

Downsizing the Future: Beyond Blade Runner with Mike Davis

To Mike Davis, the burnished urban surface of what postmodern intellectuals are fond of calling L.A.'s "depthless present" is a rear-view mirror. In it, Davis sees the historical transformation of Los Angeles into the sun-kissed Promised Land of popular myth by real estate barons and other influential boosters with vested interests. Contrarily, he also sees the invocation of the city's nightmare double in the anti-myths of noir writers such as James M. Cain (*Double Indemnity*), essayists such as Joan Didion (*Slouching Toward Bethlehem*), and "post-noir" novelists such as James Ellroy (*Los Angeles Quartet*.)

"The ultimate world-historical significance---and oddity---of Los Angeles is that it has come to play the double role of utopia and dystopia for advanced capitalism," writes Davis, in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. "The same place, as Brecht noted, symbolized both heaven and hell. Correspondingly, it is the essential destination on the itinerary of any late 20th century intellectual, who must eventually come to take a peep and render some opinion on whether 'Los Angeles Brings It All Together' (official slogan), or is, rather, the nightmare at the terminus of American history (as depicted in noir)."

At the same time, Davis uses the city that Umberto Eco (*Travels in Hyperreality*), Jean Baudrillard (*Simulation*), and other tourist-theorists see only as a shimmering mirage of simulation, as a crystal ball---a "city of quartz" in which he discerns lowering clouds on the horizon of our collective future. In *City of Quartz*, he makes short work of knee-jerk postmodern critiques that collapse all of L.A. into Hollywood, Disneyland, and the Bonaventure Hotel, "reading" the city as "nothing more than an immense script and a perpetual motion picture" (Baudrillard)---the apotheosis of fakery, narcissism, hedonism, and clawing desire. Just as neatly, he skewers critiques that envision L.A. as a designer dystopia in the darkly romantic, *Blade Runner* mold, arguing that they convert "history into teleology and glamorize the very reality they would deconstruct." Both analyses float free of social reality and historical causality, argues Davis.

A 49-year-old native Californian and unrepentant Marxist who teaches urban theory at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, Davis drills through the sedimented myths of what the architectural critic Michael Sorkin has called "the most mediated town in America," returning us to the cold, hard bedrock of historical fact with a jarring thump. "If there is any cliché I wanted to undo," he told a *Los Angeles Times* writer, it was the one about "the insubstantiality of Los Angeles." An all too rare hybrid of activist intellectual, impeccable historian, and gifted storyteller with a blisteringly caustic wit, Davis is above all a very angry man with a rage to understand: every word of *City of Quartz* reads as if it were etched in an acid bath. William Gibson, who cites its influence in the acknowledgements to his novel, *Virtual Light*, pronounced it "more cyberpunk than any work of fiction could ever be." Forget Baudrillard and the rest of the effete, elite, professoriat riding on his coattails; mesmerized by the vapor trails of pure theory, they turn a blind eye to the ever grimmer human reality behind the hyperreality. For them, as Davis notes, "What was once anguish seems to have become fun." Live, from ground zero, *City of Quartz* and Davis's two brief dispatches from the frontlines---*Beyond Blade Runner: Urban Control/The Ecology of Fear* and *L.A. Was Just the Beginning/ Urban Revolt in the United States: A Thousand Points of Light* (both published by the *Open Magazine* pamphlet series)---begin to theorize a way out of this place.

Delving into the past, he unearths the market forces and social engineering that have made Los Angeles what it is: a megalopolitan sprawl straight out of Gibson's *Virtual Light*--- economically and ecologically moribund, ravaged by social polarization and racial tensions that have provided fertile ground for the criminalizing of non-whites, urban youth, and the homeless; the militarizing of a notoriously brutal police force; the privatizing of public space; and the proliferation of fortified suburban enclaves whose lawns bristle with warnings of "Armed Response."

