William Fulton 1997
The Reluctant Metropolis

LIST OF MAPS

The Collapse of the Growth Machine

If you define the Los Angeles megalopolis broadly enough, which most people are unwilling to do, I live at one end of it.

I live in Ventura, shorthand for San Buenaventura. It's a working-class oil town turned typical Southern California suburb, located where Highway 101 hits the ocean after a sixty-five mile trip north and west from downtown Los Angeles. L.A.'s sprawl has crept toward Ventura along the 101 Corridor across the fertile, flat soil of the Oxnard Plain. It's blocked from moving farther because of the ocean and an imposing set of rugged hills up toward Santa Barbara known as the Rincon. In a very real sense, this is where L.A. ends.

Most of my neighbors, of course, don't want to believe that we are part of Los Angeles. A lot of them moved to Ventura or thereabouts to register a vote with their feet on how they feel about L.A. The irony of this attitude is rich indeed. Geographically we are close. We watch L.A.'s television shows and listen to its radio stations. Economically we are linked, much more than we used to be in the oil boom days, when our strongest economic ties were to Bakersfield and Houston. And when something bad happens in L.A.—a fire, an earthquake, a riot—our friends and relatives call to make sure we are okay. Our response is usually that everything is fine because we don't really live there. We have decided that we live somewhere else.

It should have come as no surprise to me, then, to learn that the people at the other end feel pretty much the same way.

I remember the day I found the other end. It was a moody, rainy morning in the spring of 1990, and I braved the freeways for three-plus

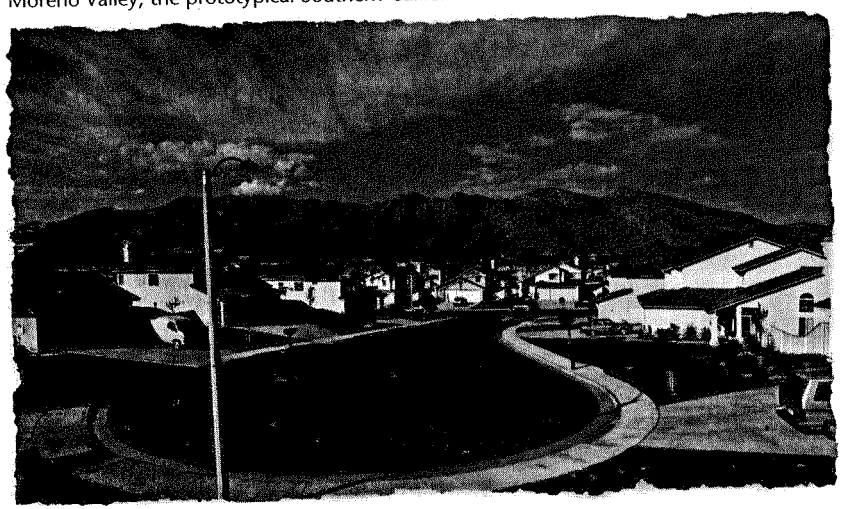
hours in my thirteen-year-old Honda Civic to go to Moreno Valley in Riverside County. Skidding across the wet lanes of the freeway—Southern Californians are terrible wet-weather drivers, treating every rainstorm as if it were a blizzard—I traveled through suburb after suburb, past shopping center after shopping center and tract after tract. Camarillo. Calabasas. Woodland Hills. Sherman Oaks. Studio City. Glendale. Pasadena. Duarte. San Dimas. Pomona. Corona. The suburban monotony was so continuous that it was numbing.

