

From Decadence to Despair: 1980's & Early 90's Los Angeles

By Jon Rapoport

Los Angeles is a city unlike any other municipality that has ever existed in the history of the world. In less than a century, the city and metro area grew from a tiny burg into one of the planet's leading centers of culture, economic productivity and tourism, while standing as the undisputed headquarters of America's most exportable product, its all-powerful popular culture. Known the world over for its celebrity lifestyle, beaches and ideal weather, the five-county metro area of 17 million souls has evolved into a melting pot of people from every corner of the world, seeking their piece of the California dream. But, like any fast-growing, highly impactful organism, growing pains will always be a part of the equation. While present-day LA deals with the wide-ranging impacts of a lack of affordable housing, a homeless epidemic, the never-ending threat of natural disaster and a raging pandemic, this world city sits in a far different position than the ups and downs that came with life in the roller coaster ride that was the frenetic days of the 80's and early 90's.

From 1980 through 1996, Los Angeles served as the world chokepoint for the intersection of domestic and international political drama, a changing business landscape, immigration, popular culture, sports, health/wellness, drug addiction, crime, civil rights and acts of nature. Just like how the roaring 20's gave way to the Great Depression of the 1930's, LA's period of boom soon became its most profound period of bust. With the snap of a finger, everything changed. And because it was the entertainment capital of the world, the cameras were almost always rolling.

While New York City has been the nation's largest municipality since 1790, LA did not become the second largest city until 1980. At the turn of the 20th century, LA was home to just 100,000 people, with LA County laying claim to 170,000 residents. Events like the 1932 Summer Olympics, the relocation of the entertainment industry from New York, the post World War II surge in new residents and the increase of non-European immigration, turned this formerly sleepy coastal town to a city of 3 million and a county of 7.5 million by 1980. When factoring in the surrounding counties of Orange, Ventura, Riverside and San Bernardino, the 1980 LA metro area had grown to nearly 11 million residents. Few cities and metropolitan areas had experienced a meteoric rise as rapid and profound as LA. This vast region of ocean, mountains, desert and beautiful year-round weather had most certainly arrived with a bang.

The beginning of the 1980's saw the convergence of a diverse group of historic figures, all of which had come to LA to make their mark on the world.

Ronald Reagan was elected president in November of 1980. Reagan's rise from actor, to California governor and on to the White House served as a crowning achievement for LA. A Hollywood actor becoming president very much legitimized the entertainment industry, with Reagan's foreign policy even further enhancing the economic standing of the area. At its peak in 1987, California was home to 30 percent of the nation's

aerospace jobs, with 1 in 10 of those jobs occurring within the LA area. All told, 20 percent of the state's manufacturing roles were in aerospace, with a whopping 28 percent of LA's manufacturing positions coming from that industry. With the Cold War raging and the space shuttle program in high gear, Reagan saw to it that billions of dollars in defense and space exploration funds landed in his home state. When combining government expenditures with commercial air travel becoming more affordable to the average American, the Los Angeles aerospace industry was flying at a breakneck clip throughout the 80's.

The 1980's also witnessed massive growth in the Asian business landscape, particularly that of Japan. While the rise of the Japanese auto and electronics market did a number on its American counterparts in Detroit and elsewhere, the LA area saw benefit from these developments as its combined seaports of San Pedro and Long Beach leapfrogged New York to become the nation's leading commercial port of entry. In addition, virtually all of the Japanese and Korean auto and electronics manufacturers elected to base their American operations within either LA or Orange County.

Not to be outshined, the entertainment industry also experienced boom times in the 80's, thanks in large measure to the invention of cable/satellite television, the VCR and Walkman. America and the world suddenly desired more entertainment content at their fingertips, with Hollywood stepping up and providing some of history's most successful and memorable works of film, television and music. From a cinematic standpoint, Stephen Spielberg led the way with classics such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *E.T.* and *The Color Purple*. On the small screen, mega TV events like the "Who Shot J.R.?" episode of *Dallas* and the final episode of *M*A*S*H* shined brightly, along with the emergence of the situation comedy, including classics like *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers*. In the world of music, the creation of MTV, along with the ability for music to now be heard on the go, led to enormous growth, with names like Michael Jackson and Madonna quickly becoming pop culture icons throughout the world.