In so doing, Davis---true to the book's title---excavates a worst-case scenario for the future of urban America: a 21st century Los Angeles in which the government and private sectors have abdicated any vestige of responsibility to the dispossessed; where public space and civil rights have been willingly relinquished by homeowners fearful of racial unrest and gang violence; and where the upper- and middle-class citizenry has incarcerated itself in gated communities or, on family outings, in surveilled, privately patrolled malls, "historic districts," or theme parks. Already, as Davis notes in *Beyond Blade Runner*, Universal Studios has constructed a "parallel urban reality" called *CityWalk*, repackaging "the best features of Olvera Street, Hollywood, and the

West Side" in what its designer calls "'easy, bite-sized pieces' for consumption by tourists and residents who 'don't need the excitement of dodging bullets...in the Third World country' that Los Angeles has become."

On Beyond Blade Runner's final page, he asks, "Will the ecology of fear become the natural order of the 21st-century American city?" The forecast, to Davis, is not auspicious. "If we continue to allow our central cities to degenerate into criminalized Third Worlds," he writes, "all the ingenious security technology, present and future, will not safeguard the anxious middle class. The sound of that first car bomb on Rodeo Drive or in front of City Hall will wake us from our mere bad dream and confront us with our real nightmare."

Dery: In *City of Quartz*, you offer a stinging critique of the cynical, apolitical ecstasies of postmodernism, quoting an L.A. Weekly writer who notes that Baudrillard "loves to observe the liquidation of culture, to experience the delivery from depth." At the same time, your Orwellian descriptions of the LAPD's *Aerospatiale* helicopters and the city's gated communities were seductive enough to influence William Gibson's *Virtual Light*. Do you ever feel as if you're in danger of succumbing to the same sublime horror that Baudrillard seems to relish?

Davis: Well, it's difficult to resist the spectacle. Part of the aftermath of the '92 rebellion is that everybody has his riot experience; thanks to the looting of Sammy's cameras on Fairfax and Beverly, virtually everybody in the mid-city now considers himself to be a battle-hardened survivor of an urban riot. It's generated this great melodrama and a sense of danger which is of course totally disassociated from the daily acid drip of poverty, cutbacks, and the incredible monotony of daily life in the city for the majority of its inhabitants.

You know, I don't really know what postmodernism is; I do know that we live in a post-liberal, post-reformist period where substantive urban reform has been abandoned and where the liberal positions of the '60s now stand in almost revolutionary relationship to political discourse in this country. What's being recycled as postmodernism is Frankfurt School Marxism in its most pessimistic mode, although admittedly jazzed up with some very interesting thoughts about new technologies and media. But Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* still squats on the horizon, shaping the argument; the "postmodern" disappearance of the critical subjectivity is pure Marcuse.

So is this really a stage beyond modernism or are we witnessing the decadent droning on and on of a modernism that no longer bears any trace of reform or hope? I mean, as the governor's insisted time and again, with admirable, horrifying clarity, the Californian budget debates of the past few years are a debate about the future, in which the public sectors are permanently downsized and as a result the future is downsized for a whole generation of children and immigrants and people of color. The irony is that the corporations who support the governor are destroying the whole institutional matrix that made California the leading science-based economy in the world. In their immediate impact on the inner cities of Southern California, the budget cuts do far more damage than the riots. You're talking about a billion dollars immediately taken out of public programs and the loss of about 15,000 jobs in the black community, which is just disastrous.

At the moment, when needs are increasing, the major cities in the United States are downsizing not just their short range commitments but their long-term ones. Of course, we can go farther: Detroit and Michigan have shown that you can even abolish general relief, leaving people without any safety net whatsoever.

Dery: Thomas Hine, in his book *Facing Tomorrow: What the Future Has Been, What the Future Can Be*, suggests that we have ceded the territory of the future, and that our inability to conceive of it except in caricatured, cynical terms is a sign of cultural rigor mortis. Do you think we've arrived at that pass?

