

Teleurbanism and Los Angeles: Free Calls All Weekend Long

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“...structures are changing today; they are losing their specific separate properties and are defined more by how they relate to the organization of the whole and how you relate to them; you zoom in to solids, you fluctuate along evanescent distances, space opens up around you; any variety of mutations are possible, all unquantifiable, orderless, dimensionless, happening in a fluidum” (Ben Van Berkel).

Calls made anywhere within our four-county coverage area using these area codes—818, 626, 323, 949, 714, 909, 213, 310, 562, 760 and some parts of 805—are all billed as local calls (LA cellular)

Los Angeles, Mulholland Drive, 5 a.m.

Beyond the blue gray haze of predawn, the cellular phone network begins to slowly reveal itself.¹ A faint glimmer emerges from faux palm tree facades, rooftop stands and hilltop platforms. Obscured by the dramatic engineering of a concrete infrastructure, the transparent purveyors of a new teleurbanism fade into the background. Privately financed and mass-produced, this new infrastructure is in the process of being built out in stages; the first networks provide a thin coverage zone, which produces revenue to finance its own perpetual growth over successive stages. Representing the minimum-energy solution when a collection of tangent circles with flexible boundaries are subjected to pressure, the hexagonal grid of the cellular network is the utopian city of the teleurbanists—a world of perfect coverage.² On the everyday streets of Los Angeles the honeycomb overlays the urban fabric, transforming itself to the previously formed hierarchies of an automobile. Phone to ear, we follow the transient coverage maps, scanning the airwaves for the new voice of the city.

Burbank, Buena Vista Street, 9:10 a.m.

Transmitting at the 824.040-880.620 MHz frequencies, the cellular network is the link holding together the individual goals of its citizens, creating an ephemeral urban identity in its airwaves. No longer

do we see physical territory, or socially engrained values, define a city, but rather it is the will of its citizens. As Albert Pope has stated: “The contemporary urban environment is composed and recomposed by each individual everyday around literal and virtual itineraries, and not in relation to a fixed arrangement of places” (Pope 1996:232). The traditional city of clean duality (figure/ground) has disappeared, to be taken over by a meshwork of interactions. In cities like Los Angeles, where the physical boundaries have become so expansive and invisible, it is often the telephone area codes that mark the psychic boundaries of the city. Like the individual who has a post office box in Beverly Hills for the prestigious 90210 zip code, we are also seeing call forwarding in order to capture the perception of being in the “city.” Los Angeles’ transformation from the center-dominated form of the 19th century, to a homogenized network of connections (or individual itineraries), has become a consistent development of post-war urbanism. The city changes daily, rearranging itself to the rhythms of its citizens, each creating their own city through the windshield, the computer monitor and cell phone.

El Segundo, 405 Freeway, 11:25 a.m.

From its inception Los Angeles has been a city of outward expansion, but not until the construction of the inter-city freeways, beginning in the 1950s, did the center dominance begin to fade. Given the now familiar critique of the freeway as an instigator of sprawl, it is important to state that the freeways were a highly sought-after addition to the infrastructure,

connecting local communities together. The freeway can thus be seen more accurately as the effect of the citizen's desire for independence and movement, as opposed to a cause of outward flight. With the freeways, distance became a function of time, where increased speed translated into shrinking travel time. From 1950 to 1960 the area of land within a thirty minute drive from downtown rose 175%, and new high-speed connections joined the satellite communities of Pasadena, Hollywood, Glendale, Santa Monica, and Santa Ana, as well as the Los Angeles International Airport (Brodsly 1981). More than anything else the freeway became a product of the desire for individual choice, of the desire for a utopian alternative to the density and perceived dehumanizing nature of the city. Speed allowed a decrease in social dependence on the local community allowing for new settlement patterns outside the city center.

Carson, Vermont Avenue, 1:47 p.m.

