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**Editorial:  
*The Essence of The City***  
Orhan Ayyüce

Los Angeles architecture is everywhere it wants to be.

The LA Forum asked five people to contribute to this issue of the newsletter: an artist, an actor, a geographer, an architect, and an urban critic. Their stories were loosely talked about—we wanted this issue to lack the premeditated and often templated conversations about architecture and urban design.

We conducted an interview with Bob Wisdom, the actor who portrayed officer Bunny in the TV series *The Wire*, who grew up in Washington DC, New York City, and now resides in Santa Monica. Interestingly, our conversation swiftly shifted to racial issues and their impact on North American cities.

As artist William Leavitt was driving to see a friend, he photographed quintessential night light scene and in one shot captured something omnipresent in

everyday neighborhoods. Previously, we had talked about the familiar light and space of L.A. as a kind of everyday “light and space.”

The urban geographer Rob Sullivan chased Crenshaw Boulevard until it turned into a dirt road, recording his observations and meanderings.

In writing about the sidewalk, Italian architect and now an L.A. resident Ilaria Mazzoleni proposed the only physical project in the fold, drawing attention to an often unsung, and perhaps the most complex, part of the urban infrastructure, physicality we all use, the sidewalk.

We had an editorial plan, then, through a conversation, the drafted issue was shown to Victor Jones, an architect and an urban critic. In his op-ed piece, Victor responded with his take on the above, tearing into the heart of the matter.

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**Op-Ed:  
*L.A.: Pretty Fake Nice?***  
Victor Jones

It began in Paris in bed with Instagram.

Jet-lagged and sleepless, I grabbed my phone and nudged my trusty companion with my index finger. Lately, passing time with Instagram has become a comforting escape from the doldrums of being an overworked, under loved academic/architect. There are enough of us who know what that feels like. Anyway, pleasantly surprised, an ex-student of mine had posted a picture of a sidewalk that I discovered several years ago nested between the traffic lanes of the Arroyo Seco Parkway. I follow him from time to time since he takes interesting photos around L.A., of the Riverwalk, CicLAvia, and other community endeavors.

So, I clicked the heart shaped icon followed by the “...” below the image and wrote, “My absolute favorite walk in Los Angeles!”

Less than four feet wide but over 5,000 feet long, the narrow concrete trail begins in Chinatown’s most eastern tip. The public passage runs through Elysian Park over Solano Canyon. Somewhere past the halfway point, it spirals down a circular stair to land in the middle of high-speed traffic into what is known as the Arroyo Seco Confluence. Here, the barely recognizable Los Angeles River, entwined in a maze of transportation infrastructure, becomes a gritty monument to environmental ruin. A few hundred feet later, a defunct water fountain under a freeway overpass, in front of a Home Depot parking lot, marks the epicenter of Confluence Park. Like Alice in the rabbit hole, each step takes you further into a nether

world of unimaginable astonishment. So impressed by this curious public space, the surrounding infrastructure, and its too close for comfort qualities, I structured entire university seminars around it—took students on countless field trips there to discover the rich and unlikely layering of spaces; it even inspired me to write a book about a bridge in southern Italy that challenges the singular function of transportation infrastructure. Pondering my affection for the place, I finally fell asleep.

When I woke up, I did what I usually do, pick my phone up off the floor beside me, rub my eyes and scroll through the icons on my phone screen. Only this time, the number 152 inside a little red dot popped up next to the Instagram icon. I was ecstatic. I thought, Finally! Folks liked...

Instead, one hundred fifty crushing reactions and two yellow-faced emoji with tears pouring from their eyes constituted an overnight crusade against my one little “like.” Between full-blown editorial rants were one-word expletives. Then there was my ex-student’s response. Wanting to subdue his extreme disappointment, he wrote with a slightly patronizing tone, “What the walk does is oppress and enrage. Long narrow cage hardly wide enough for two people to move against a field of cars... what does it do for you? Have you ever depended on it for transportation?”

