

'Image, or Maybe Viewage, Is Everything'

■ One's sense of urban life is greatly influenced by personal geography. An ocean view can erase contemplation of a city's ills.

By MATTHEW JAFFE

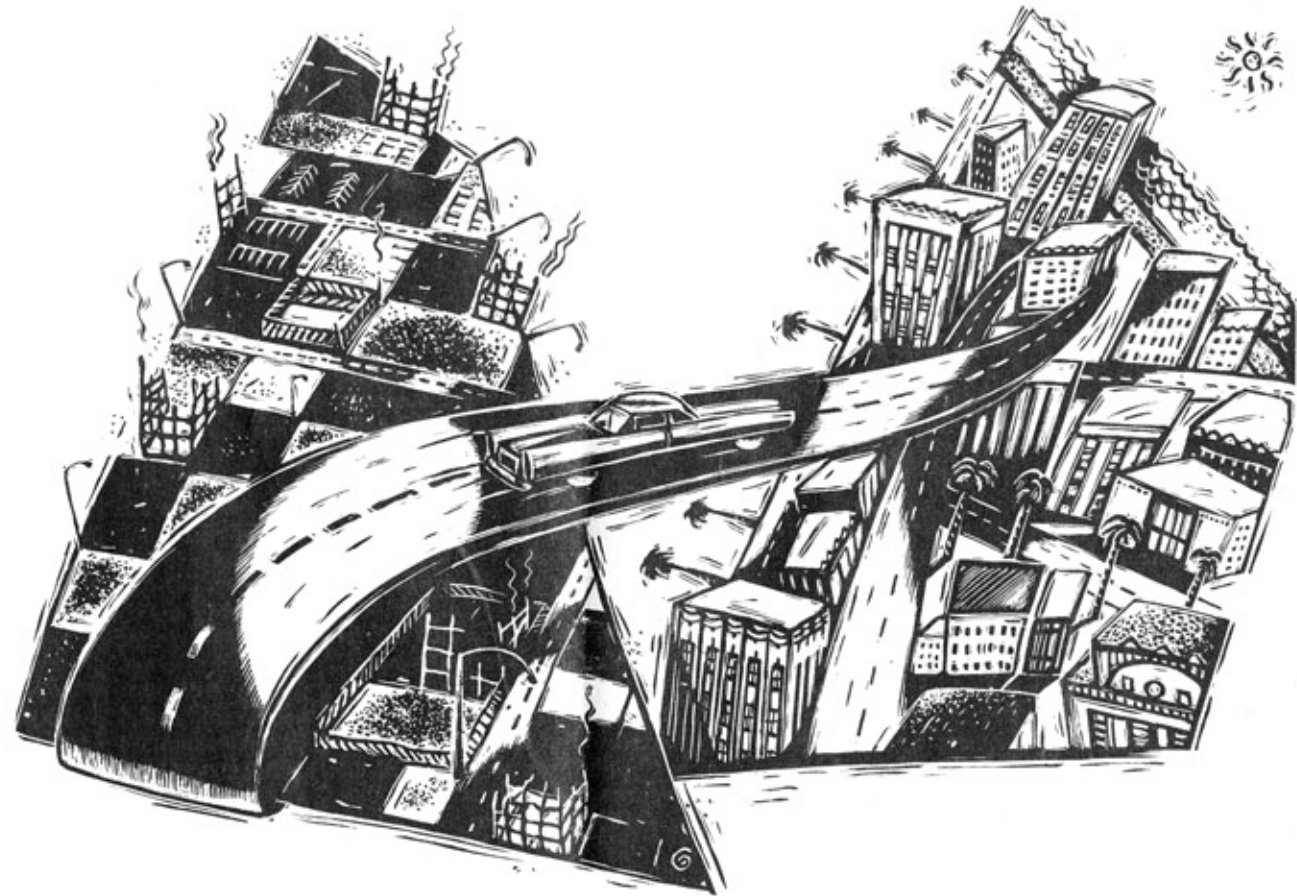
A new myth has risen from the ashes of Los Angeles' long-held civic conceit of a complex but happy multiculturalism. The basic notion is that once the riots, or *intifada* as some prefer, crossed La Brea Boulevard and headed west, the city changed forever. The out-of-sight, out-of-my-face segregation that both helped feed the original myth and allowed many to ignore the city's problems would finally surrender to the realization that even the best ZIP codes could not guarantee protection from modern Los Angeles.

So when Rodney King asked if we could all get along, the response was, "Why, yes. Of course. We must. They could have burned down Campanile." Once the city finished sweeping up the broken glass, we would stay together and tear down the remaining barriers in the City of the Walled-In Angels.

I believed it, too, and told friends in other parts of the country that the very premise of the city's social order was dead. The riots had changed things. Changed me. Actually, I had been out of the country, but there was enough left smoldering that I too could claim my rightful share of the civic trauma.

In my long-distance dispatches from the now-quiet western front, I described burned-out stretches along my commute to Mid-Wilshire. My favorite Indian restaurant was gone. The National Guard stood watch a few blocks from the office. This was real.

Even as the tension ebbed (I noted a watershed day when drivers on Sixth Street didn't duck after a car backfired), it seemed that, yes, indeed, the assumption of security through separation could not be maintained. And around the office neighborhood, the sad increase in the number of homeless and the demise of the shopping strip because of MetroRail construction certainly served as a reminder of the bigger economic picture.



JULIETTE BORDA / For The Times

Then, about one month ago, my office followed the lead of that Indian restaurant and moved to the West Side. My commute remained five miles, but now I traveled west instead of east from the Fairfax District.

It didn't take too many drives to realize that even in post-riot Los Angeles, personal geography could greatly influence one's view of the city. You can choose to bury your head in the sand, especially if that sand is on your own private beach.

After leaving behind the homeless guy who implores drivers from the median at San Vicente and La Cienega boulevards, I now follow a route that seems untouched not just by the riots (or disturbances) but also by the recession (or downturn) which, if you hadn't noticed, officially ended almost two years ago. From the driver's seat, Beverly Hills, festooned with Academy Award banners, the high-rise luxury of Wilshire Canyon and residential Westwood bear no scars.

Outside the parking garage, there are no homeless people waiting to clean windshields. The only hint of class inequality is in the garage itself, where the most expensive cars occupy the reserved slots closest to the elevators,

while the automotive *lumpen* is forced up to the fifth, even sixth level, to search for available spots.

The view from the office doesn't inspire awe (barely a sliver of ocean, a decent chunk of the 405), but it also doesn't take in squalor. No shootings, knife fights or sound of sirens.

In about a week, the dire prospect that I had pondered every day was miraculously mutated into a renewed optimism about L.A. I thought that maybe it was the end of the Reagan-Bush years and the fact that I too now believed in a place called Hope. But when I told a friend living in Northern California about my change of heart, he explained things: He grew up looking at Catalina from his San Pedro back yard, and has always maintained his happy perception of Southern California. Image, or maybe viewage, is everything.

I got off the phone, looked past a swaying palm tree and out to a rain-scrubbed view of the Santa Monica Mountains. What a wonderful world it could be, I thought, if only that guy at San Vicente and La Cienega would just get a job.

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