The Ordinary Place I Once Called Home: Making Sense of the San Fernando Valley

by

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> The world's image of Los Angeles (as opposed to its images of component parts like Hollywood or Malibu) is of an endless plain endlessly gridded with endless streets, peppered endlessly with ticky-tacky houses clustered in indistinguishable neighborhoods, slashed across by endless freeways that have destroyed any community spirit that may once have existed, and so on . . . endlessly. […] in terms of some of the most basic and unlovely but vital drives of the urban psychology of Los Angeles, the flat plains are indeed the heartlands of the city's Id.
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> Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1990)

I spent my first sixteen years on the sunbaked concrete plain that is the San Fernando Valley (Figure 1). We were practically equidistant from its four corners, although we could claim with some pride to be located (just slightly) in the Western half of the Valley ("the good half"), where the "communities" of Van Nuys, Reseda, and Northridge come together. To almost anyone unfamiliar with the Valley, it's all the same — flat, tacky, monotonous: one non-descript place after another. Strip mall, mini mall, shopping mall; gas station, Jack in the Box, 7-Eleven; car wash, donut shop, auto dealership. Is this the landscape of my youth? Or is there something more?

Of course, there's got to be something more. Yet I have deeply ambivalent feelings about this place I once called home. While I feel a some sense of attachment to my home town, renewed with regular visits to my parents, who still live in the same house, I still can't say that this is a place that I know well. To some degree I share the outsider's perspective that the landscape of the Valley is just flat, monotonous, tacky, barely worthy of consideration, especially compared to other, apparently more "interesting" places that I have lived, such as Berkeley and Madison. At times, I've felt as if I was shortchanged, that more stimulating and diverse surroundings might have somehow made me a fuller person. Therefore, this paper serves a very personal purpose: an opportunity for me to come to terms with the prosaic, urbanized landscape of the place where I grew up, to reflect on it, and hopefully, to understand it better.

How to interpret the history of this intensely humanized landscape, when so many of the original, "natural" features of this place have been obliterated or transformed beyond recognition? By way of a brief and selective tour of my old neighborhood, I will use a few features of this place as touchstones to make connections with a past that seems so far out of reach, yet goes a long way towards explaining why the Valley looks the way it does today and why its people live the way they do.

The swimming pool

Our house—a compact ranch-style house with tar paper and rock roof, a lawn barely long enough to make a first down, and a garage just big enough for one car—is typical for the era in which it was built, in 1960. Dominating the backyard is the cement-lined, kidney-shaped pool, small by Olympic standards, but outsized for the house lot. The few trees, bushes, and flowers in the yard are densely packed in the narrow perimeter between the cinder block fence and the pool's concrete deck, dangerously slippery when wet but fast-drying in the usually searing heat. This splashy, frothy site of summer fun may have little deep meaning, especially for the young children who have been its major users. To some, the swimming pool serves as a symbol of the superficial lifestyle of suburban Southern Californians, a prime example of expensive, wasteful leisure in artificial surroundings. I don't wish to judge the pool, or those who swim in it. Yet the pool represents one of the central contradictions of Southern California living. The warm, dry, and regular climate that has attracted millions is at once a curse and a blessing. It created the conditions for year-round agriculture, year-round leisure, and year-round living in general. But the lack of rainfall and meager water supply was the most palpable obstacle to regional growth and development. To overcome this shortcoming of nature required the imposition of a new hydrologic regime, forcing water to flow to places and in ways that it would never go without human intervention.

Most residents of the San Fernando Valley, including my family, live on the broad flat plain at the valley's base. Although not readily apparent at ground level, the Valley slopes down slightly from the northwest to the southeast. Through a gap in the southeasternmost corner, near Griffith Park, the Los Angeles River flows out of the Valley, towards downtown, and eventually out to the sea near Long Beach. Today, the main channel of the river, as well as several of its tributaries, such as the Tujunga and Pacoima washes in the east Valley, are encased in concrete. For most of the year, these artificial channels are dry except for a slight trickle. The river has been thoroughly domesticated, seemingly without purpose, except to serve as the main conduit draining a massive system of urban storm sewers.