Having spent the last decade of my career working, both in practice and in academia, to dismantle some



of the invisible barriers between poverty and privilege, I immediately, understood the plea for environmental equity. And while I share all those raging critics' eagerness to see safer, better-maintained, more easily accessed pedestrian crossing across the city, especially in underserved communities, something else equally valuable is at stake. Is it because this is one of a few accessible vestiges of Los Angeles's audacious urban experiments? Is it because I am comforted by the fact that any sidewalk exists at all in a city so indifferent to its underserved population? But my critics, so hell bent on defending their cause for making this and other patches of not-so-nice L.A. nicer, safer, and more accessible for Angelenos, they fail to see any value in this walk. Out numbered and completely misunderstood

I finally gave up. Besides, since when did Instagram become a platform for meaningful discussion and debate? But why not expose a rough and unfinished Los Angeles—homage to a city that on countless occasions has bore the name the Great Wrong Place? Our complex, ever-changing city is fueled by the messy topics of poverty, prejudice, and powerlessness, even as we journey through parts of the city that are not motivated by good intention. Coarseness is a form of protest in a time where every single urban ailment seems to be systematically smoothed out with a parklet, bike lane, farmer's market, café table, or community garden.

The urban experience traverses topics about race and belonging alongside the ironies and contradictions of policy,

planning, and politics. Other worrisome issues at hand include demographic inversion in traditionally ethnic neighborhoods like Boyle Heights and Highland Park, or the city's damming homeless crisis—shocking, especially given the excess of wealth.

On some level even the expanding wasteland of Neo-Gothic caricatures on the ever-more-intrusive University of Southern California's campus warrants attention in terms of its negative impact on the civic wellness of Los Angeles.

How much more "nice" can we stomach before cities start looking like their suburban counterpoints?

What will replace the grit? Pretty, fake, nice?

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# Sidewalks in The Infrastructural City

IM Studio MI/LA  
Ilaria Mazzoleni  
with Dohnbi Kim

Text editing: S. LaBrie  
and S. Lieberman

Throughout the rich history of urban infrastructure, sidewalks have existed as parallel edges framing the streets where people travel and where food and goods are brought in to nourish and sustain life in the city. While sidewalks are zoned corridors, responsible for providing *safety* for the walking public, their modern purpose reaches far beyond *protecting pedestrians* and modulating vehicular movement. These walkways fulfill a multitude of purposes and represent a complex world of *infrastructural needs* and *governmental responsibilities*; standard utilities including power, water and other information exist above and below the surface, where a deep network reveals the larger urban built environment that the sidewalk serves and connects.

However, in the *industrial areas* of our *metropolises*, with far fewer pedestrians, we observed that sidewalks behave less like walkways and more like buffers protecting the corners of

buildings. Thus far, these barren strips of land have been missing opportunities for smart, alternative design.

In this *vision of transformation*, by breaking twentieth century norms, we have used *biodiversity* principles to *integrate the resilience of nature* into *conventional industry*.

## History

The first sidewalks in history appeared around two-thousand years ago, with one of the most well-known examples from the Roman city of Pompeii. The sidewalks and roads of Pompeii were supremely designed—paved in a type of stone that was durable enough to survive to the present day, yet soft enough to be imprinted deeply by the wheels of horse-driven carts. Additionally, large stepping stones were placed in the road with interval spacing, allowing people to cross while providing enough room in between the stones for wheeled carts to pass through. These ancient sidewalks not only facilitated commerce but enabled pedestrians to move safely above trampling horses and the grimy flow of sewage. This vibrant urban life would eventually come to an abrupt end in 79 AD, when Mount Vesuvius erupted in a torrential explosion of ash and pumice. During the Middle Ages, cities became more dense, with narrow streets, animated by artisans' shops, which provided the proliferation of a lively pedestrian street life. It



was during the Renaissance that public life extended into larger squares, where open-air markets enhanced the shops' activities while allowing the possibilities for faster traffic. The modern city developed after the post industrial revolution, with plans like the Haussmann in Paris, giving the city center parks, squares and larger infrastructural boulevards, and providing a healthier and safer urban environment for growing populations. The widened sections of boulevards allowed for wider sidewalks, where the newly forming bourgeois class could pleasantly stroll.

