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Why the rush to Manhattanize L.A.?

There seems to be little public debate about the dramatic remaking of Los Angeles into a left-coast New York.

By Joel Kotkin

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Last week, the City Council voted 12 to 0 to approve a sweeping set of zoning changes that will encourage larger and more dense development downtown.

The new rules are only the latest move toward the Manhattanization of Los Angeles. There's also the renewed interest in extending the Red Line subway to the ocean. And there's billionaire Phil Anschutz's plan to create a Times Square for Los Angeles near Staples Center, as well as billionaire Eli Broad's aim to duplicate New York's 5th Avenue along Grand Avenue. There's even talk, in planning circles, of building mini-condos and apartments at -- what else? -- Manhattanite sizes of 250 to 350 square feet.

Los Angeles, the first great modern metropolis with multiple urban cores, seems determined to remake its urban DNA -- and fashion itself, to one degree or another, in the image of New York City. Bruce B. Brugmann, the populist publisher of the San Francisco Bay Guardian, coined the term "Manhattanization" in the 1970s to describe just what we're seeing. Broadly speaking, it refers to a vertical urbanism in which the entire city serves as a bedroom for a dominant urban core that is chock-full of cultural attractions. Density is a premium value in a successfully Manhattanized city, producing economies of scale, extraordinary concentrations of skills and an entertaining street scene. Human activities are more important than sunlight, nature or individual privacy.

Such development is peculiarly suited for Manhattan Island, a geographically constrained and remarkably stable lump of rock on which the city grew rapidly in the heyday of water and rail transportation. It's not so clear, however, that L.A., which has been expanding outward for more than 100 years and is famously sun drenched, car crazy, blessed with natural beauty and earthquake prone, should follow a similar course.

The advertisement features a grid layout. At the top left is the Cadillac logo. To its right, the text 'SRX' is displayed in a large, white, sans-serif font. Below 'SRX', the text 'ATTRACTIVE LEASE OFFERS' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. To the right of this text is a photograph of a silver Cadillac SRX SUV parked in front of a modern building. Below the text and photo, there are two buttons: 'LEARN MORE >' and 'LOCATE A DEALER >', both in white text on a dark background. At the bottom right of the advertisement is the Cadillac logo in its signature script font.

At the very least, such a dramatic change should be the topic of serious debate among politicians, city officials and the public. But so far, the debate about higher density in L.A. has been as contentious as public discussions in the former Soviet Union.

Why is this happening? One reason for the city's apparent lock-step march to Manhattanization is that big developers are increasingly dominating and politicizing land-use decisions, much as they do in New York City. The \$4-billion "Atlantic Yards" project in New York is an example. The proposal would add about 6,500 mixed-income residential units to the generally low- and mid-rise environment of downtown Brooklyn, making population density in the area among the nation's highest. Despite intense grass-roots opposition, developer Bruce Ratner and his ally, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, have won at least \$500 million in subsidies for the project.

"You can't stop [big developer] interests unless you have equally powerful interests on your side," said urban historian Fred Siegel.

Similar developer-driven politics is becoming increasingly common in Los Angeles as well. Land and politics have a long history in the city. But many smaller builders -- people who constructed tract housing or apartments in the 1970s and 1980s -- no longer can play today's complex political game, involving government subsidies, "air rights" to allow more high rises and inclusionary zoning that requires below-market units in new projects. One retail developer told me that he and others like him prefer to build in such places as San Fernando, Burbank and the Inland Empire, where "the development game" is not as complex and politically determined.

That leaves the field largely to big developers with deeper pockets, more lawyers, better political connections and diversified interests that enable them to wait out the city regulatory process. "A decade or two ago," said Robert Scott, who served on the Los Angeles Planning Commission from 1993 to 2003, "you could still build pretty much by the existing code. But the process has become less and less accessible" to smaller players.

In part, that's because city policies have promoted, at least in principle, such social goals as affordable housing and "smart growth" -- building condos and apartments near commercial areas and transit lines. But the side effect of these policies has been to make the development process impenetrable to all but the most well-heeled, Scott says.

What opposition there is to Manhattanization is relatively isolated -- like the citizen recall effort against Westside City Councilman Jack Weiss, who is considered by some of his constituents to be too friendly with big developers. Weiss alienated them when he embraced construction of two 47-story condominium towers in Century City, calling the project a perfect example of smart growth. Homeowner groups strongly opposed the development because they contended that it would add to already heavy traffic congestion in the area. (Chicago-based JMB Realty, the project's developer, eventually agreed to create a \$5-million fund to soften the environmental effects of the towers, and a dispute about who controls it sparked the recall effort against Weiss.)