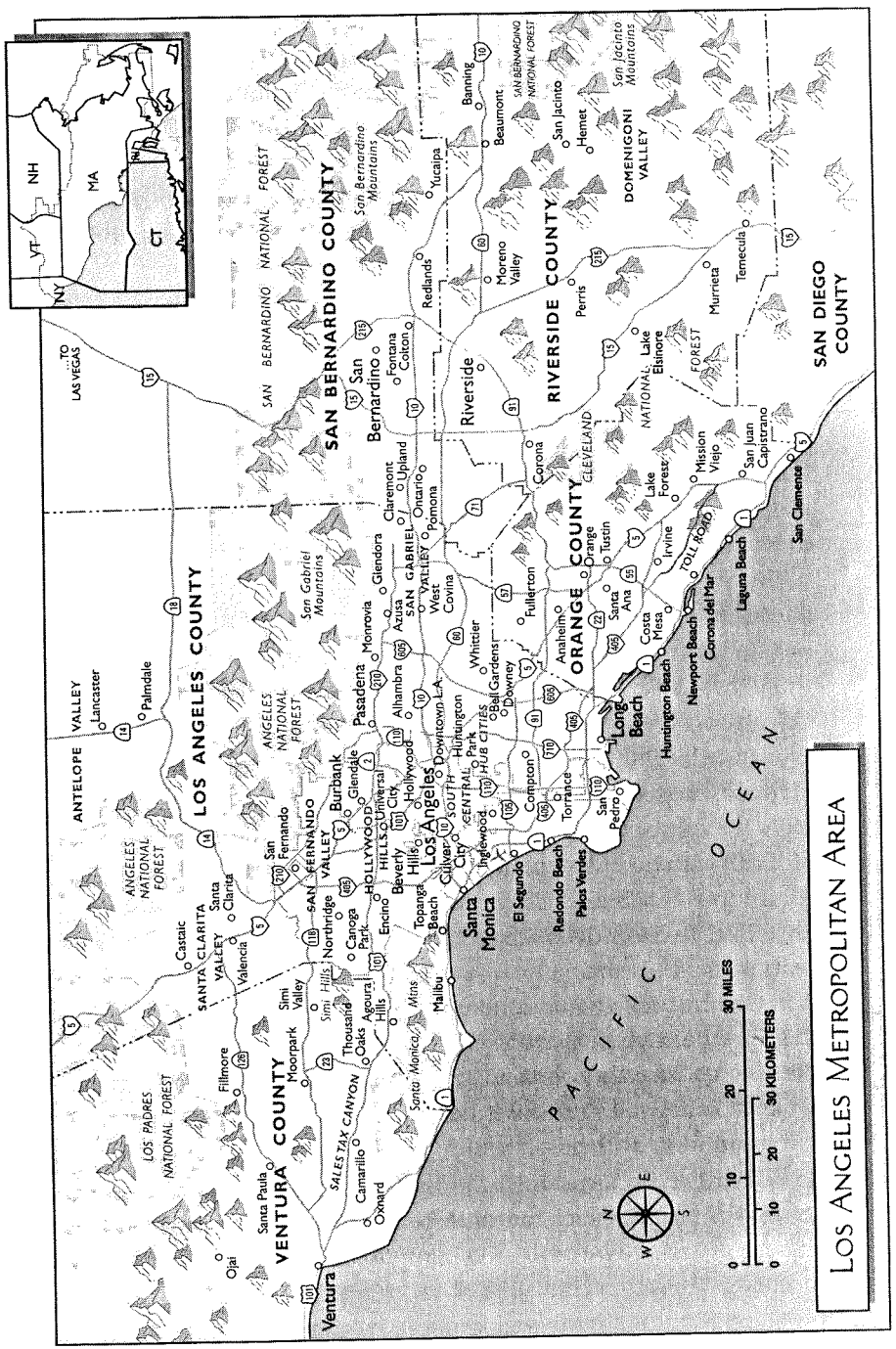
Then, after a hundred and thirty miles, I stopped and saw a meadow. Rich and green from the spring rains, hard up against the San Jacinto Mountains, this was obviously the edge of town. Roads trailed off into ruts. Houses had a ramshackle look, with old tools and cars in the yards. Retail establishments were made of cinder blocks. Of course, there are more towns past the mountains: Banning, Beaumont, Palm Springs. But nothing else I had seen that day conveyed quite the same sense of termination.

It had taken almost half a day, and I had covered a distance that would have taken me through three or four Northeastern states, but I had finally found the other end of Los Angeles. And as I traveled around Moreno Valley that day, the people I talked to felt as much alienation from Los Angeles as my neighbors in Ventura.

Moreno Valley had grown in size from ten thousand people to more than one hundred thousand in less than a decade, and it was almost a parody of the typical 1980s suburb: subdivision after subdivision along

Moreno Valley, the prototypical Southern California suburb of the 1980s.





the freeway, punctuated only by shopping centers and franchise restaurants, all linked together by overgrown arterials that the traffic engineers had demanded up front. Mini-malls were so ubiquitous that they even housed churches, which had nowhere else to go. And even more than Ventura, Moreno Valley was dependent on the Los Angeles megalopolis. It was largely vacant during working hours, with a third of the breadwinners off in Los Angeles or Orange County or Riverside making the money they would import back to their Moreno Valley tracts. The trick for making the seventy-mile trip bearable, the long-distance commuters said, was to hit the critical interchange of Highway 60 and Highway 91—the main road to Orange County—before five in the morning, when it began to jam up. The interchange of Highway 60 and Highway 91 is located fifty-six miles east of downtown Los Angeles.

And yet it was here, in this unlikely place on the desert's edge, that people said they found a semblance of community no longer available to them in Los Angeles or Lakewood or Fullerton or El Monte. Some combination of "low" prices for housing ($130,000 for a starter home), an illusion of spaciousness, and the old suburban ideal that everybody here was starting fresh had so much appeal that it seemed worth the hassle.

One local resident, who endured the two-hour commute to Orange County for several years, told me that he could have found a house closer to his work, "but I wouldn't have been able to have a pool." A former flight instructor employed by a local developer who wanted to build more than three thousand houses and a business park (on that meadow I found) said he didn't really mind living in a half-built, auto-bound community in the middle of nowhere. In fact, he said, it made him nostalgic. It reminded him of his boyhood in Orange County thirty years earlier.