Davis: No, and I suppose I'm hoisted on my own petard here because I've profited greatly from peddling apocalyptic visions to people but there's two kinds of realities struggling in the heart of this city. On one hand, you have levels of inhumanity that are being naturalized and accepted every day that return us to the worst part of the 19th century. At the same time, you can still find some of the greatest working class neighborhoods in the United States in Los Angeles. Sundays in the park are as funky and as much fun as ever, and people haven't lost the vision or understand of what the good life is.

One of the things I've increasingly ended up fighting for, where I teach and in the kind of politics I do, is a nostalgized vision of what Southern California was like 30 years ago---the freedom of its beaches and its cruising streets and the kind of careless, libidinal adolescence that used to be possible. Looking back, I see the enormous advantages that were conferred on childhood and adolescence by the levels both of social expenditures that existed in this state in the '50s and '60s and by the relative freedoms, the intoxications that white kids had.

Without making that a golden age (because it wasn't for kids of color), it's certainly something to defend in the present dark ages of the city where the only legal activity for city kids now is to consume. The Santa Monica city council had this big debate about putting a curfew on their wonderful new Third Street promenade and they decided that the only lawful activity for youth after dark is to shop.

Dery: At the same time, it's a commonplace that the mall paradigm has infested urban design at large.

Davis: Of course, although I should point out that the malling of public space doesn't have this kind of Marcuseian determinacy, where the critical consciousness or the rebellious subject is extinguished in the sweet plunder of intoxicated consumption. Rather, what actually happens is the definition of new forms of criminality, to the extent that the social spaces that people--- particularly kids---use are now these pseudo-public spaces, malls and their equivalents. Increasingly, the only legal youthful activities involve consumption, which just forces whole areas of normal teenage behavior off into the margins.

I recently read an account in the Orange County Register of how Irvine, which is the last generation's absolute model utopia of a master-planned community, is producing youth pathologies equivalent to those in the ghettos simply because in the planning of Irvine there was no allotted space for the social relationships of teenagers, nowhere for them lawfully to be---the parks are closed at night, they're not allowed to cruise, and so on. So you get these seemingly random, irrational acts of violence.

Dery: A far cry from the misty Wagnerian romanticism of Blade Runner's noir metropolis.

Davis: Which underscores the limits of the Blade Runner vision. What we need right now is the rigor of a hard, relentlessly realistic future. William Gibson provides us with the best template of the dark future we're building, by extrapolating what actually exists, whereas Blade Runner is just a gothic romance. There's nothing in it that shows you how L.A. will erode into the 21st century because most of this city---its interior valleys---are flat, anonymous plains of dingbats and bungalows and ranch-style homes retrofitted with increasingly ghastly medium-density stuff.

Blade Runner is a pastiche, and when you peel away some of the layers, its core vision is Metropolis, which in turn is Hugh Ferriss---this continuing obsession with modernism, where the future city is a kind of monster New York. You could probably go all the way back to a book H.G. Wells wrote in 1906 called *The Future in America*, in which he talks about a methodology for envisioning the end of the 20th century through a process of gigantism. That's what's continuously underlaid that vision---the mile-high skyscrapers, the little squad cars flying around in the air---and Blade Runner's fidelity to this Wellsian vision of the future certainly contrasts Gibson's.

Dery: Blade Runner, in the final analysis, is about retro-futurism---a nostalgia for obsolete tomorrows.

Davis: Yeah, and another thing that has to be fitted into this--- and I'm not sure how it works, exactly---is this whole cult of dead tech, this cargo cult of de-industrialization that at least in contemporary L.A. is enormously in vogue on the West side. By this I mean that people whose daily work has almost nothing to do anymore with the worldly production of goods seem to desire huge gears and obsolete machinery. The flotsam and jetsam of the old industrial age is an ambience everywhere; most of the restaurants and bookstores and micro-breweries on the West side have some kind of decor that has to do with industrialization---a kind of Second Machine Age. It's precisely because we've come to the point of de-industrialization that all of this stuff has become perfumed ruins; it has the same relationship to contemporary consciousness that the medieval landscapes had for the Romantics.