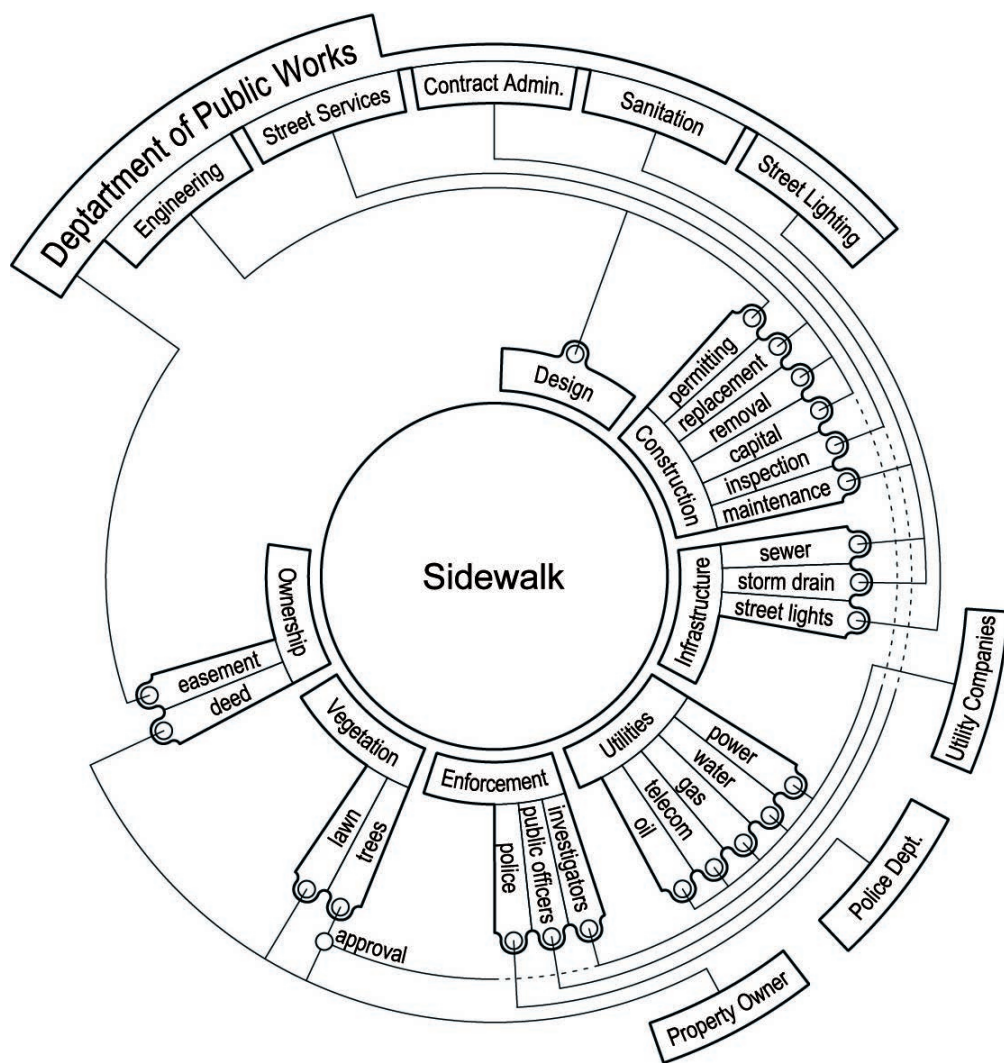
## Present

Today, the sidewalk has developed into a staple urban form. Beyond the safety factor, sidewalks provide space for socialization, entertainment and expression as people find room to walk, exercise, congregate, eat, and relax. They even provide a temporary landing for homeless people. Taxi zones, bike corrals, bus stops and subway entrances enable travelers to plug into larger transportation networks. Trees, grass, bushes, and other



