

## The Poet of LA's Urban: Mike Davis

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Mike Davis wrote about many subjects, but here I will concentrate on his classical contribution to the study of cities, urbanism, and urban politics, the magisterial book *City of Quartz* (Davis, 1989). In this essay, I will explore its relationship to the field of academic research on cities. CoQ draws on Davis's kaleidoscopic knowledge of the Southern California urban region, deftly melding histories of the city, its social movements, political elites and popular struggles, architectural criticism, all informed by an innate sense of the geographical layout and materiality of socio-economic processes, rendering how they feel and give meaning and anguish to people on the ground. Davis makes us feel as if we are there, taking in the feeling of the changing, conflictual, booming, dizzying urban environment of the Southland in the turbulent 1980s. He manages to do this while slicing through and often taking down alternative narratives about LA: the successful boom town; new paradise under the sun; well managed infrastructural imperium; orderly model of American suburban propriety; glamorous and glittering Hollywood. Less the "capital of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" as some of us in the so-called "LA School," once dubbed it, the Los Angeles of *City of Quartz* is more a big powerful runaway truck on the freeway (better captured in the French *camion fou*, and I say this in homage to Davis's liberal use of French phrases such as *conjuncture*, *sans culottes* and so on).

As has been much remarked, Davis has his own prevailing narrative flavor, that of LA *noir*. He is the historian's counterpart to the dark, dystopian LA so favored by certain

traditions in film and literature. The city that everyone who is not drunk on the paradise-boom town cocktail loves to hate.

It's one thing when a filmmaker or novelist or artist does *LA Noir*. When a serious scholar does it, they get pushback, including in so-called liberal circles. As the 1991 *New York Times* review of *City of Quartz* put it, "if this is hell, why is it so popular?" (*New York Times*, XXXX). That question is not the one, however, that Mike Davis sought to answer. I take his question to be more something like, "why and how is this particular urban, hell or not, produced, and by whom?" And we could further modify the question, because Mike Davis is more subtle than to paint a picture of LA as hell; it's more something like a confusing purgatory-like labyrinth whose walls are made of quartz. And looking through quartz walls or windows, there are some rather attractive viewpoints with refracted light that can make us drunk on the pleasure of being in them, even if by doing so we are probably – and maybe without even knowing it -- going down the beautifully-lit road to hell in the runaway truck. And, to take up the *New York Times* challenge, as for what is popular, lots of things are, not all of them very pretty.

As a starting point, we have to appreciate the sheer written beauty of *City of Quartz*, a work that artfully but analytically melds history, urban social science, criticism, and poetics, to give us a powerful chronicle of LA's *zeitgeist*. As such, *City of Quartz* deserves to take its place alongside the classics on LA from film and literature, but with a social scientific and historical sensibility.

I say this because this is the first step, to take Mike Davis's work for what it is, not imposing a standard academic model of what it should be, whether a standard historian's history or, as I will now discuss, a standard urban social scientist, such as a geographer, sociologist or economist doing research on LA.

But now for the bait-and-switch part of this essay. I think it is now useful to consider how *City of Quartz* relates to urban social science, because Davis's book has become a powerful influence on our academic community. Davis displayed excellent mastery of the literatures on LA's urban history and the positivistic findings from urban social science. And yet, the narrative bursts out of the boundaries of his source fields, as he gives himself the freedom to not be limited by standard academic canon – the kinds of things we are allowed to say in journal articles and academic press books. Assessing it is a challenge because of the mixing of genres, including social science, history and poetics.

Let's begin by considering how well Mike Davis did in the world of positivist findings about LA, by which I mean, how well did he get what was going on in LA and what it would mean for the development of LA in the subsequent decades. The answer is: extremely well. Mike wrote a preface to the 2006 re-edition of *City of Quartz* that begins with the following: "Authors are strange parents (Davis, 2006). Some never wean their offspring, preferring to keep them on their knee, forever close at hand. Others, like myself, punctually kick their progeny out the door, with orders never to call home.....I have not looked at *City of Quartz* since I sent the manuscript.....to my publisher in London in 1990." And then, Davis goes through the astonishing list of things he got right, but not in order to glorify himself. He goes through the list – the Bradley era strategy of building a downtown, the ports, of trying to reconstruct after Rodney King, of the homeowner revolts, of plant closings and redlinings – and concludes, in 2006: "No great American city – the recent case of New Orleans aside – is so susceptible to downward mobility over the next generation." How sadly right he was. I have a personal stake in this statement, because around that time, my team undertook a 7 year research project, whose starting point was the fact that LA had slipped from number 4 in US per capita income rankings in 1970 to number 25 by 2009. Mike didn't run the