Given these attitudes, it should have been equally unsurprising that when a large portion of urban Los Angeles erupted in flames and riots almost exactly two years later, people in places like Ventura and Moreno Valley didn't think it had much to do with their lives or their communities.

Triggered by the acquittal of four white Los Angeles police officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King, the riots raged over an enormous area—a hundred square miles or more, an area bigger than most large American cities. The riot zone encompassed L.A.'s historically black neighborhoods, as well as dozens of other crowded districts that were the entry points for recent immigrants from Asia, Mexico, and Central America. Many of the names were familiar enough to people anywhere in Southern California. Watts. Central Avenue. West Adams. USC and the Coliseum. Koreatown. MacArthur Park. Even Hollywood. But to the suburbanites watching the tragedy on television, most of these places were nothing more than names—poor, neglected places that had been thrown away, decades earlier, by their parents or grandparents. In the mental map of Southern California that most people carry around in their heads, the riot zone was a hole in the metropolitan doughnut.

The riots touched people in the outer suburbs, of course. Most had a friend or relative in danger who had never escaped the urban detritus; many opened their homes to these unfortunate souls during the riots. Older suburbanites remembered living and working in neighborhoods that were going up in flames. One friend, a woman in her fifties, said that watching the riots brought back vivid memories of crouching in her Wilshire District home during the Watts riots of 1965 while chaos reined on the street outside. For her, the whole experience simply confirmed the wisdom of her decision to flee many years before to Camarillo, fifty miles away.

In the months and years that followed, there was considerable evidence that the riots had profoundly affected all of Southern California's suburbs and all of its suburbanites. In Ventura County, where I live, Korean merchants arrived *en masse* from L.A., looking for retail stores to operate without having to fear for their lives. They quickly learned that they needed a gun in a poor neighborhood in Oxnard just as much as in South Central. In Moreno Valley, where working-class black neighborhoods had grown up around a local air force base, South Central kids arrived regularly, sent to live with aunts and uncles located far from the turmoil of urban life. The result, as Moreno Valley quickly discovered, was not a reduction of gang activity but a geographical expansion of it. (The gang member "Monster" Kody Scott, who wrote a well-publicized autobiography, divided his time between South Central and Moreno Valley and was arrested in Moreno Valley for beating up a man who allegedly derided his gang.) And all over Southern California—as the region reeled from a devastating recession and a series of natural disasters—businesses, workers, and families suffered from bad publicity worldwide and a resulting reluctance by tourists, investors, and others to make a commitment to the region.

Yet none of this drew people together. If anything, it pushed them further apart. Nothing has changed in my neighborhood, people said; I have nothing to worry about. Maybe the people in South Central burned down each other's mini-malls, but in our town the chaos seemed about as real as the Gulf War. (The riots didn't come within thirty miles of Simi Valley, the conservative suburban enclave in Ventura County where the Rodney King trial was held.) Those who feared their neighborhoods were changing moved farther away. And those who were still afraid moved behind walls and gates where, they hoped, the rest of society couldn't follow. Even people who really did live in Los Angeles continued to atomize, bombarding the U.S. Postal Service with requests to list their residences as being located in North Hills, West Hills, Sherman Village, or anything but Los Angeles. (In 1996, the San Fernando Valley even pursued one of its periodic attempts to secede from the City of Los Angeles.) Instead of trying to fix Los Angeles, we all simply decided that we live somewhere else.

By all conventional notions, Los Angeles is a foolish location for a big city. It gets only one-third the rainfall of New York. Its rivers flow sporadically, and its natural water could sustain a city of perhaps a half-million people. It is the largest city in the world located so near a geologically unstable mountain range; the uplifts, mudslides, and debris flows from the San Gabriels are kept at bay only through the efforts of an army of public works employees and equipment that would be the envy of many Third World dictators. Almost every scenic and heavily foliated canyon in the region is a fire trap because of the annual summer drought, which usually lingers until November. Los Angeles has no natural harbors or ports; it is not located near sources of raw material; and even before Europeans settled in the region the air was filled with haze and smoke. Only its remarkably mild climate is a natural advantage, though admittedly a compelling one. The sociologist Harvey Molotch, a perceptive student of urban growth, once wrote that L.A.'s rise to prominence "can only be explained as a remarkable victory of human cunning over the so-called limits of nature."

Conducting academic research on cities in the 1970s, Molotch coined the term "growth machine" to explain the political and economic structure of the typical American city. Places are commodities, he wrote, whose success is driven not by natural advantages but by the efforts of "place entrepreneurs" such as land speculators, bankers, newspaper publishers, politicians, and public utilities with a stake in the economic growth of a particular geographical area. Taken together, these place entrepreneurs make up a cartel of powerful interests—a growth machine—dedicated to fueling a virtually endless and presumably profitable cycle of growth, no matter what the consequences.