Yet it was not always this way. Once the river flowed wild, from its source in the northwest valley on out to the sea. Although instrumental to the growth of the young city in the mid-1800s, the river had a mind of its own, its unpredictability at odds with the goals of an expanding metropolis. In the Valley, the river is, in a sense, just the surface expression of a large subterranean reservoir flowing languidly southeast through porous alluvial deposits.[1] The river, conventionally understood, emerged in present-day Encino where the underground flow hit solid rock at the base of the Santa Monica Mountains.[2] That was the situation that prevailed for ten or eleven months out of the year, during the long dry season; however, for a few days every winter, heavy rains would cause the river and its tributaries to overflow their poorly defined and shallow channels and flood vast areas in the Valley as well as areas south of downtown (Figure 2).

Thus, for most of the year, there was barely enough water, and sometimes there was simply too much. Floods were certainly an inconvenience, costly to property, and sometimes, human life. Yet these periodic floods deposited the rich alluvium that made Los Angeles county the most productive agricultural county in the nation until the 1950s.[3] However, after the massive flood of 1914, which caused $10.1 million ($162.1 million in today's money) worth of

damage in the county, there was a push for the channelization of the river and construction of flood control dams (Figure 3).[4] Ironically, the piecemeal nature of the construction of the flood control and channel works, undertaken first by the city and county and eventually by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, worsened flood episodes in the West Valley. These upstream sections of the river were the last to be encased in concrete, and the construction of overly narrow channels below created a bottleneck effect during heavy rains. This problem eventually necessitated the creation of the Sepulveda Dam flood basin, which, happily, doubles as Balboa Park, which I fondly remember for bike rides and baseball games. Ironically, then, the quest to control the wild torrents of nature led to the creation of the Valley's largest swath of greenspace. But nearly every winter, Valley residents are reminded of the park's essential function, as the main streets through the park are closed due to flooding.

The other part of the Valley water story is how to deal with the area's characteristic dryness. The river, other perennial streams and washes, and even subterranean reservoirs were insufficient for agriculture or residential development.[5] On the other side of the Santa Monicas, Los Angeles was rapidly developing and had been searching for alternative sources of water since the late 1800s. To make a very long and intriguing story short, the city found its liquid El Dorado in the Owens Valley, some 250 miles to the north on the eastern face of the Sierra Nevada, and transported the pure mountain water across the desert and over the Tehachapi mountains by way of an aqueduct built by the city. The terminus of the aqueduct was a set of reservoirs at the northern end of Valley; however, the Valley, most of which was an unincorporated part of the county, could not use this water until it agreed to annexation by the city. While there were some benefits to maintaining independence, the allure of a steady and plentiful water supply was too much to resist. Within two years of the aqueduct's completion in 1913, Los Angeles made the San Fernando Valley its single largest addition.

Thus, the situation we encounter today: almost every drop of water used in the Valley, whether for drinking, cooking, bathing, gardening, or swimming, originates as snowmelt in remote mountains that most Valleyites have never seen or perhaps even heard of. The rivers and streams that once flowed wildly and erratically across (and underneath) the Valley floor have been encased in concrete channels, which are mostly fenced in and not very appealing for recreation, anyway. During the rains, water runs off of the roofs and down onto concrete driveways and streets, into the gutters down to the storm sewers, which carry their load swiftly and directly toward the open channels. This system limits groundwater recharge, but that's hardly a concern, anyway—after all, who needs well water anymore? Water comes through city pipes, and there's plenty of it. Sure, once in a while the droughts come and if one lasts long enough, as in the early 1990s, people might flush their toilets less frequently, and let their lawns go brown. But it's worth noting that through it all, my pool stayed clean and blue, its level maintained against the effects of evaporation by a constant supply of fresh water.

The lemon tree

In one corner of the backyard, next to the pool filter, stands a small lemon tree. The lowest branches are just high enough above the ground so that a person can just crawl underneath to pick up fallen fruit. This tree has never yielded that many lemons, probably because of neglect, improper care, and the chlorinated pool water that occasionally seeps into the soil. Most people that I know on the block have fruit trees: lemons, oranges, avocados. Kind neighbors with more horticultural skill have regularly regaled us with ripe, fresh fruit. Today almost no one in the Valley makes a living from growing fruit, but for many years, orchards covered much of the Valley floor and perhaps even the lot where my house now stands (Figure 4).

