Everyday Los Angeles
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Dedicated to John Chase (1953-2010, the first Everyday Urbanist

Around 1990, we recognized that something new and important was happening on the streets of Los Angeles.[1] What we saw around us contradicted the widely accepted (even among Angelinos) image of the city as "autopia," a place notorious for its complete absence of street life, an urban feature ridiculed in numerous jokes and even commemorated in the rock song "Walking in LA" with its repeated chorus "nobody walks in LA." Sometime during the course of the 1980s all of this had changed. The city was still car-oriented but its sidewalks and parking lots had exploded with new and surprising activities. Recent immigrants sold oranges from median strips, vendors lined up along sidewalks, offering everything from tamales to tube socks. Other vendors hijacked the chain link fences that surrounded vacant lots to display cheap rugs and flags for sale. In spite of restrictive regulations, mobile food carts and trucks moved across the city, selling everything from fresh fruit to bacon-wrapped hot dogs. Outside of Home Depot and paint stores, day laborers gathered, available for employment. A new building type appeared all over the city on corner sites vacated by gas stations: the mini-mall. Cheaply built and designed for quick, convenient, automotive commerce, mini malls quickly attracted immigrant entrepreneurs. Their plastic signs, juxtaposing English with Hangul, Thai and Armenian characters, served as an index of the city's rapid demographic shifts as it became a major destination for global immigration. Even familiar places demonstrated an unexpected capacity for shape shifting, such as the auto-body shop on LaBrea Avenue that closed down in the late afternoon, to be reborn as an outdoor tacqeria, grilling up carne asada to attract passersby. In quiet neighborhoods, residents transformed their driveways or lawns into weekend retail venues. As garage sales proliferated, some active streets turned into the second-hand equivalent of a mall. As Los Angeles residents, encountering them in the course of our daily experiences and as scholars and designers interested in urbanism, we found these changes vital and exciting. In the course of conducting their daily lives and earning a living, all of these people had, inadvertently, created a new urban landscape. In many different ways, they activated and humanized neglected and desolate parts of the city, filling them with people and life. Women wearing aprons and selling homemade food domesticated sidewalks and parking lots, making them seem more like home. Cheap rugs covered the harshness of chain link fences, their soft texture and right patterns evoking a multiplicity of urban living rooms. During the O.J. Simpson trial, the slogans on t-shirts sold on the street provided a running commentary on shifts in public opinion. Mobile food vendors created temporary restaurants in different parts of the city, bringing unexpected groups of people together for a meal. Mini-malls, filled with mom and pop businesses, became a staple of Los Angeles lives. Garage sales made private lawns into public places, making worn out personal items, recently the contents of closets and drawers, available for viewing and purchase by anyone passing by. Unlike the previous generation of auto-oriented commerce, based on impersonal mechanisms like drive-through windows, this new commerce required human contact and interchange as part of the transaction.

The liveliness of the urban life around us heightened our dissatisfaction with the prevailing modes of urban design. Even in Los Angeles, most urban designers, pursuing their own design agendas, seemed unaware of the city around them and displayed little interest in the people who lived in it. In the early 90s, both the discourse and the practice of urban design in Los Angeles consisted entirely of concepts and places conceived in nearly complete opposition to the city as it actually existed. The New Urbanism, looking to the past to create neo-traditional towns, complete with compact centers and walkable neighborhoods was surprisingly popular. Although sprawling Los Angeles would seem like an unlikely home for this movement, its advocates promoted Playa Vista, a new development on the west side of the city, as an alternative model for urban development. They claimed that density and self-containment would reduce car use and encourage community. More avant-garde designers engaged in speculative practices, which encouraged "deconstructing" urban space through mapping and layering to produce new urban forms. In different ways, both seemed equally formulaic and abstract, generic approaches that ignored the rich human meanings we saw around us. The urban design projects that actually got built adhered to traditional concepts of public space. After multiple design competitions for the location, Mexican architect Ricardo Legoretta's 1990s redesign of Pershing Square, a historic plaza, once the focus of downtown Los Angeles, still remained largely empty. Citywalk, a pedestrian mall designed by John Jerde as a collage of historic Los Angeles streetscapes, was far more popular but was not a real street, just part of the Universal City theme park. In response, we decided to propose a new set of urban design values. Based on what we saw around us in LA, we wanted urban design to have an empirical not a normative starting point, accepting the city as it actually was instead of re-imagining it as planners and designers thought it should be. We also wanted to place urban residents and their daily experiences at the center of the enterprise.

We decided to call this everyday urbanism. Unlike other terms, such as informal, "everyday" could contain many different layers of meanings. Some of these we selectively borrowed from French philosophers such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel DeCerteau, who had theorized everyday life in interesting ways. Both saw the ordinariness of the everyday as uniquely leveling, since everyone, whatever their income or status, has their own everyday experience. This was important since, although many Angelinos connected these phenomena exclusively with recent immigrants, we found everyday urbanism over the city. Beverly Hills, for example, was a "hot spot" for permanent garage sales, often selling new items, as homeowners, many of whom were "upside down" adopted domestic retail to help pay the mortgage. This forced the city, worried about its image, to start restricting garage sales and requiring permits.

Both thinkers also argued that the temporal dimension was as significant as the spatial in everyday life, organized around the complex but repetitive rhythms of days, weeks, seasons, years and lifetimes.