For the last hundred years, Los Angeles has been one of the most effective growth machines ever created. It was set into motion, very deliberately, by a small group of visionary (and greedy) business leaders who understood Southern California and set out to exploit its potential allure. The story of this group has been told many times and fictionalized in the film *Chinatown* and elsewhere. Originally it included many of the most famous names in Southern California history, names that are imprinted on streets, buildings, and neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles.

Henry Huntington, heir to a San Francisco railroad fortune, built the Red Car system, subdivided vast amounts of land, and amassed more than $40 million in profits during the first decade of the twentieth century. Water engineer William Mulholland built the great aqueduct from the Owens Valley. Harry Chandler, the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times,* led a cartel of investors who manipulated politics, business, media coverage, and public works investments in an unprecedented manner to build a great city. The son-in-law of *Times* founder Harrison Gray Otis, Chandler was an aggressive real estate speculator who shamelessly used his paper to promote business, bust unions, and lure people out to new real estate developments. The cartel was small. According to one estimate, there were fewer than ninety growth barons in Southern California during the first two decades of the century.

Whatever their number, they succeeded magnificently. Lacking water, the cartel simply imported it from hundreds of miles away, using whatever political clout and legal skullduggery was required. ("If we don't get it," William Mulholland once said, "we won't need it.") Lacking people, they imported bodies, luring trainload after trainload from the frigid winter climes of the Midwest with the promise of an eternal summer, a moral society, and a nice little bungalow. Lacking an economy, they invented one, using a Ponzi scheme of real estate speculation until they could kick-start other industries, such as entertainment, oil, and aerospace. No challenge in this task of city-building was too great.

Once, in the 1920s, a *Saturday Evening Post* reporter commented to his tour guide that a particular mountain had been moved. "Oh yes," said the guide. "Harry Chandler wanted to move it a little farther to the north to improve the view."

These engineers of the growth machine engaged in a wide variety of activities—streetcar companies, electric utilities, water service, publishing. But many of these tasks were loss leaders that didn't see a profit. Their real purpose was to facilitate the growth machine's underlying goal: to consume land profitably. And for everything that Los Angeles lacked, land was one raw material available in abundance. The region's topography was defined by a group of valleys and plains ringed by a series of mountain ranges that helped shape L.A.'s pattern of growth. But the valleys and plains themselves were vast, offering what seemed to be boundless opportunity to lay down subdivision after subdivision for the Sioux Falls immigrants disembarking at local rail stations.

The Los Angeles Basin, the coastal plain stretching almost without interruption from the Hollywood Hills deep into Orange County, provided a vast chessboard on which to play the game of urban development. Hot, dry interior valleys, especially the San Gabriel, which had groundwater, were ideal for the small-scale farming that many Midwesterners brought with them as a counterpoint to urban life. The result was a decentralized settlement pattern quite different from the industrial cities in the East and Midwest. Unlike almost every other city in the world, metropolitan Los Angeles did not grow by radiating from a single center. It appeared when many different centers blurred together.

Early in the century, Huntington's Red Cars connected disparate settlements from San Bernardino to Santa Monica with a vast interurban system. (More ambitious plans to link up Santa Barbara and San Diego were never realized.) The interurbans gave the emerging region a backbone, but also made sprawl permanent by facilitating long-distance commuting. Soon the automobile began to fill in the gaps. But not all of this growth was chaotic. Historian Greg Hise has discovered that much decentralization was, in fact, a planned effort to create a string of small industrial suburbs, each with its own adjoining bedroom community. In any event, this decentralization was fostered by an unusually strong attachment to the automobile. By 1940, a time when most Americans struggled simply to keep a roof over their heads, virtually every family in Southern California had a car.

To process the consumption of all this land, a huge real estate infrastructure emerged. The modern homebuilding industry was practically invented in Los Angeles. So, ironically enough, was modern zoning, originally promoted by local subdividers as a tool to ensure high-quality (and high-profit) development. As early as the 1920s, traffic engineers began working on designs for the freeway system that would be the region's most visible and impressive human achievement. From a few dozen land barons, the growth machine grew to include thousands of middle- and working-class people who were engaged in planning, processing, and building L.A.'s new neighborhoods and towns.

After World War II, Los Angeles—now sprawling, metropolitan Southern California—continued to consume land with extraordinary skill and for extraordinary profit. Fueled by a strong industrial base that emerged during the war, and supported by the aggressive infrastructure investments of Governors Earl Warren and Pat Brown, Los Angeles reached deep into outlying regions. The population of the San Fernando Valley quintupled in sixteen years, from 1944 to 1960. Orange County, an agricultural region, topped one million people by the mid-1960s.

