

The Future of Filming in Downtown Los Angeles

By Sarah Lorenzen

The film industry is a vital part of the economic, social and culture life of downtown Los Angeles. However, due to changing demographics in the area, the prospects for location filming over the next 5 to 10 years are largely unknown thereby presenting a risk to both the city and the film industry. In 2003-2004 we (1) embarked on an urban research project to study these risks. The project had three principal components: 1) researching the urban and infrastructural requirements of location filming; 2) determining what social, technological, environmental, economic and political trends could significantly impact location filming downtown; and 3) developing infrastructural, political and urban responses to mitigate potential conflicts between the film industry and downtown residents.

The film industry represents 9% of California's economy and is Los Angeles' fifth largest employer. The bureau of labor estimates that more than half of all US motion picture/TV production employment is located in California of which 92% is in Los Angeles. Hollywood is also a major tourist attractor, which is significant given that tourism represents 20% of the state's economy. In addition, there are the indirect expenditures by film crews for parking, rentals of underutilized properties, fees paid to LA's

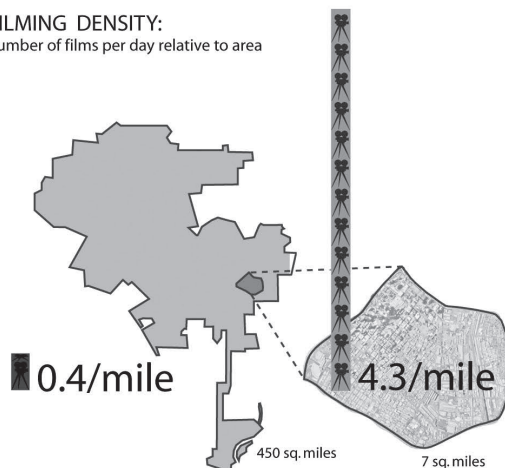
police and fire departments, and payments to residents for use of their properties.

Location filming occurs throughout Los Angeles, but we focused on downtown because it is the most heavily filmed spot in the United States. By our assessment, there is ten times more filming per area in downtown than in the rest of Los Angeles. This is due to the age and variety of buildings types, the large quantity of vacant properties, the area's generic quality (required for the film industry to "cheat" other locations) and the availability of surface parking (needed to set up base camps.)

Our objective was to develop a comprehensive resource tool that would allow the film industry to work more effectively in downtown, while also improving the area for its residents and business owners. The development of this resource tool involved collecting and analyzing complex urban data using aerial mapping, 3D modeling, diagramming and scenario planning techniques. The work was later presented to film industry leaders and city officials to help them make decisions about film industry innovation and film-specific urban infrastructure development for this area of the city.

FILMING DENSITY:

number of films per day relative to area



EIDC Oct. 2003

POPULAR FILM LOCATIONS:

categorized by type

- base camp
- neighborhood/district
- theatre/stage
- office/condo/hotel
- sound stage
- alley
- road/tunnel/bridge
- parking lot



off much of their land and began filming on-site rather than in their studio back lots. In the 70's the cheaper cost of on-location filming (using Cinemobiles) led to even more location shoots and filming in rented production facilities. (2) Another defining event for location filming was the creation of a 30-mile radius labor zone established during the depression by film worker unions. It dictates how far film crews can travel before they are paid higher wages and are given travel per diems.

Today the film industry shoots on location about 44,000 days per year within Los Angeles and unincorporated LA County. (3) To film, crews need large amounts of equipment: trucks, trailers, generators, food carts, bathrooms, props and many, many cars. Movie, TV and commercial shoots are all trending towards larger and more expensive productions. As they grow the people and

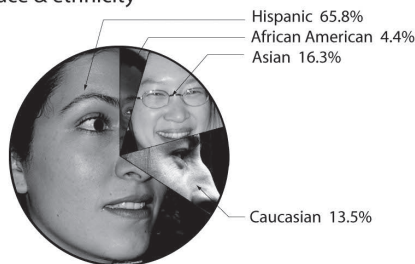
equipment required on site also increases. This has led to an increase in complaints directed at city officials by residents and business owners. The situation is particularly difficult in downtown not only because this area has more filming (downtown is the only "urban-looking" area inside the 30-mile zone), but also because of the kinds of movies that are filmed here. It is the favorite location for action movies and cop shows, which means night shoots, explosives, helicopters, and car chases.