But only a handful of local politicians -- including, most notably, Supervisor Zev

Yaroslavsky -- seem to recognize that some Angelenos think that adding density to our already crowded region won't necessarily improve the quality of life. He recently told a gathering of neighborhood councils that "the gulf" between City Hall and the community over land use and development "gets wider every day."

The paucity of official opposition to Manhattanization reflects, in part, changes in L.A. politics. As recently as the 1990s, the city's political scene was a fractious game, with distinct voices representing different neighborhoods, ethnic groups, labor and business associations. Opposition to further high-density development was particularly strong in the San Fernando Valley. There, such grass-roots-oriented City Council members as Joel Wachs and Ernani Bernardi paid more attention to the interests of their constituents than to those of developers and unions. Bernardi, for instance, was a constant foe of the city's redevelopment agency, which long promoted high-density growth, and he and Wachs often challenged downtown development proposals tied to taxpayer subsidies.

Today, small developers, who often had local supporters, are out, and citywide and national players are in. Prime examples are New York-based Related Cos. (Grand Avenue), Anschutz Entertainment Group (L.A. Live), JMB Realty (condo towers in Century City), Astani Enterprises (downtown condos), J.H. Snyder Co. (NoHo Commons), as well as the shopping-mall giant Westfield, which has proposed building in the west Valley what would be one of the largest malls in Southern California.

These companies, along with other developers, have become substantial contributors to the campaigns and causes of local politicians. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's campaign to control the L.A. Unified School District, for instance, was a recent beneficiary. Because it was an issue campaign (rather than a political race), there were no limits on contributions, and many big developers with projects pending or already underway in the city were generous in their giving.

For example, Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG) gave \$125,000 to the mayor's Committee for Government Excellence and Accountability, set up to lobby for a bill that would have given him significant control over L.A. Unified, and to Partnership for Better Schools, which spearheaded Villaraigosa's successful drive to win a majority on the school board. Other contributors to the two committees included developer J.H. Snyder Co. (\$100,000); AP Properties, a JMB Realty affiliate (\$100,000); Astani Enterprises (\$100,000) and Westfield (\$100,000).

Term limits also may encourage developer-driven politics. Before voters limited their time in office to two consecutive four-year terms in 1993, council members often represented their districts for decades without having to worry much about challengers. Bernardi, for instance, served 32 years on the City Council.

But in the era of term limits, ambitious council members facing the end of their terms have to begin fundraising for their next race for elected office almost immediately after election day. Given the high cost of modern campaigns, they have no incentive to alienate wealthy developers who could bankroll them. True, individual contributions to political campaigns are capped. But big developers have subcontractors, lobbyists and lawyers who can add even more dollars.

This may partly explain why the City Council -- even those members who represent the Valley and South Los Angeles and might logically be skeptical about subsidies for downtown developers -- has largely bought into the mayor's vision of "elegant density" to keep pace with rising demand for housing. For instance, not only did council members vote 12 to 0 on last week's zoning overhaul, but earlier this year, the vote to lease public land and grant about \$66 million in tax breaks over 20 years to the developer of the Grand Avenue project was 13 to 0 by the City Council and 4 to 1 by the L.A. County Board of Supervisors. And in 2005, AEG received \$270 million in financial help from the city for L.A. Live. The vote: 14 to 0.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with unanimity. The problem is the lack of rigorous debate or much public discussion. For instance, the council's decision last week to change downtown's zoning rules involved virtually no debate at all.

Ever higher density downtown -- and in other parts of the city -- may be one answer for L.A.'s housing shortage. Although it's hard to see studio or one-bedroom apartments as a big help for working- or middle-class families.

But the current Manhattanization poses many risks. Traffic congestion is likely to get worse before it gets better because the city's transit system is not sufficient to get people out of their cars now or in the immediate future. Too much construction of expensive high-density space, particularly downtown, could create a glut, which could dampen prices and force developers to seek renters rather than buyers. Already, the trend is toward rentals, rather than sales, in the downtown market.

Ultimately, it comes down to whether Los Angeles will have a serious debate about where it is headed. Jumping blindly on the Manhattan express, without considering the implications for the city and its many great neighborhoods, is not a promising first step.

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