During this period, the Los Angeles growth machine grew even more sophisticated. Mass-produced housing, invented by William Levitt on the East Coast, was perfected by firms like Kaufman and Broad, which even today excels in the purchase of inexpensive remote farmland for building serviceable seven-lots-per-acre subdivisions. The modern savings-and-loan business, which provided stable sources of home mortgages for the middle class, flourished in Southern California as nowhere else, providing vast fortunes for the likes of Mark Taper (Great Western Savings) and Howard Ahmanson (Home Savings). And modern urban planning techniques emerged in order to facilitate development on a vast scale. These were later exported worldwide by local planners and architects such as William Pereira. A flamboyant "black-cape" architect who headed his own firm, Pereira dabbled in large-scale city planning and left his imprint on the landscape with his ambitious, circular, auto-oriented urban designs for UC Irvine and The Irvine Company's Fashion Island shopping center in Newport Beach. By the 1960s, the Los Angeles growth machine had been transformed into a vast industry.

The resulting scale of Los Angeles in the 1960s was so staggering and unprecedented that distinguished urban planners were left speechless. This was no simple hub-and-spoke industrial city, with boulevards

and rail lines radiating outward from a central downtown core. It was, in the words of one scholar of the period, a "fragmented metropolis"—a multi-headed beast with no center, with a system of urban organization that Easterners and Europeans couldn't fathom, and with such a sense of urgent destiny that it clearly preferred movement over history. "Like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original," the English architectural historian Reyner Banham wrote in 1971, "I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original."

During this period the consequences of the growth machine first became evident. As the plains of the Los Angeles Basin were eaten up, the growth machine chewed deep into the desert and the mountains, leading a nascent environmental movement to complain. As the metropolis moved outward, neglect and decay were left in the inner city. Until the 1950s, Los Angeles had seemed a benign alternative to Southern racism for many hopeful blacks from Texas and Louisiana. But the same efficient real estate industry that built a great metropolis worked hard to keep most of the city off-limits to African-Americans. According to Robert Conot's classic account of the Watts riot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness,* the San Fernando Valley more than doubled in population during the 1950s, from three hundred thousand to seven hundred thousand. But the black population actually declined, from eleven hundred to nine hundred—dropping from four-tenths of one percent to only one-tenth of one percent. By the mid-1960s, Los Angeles was the most segregated city in the country—a fact which, among others, led to the Watts riots of 1965.

Because the growth machine couldn't handle regional problems like smog, planners and politicians struggled to embrace these concerns. In the mid-1960s, local governments banded together to form a kind of regional government, the Southern California Association of Governments, which they hoped would be able to lasso the region. But there would be no lassoing Los Angeles. During the 1970s and especially the go-go years of the 1980s, the growth machine continued to churn.

In part it churned from necessity, because population growth and a vision of economic opportunity had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. During the 1980s, the Southern California region added more than three million people, a population the size of Chicago, and most were not arriving by train from the Midwest. They were stepping off planes from Asia or crossing the border, legally and illegally, at San Diego. Lured by the seductive international image of Los Angeles, they were not deterred by smog or overcrowding or crime or segregation. And the immigrants were joined by thousands of investors from around the world who poured billions of dollars into real estate investment. Hundreds of thousands more people were simply born to the fate of living here, often in the families of recent immigrants. These folks were not going anywhere. To them, and to millions more from the postwar generation, Los Angeles was home and always had been. Having been set into motion a hundred years earlier, the growth machine couldn't stop.

In part, however, the growth machine continued to churn because, for better or worse, churning growth is what the region's economy was designed to do.

By the 1980s, Los Angeles had one of the world's most vibrant and diversified economies. The aerospace industry, Hollywood, the garment business, agriculture, international trade—all were important components of this diversified metropolitan powerhouse. Underlying all of them, however, was the familiar process of consuming land profitably, which had become so intertwined with the region's economy that it was impossible to disentangle.

Orange County developers, having played out their home territory, searched for new land elsewhere as a means of staying in business; they became, in effect, exporters of land development. A vast collection of brokers and lawyers all over Southern California churned deals in order to make their Porsche payments. Labor unions pushed for more growth to keep their members employed; at one point during the 1980s, more than twenty percent of Riverside County's employment base was connected, directly or indirectly, to the construction industry. And most of Southern California's other basic industries turned to the real estate business sooner or later in search of profits. (One ongoing trend throughout the 1980s was the repeated attempts by land-rich movie studios to convert their backlots to more profitable uses such as theme parks, shopping centers, and condominium complexes.) Prosperity depended on growth, and in the 1980s, as in the 1920s, growth meant expanding the metropolis, creating more subdivisions, and converting more land on the fringe to urban use.

By the end of the 1980s, the scale of metropolitan Southern California was so vast that even the speechless urban planners of the 1960s couldn't have foreseen it. The megalopolis was now more than a hundred

w subdivisions in the Antelope Valley just before the real estate bust, 1990.

miles from north to south and a similar distance east to west. Business centers had decentralized so dramatically that Orange County, a generation removed from lima beans, now had a "downtown" larger than San Francisco, and its own suburbs an hour even farther away from central Los Angeles.