On the other side of the conflict are the film industry concerns about run-away production(4) (particularly by unions) and the potential loss of jobs. The industry believes the city favors resident's needs over their needs, making it harder to film in the city thereby driving productions out of Los Angeles.

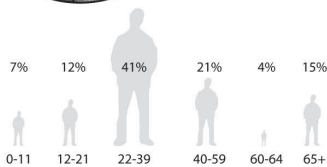
DEMOGRAPHIC & REAL ESTATE STATISTICS

los angeles central city's population in 2000 was 25, 208

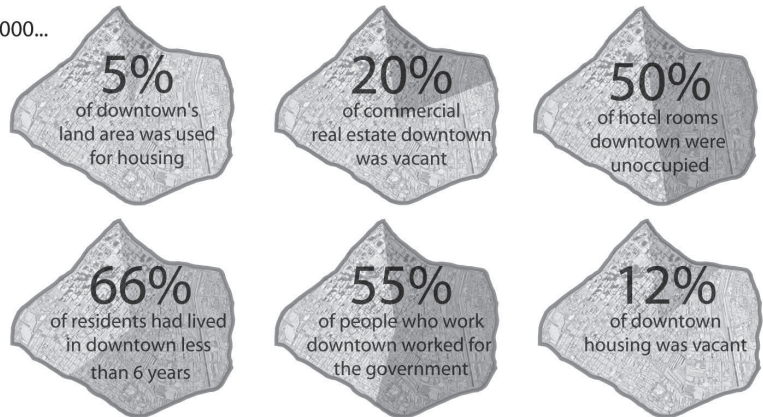
race & ethnicity



age



in 2000...



Downtown Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California
2004 Economic Overview & Forecast

Downtown Los Angeles

Downtown is a relatively small area, about 7 square miles, bounded by the LA River on the east and highways to the North, West and South. It includes a host of communities including: the Arts District, Little Tokyo, the financial and cultural center on top of Bunker Hill, the Civic Center (the largest government center outside of Washington DC), the old Bank District, Skid Row and industrial/manufacturing areas including the Toy, Fashion and Jewelry Districts. The diversity of building types and cultural life in downtown make it ideal for filming. Downtown is in fact the only area in Los Angeles that has "a big city look," (5) which allows it to stand in for other cities in the US and abroad (many of the TV shows and movies that are set in NY, Chicago and Philadelphia are actually filmed in Los Angeles).

Although Los Angeles is a young city, it has gone through many changes. The city was founded in 1781, but it did not really take off until the 1900s. In thirties downtown was a vibrant financial and cultural center, but the area began to decline after the Second World War when resources were diverted to other parts of the city. It started when the city began pumping water to the Valley (mythologized in the movie Chinatown) and building new highways, which promoted suburban growth. Then the city built a new central business district several blocks from the original business center, fractioning the city center. The most devastating blow came when the city officially designated part of downtown as skid row concentrating all the city's homeless services in a tiny area. In the 1980's developers overbuilt office space causing a glut, which significantly devalued downtown properties.

A decade later the Japanese, who were sliding into recession, dumped their vast real-estate holdings in the area. The city's tax structure made it cheaper for landowners to tear down buildings, than to hold onto empty buildings. The result is a downtown full of make-shift surface parking lots, where one fifth of office space is empty (6), where more than 20,000 homeless live (largely in tents), and where only the ground floors of buildings are occupied. The squalor, the large number of empty building, and the large number of surface lots, though unfortunate, benefited the industry in many ways. It made it easier to close down streets, to make as much noise as they wanted, to film at night, and to set up large base camps.

Revitalization

After many false starts, it appears that downtown LA is developing into a vibrant, live-work neighborhood. The area boasts one of the hottest real-estate booms. Downtown is being transformed from an office and industrial center that would only sustain low-income and non-traditional housing into a housing, entertainment and mixed-use center. In some parts, such as in the Old Bank District, the change has been dramatic. It has been estimated that there will be around 6 billion dollars worth of construction in downtown between 2002 and 2006. Much of this revitalization has focused on adaptive reuse of abandoned commercial properties for housing, but there is also new construction. The last five years has seen the construction of several high