The freeway formed a new trajectory of movement much different from the ubiquitous equality of the city grid. A new spatial hierarchy was unveiled, one in which neighborhoods became transformed by their connection to or separation from the transportation network. The linear pattern of the freeway created a hierarchy composed of off-ramps, linear strip roads, and private drives. Under this system the individual is elevated to a new position; as Albert Pope says, "everyone now lives, not on an anonymous grid coordinate, but at the end of a particular path, on the last driveway, on the last cul-de-sac, in the last development" (Pope 1996: 190). Each person is

made into the center of his or her own universe, at the end of a long telescoping progression from the anonymous city to the independent home. Given our society's bias toward individual identity, the widespread acceptance of the freeway is seen as very natural; its liberating functions celebrated the individual autonomy over the social network of the city. The egocentric homestead thus becomes an isolated module, as Jean Baudrillard has spoken: "Each person sees himself at the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect and remote sovereignty, at an infinite distance from his universe of origin" (Baudrillard 1983:128). This liberation experienced by the homeowner creates a tense equilibrium with the freeway, an entity that simultaneously acts a connector and separator.

Long Beach, 7th Street, 3:14 p.m.

Over three million citizens of the Los Angeles region are now connected to the cellular phone network, a number expected to double over the next few years.³ The boundaries of the city are blurring further as the interactions that used to happen in face-to-face transactions have now been transplanted by distance-shrinking telephone conversations, e-mail and Internet connections. The cell phone has quickly moved beyond its status as novelty item ("guess where I'm calling from?") to an urban necessity, connecting family, friends, and work alike (Klein 1998). It is a utilitarian device, which obliterates all previous realities but its own, creating new spatial relationships and connections in its wake. It is also a network without blind spots, because to communicate

on the network is to locate and expose oneself. Communication companies, which already have access to our lives and habits, are now utilizing former military technology (Global Positioning Systems) in most new cell phones, enabling a cellular user to be located anywhere on earth to the accuracy of a few feet.⁴ New terms of engagement are inherent in every call from a cell phone, where exposure is not only a risk, but a requirement of network operations. This fundamental subservience to the system was expressed by Jean Baudrillard:

the essential thing is to maintain a relational décor, where all the terms must continually communicate among themselves and stay in contact, informed of the respective condition of others and of the system as a whole, where opacity, resistance or the secrecy of a single term can lead to catastrophe (1983: 128).

To maintain privacy with this system is to terminate all communications. The power of the hexagonal cell is contingent on its ability to see its neighboring cells and in turn be seen by them, thus mapping the individual within this new transparent community, a willing prisoner of its total exposure, in exchange for a spatially liberating mobility.

Paramount, 605 Freeway, 4:53 p.m.

Today's infrastructure is being developed in the corporate offices of companies like AT&T, MCI, Sprint, Microsoft, and Disney--the leaders in the communication industries. There is an unquestionable faith in the free market's ability to respond to our needs,

which makes, by comparison, the happenings in government seem almost irrelevant. This change in the urban power structure towards competing private infrastructures is a troubling glimpse of the sovereignty now afforded to corporations in the planning of American cities.⁵ Cities are now largely led by the itineraries of its private corporations, where citizens shape urban form based on their buying habits. We are seeing this in the hierarchy developing in the cellular coverage maps of Los Angeles, whose patterns display diminished access in neighborhoods not fitting the demographic profile sought by cellular companies. As the industry states in its own literature: "At \$500,000 per cell tower site, they have been judiciously placed where they provide the most return" (Drouillard 1998:1-3). In other words, entire parts of the city and the country may be passed over for new systems, if they do not contain the required subscriber base to financially obligate its construction. We can witness the network following the freeway and major surface streets where usage is heaviest, at the expense of the zones excluded by the transportation systems. That parts of the city remain victims of "swiss cheese" coverage will only become a concern when the density of lost calls and complaints in a particular area triggers a corporate response. Consumer polling, interest group research, and statistical data are used to understand the needs of the cellular citizens at the expense of the collective needs of the community. While the operations of a smooth corporate hierarchy are unquestionably more efficient, in the end, the corporation answers only to the stockholders and not to the needs of the citizens.

Los Alamitos, Cerritos Street, 5:39 p.m.