Via dell'Abbondanza Wikimedia Commons





of city conventions. Many such areas can be found along the Alameda Corridor, the logistic and industrial axis for Los Angeles, connecting the port to downtown. Along this corridor, the booming movement of large vehicles far outweighs the presence of pedestrians. Trucks and trains dictate the flow of goods as workers march into warehouses. Trees accentuate the footpaths, infrequently spaced, growing within the hard edges, providing occasional shaded areas and visually contrasting the primarily bland city-hardscape. Walking paths remain mostly empty and are used only periodically during times when people commute to and from work. In these areas, the air is filled with thick pollution and palpable desolation. Recognizing the critical importance of these logistical and production cores, we are rethinking some of the conventional city elements, such as the sidewalks, here misplaced. In this deepening exploration of the importance of industry and the purpose of sidewalks in the built environment, the City of Vernon serves as an ideal example of current conditions, acting as a perfect showcase of future scenarios.

#### Exclusiveness

A city nested within a city, Vernon reaches an area of 5.16 square miles, roughly one percent of Los Angeles's total land area (cityofvernon.gov). Within its boundaries, large factories, distribution centers and heavy transport infrastructure work constantly to

process and transform food and goods coming in mainly from Long Beach Harbor. As this small city plugs into a large-scale flow of raw and processed materials, it has developed into a "home to industries including food and agriculture, apparel, steel, plastics, logistics and home furnishings" (cityofvernon.org). With its land area covered almost entirely with industrial buildings, the city of Vernon has adopted the motto of "Exclusively Industrial," highlighting its dedication to maintaining largescale production.

High output also means high input, as the city demands

considerable natural resources such as energy, water, and labor in order to sustain its operation. High output also includes considerable pollution!

vegetation punctuate the urban landscape with pockets of nature. Today the sidewalk has developed into a vital zone for the activation and expansion of public life.

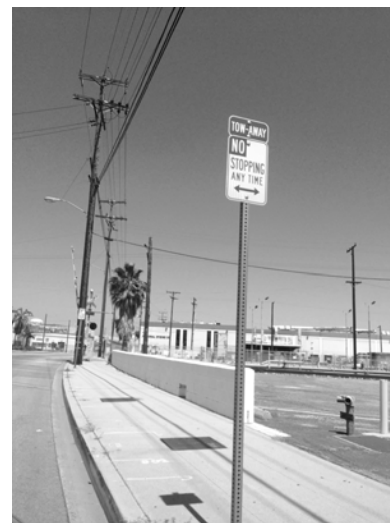
#### Utility

Beyond their historic purpose of providing pedestrian safety, sidewalks play a crucial role in the city's complex network of power, water and sanitation. Above the ground, sidewalks secure street lamps, traffic lights, electricity poles, trees, signposts and other structures that define boundaries and provide rhythm to various types of movement. Below the ground, sidewalks, along with the streets, make up part of a deep crosssection of vital elements, where miles of pipes and conduit serve to circulate water, gas, sewage, runoff, telecom and electricity throughout the city. These critical lines run parallel to the streets and cross under the sidewalks so that buildings can be connected to larger infrastructural networks. To maintain such a complicated piece of urban fabric, the government must

navigate a convoluted mess of overlapping jurisdictions, with the Department of Public Works responsible for its major components everywhere. In terms of its infrastructure, maintenance, governance, and sectional quality, the sidewalk is one of the most multi-functional elements of the urban environment.

#### Misplacement

Having secured itself as a key element in the urban world, the sidewalk has spread throughout Los Angeles to the point of near ubiquity. Its benefit remains clear in places where a large number of pedestrians regularly circulate. However, in other parts of the city where pedestrian traffic is sparse, the sidewalk appears to be an imposition, a purposeless product



Bus stop near Farmer John  
Ilaria Mazzoleni and Dohnbi Kim



Truck Loading Docks In Relation to Sectional Street View Ilaria Mazzoleni and Dohnbi Kim



## Emptiness

Vernon is a city for goods, not for people. As of 2010, the city's population was 112 (Census), which is a tiny fraction of the approximate 50,000 people employed by Vernon's 1,800 businesses (cityofvernon.gov). Pedestrians are rarely seen on the sunny yet desolate streets, even during commuting hours. Conventionally, these walkways exist to separate the slow pace of pedestrians from the fast movement of cars. Successful sidewalks also act as thresholds that transition people between the exposed outer world of the public city and the contained inner world of private buildings. In Vernon, people rarely inhabit any space outside of private, environmentally controlled enclosures. Whether they are sitting in the cockpit of a vehicle, riding a Metro bus, or working behind the walls of a factory, Vernon's workforce enjoys little to no benefit from the city's ambulatory zones. The sidewalks of this city are chronically empty, begging the question of what purpose they serve.

