and general hazards associated with slaughtering, fuel generation, and other noxious industries. The city council fixed where manufacturing could locate in 1904 with an ordinance restricting certain industrial uses in a residential area. Statutes in 1908 and 1909 parsed the city into two residential and seven industrial districts. The next year, an ordinance designated as residential all city land not falling within the industrial districts. Other incorporated communities followed suit and assigned land for industrial development. Although designed to protect single-family housing, this legislation promoted the development of dispersed industrial clusters and encouraged manufacturers and developers of these tracts to plan for working-class housing and services in close proximity to employment.

This type of restrictive legislation actually furthered industrialists' interests and these became preeminent across entire swaths of the city where other uses were now non-conforming and therefore short of authority. Industrialists capitalized on these regulations and in many cases they consulted on planning through their cooperation with city and county officials. The Chamber's position on zoning is evident from the minutes of a 1922 board meeting. When asked if the group had gone on record "in favor or against the policy of zoning" a director replied: "It is a child of the Chamber. We started it."

Planned Industrial Districts: Torrance, the Eastside, and Vernon

Torrance represents a second type of industrial landscape: dispersed greenfield sites engineered with up-to-date infrastructure and services, intended for firms whose production relied on the beltline for mass production of metal fittings, refinery equipment, tires and tubes, and automobiles. These goods were crafted and assembled for a regional market and increasingly for export throughout the West and across the Pacific. In 1911, Jared Torrance, an entrepreneur who made his fortune in railroads, real estate, and oil, announced plans for an industrial city. Torrance incorporated the Dominguez Land Corporation with financier Joseph J. Sartori (Security Pacific Bank), purchased 2,800 acres in southwest Los Angeles, and hired F. L. Olmsted Jr., and Irving Gill as designers. Olmsted's plan set out a transit gateway and a civic center with a theater, public library, and linear park leading to detached, workingmen's cottages. Industrial development was piecemeal until 1916 when Dominguez Land donated a 125-acre parcel to the Pacific Electric Railway for its construction and repair yard, which then served as a generator for ancillary manufacturing. In some ways Torrance was exceptional. A single corporation controlled development, the development proceeded in accordance with a comprehensive master plan, and the corporation ensured a high degree of coordination through "reservations, restrictions, conditions, covenants, charges and agreements" that fixed land use precisely by type.

> Los Angeles at the turn-of-the-century was a city at odds with popular images of an American Mediterranean, the antithesis of New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and other cities in the great industrial belt stretching from the Atlantic seaboard to the Great Lakes.

We find a similar pattern of development on the Eastside in a segment of the county beginning at the Los Angeles River south of Whittier Boulevard, extending eastward to Montebello, and then south along the Rio Hondo to Gage Avenue. This zone encompasses parts of Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, Commerce, Vernon, and Bell. During the 1920s, it was the site of intensive development. Within these boundaries, industrial realtors such as W. H. Daum leased or sold property to B. F. Goodrich, Samson Tyre and Rubber, Union Iron Works, Okeefe and Merritt, and Illinois Glass. Daum began his career as an industrial agent for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, opened his own Los Angeles firm in 1913, and over the next four decades helped set the pattern for industrial dispersion in the region. Through a series of holding companies he managed property in the East Side Industrial District while simultaneously developing sections of Vernon and property along Slauson Avenue.

Daum and other realtors did not simply respond to a perceived opportunity, nor did they meet the needs of a neutral market. Instead, these developers created comparative advantage and developed location attributes. Some elements, such as the rail lines, were already in place; in addition, the land was sparsely developed, and it sold at attractive prices. But much had to be created, and entrepreneurs like Daum established institutions, such as the Eastside Organization and Ninth Street Club, to promote collective endeavors. These organizations agitated for street improvements and the spanning of the Los Angeles River with viaducts to "remove all barriers - natural, unnatural, and prejudicial."

Concomitant with this industrial program, the Janss Investment Company, J. B. Ransom Corporation, and Carlin G. Smith were promoting Belvedere Gardens, Samson Park, Bandini, Montebello Park, and Eastmont. Smith noted that Eastmont was "neighbor to a mighty payroll . . . facing a destined city of factories." The Janss Company, better known for Westwood, Holmby Hills, and other exclusive westside projects, had been developing Belvedere Heights and then Belvedere Gardens since 1905. Advertisements presented Los Angeles as a city awash with humanity "overflowing to the east." By 1922, Janss concentrated on parcels adjacent to the Hostetter Tract, site of Sears Roebuck's regional distribution center and added its voice to calls for street widenings to provide for the anticipated 25,000 new residents "who will make their homes in Belvedere Gardens owing to the great industrial program inaugurated for this section."

During the 1920s, nationally prominent firms, such as Swift & Company, Goodyear, and U.S. Steel, established branch plants in Los Angeles. Swift & Company joined a number of local firms in a 300-acre development planned, constructed, and managed by Chicagoans John Spoor, A. G. Leonard, and Halsey Poronto, prominent members of the syndicate responsible for that city's Central Manufacturing District (CMD). These entrepreneurs purchased part of the Arcadia Bandini estate and recast the site for modern industry with large, single-story, fireproof buildings, top of the line services and amenities, and low taxes. The syndicate offered prospective lessees and buyers financing and construction assistance, infrastructure improvements, including parkways, landscaping, ornamental street lighting, and the Los Angeles Junction Railway, a beltline with direct connection to all trunk lines entering the city. Vernon annexed the CMD in 1925, and in 1929, the Chicago syndicate sold out to the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad, which purchased the remaining 2,000 acres in the Bandini estate and extended track and industry west into the remainder of Vernon and east into Commerce. Workers resided in Maywood, Huntington Park, and Bell, an unincorporated community of 9,000 with direct bus service to the CMD.