The region was so large that it now encompassed several different climates. Bosses sitting in balmy Universal City or Beverly Hills were often dumbfounded by employees calling from their high-desert starter homes in the Antelope Valley to say they were snowed in. Of course, being snowed in might seem preferable to the wrenching sixty- or seventy-mile commute along crowded freeways that no longer seemed an apt symbol for a society based on movement. The area once known simply as Los Angeles was now home to fifteen million people, all living and working in such close proximity that if all Americans were jammed that close together they would fit inside Missouri.

In building a metropolis far beyond the dreams of Chandler, Mulholland, and Huntington, the growth machine also laid the foundation for its own destruction. Because no other metropolis had ever grown so large by promoting an essentially anti-urban way of life.

Other cities, such as industrial-era Chicago and New York, produced growth machines that were L.A.'s equal. But these were based on the gritty realities of urban life: factories and railroads and ports and sweatshops. The people drawn to them, though they dreamed of a better life, recognized that they would be living in a crowded, often dirty, and difficult urban place.

From the beginning, Los Angeles was different. It marketed itself, especially in the Midwest, as the anti-city, and the Midwestern settlers it attracted were profoundly anti-urban in attitude. Many came to Southern California hoping to build a subsistence agricultural lifestyle on five or ten acres of irrigated land. Others sought to use Los Angeles as a transition between a rural past and an urban, industrial present. They worked urban jobs, but reveled in the decentralized small-town life Los Angeles had deliberately produced. Those who thought of themselves as rural folk eagerly bought up the hobby farms being created all over Southern California. (The 100-by-400-foot lot was a popular subdivision in the first half of the century. Ideal for hobby farming, it proved equally useful decades later for "shotgun" apartment buildings.) These dreams were equally true for black and Latino immigrants, many of whom lived, and live, on solid single-family streets that seem the antithesis of urban decay even when they are located in the middle of poor and troubled neighborhoods.

California's Progressive-era political structure, which had decentralized and depoliticized local government, reinforced these anti-urban attitudes. Southern Californians have an almost inborn mistrust of big government, and especially of political machines, which they regard as exactly the sort of corrupt urban ill they moved to Los Angeles to avoid. (At the same time, Los Angeles residents have been traditionally accepting of, or blissfully ignorant about, the business-oriented growth machine that truly ran things.) By around 1920, Los Angeles had become a kind of national suburb for old-line Protestants wanting nothing to do with the immigrant politics of big urban cities elsewhere in the country.

This attitude played nicely into the region's decentralized nature, creating a plethora of small, self-governing cities and establishing local government close to the people as the norm. During the 1950s and 1960s, thanks to the so-called "Lakewood system," the number of small cities grew dramatically. By contracting with Los Angeles County for essential but expensive services such as police protection, dozens of small municipalities were created on the cheap. The Lakewood system helped atomize the Los Angeles Basin into a series of small duchies with little interest in one another or in the region as a whole.

The exception was the City of Los Angeles, which grew large early in the century via forced annexation of areas such as Hollywood that needed a steady water supply. But even Los Angeles had a nonpartisan

he dream: The *faux* rural Southern California landscape early in the twentieth century.

government that vested little power in the mayor, minimizing the possibility of machine politics.

All these components of L.A.'s allure—hobby farms, an anti-urban bias, the small-town atmosphere, localized governments—represent the American suburban ideal. Multiplied by a postwar population of approximately four million, however, these attitudes created a huge metropolis in self-denial about what it was. Most residents benefited from the industrial economy but continued to think of themselves as rural or small-town folk. (In the 1970s, this attitude led to an explosion in the sale of Japanese import pick-up trucks, a boom Japanese manufacturers could not explain because they thought urbanites didn't need trucks.) In contrast to other cities, most residents had no commitment to or even memory of L.A.'s urban core, since people moved straight to their particular neighborhood or suburb without stopping in a crowded immigrant district near downtown. (This was as true for African-Americans as for Midwestern whites; poor transportation stranded the black neighborhoods, making travel to downtown difficult and even more alien.)

After World War II, then, Southern Californians willingly accepted a fraud. To fulfill their anti-urban dream, they relied on the growth machine to continue manufacturing *faux*-rural suburbs. But as new suburbs were created, the metropolis grew bigger and more unmanageable, further and further from the ideal most residents carried in their heads while driving their pick-up trucks to work.

The reality: The emerging suburb of Westchester, near Los Angeles International Airport, in 1949.

But as long as people could count on a quiet existence in their homes and neighborhoods, and as long as the builders and the bankers continued to stamp out new suburbs to prolong the dream, Southern Californians were able to live with this paradox.

Thus, the members of the postwar Los Angeles growth machine—the bankers and the homebuilders and the building trades unions—lived off the deception for decades, even persuading themselves that they were heroes for perpetuating it. But by perpetuating the illusion, they embedded the anti-urban ideal deeper in the region's psyche. A few years ago, a senior executive of The Irvine Company, the landowning company that developed much of Orange County, lamented the way the growth machine had marketed its postwar suburbs. In the 1960s, he recalled, the company's slogan had been: "Come to Irvine and hear the asparagus grow." In retrospect, he said, perhaps they should have marketed Irvine as "a dynamic and growing community." After all, he said, "When you live between two freeways, it's hard to hear the asparagus grow." But there was a darned good reason why the company didn't market the idea of a bustling future: It wouldn't have sold any houses.