Dery: Isn't this an example of what McLuhan meant when he said, in *The Medium is the Massage*, that "We look at the present through a rear-view mirror?"

Davis: Yeah, I think so, but around it is some strange process of nostalgia which I can't quite figure out and of course it's surrounded by the aura that there's no hope of ever doing any of this stuff again and a kind of world-view that I think forgets that much of the subsistence of the world is still produced in this fashion, just not here.

One of the things I find interesting in contemporary architecture here is a kind of techno-Baroque, an excessive amount of what's really just decorative quoting of industrial motifs. I don't think that the computer chip has produced its own aesthetic, a contemporary version of streamlined Deco. It's hard to find an analog between the revolutionary new technologies and the design of the city itself. At the same time, if you look at the work of artists like Robert Irwin, who sculpts space in an almost Zen way, using things like light and reflection and

refraction, you get some sense of the possibility of an austere aesthetic of the microchip and the creation of new kinds of ephemeral spaces. It always delights me to drive through Dallas at night because of the way that the skyscrapers are programmed to play light shows with each other.

Dery: It sounds like an architectural metaphor for the blinking lights on Daniel Hillis's massively parallel Connection Machine or the light-streaked datascares of Gibson's Matrix.

Davis: It has something to do with a microelectronic aesthetic of very transient and decaying states, and applies primarily to the city at night--the city playing strange light games with itself, evoking dreams and floating images, producing an infinity of mirages. The one model we have is The Empire of Signs, Barthes's interpretation of Japan, and of course the advertisements in Blade Runner that float like clouds through the cityscape. There's a lot there to play with, but I don't know anybody who's actively working with it.

Dery: The malling of public space, which we were talking about a few minutes ago, is attended, increasingly, by the theme parking of reality. On that note, what do you make of CityWalk, Universal Studios' loving recreation of an L.A. that never was?

Davis: CityWalk is the moment when Baudrillard draws a huge, satisfied breath and draws deeply on his cigar; it's the simulacrum of the simulacrum. Of course, CityWalk has more to do with the competitive challenge of Florida than anything else. If you want to enjoy Hollywood now, you go to Florida, so Universal Studios is responding to that by making it possible to go to Hollywood right here in L.A.! You know, this idea of taking the traditional public tourist spaces and interiorizing them in theme parks and security environments--putting them in aspic, so to speak--is what Disneyland is doing with its expansion. They're going to have a version of San Diego's Victorian Hotel Del Coronado and so on; the idea is to be able to do the whole grand tour of Southern California without ever having to leave the safe perimeters of the theme park. In time, there will be very little left outside the theme parks.

Dery: Speaking of which, Disneyland is conspicuously absent from City of Quartz.

Davis: It wasn't something that I was particularly interested in, though if I were to do Disneyland, I wouldn't be concerned so much with the politics of spectacle as with straightforward questions of exploitation and the living conditions of the people who make the machinery of Oz work.

There are much stranger realities than Disneyland in Southern California. The old industrial belt along the L.A. river has become this vast zone that consists of recycling and salvage yards. I met these immigrant workers there who break up computers all day long in a computer junkyard, in my mind typifying postmodern proletarians. You have to imagine a pile about 30 feet high of literally thousands of broken, defunct computers, and these guys with ball-peen hammers and screwdrivers and pliers listening to rock 'n' roll in Spanish, dismantling this stuff. There was one really funny guy who, when I asked him why he'd come to California, said, "To work in your high-tech economy," as he smashed an obsolete Macintosh.

Further Reading

Beyond Blade Runner: Urban Control/The Ecology of Fear and L.A. Was Just the Beginning/ Urban Revolt in the United States: A Thousand Points of Light are both available from the Open Magazine Pamphlet Series, POB 2726 Westfield, New Jersey 07091, USA (\$4 for U.S. residents; \$6 outside the U.S., payable by international postal money order or a check drawn on a U.S. bank)