## Nature

The prioritization of Vernon's industrialized zoning must be reevaluated to address the conditions of public spaces in order to make room for a more livable metropolis. There is so much more a city can do to establish an integral relationship with the nature of its own productivity and nature itself. After the initial analysis and observation, it became clear to us how these spaces had the potential to play a more active role in this urgently needed transformation. The space dedicated to sidewalks is fundamental to the organizational life of a city: dividing the public and private realm, articulating flows and speeds and providing buffer zones against dense development in a highly infrastructured city that is heavy in resource consumption. It was clear that we need to elevate the use of such spaces to function more provocatively in transforming the urbanscape.

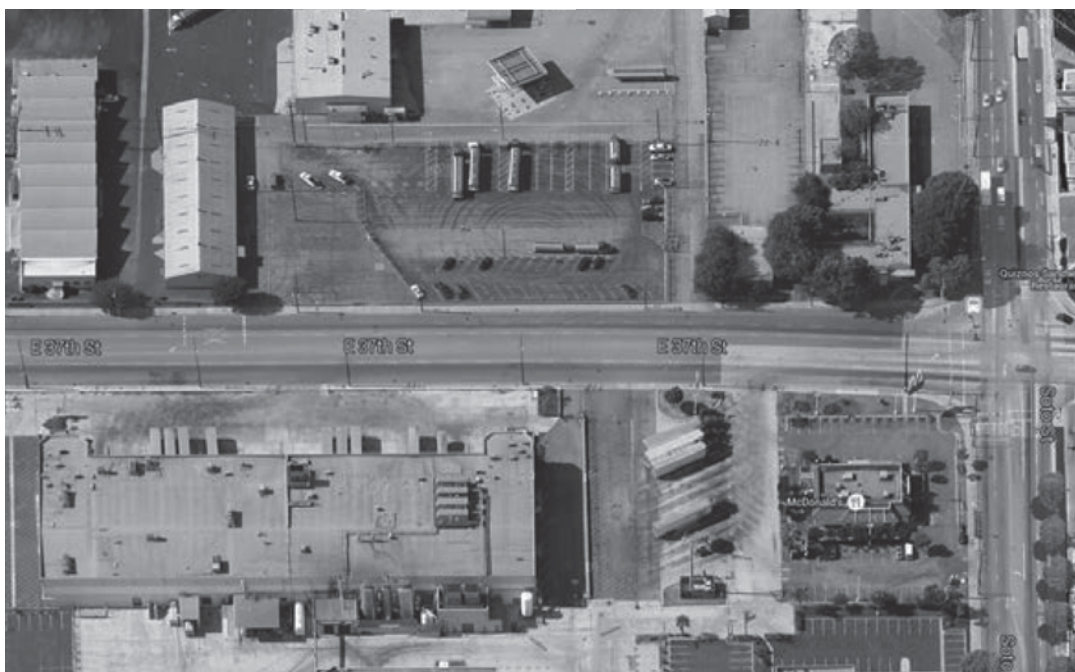
In our proposed vision of *reclamation* and *rehabilitation*, the first step is planning for the obsolescence of sidewalks in Vernon, a city whose unused spaces, which stretch out for miles, have until now solely glorified its wasted potential. All these strips of concrete, once perceived as barren, now have the exciting opportunity to be repurposed for introduction of biodiversity. In this enriched ecosystem, the inserted flora and fauna will interconnect with the current environmental imbalance of conventional industry: grass, bushes, flowers, and trees will grow thick, inhaling pollution and exhaling clean air. Along the L.A. River's banks,



