BUILDING A REGIONAL PRODUCTION NETWORK: OIL, CINEMA, AND AVIATION

Firms in these sectors produced primarily for export, and to 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 directly or indirectly in component manufacture and assembly. These firms served as generators for the development of residential districts with associated commerce and industries.

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 centers, 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, Montecito, and Washington, and multiple districts in between. Subsequent censuses recorded secondary concentrations, for example, in Harry Culex’s new community on the former Rancho Balboa eight miles west of Los Angeles’ city hall. By 1918, Goldwyn Pictures, the Henley Lehman Studios, Sarnbor Laboratories, and the Maurice Tourneur Film Company had competed for space in the Culver City. A 1927 pamphlet welcomed Cecil B. DeMille, Hal B. Roach, and the American Artists studio; they had established “plants” in Culver City. The mirroring 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 until the 1930s with the dispersal 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 dispersal of Southern California’s vaunted aircraft 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 fields and refinery sites. Standard Oil and other large firms occupied ancillary industries. The copy underscored the district’s proximities to a “wide variety of employment.” Broadside entitled potential buyers who could “live within walking distance to scores of production plants.”

CONCLUSION

Development in Westchester, Torrance, and the Eastside cannot be analyzed according to the stock suburban thesis. 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 processes. In California, firms were joined in a dispersed network of defense workers drawn by these employment centers, selected sites in close proximity for community projects. Simultaneously, the firm opened a subsidiary adjacent to Mines Field, an airport 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 the nucleus for prime airframe contractors, subcontractors, 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. A map accompanying advertisements for Westchester in the Los Angeles Herald-Express plotted prime contractors and eleven ancillary industries and their family of operation, the requisite zoning, and eminent domain for expansion. Simultaneously, the firm opened a subsidiary adjacent to Mines Field, an airport 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 the nucleus for prime airframe contractors, subcontractors, and parts and component manufacturers.

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 coordinated, complimentary, and highly planned. Together, these coincident enterprises reprise 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 processes that are either 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, architects, design professionals, and other city planners, 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 coordinated, complimentary, and highly planned. Together, these coincident enterprises reprise 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 processes that are either standard narratives of suburbanization or more recently, of “edge cities.”

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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. In the case of City Industrial Tract, which straddles a city-county boundary in East Los Angeles, the Walter Leimert Co. advertised branches plant expansion, as well as the growth of locally owned firms, did not produce a generic industrial Los Angeles. This type of restrictive legislation actually furthered industrialists' interests and these became preeminent across entire swaths of the city. In addition, the land was sparsely developed, and it sold at attractive prices. But much had to be created, and entrepreneurs, such as the Eastside Organization and N Inth Street Club, to promote collective endeavors. 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 competitive advantage and developed location attributes. Some elements, such as the rail lines, were already in place, and others were developed, and it sold at attractive prices. But much had to be created, and entrepreneurs, such as the Eastside Organization and N Inth Street Club, to promote collective endeavors. Daum began his career as an industrial agent for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway; he located on the Eastside in a sector of Los Angeles, the Walter Leimert Co. advertised.