The city is now divided into different demographic groups, as the television audience before it, with the cellular commuter being the coveted target audience of middle-class professionals (Klein 1998).⁶ Attracted to the mobile cellular consumer, Charles Schwab recently unveiled a telephone voice broker system for voice-activated stock quotes and ordering (Larson 1998). Other companies have also implemented driver-friendly automated phone ordering systems that allow commuters to purchase clothing, stocks, or airline tickets from their mobile phone, without the distracting need for push-button controls. Advertising has become a pervasive influence on the city, transforming the daily commute into a new experience no longer related only to the logistics of travel. Just as the thirty-second commercial has become a natural and expected part of television viewing, advertising's appearance is now an unconscious connector of daily life. The congested areas of the transportation network, where the commuter is found in mass, have become as valuable as advertising space. As marketing companies have come to understand the urban collective psyche of the city, they have also assumed the role of the influential urban thinkers of today. They possess a spatial command of the new city, dictated not only by the mapping of strictly physical space but the understanding of the collective desires of the consumer and the transient reality of the consumer's daily life. It is in this that we can find the potential for a new system of urbanism that accepts our society's increased preference for individuality and personal freedom, but

finds greater collective agreement beyond the strictly segregated hierarchies of the physical community. This does not mean that we abandon physical space, but rather that we come to understand it through the ephemeral relationships and events of the everyday world. It is in the world of billboards, bus stops, radio/TV coverage, freeways, gas stations, and advertising that the life experiences of the urban dweller are formed, and it is here that the urbanist can begin to explore a space that does not seek to segregate by demographics, but to find issues of collective interest and collaboration within the expanding networks of the city.

Anaheim, Katella Avenue, 6:27 p.m.

The sun slowly disappears on the horizon, only to be replaced by the linear white lamps and backlit signs of Katella Avenue. Through numerous area codes, city borders, and county lines, the car keeps going, pushing but not breaking the boundaries of the cellular and radio coverage zones. The contemporary city is now a matrix of communication systems that have propelled beyond the territorial limits of the city. The freeways, telephone and satellite networks, fiber optic cables, and radio and television frequencies each provide systems through which the everyday city flows and composes itself. What is to be made of architecture and urban planning in this dispersed city? Urbanism must come to grips with the new reality of mobile and malleable infrastructures. We must begin to compete with corporate telecommunications planners, creating malleable alternatives and subversive itineraries to their transparent

systems. Like the cellular towers themselves, today's teleurbanists must form connections between the communications networks and the everyday reality of the city, carving new systems of interaction and collective space from the smooth surfaces of corporate control.

Endnotes

¹ The term cellular is meant here to include not only the analog cellular phones that have been associated with the term, but also the radio-based communication devices such as beepers, Digital PCS (personal communications services), and similar wireless devices that rely on the cellular phone towers for connection.

² The hexagonal grid is often referred to in the technical writing surrounding radio-based technology because it represents an ideal efficiency. The hexagon's symmetry means the distance between a given cell and its immediate neighbors is the same along any of the six main directions, thus it contains twelve-fold symmetry as opposed to the rectangle's eight-fold symmetry.

³ I am referring here to the Los Angeles Cellular District as established by the Federal Communications Commission. This region is estimated to contain a potential of 13.6 million subscribers, of which the cellular industry claims a twenty-five percent subscriber base (approximately 3.4 million). According to the cellular industry, it expects to maintain a thirty percent annual growth in the customer base over the next five years (Zysman 1995).

⁴ The Global Positioning System (GPS) is a worldwide radio-navigation system formed from a constellation of twenty-four satellites and their ground stations. Using the satellites as guides, the system pinpoints a target through triangulation. General Motors' new Cadillac and Buick models have GPS-equipped cell phones built in.

⁵ This historical power shift from public corporations to private corporations has been discussed by Gerald Frug (1980). Frug reflects on our current legal system's propensity to ensure that private corporations are protected from state domination, while public corporations are subject to such domination. He traces the powerlessness of today's cities, and the subsequent rise in private corporate powers, to our legal system and its favoring of individual rights over state's rights.

⁶ This demographic information comes from American Demographics Magazine (Klein 1998). Klein reports that households with the highest incomes of \$50,000 plus have the highest number of cellular users at 61.7 percent, compared to 43 percent for \$30-50,000 household incomes and 23.8 percent for households that earn less than \$30,000. 46.8 percent of households with respondents age 18-34 had cell phones, compared with just 33.8 percent of those aged fifty-five or older.

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