The LA River at Vernon *Ilaria Mazzoleni and Dohbi Kim*

breaking up some of the concrete edges will make room for more natural elements: lagoons teeming with fish, microbes, and algae can thrive on large volumes of organic waste that had been previously misplaced and mishandled during the manufacturing of food. Synthetic arboretums filled with photovoltaic "trees" will enable factories and warehouses to photosynthesize their own energy. Birds, insects, and small mammals repopulating the urban landscape, can nest on the multitudinous signage posts surrounding the controlled environments, adding to the richness of this radical, new hybrid environment. In a city with no pedestri-

ans, the open spaces will be transformed into a network of extreme biodiversity, promoting the proliferation of all natural and technological elements that facilitate the production of renewable energy while minimizing the heat island effect and air and water pollution. By applying the principles of ecosystems design, the industrial city will become an integral part of the larger metropolis, not only by minimizing its footprint but also by generating a positive model where the resilient growth of nature becomes the seed inspiration in transforming the urban environment of the Twenty-first Century.













# Crenshaw Boulevard: *The Spinal Column of Black Los Angeles*

Rob Sullivan

There's an odd bookended quality to Crenshaw Boulevard, a refractive mirroring, glimmering from one end of the boulevard to the other. At its northern terminus, the Harbor Insurance Building stands at the corner of Wilshire and Crenshaw. At its southern terminus, as Crenshaw Boulevard dwindles into a narrow two-lane road before turning into a trail that leads into the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve, an expansive view of the Pacific Ocean presents itself. Beginning at the "harbor" of insurance, winding into the Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors, and ending at the vista of the Pacific, Crenshaw Boulevard takes on many guises, with perhaps the most noteworthy being its standing as the spinal column of L.A.'s African-American community. Yet to dismiss Crenshaw Boulevard as only a stand-in for the Crenshaw District, which in turn is only a stand-in for black Los Angeles, would be to misread the street, as it is much more complicated than such a limited reading allows.

First, Crenshaw Boulevard starts (or ends, as the case may be) on the fringes of Koreatown, with the intersection of Crenshaw and Olympic being the most prominent marker of the Korean influence. Once over the Santa



Monica Freeway overpass, we have entered the Crenshaw District, the last predominantly African-American neighborhood in Los Angeles. There is a certain protective and fierce embrace of this neighborhood by black Angelenos, a feeling that if the Crenshaw turns Latino or Anglo, all is lost in L.A. This does not amount to a racist or even a racial attitude, merely an acknowledgement of facts on

the ground, as Latinos are now the majority in formerly African-American enclaves such as Watts and Compton; if such a cultural strain is to survive in L.A., it must survive here.

At the corner of Adams Boulevard and Crenshaw is Phillips Bar-B-Que, the tantalizing aroma of its foodstuffs serving as a sort of olfactory portcullis into the Crenshaw—baby backs and chicken links, greens and shredded pork sandwiches combining into gustatory battlements. The culinary influence of Soul Food serves as one kind of entranceway into the Crenshaw District. The presence of a mega-church, the West Angeles Cathedral

at the corner of Exposition Boulevard and Crenshaw, serves as another kind of entranceway. A stunning variety of churches and meetinghouses, from rickety storefront churches to faux cathedrals, are scattered along the boulevard and are even present at its terminus in Palos Verdes, with the wedding-friendly Wayfarers Chapel, designed by Lloyd Wright, sitting at the bottom of the bluffs that overlook the Pacific.

On the western side of the street, we soon come into view of the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza, which opened in 1947 and was the first mall to operate on the West Coast. The

Plaza houses what is probably the paramount meeting place for the movers and shakers of L.A.'s African-American community, the Post and Beam restaurant, which features such dishes as shrimp grits with beef bacon, smoked ham hock, and cornmeal crusted catfish.