So it is not surprising that when Los Angeles finally grew so vast as to be unfathomable even to those who lived there—when the gap between the illusion of a spacious suburban lifestyle and the daily reality of a massive metropolis could no longer be papered over with dreams—the growth machine began to collapse under its own weight. Happy suburbanites turned angry about traffic jams and high taxes, reducing their tolerance for more suburbs. Struggling inner cities began to rise up against decades of neglect. Farmers and environmentalists protested the loss of open land. In short, the formula that had built Los Angeles so quickly no longer worked.

It took a long time, two decades or more, to reach this crisis. Perhaps the first inkling came in the early 1960s, when dairy farmers in southern Los Angeles County (then still one of the leading agricultural counties in the nation) actually created three new cities in the hope of controlling their own destiny. But Dairy City, Dairyland, and Dairy Valley quickly gave way to the growth machine, becoming Cypress, La Palma, and Cerritos.

During the 1960s, discontent continued to build, especially among the affluent suburban homeowners who lived on pristine hillsides on both sides of the Santa Monica Mountains. A decade earlier, homeowner groups in the area had organized into an umbrella organization, the Federation of Hillside and Canyon Associations. Now, fearing large-scale development of the mountains west of Sepulveda Pass, the Hillside Federation staged a mini-revolution to halt construction of a large four-lane highway along the route of winding and scenic Mulholland Drive. Backed by the Sierra Club and other environmental groups, homeowners began a decades-long effort to block development in the Santa Monicas by creating a regional park. (See chapter 7, The Education of Maria VanderKolk.)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, homeowner unrest led to a number of electoral victories. In 1967, an iconoclastic homeowner association president, Marvin Braude, was elected to the Los Angeles City Council from a Westside-Santa Monica Mountains district on the strength of the anti-growth issue, which he continued to champion for more than thirty years. And in a startling victory in 1972, environmentalists succeeded in passing Proposition 20, a statewide initiative to restrict development up and down the coast. (The proposal had gone nowhere in the legislature, where it had been introduced by a young Assemblyman named Pete Wilson.) Thus, in a period of only a few years, a homeowner/environmentalist coalition succeeded in hobbling the growth machine in two key areas of Los Angeles, the mountains and the beach.

But it did not spread. The agitators at the beach and in the mountains were affluent homeowners who lived directly adjacent to these areas. The homeowners and their environmentalist allies were never able to broaden their appeal to include L.A.'s vast working-class neighborhoods in the Los Angeles Basin and along the interior valleys—what Reyner Banham called "The Plains of Id," those vast flat plains of single-family homes where working- and middle-class Angelenos had come to seek their membership in the national suburb. Despite occasional dissatisfaction, most people there thought the system still worked. Living closer to the edge, they weren't willing to take political risks that might affect their jobs. So the growth machine continued to operate pretty much as it always had.

Predictably, the only issue related to the growth machine that could move the voters of the Plains of Id was taxes. And the most dramatic expression of discontent came with the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978.

Proposition 13, which cut property taxes by two-thirds, was widely credited with kicking off a nationwide tax revolt. The initiative was devised by apartment owners (ironically, a pro-growth group) who wanted to cut their own taxes in the face of rising property values. And it was marketed as a means of allowing fixed-income senior citizens to keep their homes. But Proposition 13 had a profound impact on the growth machine, as many of the working-class folks who voted for it well understood.

Even after Los Angeles outgrew its land-speculation phase, growth continued to be fueled by a fiscal Ponzi scheme. Current property owners and residents paid higher taxes to support the debt-financed construction of new facilities (roads, water pipes, parks, etc.) to be used by newcomers who would then help finance the next phase, and so on. (The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California still finances growth this way; everybody in the region pays the same rate for water.) It is amazing that this system worked for so long in a region as individualistic and anti-urban as Southern California.

When property values, and hence property taxes, rose rapidly in the 1970s, it was not difficult for folks on the Plains of Id to understand that they were subsidizing the growth machine with their property taxes. The passage of Proposition 13 put an end to that fiscal system.

With so little property tax revenue available, local governments around Los Angeles could no longer finance growth from their current tax base. Instead, they had to hit up the components of the growth machine—landowners, developers, and home buyers—directly for the funds.

Above all else, the passage of Proposition 13 reasserted the anti-urbanism of most Southern California urbanites. And it marked the beginning of an era of xenophobic hunkering down. Throughout the 1980s, most Southern Californians wrapped themselves up in a self-centered political cocoon. Spread across a vast landscape by eighty years of sprawling development patterns, cut off from one another fiscally and socially, weary of sharing their space with fifteen million other people, and fueled by an enduring anti-urban ideal, Southern Californians simply ceased to be citizens in the larger sense and withdrew into their subdivisions. They would emerge to go to work and an occasional ball game, and perhaps to hit the beach or Disneyland. But then they would retreat quickly into Rancho Vista or Woodbridge or whatever other ready-made pseudo-community the growth machine had manufactured for their consumption.