47 buildings in downtown are being renovated

\$755.6 million in investments

5287 units in the next 2 1/2 years

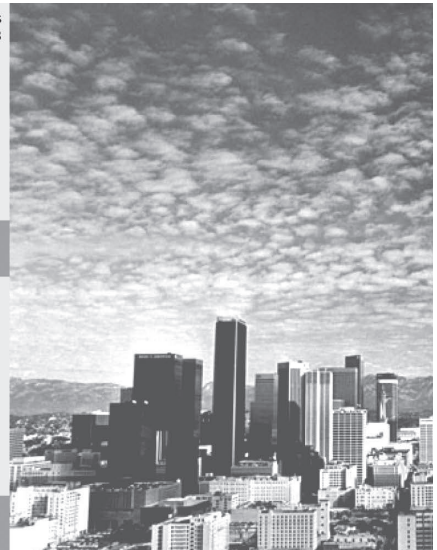
Los Angeles Downtown News
September 15, 2003

for sale

714 units for sale by 2005

for rent

4573 units for rent by 2005



profile government and cultural buildings including Moneo's Our Lady of the Angeles (the world's third largest cathedral), Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall, and Morphosis' Caltrans building. The most recent and ambitious proposal is the Related Companies of California's Grand Avenue Project: \$1.8 billion in outlays for a 16-acre park and 3.8 million square feet of development.(7)

The revitalization of downtown began in 1997 when pioneer real-estate developer Tom Gilmore bought one block in the old bank district. Gilmore and his associates saw an opportunity to create market-rate "loft" housing in a handful of beautiful early 20th century buildings. The buildings lay abandoned and could be purchased for very little money. The city was thrilled that someone was taking an interest in the area and did what it could to help. In 1999 the City Council approved an adaptive reuse ordinance to facilitate residential conversions of downtown's pre-1974 buildings (8) exempting them from typical density, parking and other use requirements demanded of new construction.

Many of the buildings affected by this adaptive reuse ordinance are the same ones that are of particular interest to the film industry. In some ways this revitalization has been a benefit to the film industry as it guarantees that these buildings are maintained. The difficulty is that it has also made it more expensive and harder to get permits to film these locations. Location filming in LA requires that all residents within 500 feet of a shoot be notified ahead of

time (9). Buildings that have affluent tenants (who understand their civic power) often mean that it is harder to get permission to film at night or to get noise dispensations. Residents also often extort film crews demanding compensation to turn off loud radios or to stay out of the way.

Parking

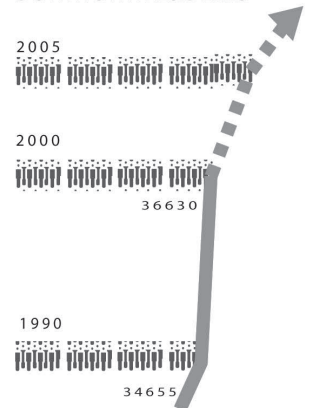
There is no question that the resurgence of downtown LA has been a good thing and that the adaptive reuse ordinance has helped make this revival possible, but there have been unforeseen consequences to these changes that have negatively affected the film industry. The most significant change has been a shortage of surface parking. Second only to finding the right "look" for a particular scene, surface parking is the industry's most valued resource. Every day downtown's parking lots are used to park: crew vehicles, grip trucks, honeywagons, wardrobe trailers, lighting cranes, generators, and to set up: portable toilets, staging areas and catering tents. A medium-sized film shoot in Los Angeles with around 100 crewmembers will need space for around eighty cars, thirty to forty trucks, a large tent and a 1,000 square foot staging area.

Before the real estate boom about 40 percent of parking in the area was on surface lots. (10) As development pressures intensify most of the surface lots are being lost to new development. Street parking is also diminishing to accommodate loading zones,

TYPICAL PAYOUTS BY FILM INDUSTRY TO DOWNTOWN RESIDENTS

renting private apartment:	\$3,000 / day
hanging fake curtains on window	\$500 / day
use of elevator & staircase	\$500 / day
stop table saw noise	\$100 / hour
open building door	\$100 / shoot

DOWNTOWN RESIDENTS



filming downtown ...priceless



University of Pennsylvania Department of City and Regional Planning; US Bureau of Census 1990 and 2000

driveways and other non-parking uses. Exacerbating the loss of surface parking is the exemption clause in the adaptive reuse ordinance. Many of the older buildings that are being converted into housing were built without adequate parking, and relied on public lots and garages to meet their needs. It is also impractical to try to create parking in these older buildings due to building footprint constraints and column placement.