Crenshaw takes a turn at Stocker, and within the elbow of Crenshaw and Leimert boulevards, lies Leimert Park, Crenshaw's arts district. Here, we take a slight

detour off Crenshaw as this area should really be thought of as an extension or appendage





of Crenshaw Boulevard. Dotted with African arts and crafts stores, Leimert Park also houses the World Stage, a teaching center and performance venue for jazz musicians and poets, which was founded in 1989 by jazz drummer Bill Higgins and poet Kamau Daáood. Directly across Degnan Boulevard from the World Stage is Eso Won Books, which features a wide variety of literature oriented to African-American studies and culture. Towering over Leimert Park is the spire of the Vision Theater, an Art Deco landmark dating from 1931 and designed by Morgan, Walls & Clemens, the same firm responsible for the Wilern Theater, the El Capitan Theater, and the Richfield Building.

Shunting back onto Crenshaw Boulevard and continuing our journey west, we next enter Hyde Park. This area, circumambient to 60th Street and Crenshaw, is probably the seediest portion of the entire boulevard. Well stocked with what L.A. noir novelist James Ellroy refers to as “fuck pads,” “hot sheet” motels that charge by the hour—no questions asked—and apartment houses that look like they are in a permanent state of disrepair, Hyde Park is a kind of interstitial gray zone between the Crenshaw District and Inglewood. Once 79th Street is crossed, we have left L.A. and entered Inglewood. A lengthy stretch of middle-class apartment buildings extends from this border to Torrance. Crenshaw here becomes predominantly residential, with an admixture of some rather handsomely designed four-unit apartment complexes and some that seem to have been designed with the purest functional banality in mind.



This tedious progression ends with the appearance of the Brolly Hut, a Googie-inspired diner near Crenshaw and the Imperial Highway, one of those playfully futuristic “low art” landmarks that gives Los Angeles that quirky feel of being simultaneously absolutely ridiculous and absolutely wonderful. We soon enter Hawthorne and are immediately reminded of L.A.’s connection with the aerospace and defense industries. After

swooping under the 105 Freeway, in quick succession, we pass the Hawthorne Municipal Airport, Jack Northup Avenue, and the grounds of Space Explorations Technology.

Soon we ascend into Rolling Hills Estate, an enclave of privilege standing in stark contrast to places such as Hyde Park. Horse stables and private academies suddenly pop into view, and as we continue further up into the hills, we reach Palos Verdes, a peninsula of wealth sheltered by the sea and the heights upon which it is located. It’s quite startling to note the change in demographics during our journey; we have gone through the edges of Koreatown, into the heart of the African-American Crenshaw District, before passing through the lower-middle to middle class towns of Inglewood, Hawthorne, Gardena and Torrance. Once we reach Rolling Hills Estate and Palos Verdes, it is very white and very wealthy. And now, at the western terminus of Crenshaw Boulevard, one of the most storied of the many storied avenues and boulevards of Los Angeles, it is very odd to see how this thoroughfare ends at the border of a nature preserve and essentially turns into a dirt trail. From Wilshire Boulevard and the Harbor Life Insurance Building to this vista of the Pacific Ocean, Crenshaw Boulevard is a spinal column of the city, tying together supremely disparate parts as it swoops south to north and north to south, its vertebrae the disks upon which so much of Los Angeles twists and turns.

