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To Live and Walk in L.A

A Downtowner Dreams of a Mass Transit Future

by Robert La Franco

The other day, while bouncing through Wilshire Center on the 720 Metro Rapid, I called a friend in Santa Monica to catch up.

"Hey, did you know we have a subway in L.A.?" This is actually a little known fact on the Westside.

"What's that noise?" she asked, ignoring my useless bit of information. "Where are you?"

"I'm on the bus," I said.

"Why?"

"Because we don't have a train," I said bitterly. I could hear background noise and drew a mental picture of it, a trademark California scene of rolling surf, screaming gulls and ocean breezes. It was actually BMWs on the 405.

"No, why a *bus*?" She spit out that last word as if I had said I was at the entrance of a leper park. "Is your car busted?"

Since moving Downtown a year ago, I've become enthralled with the concept of L.A. mass transit. At first it was a passing curiosity, but now I see it as a civic duty. The mayor wants to make this a "green city" complete with appealing public spaces and pedestrian-friendly zones that will close the vast gaps of unwelcoming urban-ness that make up L.A. I want to support him in that, but I am also truly worried about the Inconvenient Truth that wafts through my screens and appears as a layer of gritty, black soot on my furniture every week. Having missed a chance to sell during the recent run-up in housing prices, buying a hybrid is out of the question; riding a bike 15 miles to see a movie or go to dinner seems a bit silly. That leaves mass transit.

"Why would you want to be on a train in L.A. anyway? What if there is an earthquake?" my friend asked as she inched her way northbound. I tried to concentrate but was distracted by an old woman wearing a polyester shirt with paramecium designs, white gloves, a heavy layer of talcum powder on her face, and plastic bags wrapped around her shoes. She began smacking me after I'd tapped her shoulder to tell her a man was giving up his seat.

"Yeah," I said, turning my shoulder to my attacker. "I guess I'd rather be crushed by a parking garage or a freeway overpass. At least I'll be sitting in a leather seat at the time."

"It's not the same thing. Besides, you have to walk everywhere. And what kind of people take trains in L.A. anyway?" she asked.

At this moment, a young woman boarded. She was wearing knee-high leather boots and a mini-skirt that reached barely a quarter of the way down her fleshy and unadorned bottom. After prancing up and down the aisle, she took a seat that had recently been abandoned by a homeless woman whose odor compelled people to hold their hands to their noses. A couple of French tourists seemed oblivious to all of it as they poured over their *Frommer's* guidebook.

My friend was getting to the heart of the matter: I'm told it was this fear of the unwashed mob that has left L.A. with a stubby train line reaching only as far west as Koreatown. Thanks to this abrupt end, the mass transit trip from the Civic Center to the Red Line's last stop takes 15 minutes. The Metro Rapid bus from there to the eastern border of Santa Monica takes about an hour.

I sighed as the bus driver unleashed fury on a Mexican man who had asked her about the schedule of another bus line. She screamed that she had no way of knowing the schedule of other bus lines. He called her a liar. She told him he had a small penis. Uh-oh, I thought as I slinked back in my seat.

"Good people keep on walking no matter what happens," the Buddha once said, a stinging rebuke to the more popular bromide about walking in L.A. Yet Westside politicians are suddenly supporting the subway's completion a decade after blocking it on behalf of their now jammed constituents. Unfortunately, getting rail lines running to the ocean, the airport and deeper into the Valley seems, at best, a long shot.

Still, I can't help but get excited by the passionate talk of making L.A. a truly 21st century city; talk of a trolley reborn in Downtown Los Angeles that would whisk pedestrians along dressed-up Art Deco corridors; talk of the new light rail that will run from USC to Culver City and maybe, someday, to Santa Monica.

I dream of rail lines breezing past slow moving - but moving - freeways, lines that run from Pasadena to the beach, up into the Valley and then across it through Burbank and Glendale back to Downtown. I dream of being able to get home after a late night without having to throw together a new itinerary on the fly when the subway security gate lowers before my eyes. I fantasize of Westsiders looking on in envy at a vibrant, colorful, energized and walkable Downtown. Not an amusement park or pockets of isolated and heavily protected affluence, but a real urban core, entertaining its residents and then discharging them to the four winds, car-less and smiling. For a moment I feel good knowing that someday trains may once again rumble along crowded L.A. roadways.

It's a bit of fantasy, I know. But intending no offense to a notable hair-gel band of the 1980s, I think I'll go with the Buddha on this one. Walking is noble, even in L.A. It's the waiting that's the hardest part.

My Downtown is a column about Down-town residents and the issues, challenges and triumphs they encounter while living in the Central City.

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