Once inside, they did not venture out. Many felt disconnected not only from the teeming and volatile metropolis of which they were a part, but also from their own small cities, from which they were often physically separated by gates or large roads. Their sense of community shrunk to include only their tract. After Proposition 13, working-class suburbanites did not emerge from this cocoon to challenge the growth machine, even though they had clearly lost faith. Instead they simply stayed put. Middle-class suburbanites, by contrast, occasionally rose up and vented their anger as citizens—though politically they had been transformed into a peculiar class of citizens best described as "tract-home environmentalists."

Heirs to the middle-class suburban dreams of the hobby-farming "rural folk" two generations before, tract-home environmentalists had already received all the benefits they were going to get from the growth machine: a house, a plot of land, and a middle-class job. They saw no reason to permit the machine to continue operating, at least not in their neighborhood. And so they tried to shut it down. It was not uncommon, for example, to see Phase Two of a subdivision scrapped because residents of Phase One adamantly opposed construction of a neighborhood exactly like theirs filled with people exactly like them. All over the region homeowner groups agitated for gates around their neighborhoods, for separately incorporated cities, and for exclusive access to schools and parks and other supposedly public places which had been paid for by up-front development fees or special neighborhood-based taxes. It is surprising that no neighborhood tried to dig a moat.

And so the political basis for the growth machine collapsed. A vast metropolis, founded on a vision of land profits and sustained for decades by the faith of rank-and-file suburbanites who consumed its products, suddenly seemed to have no consensus among its own residents even to exist. In the absence of an overarching vision, the former components of the growth machine began breaking apart and scrambling for their own survival, rather than working together. Some old-time homebuilders simply griped that they were no longer heroes. Other elements of the growth machine, such as the Metropolitan Water District, tried to buy political support by wrapping their projects in environmentally friendly packages. Still others tried to buy off opposition by coughing up band-aid solutions to the symptoms: fewer houses, more parkland, schools, community infrastructure, often just plain money.

While the growth consensus has collapsed, no new paradigm has emerged to take its place. As I realized the day of my long commute to Moreno Valley in 1990, there is a void at the center of Los Angeles. Not just a void in the physical center, where neglect has created slums. But a void in the political and psychological center, where we decline to take responsibility for a metropolis and an urban landscape that we ought to think is ours.

That lush meadow I saw in Moreno Valley doesn't have three thousand houses and a business park on it today, as the developer of the property anticipated. In part that's because real estate and capital markets collapsed shortly after my visit. But it's also because, predictably, there was no consensus in Moreno Valley about what should be done. Many of the town's political leaders supported the project, because the developer promised that businesses locating there would provide local jobs. But a lot of local homeowners, who felt that jobs would never materialize, did not want to chew up a beautiful meadow to build houses for a few more commuters competing for space on the freeway at four-thirty in the morning.

As for myself, I didn't stick around long enough to form a strong opinion one way or the other. By the end of the day it had stopped raining, so I got back into my Civic and headed west on the freeway. Moreno Valley was interesting, but it was just another suburb of Los Angeles. It wasn't really a part of where I live. It was too distant, too remote, too filled with cars and shopping centers and commuting suburbanites who didn't fit the ambiguously anti-urban image I had of the town where I live. Like everybody else in metropolitan Los Angeles, I just wanted to get home to my own tract.

PART ONE

Power

The collapse of the Southern California growth machine took a long time. Almost thirty years elapsed from the first rumblings of dissent to the wholesale breakdown that accompanied the real estate boom of the late 1980s and the subsequent bust of the 1990s. The path to this restructuring was littered with the carcasses of the once-invincible land developers and their political friends.

Starting in the latter part of the nineteenth century when the growth machine began churning in earnest, the foundation for L.A.'s expansion was laid by the businesses that profited—the real estate developers, the bankers, newspaper publishers, and so on. And over the decades these business interests necessarily became intertwined with Los Angeles's political leadership. Local politics in Southern California may have been weak and nominally non-partisan, but developers still had to obtain approval for their plans and permits from cities and counties in the region. So they did what special interests everywhere do: They groomed candidates, contributed to campaigns, and subtly co-opted the political process to advance their own ends.

Nowhere was this intermingling of politics and business more skillfully accomplished than at the Los Angeles County Hall of Administration where the local Board of Supervisors—or the "Five Little Kings," as they were known in local parlance—presided over the urbanization of a sprawling four-thousand-square-mile area stretching from the desert to the sea. The supervisors met (and still meet) during the daytime in downtown Los Angeles, far from the communities whose futures they were shaping. They accepted campaign contributions (and in the old days