Although we thought that the dissatisfactions of everyday life would inevitably led to a highly specific forms of local politics, we dropped most of the critical and negative aspects that characterized much of the writing on the everyday. Although clearly, not everything about everyday urbanism was positive (the ubiquitous orange sellers, in fact, were not free agents, but more like indentured workers, working selling fruit to pay off the coyote who brought them across the border) we optimistically felt that the urban

transformation we saw around was hopeful, particularly in a city in the midst of a recession and beset by rapidly changes in its racial and ethnic makeup. More than just survival mechanisms, they demonstrated new and inventive ways of appropriating and using urban space. At the very least, they deserved attention and analysis. To make this point to a wide audience, we decided to publish a book. In addition to our own writing, we asked friends and acquaintances to contribute essays.[ii] All except one (Walter Hood's piece on West Oakland) were about LA. Designed by Lorraine Wild as the anthesis of slick architectural and urban volumes, the book featured hand drawings, photographs and hyper-realistic models, all experiments in how to represent everyday life. Finally, in 1999, after many delays, Monacelli Press published Everyday Urbanism.[iii]
We quickly found ourselves at odds with a broad range of prevailing professional and academic opinion. Planners in Southern California cities, including Los Angeles saw the activities we described not as positive examples but as regulatory problems to be controlled. In fact, many of them, from street vending to permanent garage sales, violated city codes. Since we focused on vernacular practices, architects were generally indifferent, including the New York Times critic Herbert Muschamp, who walked out of one of our earliest presentations, demonstrating his lack of interest in non-authored design. When it came to buildings, however, the AIA took a stand, beginning a campaign to ban mini-malls, which most of its members considered to be "urban blight." Progressive thinkers like Mike Davis objected to our optimistic appraisal of the city's public and political life. Davis' City of Quartz, published in 1990, and David Rieff's 1991 Los Angeles Capital of the Third World, countered our interpretations of everyday urbanism. Instead, both depicted the city in apocalyptic terms, seeing mini-malls and street vendors as symptoms of a collapsing public realm and a multi-ethnic city hovering on the verge of implosion. Yet, over time, the concept gathered many supporters. It turned out that Everyday Urbanism, rather than inventing a new idea, encapsulated a widespread but not yet articulated attitude towards cities. Urbanists in Los Angeles and around the world were already paying attention to many of the same things. By accepting and analyzing these urban practices, Everyday Urbanism gave a name to a way of engaging with the city that, it turned out, a surprising number of people could relate. This produced, in addition to a design approach, upper case Everyday Urbanism, a lower case everyday urbanism, now a widely accepted term to positively describe ordinary places and activities. By 2004 the concept had acquired such wide resonance that Doug Kelbaugh, Dean of the University of Michigan School of Architecture, declared that Everyday Urbanism was one of the three dominant urban design paradigms.

Over the years, Los Angeles' everyday urbanism has continued to expand and intensify. Now recognized as a permanent dynamic in the city's development, it has justified our optimism that it was a positive contribution to the physical and social life of the city. A significant "trickle-up" effect can be observed. As informal practices moved up the food chain, they influenced the middle class, who then not only accepted but even applauded them. The battle to legalize street vending, which seemed to be on the verge of success twenty years ago, is once again on the city's agenda, this time with a much better prognosis. This is the result of an informal alliance of hipsters, foodies, and immigrant vendors that began when vendors started appearing outside of late nightclubs. As gourmet chefs adopted them, food trucks and carts of all kinds, once known as "roach

wagons." have become a popular part of the city's food scene. Their popularity has legitimized immigrant vendors. Attendees at The 2010 "Vendy" awards selected the best street food in the LA. In spite of competition from trucks operated by top chefs, the winner was Nina Garcia, who has sold her Mexico City style quesadillas from a card table in the parking lot of Big Buy in Boyle Heights for two decades. Her victory, celebrated by restaurant critics and foodie blogs, demonstrates how the entry of middle-class, often college educated, cooks into the world of street vending has upgraded its image among the middle-class public. Similarly, the efforts of UCLA researchers and advocates to study and support day laborers have produced an even more dramatic transformation in their image. Once perceived by the public as criminals and loiterers, day laborers now benefit from municipal and corporate hiring sites, which recognize their value as an official part of the labor market. Planners have started to recognize the ways in which temporality can transform urban space, adopting different forms of temporary urbanism such as pop-ups and mobile events to enliven desolate areas and serve as "eyes on the street." As different immigrant communities prospered, they took on a larger role in shaping the city's built environment. In Koreatown and the San Gabriel Valley, developers draw on models from Seoul, Hong Kong, and Taipei to densify suburban landscapes with high rises and innovative mini-mall prototypes. Upgrading monumental version of mini-mall urbanism. Meanwhile, as everyone knows, mini-malls continue to be the location for some of the best food, of all types, in the city. As much as the Grove and LA the proposed Grand Street, everyday urbanism, omnipresence will continue to be shape the city's defining features,

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[i] The group included John Kaliski, and John Chase, both writers, architects and urban designers, along with other teachers and students at SCI-Arc, the city's independent school of architecture.

[ii] Contributors included: Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a folklorist, Mona Houghton, a writer, Dennis Keeley, a photographer, Camilo Jose Vergara, a sociologist and photographer, Walter Hood, a landscape architect, and architects Phoebe Wall Wilson and Norman Millar.

[iii] Monacelli published a second edition, Everyday Urbanism: Expanded Edition, in 2008.