numbers, but his deep understanding of what he called “regional immobility, brancheville, manufacturing decline, the new inequality, terminal suburbs, and spurning the peacemakers” allowed him to add it up and understand where the runaway truck was heading. Mike Davis called his book “the biography of a *conjuncture*: one of those moments, ripe with paradox and non-linearity, when previously separate currents of history suddenly converge with profoundly unpredictable results.” Before this conjuncture, there was the many decade period that took LA from a small and relatively low-income place (69<sup>th</sup> in 1920) to big and rich in 1970 (4<sup>th</sup>), all the while adding millions of new residents. And LA did so in a context of declining income inequality from 1940 to 1980. By contrast, the period since 1980 has, objectively, been much less successful for the region – greater inequality, which is a national problem, coupled to regional failure to remain a high-income city, underneath which is a growing sea of poverty, low wages, and low-tech employment. Mike got the *conjuncture* perfectly. He did recognize the positive side of it – LA in the post-1980 period welcomed millions of immigrants, though it hasn’t done as well with integrating them economically as NY and SF in the same period. When we rolled out our book on LA’s slide down the American urban system (Storper et al, 2015) we were often met with stunned surprise or hostile pushback, so convinced were many of the leadership audiences that the So Cal metro region had been an example of urban success and comeback since the awful 1990s. So, Mike Davis was a poet, but he was, in many respects, a poet with very good grasp of positivist realities.

If we move from economics to urban sociology, an urban social scientist would also, I think, take Mike Davis’s side in understanding the class and inequality politics of Los Angeles. Mike saw that the region’s openness to immigration in the 1970s and 1980s and 1990s was one of its great strengths and that the integration process, while a bit slower

than comparison cities (in terms of income growth), would ultimately work, and he saw this in the context of the century-ago process of European immigration. Mike was *noir* but not negative. And yet, Davis pulled no punches in insisting, with his historian's eye, that the elites of LA displayed particular hostility to working class people and unions, even compared to some other American city-regions, and especially compared to the class politics of the San Francisco Bay Area. Up there, the elites had had to deal with a more mobilized (unionized) working class based on the port industry, and they displayed a more temperate approach to attempts at union-busting than in the Southland. Southern California white elites and working classes were sourced more from poor areas of the Midwest than the European ethnics who went to the Bay Area and who brought with them more class-based politics. The white leadership of LA was rougher and meaner.

Race dynamics in LA, as Mike Davis pointed out, were also harsh, but differently harsh from East Coast cities. Historically, LA's Black population peaked in 1970 as a share of the region, and never attained the shares of the great NE/MW or Southern cities. But during the Great Migration, LA did become a major center of Black culture for a while. The *conjuncture* when Davis was writing *City of Quartz* was a tough one of the crack cocaine urban wars of the 1980s, leading up to the Rodney King riots. The background was LA's deindustrialization (which dramatically affected Black employment and income), and the carceral turn in federal and local policy under Reagan and Clinton presidencies and Deukmejian governorship. The dysfunction and cruelty of policing in the region predates this era, but hardened it in some ways under the regime of Daryl Gates as police chief. And, as Davis points out, LA and Orange Counties were historically a locus of White supremacist and far-right movements, the creepy underside to the liberal but louche Hollywood and beach vibe. Positivist research on the history of urban spatial structure

agrees with Davis by documenting the historically high levels of spatial segregation of race and class groups in LA, even compared to other American cities.

And yet, viewed from the vantage point of Davis's poetics, a long tradition of street knowledge and cultural history suggests that racial politics and relations in LA (and California in general) were never the same as in Chicago, Detroit, New York, DC, Boston, or for that matter, Houston and Atlanta. This is because the white working class was being pacified with their bungalow suburbs, with less direct spatial confrontation contact with arriving Blacks (at least on average). One could ask, as Davis did, "did this matter?", given that the ending point seems no less brutal in the LA case (and perhaps more so) than in other regions of increasing Black population shares due to the Great Migration. When that machine of endless space, used to expand and separate groups, started to break down, so did any difference: from the Watts riots of 1965 to the brutal assassination of Black Panthers to Rodney King, LA shed any pretense to being less rough than Detroit, Boston or DC.