The lack of designated parking for the new housing developments has left residents and film crews fighting for the same spaces. So far film crews are winning these fights, as parking lot owners prefer renting to film crews. This is not surprising given

that some surface lots can command a daily fee of \$10,000. This penchant may change as the number of residents in the area increases and they demand more consistent service. Ironically the revenue derived from renting to film crews during the years when downtown was abandoned is part of the reason that these "temporary use" facilities exist today. If the city wants to retain the specialized use of the area for movie production and also continue to exempt adaptive reuse projects from building new parking, they will need to find other ways to accommodate film crews.

LOCATION FILMING : A MOBILE CITY

images from downtown los angeles



mobile boundary



mobile housing



mobile dressing room



mobile power



mobile security



mobile signage



mobile office



mobile toilets



mobile communication



mobile kitchen

Housing

In the last five years downtown has seen an increase in residential population of around 30%. This residential population is also significantly wealthier than the existing population. Downtown News (a local newspaper) recently reported that the average income of new residents is more than \$100,000 per year. This rapid rise in residential population and demographic shift (particularly in downtown's Artist District, the Old Bank District and the Historic Core) are creating unique challenges for the film industry. An increased residential population has resulted in: louder and more frequent complaints by residents against film crews; increased difficulty closing down street on evenings and weekend; and, as previously mentioned, decreased availability in surface parking for film industry base camps. Despite run-away production, filming activity (including requests for late night filming, after-hours pyrotechnics and street closures) has been on the rise.

The planning department, community redevelopment agency and downtown's city councils have all been promoting housing development in downtown. This seems to be part of a larger urban trend, the result of New Urbanism ideology, that believes housing and mixed-use development is the best solution for every urban area. The single-mindedness of this vision often means that more viable or at least equally significant development types are often neglected. In downtown the highly profitable manufacturing sector and the informal economies of swap meet vendors and the film industry are all being pushed aside in the interest of building market-rate housing. As proof one needs to simply look at the Community Redevelopment Agency's (CRA) 10-year plan for downtown, which does not once mention the film industry in its 200-page document. There is also the lack of interest in manufacturing which though pretty bleak has a vacancy rate of just 2% (11) compared to 20% for commercial properties.

It is short sighted to not incorporate the needs of ill-favored industries into how city agencies imagine the future of their city. Projects that are good for a residential downtown may not be good for other uses. Many beautification projects that might give downtown LA a unique identity (Palm trees for example) would be good for the residential community, but would be fatal to the film industry.

Politics

It has been fascinating to try to discover why an industry that has so much social and economic clout is so under-represented politically. Most LA politicians will go on record to support the film industry and to express their desire to keep filming in LA, but their allegiances are to the people who elect them. The film industry for all of its money and prestige is an invisible nomad. The big studios do not own property downtown so local politician and planning commissioners do not benefit directly (in terms of votes) from supporting their interests.

Location filming falls under a section called exceptions in the planning code, which means that their activities are allowed as long as the group filming has a license from the mayor's office or whomever he has designated to oversee this permitting. (12) The mayor and city council members can change film permitting rules if it is politically expedient to do so. In February 2005 the city council led the effort to add several new filming restrictions downtown. There are currently more than 150 rules that must be followed to film downtown (about 15% more than other areas of the city.)

The Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) has done little to incorporate the needs of the film industry. This is partly because the film industry conducts its business on the public right of way and not on privately held land. The industry is neither public

(does not fall under the domain of the government) nor private, so as Ron Maben from the Planning Department put it, "they fall through a lot of cracks." The CRA might be able to offer concessions to the film industry such as guaranteed parking, tax incentives, and other allowances if there were a way to count them as residents, or if this were mandated from the Mayor or the Governor's office.

If studios had a permanent presence downtown (such as owning property) they might be able to extract more concessions out of local city governments and development agencies. Owning property would also let them decrease their impact on city streets and parking facilities by allowing them to shuttle crew and equipment on site.

Proposals

In order to counter the trends threatening the film industry's ability to work downtown we developed a variety of short, medium and long-range proposals that could be implemented either independently or together. The proposals (described below) were the direct result of our research and were tested against future scenarios. The scenarios were shaped by tracking current trends and by imagining situations that might radically change the direction of downtown (something on par with the Japanese recession of the 1990s.) The significant events (in scenario lingo they are called critical uncertainties) were combined with the trends, and the resulting world was then described in a narrative.