Other trees and plants are so prevalent as to appear endemic to the area. Palm trees are a Southern California icon. Eucalyptus, magnolias, and plums dot the landscape. Everywhere

underfoot is Kentucky bluegrass and clover. None of these plants, however, is native to the Valley. Most of the citrus trees were introduced by Spanish missionaries in the 1700s. The Eucalyptus was brought to California from Australia in the 1850s. Palms arrived from Africa and other parts of North America.[6] The present-day vegetation in the Valley bears little resemblance to that which prevailed in the era before European settlement. In those days, according to Blake Gumprecht, "Oak woodland occupied the drier sites, interspersed with native prairie, squaw bush, and poison oak. Grasses and wildflowers carpeted the valley floor. Cactus, sage, other small shrubs, and the occasional willow tree interrupted the extensive grasslands. Great valley oaks were scattered throughout the lowlands."[7] In the dry washes, alluvial scrub communities were typical, well adapted to a mostly hot and dry climate, with periodic droughts as well as flash floods
(Figure 5).[8]

Thus, in just a little over 200 years, there has been a wholesale replacement of the vegetation of the "natural" ecosystem. It would be easy to assail the Valley and Southern California in general as artificial, if not an affront to Mother Nature herself.[9] To control and maintain this landscape of eclectic vegetation requires great amounts of water, chemicals, and human and mechanical effort. In recent years, many have attempted to restore pre-European ecosystems (along parts of the L.A. river, for example) and have turned to xeriscaping, which is more "ecologically appropriate" as it uses native plants that are better adapted to arid conditions. Disastrous as it may be, I still have a fondness for the Valley's urban greenery. It is an expression of the Californian's (sometimes reckless) insistence on doing as he or she may please: in the words of one long-time Valley resident, "Whereas in the East most of the trees in a yard were there before the house went up, here you order whatever type and size of tree fits your fancy."[10] Besides, as Miller and Hyslop contend, urbanized areas, such as the Valley, "are all the

more pleasant to work and live in because so much exotic vegetation prospers in California"[11] Perhaps this is just rationalizing circumstances that we have grown accustomed to and aren't going to change anytime soon. In any event, who could argue with the appeal of a ripe avocado, fresh off a tree in one's very own backyard.

The old house

In the previous section, I made a leap from the native scrublands of the distant past to the urban greenery of the present, thereby leaving out many intermediate stages, and a significant part of the history of the landscape. Near my house, just around the corner, is another house that may serve as a bridge between the Valley's past and present. This house stands out for several reasons: for one, it is old and in decay, with peeling paint, torn screens, and weathered siding—certainly it is much older than any of the surrounding houses, all built in the 1960s. It isn't of the compact ranch style: it has two stories, an attic, and perhaps even a basement. It isn't set back from the street, behind a green lawn, but is instead bordered by the only picket fence on the block. On the back portion of the lot (which is two or three times as big as any other in the neighborhood), behind an overgrowth of weeds and assorted junk, is a lean, dilapidated metal windmill. This must be an old farmhouse—so my house must have been part of the old farm.

The story of agriculture in the Valley begins with the founding of the Mission of San Fernando in 1797. The Spanish crown granted the Franciscan friars almost the entire Valley and the right to use the labor of the Chumash Indians who lived there at the time.[12] Within a couple of decades, the mission was prosperous: the Indians, under the supervision of the fathers, grew wheat, barley, corn, beans, peas, and fruit; the mission owned over 15,000 head of livestock that grazed on the Valley floor, presumably on native grasses and shrubs.[13] Eventually, the mission's holdings, some 117,000 acres, were secularized under the independent Mexican government, and soon after California passed into American hands, the tract was sold to the San Fernando

Homestead Association. For many years, most land in the Valley was controlled by the few wealthy members of this syndicate and its successors.[14]