The LA sports scene also experienced boom times throughout the 80's beginning when Magic Johnson moved from point guard to center (in place of an injured Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), tallying 42 points, 15 rebounds and 7 assists, in the Lakers' 1980 championship clinching victory over the 76ers. Magic, Kareem and company would go on to win five NBA titles, during the decade, with the Lakers "Showtime" era team becoming one of the most legendary of all-time and Magic himself becoming perhaps the city's most beloved figure. Not to be overshadowed, 1980's LA sports also included two Dodgers World Series titles (1981, 1988), with the '88 Fall Classic producing the iconic Kirk Gibson homerun off Dennis Eckersley. In addition, the Raiders won the city's first Super Bowl (after the 1984 season), Wayne Gretzky was traded to the Kings, and LA played host to the iconic 1984 Summer Olympics, which introduced the world to living legends like Carl Lewis, Mary Lou Retton and Edwin Moses.

All of these aforementioned political, business and cultural events significantly contributed to California and the LA area economy well outpacing the rest of the US,

leading to an 18 percent LA County population increase, during the decade, and a real estate surge from both domestic and international new residents and investors, all hoping to grab a hold of their piece of 1980's Los Angeles. Immigrants from throughout Asia and Latin America began a steady stream of migration to the area, with LA now well established as one of the world centers for making or starting a new life, discovering oneself and in many cases living a life of excess. But, as has often been the case throughout history, boom times never last forever and rough seas are an inevitable part of the journey ahead.

1990's LA

"General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall."

President Reagan uttered these historic words on June 12, 1987, while speaking at the Berlin Wall. Later that year, Reagan and Gorbachev signed the first of multiple nuclear non-proliferation treaties. Two years later, the Berlin Wall indeed fell, and in late 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. While this was obviously a fantastic development for the nation and the world, the Los Angeles area was forced to deal with the consequences of the Cold War concluding and the steep reduction in defense spending that followed. From 1988 through 1994, the defense sector contracted by 25 percent, with California and LA specially bearing the brunt of the cutbacks. The drop in production was so profound that by the time 1994 came around, the number of aerospace jobs had plummeted to levels more on par with 20 years earlier. Simply stated, the fall of the Iron Curtain was a gut punch to the Los Angeles economy. While aerospace still has a significant presence throughout the LA area, sadly, many of these jobs never even came close to coming back.

Come the 1990's, the great successes of the Asian economic landscape had also largely gone by the wayside, most notably that of Japan. While the 80's represented boom times in the Land of the Rising Sun, the 90's are known throughout the country as the "Lost Decade." Economic output came to a near standstill, with annual GDP barely clearing levels of just one percent. These declines impacted Japanese products entering LA ports, while at the same time diminishing much of the country's ongoing investment in the LA region.

The two above circumstances, combined with a subsequent real estate market downturn, ensured that the LA area would be among the hardest hit localities of the early 90's US recession. In fact, while much of the country began to see their respective economic fortunes recover, many experts believe that LA took three additional years to rebound from the downturn, as the area was navigating structural changes to its economic makeup, in addition to dealing with everything that comes with cyclical economic swings.

With the faltering Los Angeles area economy and changing local demographics as the backdrop, the region would soon experience a series of events unique to anything that has ever taken place in American history and all within the span of just a few short years.

On November 7, 1991, Magic Johnson announced that he was HIV positive and would have to retire from the Lakers immediately. In the blink of an eye, the man who perhaps best represented both the success and excess of the 1980's was struck down by a virus that had done terrible damage to the gay community, but was believed to be impervious to heterosexual people, especially that of one of the city's most renowned skirt chasers. "Showtime" was over and Magic suddenly had a new opponent to overcome. In the wake of the announcement, the whole world quickly turned its collective attention to the plight of those with HIV or full-blown AIDS.

On March 3, 1991, Rodney King was severely beaten by four LAPD officers, at the conclusion of a high-speed chase. A recording of the incident was released shortly thereafter, and almost immediately, the topic of police brutality became a major focus of conversation throughout LA and the rest of the nation, with the area's black community seeing the episode as yet another marker in its decades-long belief that the LAPD and the justice system operated in a systematically racist manner towards members of their community. When the four police officers were found not guilty, in late April of 1992, the city exploded in rage, with the five-day period of unrest resulting in 63 deaths, more than 2,000 injuries, roughly 12,000 arrests and \$1 billion worth of damage. Portions of LA had been burned to the ground, and once again, the entire world was watching.