A. Establish a film overlay zone across parts of downtown (similar to the adaptive reuse ordinance.) Allow more filming, longer hours and assigned parking within the zone. Increase restrictions outside the zone. Goal will be to promote film-friendly development like manufacturing or low-income housing within the zone and push less tolerant development like market-rate housing outside the zone.

B. Build an infrastructural grid within the film zone. A series of utility nodes will be located within three blocks of important film sites allowing connection to city electricity, data, water and sewage. This will reduce the number of trucks brought on site, cut down on set-up/dismantle time, and eliminate the need for generators.

C. Create a database of underutilized buildings and open areas available for temporary lease. These properties will be used in lieu of tents and trailers for services like dining, offices, wardrobe, and restrooms. It will be especially important to locate available facilities near infrastructural nodes.

D. Establish façade easements for buildings that are important film sites. A historic facade easement is usually given to preserve the appearance of a historic or culturally significant building and its surrounding setting. In return for protecting and doing the upkeep of the façade the owner will receive a 10 to 15% tax deduction based on the fair market value of the property. This will protect important film sites downtown.

E. Take advantage of tourist dollars brought in by interest in the film industry to increase tourism downtown. This will help existing businesses and attract new commercial development. This is compatible with the city's desire to create a 24-hour city that is safer and that has more amenities. Increased tax revenues will be reinvested into film infrastructure nodes and façade easements. Lower film demand on parking will free up parking lots for tourists visiting local merchants.

F. Locate crew parking in underutilized parking structures or empty lots at the perimeter of downtown. Establish a shuttle services to take crew from these remote-parking sites and from mass transit stops to film sites and assigned staging areas around downtown.

G. Install electronic street signage to warn drivers of street closures and alternate traffic routes.

H. Designate secondary roads (streets that don't connect directly to surrounding highways) to allow truck parking.

I. Establish building requirements for new parking structures to require truck access at grade.

The goal of this project was not to offer "band-aid" fixes, but to find innovative solutions to help the film industry to adapt as downtown changes, and to propose changes in the way city officials incorporate the needs of the film industry into the planning process.

Our experience presenting this project was symptomatic of the lack of dialog and cooperation there has between the local city government and the film industry. Although our presentation was heralded a success by both groups (the politicians in the room agreed that something had to be done, and the film industry executives and union leaders promised to be more considerate of residents), both sides felt that the other side should be responsible for funding the work.

If the film industry is to remain a visible presence downtown the first thing that must be done is for film industry leaders and city officials to find better ways to communicate. Both groups need to discuss what may happen over the next 5, 10 and 15 years in order to ensure that the film industry remains in Los Angeles and that downtown continues to develop.

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Acknowledgments:

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I am indebted to my colleagues Saad Ahmad, David Bergman, Konstantinos Chrysoy, JD Dowling, David Hartwell, Jeffrey Inaba and Michael Speaks, for many of the ideas and graphics used in this paper.

(1) Our group consisted of: Sarah Lorenzen, JD Dowling, Konstantinos Chrysoy and Saad Ahmad.

(2) www.filmsite.org

(3) Incessant Film Shoots Leave Residents Reeling, Jessica Garrison. LA Times, June 16 2003.

(4) "Run away production" is when the location of a movie is moved out of LA because the new location offers cheaper labor, fewer unions, tax breaks or other economic incentives.

(5) This fact was corroborated by Steve Dayan a business agent with Teamsters, Local 399 (Studio Drivers and Location Managers) when I interviewed him in February 2005.

(6) Real Estate Southern California, Real Estate Media Inc, January 2004.

(7) <http://www.grandavenuecommittee.org>

(8) Los Angeles Planning and Zoning Code, www.cityofla.org/pln/zone_code/2000zcode/zcode.html

(9) http://www.eidc.com/html/notification_.html

(10) Final Report Downtown Los Angeles Parking Study For Portions Of The Historic Core And Adjacent Areas, Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc, November 2003.

(11) Downtown Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California 2003 Economic Overview and Forecast prepared by the LA County Economic Development Corporation in June 2003.

(12) LA is unique in that there is a non-profit group called the Entertainment Industry Development Corporation (EIDC) that is responsible for expediting permits, notifying residents and promoting the film industry. This group had corruption problems and was completely overhauled less than one year ago. It may prove to be a successful film advocate in the future.