Initially, the syndicate stocked its land with about 40,000 sheep, but a drought in 1875 ended the Valley's sheep raising era in less than a decade (Figure 6). Afterwards, for about 20 years, dry wheat farming prevailed. The construction of Southern Pacific railroad tracks to San Fernando facilitated the delivery of wheat to the mills in Los Angeles; however, falling prices due to a worldwide glut beginning in the 1880s ended wheat cultivation in the Valley.[15] Other farming ventures came and went: chicken raising, lettuce, alfalfa, sweet corn, beets, lima beans, just to name a few.[16] But in some sense, agriculture, while certainly an important activity, was primarily a front for the real engine of the Valley economy, land speculation.

The Valley's agricultural era came and went so quickly that it makes sense to treat it as a phase in a longer history of the real estate market. The Valley land syndicate's holdings were continually subdivided and sold at progressively higher values as land use intensified, first in agriculture and then through urbanization. The pivotal moment in the story was the building of the Los Angeles Aqueduct. Once the Valley agreed to annexation by the city, the guarantee of a steady water supply made it possible to grow high-value orchard crops and land values went up precipitously. Incidentally, the major beneficiary of rising property values was the land syndicate, comprised of the very same men who had developed the aqueduct project.[17] My house was almost certainly once part of the syndicate land. The syndicate sold a piece to a farmer, who planted citrus trees and prospered for a while; after World War II, new developers (maybe even connected to the old syndicate) came around and made an offer for the farm. By the 1950s, he had sold out, and the developer platted the streets, subdivided the land into tiny residential lots, and built the new homes, based on four different models. This result was practically preordained, once the Valley was annexed to the city—after all, cities don't really

have farms, do they? Yet, for some reason, years later, that old farmhouse still remains, an enigmatic testimonial to an era that was over almost as soon as it began.

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[1] Blake Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 12.

[2] Gumprecht, p. 13.

[3] Gumprecht, p. 11.

[4] Gumprecht, p. 211. At one point during the flood, the river's discharge was over 31,400 cubic feet per second, or equal to the normal flow of the Colorado River at that time.

[5] There were also legal obstacles for farmers in the Valley before annexation to the city of Los Angeles. Legal interpretations of early Spanish land grants had determined that the surface *and* subterranean flow of the river belonged to the City of Los Angeles. Thus, before the most of the Valley was annexed to the City, most wells were technically illegal — although this law was seldom enforced, except as leverage in the fight over annexation (Charles A. Bearchell and Larry D. Fried, *The San Fernando Valley Then and Now*, Northridge, Windsor Publications, 1988, p.41).

[6] Crane S. Miller and Richard S. Hyslop, *California: The Geography of Diversity*, Mountain View, California, Mayfield Publishing, 2000, pp. 159-160.

[7] Gumprecht, p. 25.

[8] Gumprecht, p. 23.

[9] See Mike Davis, *The Ecology of Fear*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 1998.

[10] Lynn Langford, quoted in Lawrence C. Jorgensen, ed., *The San Fernando Valley Past and Present*, Los Angeles, Pacific Rim Research, 1982, p. 177.

[11] Miller and Hyslop, p. 160. They also point out that there is "quantitatively and qualitatively more vegetation today than there was before urbanization."

[12] Bearchell and Fried, p. 19.

[13] Bearchell and Fried, p. 21.

[14] William L. Kahrl, *Water and Power: the Conflict over Los Angeles' Water Supply in the Owens Valley*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, p. 96; Bearchell and Fried, p. 30.

[15] Jorgensen, p. 82.

[16] Laura B. Gaye, *Land of the West Valley*, Encino, California, Argold Press, 1975, pp. 175-177.

[17] Kahrl, pp. 96-97. Whether chicanery was involved in Valley land purchases before the completion of the aqueduct has been the focus of much historical debate. While William Mulholland and his peers were cleared of conflict of interest charges in an official inquiry, Kahrl contends that he, Otis Chandler, Henry Huntington, and others had come together to buy out the previous syndicate and form the San Fernando Mission Land Company before the aqueduct plans were revealed to the public. This intrigue was alluded to in the 1974 film, *Chinatown*.

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