Due in large measure to a rapid escalation of gang activity and narcotics sales/use, the violent crime rate of both LA city and LA County grew dramatically throughout the second half of the 80's, with the murder rate hitting its apex from 1991 through 1993, when the city was home to more than 1,000 homicides in each of those years. During 1992, which is of course the same year as the LA Riots, the city accounted for 1,092 killings, with the county totaling an astonishing 2,589 murders. The proliferation of violent crime, gang violence and drug addiction became a prominent topic of conversation in the late 80's and early 90's, with LA once again serving as the focal point of the dialogue. Life in South LA was perhaps best depicted by the 1991 film *Boyz n the Hood* and via West Coast rap music, with emerging superstars like Dr. Dre, the late Easy-E, Ice Cube, Ice-T, the late Tupac Shakur and Snoop Dogg leading the way. The good and bad of life on the streets of LA was now being showcased to millions of young people throughout America's cities and suburbs.

In 1993, brothers Eric and Lyle Menendez stood trial for the murders of their parents Jose and Kitty, with the crime taking place within the walls of the family's Beverly Hills mansion. Once again, the country's attention was focused on LA, with this spectacle playing out like that of a daytime soap opera, with tales of wealth, greed, sexual abuse, drug abuse and authoritative parenting taking center stage. As the nation watched, the brothers became household names and objects of affection from a series of women, despite eventually being convicted on first-degree murder charges. This trial served as

the criminal justice undercard for a subsequent double-murder and court case that still grips the nation and world to this day.

On January 17, 1994, a 6.7 earthquake rocked the Los Angeles area, with the epicenter occurring under the San Fernando Valley cities of Northridge and Reseda. The natural disaster resulted in 57 deaths, roughly 9,000 injuries and an estimated \$35 billion in damage. In less than two years, the LA area had now experienced billions of dollars worth of damage and more than 100 deaths, via acts of devastation perpetrated by both people and nature. Making matters worse, all this physical and mental anguish occurred with the backdrop of a depressed economy and surging rates of crime. LA was yet again taking it on the chin and of course the entire country was tuned in to catch a glimpse of the carnage.

After the 1994 NFL season, the Los Angeles Raiders elected to move back to Oakland, with Rams leaving town for St. Louis. The Raiders had seen a precipitous drop in attendance due in large measure to the team's unintended connection to the LA gang scene, as well as the franchise's home stadium sitting in what was at the time a very crime ridden neighborhood. Similarly, the Rams had lost popularity after relocating to Anaheim in 1980, with the club averaging only five wins per season, during their final five years in Orange County. Suddenly, the US's number two market was void of representation in the country's most popular sports league. Sports fans throughout the country looked on in bewilderment.

On June 12, 1994, Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman were murdered outside of Nicole's Brentwood home. Ex-husband O.J. Simpson was arrested (after taking part in the world's most famous low speed chase) and later tried in the most infamous murder trial in American history. In 1995, Simpson would of course be found not guilty in the case, with the trial bringing so much of LA life into focus, whether it be the police and justice system's dealings with the black community, the paradox of black and white LA, as well as all the trimmings that come with being rich and famous in LA and America. And once again, the entire world was riveted by every twist and turn of this ultimate LA story.

When would it stop?

Simply stated, the city was reeling. 1980's movies of LA success stories like *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Karate Kid* were replaced by more pessimistic 1990's views of the area in features like the previously mentioned *Boyz n the Hood*, *Grand Canyon* and *Falling Down*. The glory days of the 80's were now a distant memory, in light of the mayhem and bloodshed of the early 90's. LA had transformed from prestige to a punch line.

By 1995, life finally began to turn around for the ailing city and region. In April, the UCLA Bruins men's basketball team won its first NCAA championship in 20 years. During the summer of 1996, the Lakers drafted Kobe Bryant and signed Shaquille O'Neal, paving the way for what would become one of the greatest dynasties in modern sports history. The second half of the 90's also saw the local economy finally turn the corner, joining

the rest of the country in what would become the most prosperous economic period in American history. And, like much of the country, the crime rates of the late 80's and early 90's finally began to recede. LA had weathered the storm of the early 90's, but what a storm it turned out to be. It was finally time to move ahead with long awaited redevelopments of prominent areas like Hollywood and downtown LA, amid charting its course for the 21st century. LA was back on its feet!

This 16-year stretch offers a glimpse into both a highly volatile and transformational period in LA and American history, while once again providing the opportunity to learn how this hugely important city overcame its most exasperating set of challenges, similar to what the country as a whole has experienced in the early 2020's and hopes to move past as the decade progresses.

The events of 80's and early 90's Los Angeles are as relevant today as they could ever possibly be.