Less than a year after the riots of 1992, in the heart of South-Central Los Angeles, Mirian and Ernesto Ramirez bought their first house around the corner from where shops had been looted and burned.

Many of the Ramirez’s friends and co-workers thought they were crazy. But the immigrant couple, who work as hotel housekeepers, immediately fell in love with the $100,000 Spanish-style home and the neighborhood of well-kept bungalows on West 50th Street. Nearly 2½ years later, they have no regrets.

“Some people are scared of the area,” said Mirian Ramirez, a 42-year-old native of El Salvador, as she cooked a hearty chunk of beef on the kitchen stove for dinner while her four children played in the back yard.

“We are very happy here.”

In an area better known to outsiders for civil unrest, poverty and crime, thousands of Latino immigrants like the Ramirez family have realized the American dream of home ownership in the once predominantly African American neighborhoods of South-Central.

While most of Southern California has endured a real estate collapse in the past five years, home prices in much of the flatlands of South L.A. have actually risen. Most of the buyers have been droves of Latino immigrants drawn by the area’s large inventory of affordable homes and central location, real estate agents say.

“If you didn’t have the Latinos in here, you wouldn’t have had any sales at all,” said Joe Arciniega, a Watts real estate broker. “What’s keeping it going is the Latino market.”

The real estate market in South L.A. illustrates the growing clout of immigrants hold in the U.S. housing industry. Immigrants prize home ownership much more than Americans in general, according to a 1995 nationwide housing survey by Fannie Mae, the nation’s largest source of mortgage funds.

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By JESUS SANCHEZ
TIMES STAFF WRITER

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The professor at Los Angeles Valley College, with his long gray hair and beard, reminded student Mary Jackson of the biblical “Ancient of Days” sitting on his heavenly throne. Another admiring student compared his appearance to none other than Noah.

But it is not only his resemblance to a Hebrew sage that brings distinction to 54-year-old professor Zev Garber. He is a pioneer in the concept of Jewish studies at public colleges and his teaching style and passion for his work have kept the program at Valley College alive for nearly 25 years.

As Jews crowd into synagogues for High Holy Day observances this week, starting with Rosh Hashana services tonight, Garber and his colleague Jody Myers, who heads a bigger program at Cal State Northridge, stand as leaders of a lesser-known branch of Jewish learning in the San Fernando Valley. For a quarter of a century they have exposed hundreds of students to an analytical, secular approach to Judaism and Jewish culture.

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By ROY RIVENBURG
TIMES STAFF WRITER

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If Jesus had been in Denver this summer he could have thumbed through the pages of a bulletproof New Testament, posed for snapshots with a super-hero named Biibieman or shopped for a Last Supper paint-by-numbers kit.

Wandering the floor of the Colorado Convention Center, he would have been able to buy a Christian boomerang (“Love always returns”), chomp a Scripture fortune cookie and sniff a balm called Fragrance of Jesus.

All told, he could have explored six football fields’ worth of religious merchandise on display at the 46th annual convention of the Christian Booksellers Assn.

What would he think of this melding of commerce and Christianity?

It’s a $3-billion-a-year question, though hardly a new one. Almost since the Crucifixion, believers have been wrestling with the issue.

And today, with religious retailing booming—and secular companies swallowing up Christian ones—some say it is hard to tell whether the Gospel is something sacred or just another brand name.

Indeed, with the exception of furniture and major appliances, it is possible to outfit an entire home in Christian products—bird feeders to body lotions, luggage to lamps.
RIO DE JANEIRO—A greedy, corrupt and lascivious preacher in a popular miniseries or Brazilian television bears a strong resemblance to Bishop Edir Macedo, the country's most famous evangelist. Macedo's followers are furious.

The miniseries has been airing weeknights on TV Globo, the network that dominates Brazilian television. Now, a smaller network, owned by Macedo's Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, is on the counterattack.

Analysts say the clash is evidence of a power struggle between a media giant that represents Brazil's Establishment, traditionally Roman Catholic, and a rising, socially religious force that is challenging tradition. In recent decades, the growth of evangelical Protestant churches has chipped away at the Catholic Church's predominance in Brazil, and Macedo's church has become especially aggressive in asserting its social and political strength.

By WILLIAM R. LONG, TIMES STAFF WRITER

LANCASTER—When Janelle Smith began filling out the enrollment forms for her children's new elementary school in Lancaster, she suspected something was wrong.

Why would a school need to know how long her labor lasted? Whether she gave birth with or without anesthesia? Whether she'd had a Cesarean section? If the child was bottle-fed or breast-fed?

In fact, the school—and the district—didn't need to know.

When Smith protested, Lancaster school district officials were appalled. They say they didn't know about the form and had never received a complaint besides Smith's. Her calls triggered an investigation and the school district sent out a memo this week ordering its 15 schools to destroy the questionnaires.

By BETTIE SHUSTER, TIMES STAFF WRITER

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S is on which is it?

A crown jewel of Downtown architecture that is destined to become the city's transportation hub in the 21st Century while reviving a long-neglected neighborhood?

Or a $300-million white elephant featuring Italian granite, English brick and a $300,000 aquarium—a "Taj Mahal," as one critic put it, a monument to the transit agency's misplaced priorities?

Love it or hate it, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's lonely 26-story office tower and palm-lined transit center nearing completion by Union Station has altered the city's skyline and, officials hope, will redefine its view of public transit.

By RICHARD SIMON, TIMES STAFF WRITER

Special to the Times

During recesses in his Philadelphia trials, Judge Albert F. Sabo would sit in a small antechamber off his courtroom and play solitaire.

Defense lawyers remember it well because if they stepped inside to complain about a ruling, Sabo—a diminutive man with a mane of white hair who some say resembles Ross Perot—would say nothing. He would just look up from his playing cards and smile.

"It's the most chilling thing," said one criminal defense lawyer.

Observers say the same cool disdain hangs over the court case of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the black journalist and convicted cop killer whose plea for a new trial has fired the passions of grass-roots supporters, black leaders, death penalty foes and left-leaning celebrities worldwide.

By GREGG ZOROYA, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Margaret Horne, 83 years old, sits amid the enormous clutter of a world made smaller by her own mistakes—and the largesse of strangers.

"This is my bedroom," she says with a laugh, pointing to a corner of the tiny one-room apartment in Long Beach, Calif., where she has just moved. Under piles of clothing, towels and boxes—a bed peeked out. Household goods and bric-a-brac, some dating back to another century, fill every corner and spill across the floor. There are shopping bags filled with junk mail.

Not so long ago, Mrs. Horne had a three-bedroom home. Now that is gone, along with some $40,000. She is a victim of crooks purporting to be legitimate telemarketers and mail-order companies, all of them promising riches—if she would just send in a check for a few dollars. Or a few thousand.

While the riches never came, more sales pitches did—as many as 30 a day through the mail or over the phone. The promises were so dazzling "you sort of lose your head," Mrs. Horne says. Even after she had lost, substantial sums, she was tempted, much as a losing gambler stays on at the table in hope of recouping a loss.

"I would hate to give up one of these [offers] if they were real," she says.

When it comes to being conned, Mrs. Horne has all too much company among the millions of Americans over the age of 65, law-enforcement officials say. In recent years, as telemarketing has proliferated illicit "boiler room" telephonic operations, they have grown in tandem. And despite campaigns to warn the unwitting against these bogus get-rich-quick schemes, the elderly remain particularly vulnerable because of frequent loneliness and the fear of losing financial independence.

By JOHN R. ENSHLIEG, STAFF REPORTER OF THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Margaret Horne