Here, I think Davis spoke more of class than race, and when he spoke of race (in [Davis, 2006](#)) it was about the changing latino politics of the region, with Blackness dealt with more indirectly. That is a faint critique, by the way, because Mike got the big picture, which is ongoing assassination of the "street warriors" of the Black communities in the 1990s, and critically, Mike Davis understood LA's white spatial politics: "...the larger tendency is still toward regional re-segregation, represented by largely monochromatic Simi Valley, Laguna Hills and Temecula Valley."

Politics in general, and white politics in particular, is a strength of Davis's masterpiece. By tracing the frequently corrupt, and economically- or really-violent hold of the elites over region-building, and their no-holds barred approach to opposition, he

illustrates the “deal” of LA’s success. Unlike the history of its neighbor to the north, during the growth boom of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were basically no effective class-rooted, union-based coalitions that could contest the growth machine. The white ethnic culture, much of it conservative and rural “okies,” went along mostly passively with the protestant elite landowners. And land development benefited everyone, except Blacks, who were systematically dispossessed anytime they began to own real property. Davis did acknowledge the arrival of big city politics to replace the old conservative white suburban coalition – the Bradley-West Side coalition of the 1980s is when LA became a big city, maturing in political terms, and becoming a liberal city more like its eastern counterparts. But the end result is what he called “terminal suburbs,” the coalition of racial and class segregation and the politics of land ownership and land development, the machine that rolls over all opposition. “Within Southern California itself, neighborhood diversity is too often an artifact of one group moving in, another moving out.” In other words, not diversity, social mixing, or real cosmopolitanism at all. Just a use of space to move through, self-interested and no community per se. That’s LA’s signature – space to move through, not to live in or share.

This goes even for the elites. In 2006, Davis wrote that “an ‘elite’ – in the aggressive militarized sense of Harry Chandler and his friends in the 1920s – hardly exists in Los Angeles anymore. Power and wealth, of course, remain massively concentrated, but there is a real sense of transience. Too many of the *nouveaux riches* keep their bags packed, ready to bolt the city again if it again catches fire or erupts in mayhem” (Davis, 2006).

Mike Davis understood that the politics of the region was indelibly related to foundational moments in the Progressive Era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which developed weak mayor regimes intended to avoid East Coast centralized mayoral power and

corruption. This required much more compromise with decentralized landowners and homeowner groups. And on the latter, Mike Davis was prescient. Some of the roots of today's housing crisis date from the rise of homeowner group opposition to the growth machine as early as the 1970s. Unlike in the SF Bay Area, where those movements originated mostly in upper-class environmentalism and were rooted in nature preservation, in SoCal they were reactions to the bad, developer-led redevelopment in the 1950s and 1960s. One neighborhood after another were being wrecked with ding-bat apartment construction, with no community amenities, and rising rents, destroying the petit bourgeois aspirations of many to live tranquilly under the sun in their bungalows. It is less well known that it was not SF that was first to stop a freeway (the Embarcadero Freeway, suspended on the SF waterfront for decades); it was LA, where the proposed freeway down Santa Monica Blvd through Hollywood and Beverly Hills was stopped before the transportation planners could completely wreck the core of the Westside. And LA then did get into nature preservation, with a successful movement to preserve the Santa Monica Mountains.

Some of this homeowner action corresponds to the way the woke YIMBYs today portray it, as opposition to growth or rebuilding to keep the racial "other" out. The point is that NIMBYism isn't one thing, it's many. Unlike today's YIMBY critics of NIMBYism, Davis saw the historical context of the homeowner revolts of the 1970s and 1980s: "Fifteen years ago (1990, *my addition*), it was apparent that residential development had reached the last available frontier of available land within an hour of the coast....the dirt is almost gone." The urban frontier had allowed a well-lubricated urban escape machine to function, with redevelopment occurring but allowing families to move to new single-family home neighborhoods. As this ended, the neighborhoods fought for their turf. They were offered



no favorable urban alternative. Things were worse, of course, for the aspiring Black and Latino middle-classes who had obtained a little equity.

