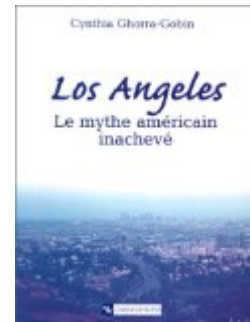


**Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin.** *Los Angeles: le mythe américain inachevé.* France-America award 1998. Paris: CNRS Editions, 1998. 195 pp. Franc 150.00, paper, ISBN 978-2-271-05510-1.



**Reviewed by** Michael F. Davie

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This book is the only one in French (except for Mike Davis' CITY OF QUARTZ translation) on Los Angeles. The author, Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin, teaches Geography at the Sorbonne and at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris; she is also a director of research at the CNRS (National Scientific Research Center) and has spent a number of years at UCLA where, *inter alia*, she received her Ph.D. in Urban Planning. For her book she received the France-America prize which annually rewards the best book in American Studies.

Thanks to this double perspective - geography and urban planning - the author has produced a dense, though very clear, presentation of the U.S.'s second city, while, at the same time, focusing on several points of central interest and importance to non-U.S. readers and social scientists. It must be stressed here that the perception and interpretation of the city by a foreign researcher cannot be identical to one produced by an American one; this makes the book all the more interesting as it reveals facets that can be invisible or judged of secondary importance by the local researchers. Thus, this French author does not present just an-

other monograph on the spatial dynamics of the city, explained through an economic perspective, but an interpretation of the L.A. city model.

Los Angeles is put forward as a representative example of what contemporary cities now are; it is also presented as a model of cities born in the 19th century in contexts differing from those of the Industrial revolution and which evolved quite differently. The author constantly integrates this approach in her work. The author notes that L.A. is certainly not as violent as the popular U.S. TV serials watched this side of the Atlantic seem to relish in depicting; however, its violence can be traced and understood through the tensions produced by the spatial distribution of the city's population and its socio-economic structure.

The city's legendary sprawl, wished by its founding fathers, and the lack of a "real" city centre, raise the question of the effect on the social and spatial identity of the city's population. The question of the social relevance of public space, in the sense this word is used in Europe, is central to many debates here on the meaning of being "ur-

ban", on the role of local government, or on the question of national, regional or local social and political integration. In a city where 83 languages are spoken, the question of integration can not but be posed; but it is also a factor in making the city the cultural capital of the West of the US, of the Pacific Rim and, thanks to Hollywood, one of the cultural capitals of the World. This complex city is managed, either through "colour blindness" or through affirmative action vis a vis the various ethnic or racial groups, even though a city centre may be spatially absent. In a certain sense, L.A. reflected the reality of an utopian U.S. city as translated by the optimism projected by its green sprawling suburbs, ever-encroaching on the untamed arid environment that surrounds it. Today's reality is slightly different, with urban highways criss-crossing it and a skyscraper-type CBD progressively emerging near its historical centre, which is redefining its national and world role.

The book is organized in three parts. The first starts with an urban history of the city since the 18th century, and takes into account the local topography, climate and the effect of the early railways. The author pays special attention to the various phases leading to the consolidation of the metropolis, through the issue of the incorporation of unincorporated areas, tourism (as from the 1870s), the oil industry (as from the 1890s), cinema (1910) and the aeronautical industry (1920s). This specificity also brought about the "americanization" of its urban society, though both the uncontrolled urban sprawl and the consolidation of clearly-marked ethnic neighbourhoods.

The author then details the characteristics of the city's ideals : a mythical space that exemplifies American family values through individual, privately-owned, homes, lush vegetation made possible by bringing precious (but wasted) water from afar, little public transport and a total reliance on the private car and loose municipal controls. These points confirm the success-story of the city

and of its inhabitants, providing an urban model envied and copied all around the World.

Chapter 2 details the spatial organization of the city through its history and description of the railroads and other transport systems, but especially through that of the freeways and the pre-eminence of the private car as the main means of transport. The near-total reliance on the car has produced an urban context where public space is either non-existent or marginalized and where ethnic specificities are clearly marked and affirmed on the ground. L.A. is thus a city lacking a central urban space identifiable by a particular architecture or by specific functions; the recently-built skyscrapers (1980s) stress only economic functions and not public significance. Thus L.A. is void of any space explicitly open to uncontrolled pedestrian ambling or to the unplanned meeting of other persons in a non-private, non-economic, environment.

This type of space is the exact opposite of domestic space, epitomized by the suburban house nestled in a community-centered local environment. Here public life is centred around neighbourhood associations, which infuse a sense of belonging to a particular place; local clubs, parties, community meetings, all, in turn, limit the exchange between persons of different social classes or ethnic origins. Shopping malls, another American characteristic, by employing private guards to limit their access to a particular groups of potential shoppers, also confirm the relative *de facto* homogenization of the local society.

All of this does not, of course, mean that the city is entirely fragmented and in the hands of uncontrolled privatism. Municipal decisions are taken after intense negotiations, hearings and lobbying, proof that the population is taking an active part in the city's life, in both the incorporated and the "free" counties. L.A. is also a multi-ethnic city (the use of "ethnic", "race", "ghettos" or "minority" always surprises non-U.S. readers) with spatial consequences in respect to employment and loca-

tion of industry and services. This, in turn, is a factor in explaining the tensions between the various "ghettos", which sometimes erupted into large-scale urban riots.

The last chapter examines the question of the relationship between the globalization processes and the emergence of a new urbanistic model. L.A. now has a "real" CBD and there is a growing tendency towards re-centralization, due, in part, to the fact that it's not just an American city, but now a Pacific city or even a World city. However, this re-centralization process is doubled by a consolidation of its polynuclearity, as public space is still non-existent. As in the past, indoor public spaces are private and controlled, accessible only to the middle-class. The gated communities only stress even more that L.A. has not opted for public space, but only for functional (i.e. business) ones, with dire environmental consequences. A very useful bibliography of both French and English-language references is presented at the end of the book.

As Los Angeles embodies the future of the city and is the model of post-modern city, this book analyzes the contradictions of the main myths it represents -- a post-modern city . Los Angeles could certainly be presented as a post-modern city because of its decentralized and departicularized urban space linked to privatized public spaces mainly structured around a freeway system. However from the very beginning of its urbanization, it enacted an idea of a "non-city" which could be readable as "60 suburbs in search of a city" or as a place of "houses and gardens". It follows then that if Los Angeles has never been itself as a city , the myth of post-modernity may actually refer to entities which have never been a city. Unfortunately the author did not elaborate enough on the idea of the post-modern city and how this rhetoric is implicitly derived from the American conception of the ideal settlement.

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