In this light, I think if Mike were around to see the YIMBY movement flourishing today, he would call it for what it is: not a progressive anti-NIMBY movement, but a developer's front movement, with compliant academics and angry millennials who want their apartments at any cost, fronting themselves as anti-segregation, but serving as the useful idiots to the all-powerful building industry, and resolutely refusing to advocate for more fundamental reforms of the land and housing development industries in the USA, especially by refusing to consider an expanded role for public housing in achieving a well-housed society.

This brings us to the strong integrative part of Davis's poetics – the materiality, the space of LA. This is less amenable to a purely positivist approach, of course. In the 2006 preface, Mike Davis pulls no punches, telling us that the onward march of “dumb sprawl,” “senile suburbanism,” and “terminal suburbs” constitutes the material heart of the region's daily life. The standard critics vacillate between LA as a horrible, sun-baked dystopia, traffic clogged and desolate, and the sunny palm-tree lined paradise of the beach side and the Richistans of the West Side or Orange County. But Mike Davis was pretty clear on where he stood.

Of course, the classic layout of these spaces was dissected well in Reyner Banham's chef d'oeuvre (*Banham, XXXX*). Other poets of LA, such as Joan Didion (or Aldous Huxley) did excavate (a term favored by Mike Davis) the realities behind appearances; in their cases, behind the mansions on the hills or the beach lies a soul-less cretinous culture of materialism, drugs, exploitative sex, and human desperation. Or David Hockney's glamorous visual hagiography of Mulholland Drive or beautiful boys diving into glamorous

Hollywood pools, and the Starchitects of the tacky deconstructed art pieces-cum-buildings that may be nice as sculptures, but sure don't help ordinary people to live in a nice urban material environment (Didion; Huxley). But, sharp as all these observers are, one senses that none of them ever had to live an ordinary life in the ordinary badlands of So Cal', like the Fontana of Davis's childhood. Davis was closer to Dionne Warwick's hit song (1968) *Do you know the way to San Jose*: "LA is a great big freeway, put a 100 down and buy a car; in a week maybe two they'll make you a star; weeks turn into months.. dreams turn into dust and blow away, and there you are without a friend....." (Cite)

Many of the professionals who deal with LA's materiality (or post-war suburbs in general) are either complicit, or afraid of being called elitists – false populism, afraid to say that Americans deserve better than what the post-war, land-drugged development industry was serving them up as habitat, marketing it as paradise and escape from the earlier urban ills that they had also created. The exception is of course, Dana Cuff, in this special issue, whose rigorous excavation of LA's spatiality is very much in line with Banham and Davis (Cuff, 2023). In addition, in assessing LA's material spatiality, Mike Davis refuses the segmented approaches of positivist engineers and planners. These are the professionals, who – for so many decades – gave a pass on the spatial isolation, alienation, and soul-less ness of LA's suburban architecture, probably because they themselves were so lacking in a culture of urbanism and city life that their complicity may have actually been out of ignorance, not to mention their buy-in to privatized land development rather than public space and public housing. The great exception to this, of course is Dolores Hayden, who was a contemporary of Davis's in the LA of the 1980s (Hayden, XXXX).

Mike Davis spoke his mind, in part because he was not afraid of being called an elitist – the way that anyone who dares criticize the hallowed 20<sup>th</sup> century "American way of life"

is sent back to the Ivory Tower and silenced. He went straight after “dumb suburbanism,” because he was confident of his own class position and spatial roots, his knowledge of life on the ground, to call it like it was, and still is. He sheds cruel light on the complicity of urban social scientists and planners in generating the material failure of LA as a city.

None of this has changed, unfortunately. While planners talk of density and urbanity, the real action is in gobbling up land as if it were 1950. The devouring of space that was Orange County in the 1960s has moved to Arizona, Texas and Florida, or Bakersfield and Tracy for that matter. *City of Quartz* is prescient in describing the frantic American use of space in Southern California – new frontiers within and between cities -- as an escape valve from the systematic effects of social and economic inequality. Davis’s voice remains a towering presence amidst the astonishingly reactionary YIMBY movement that is trying to create yet another great planning disaster today (Hall, XXXX). This is why it is all the more important for us to memorialize his unique poetics, blending powerful positivism with historical knowledge, political acuteness, and moral clarity.

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