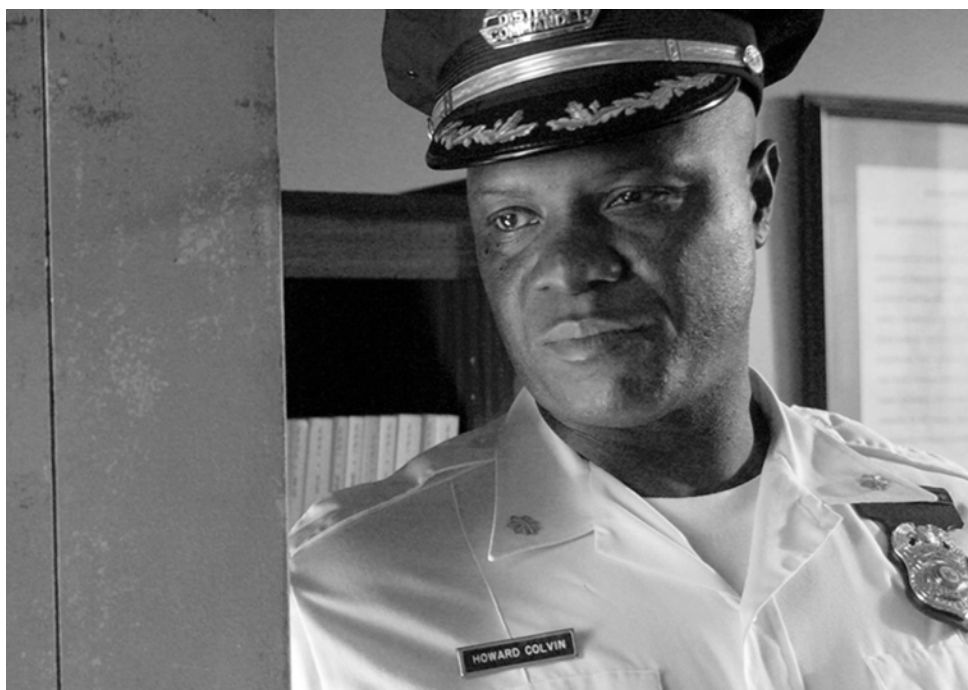
# City Takes

## Orhan Ayyüce interviews actor Bob Wisdom

Last fall, Orhan Ayyüce sat down for a conversation with Bob Wisdom at a café near the actor’s apartment in Santa Monica. Bob is best known for his role as Howard “Bunny” Colvin in the HBO program *The Wire*. The pair mostly talked about the cities.

**ORHAN AYYÜCE** The TV series *The Wire* has a big following amongst architects because it focuses on urban issues. I was wondering if you guys had any kind of discussion about this on the set?

**BOB WISDOM** That’s interesting. I don’t know if there were conversations between myself and the other actors. The producers, Ed Burns and George Pelecanos had a vision in their own work as artists. Pelecanos writes about the urban condition in Washington D.C., with very detailed and specific backdrops in his story. And then there was Ed Burns who knew the Baltimore schools, knew the Baltimore police force, and knew these issues. So, he was one of the architects who shaped the story. We would have reflective conversations. But amongst the cast, all of us knew these conditions in our blood. We never spoke of them specifically, but myself with Frankie Faison, who played the Police Commissioner, or with Andre Royo, who played Bubbles, or the other characters, we go into a scene with the comfort on those locations because it was something that we just knew. We were turned on differently. An interesting case was the woman who played Snoop, Felicia Pearson, who came in the fourth year. She came into the story just through a chance meeting with Michael K. Williams who played Omar, and he said I’m going to bring you to the show and introduce you. She had never really done any real acting before, but she knew that world so deeply and was a part of it, then, bang! He dropped her in and she never missed a beat. The acting was not a challenge at all because she could actually be that part. I remember



my first day going in as Bunny, and I sat in the trailer with two of the executive producers and I didn’t know where the story was going, but they took the time to talk me through this first episode.

And then, we went out on location. I walked into this housing project, and the story line was that a young boy was accidentally shot in the line of fire and killed; that triggered a lot of frustrations for Bunny Colvin. I remember walking in there, and it flipped me back to when I was growing up, and my cousins lived in these kinds of housing projects that we have in Washington, then in Baltimore, where there were just these split-level, four-unit buildings scattered throughout the complex. And we would call them

our homes. We never perceived them growing up as projects and ghettos. I didn’t perceive projects on the scale that the way that they’re spoken about in American culture until I got to New York in college. And then I saw these huge high-rises, you know, 40-story, 50-story monoliths.

**OA** They’re like cities in themselves.

**BW** Exactly. Cities with cultures in and of themselves. I was used to sort of almost placid Southeast Washington. In the ‘50’s and ‘60’s, Southeast Washington was a little rougher than where we were living in Northwest Washington. We had a house that my family bought But there was never any ingrained fear. When I walked into the housing projects in New York, those huge high rises, you knew you were walking into some place that had a distinct culture and if you didn’t know your way around, you could get taken, no matter who you were. So, going from the Bronx, to Manhattan, to Brooklyn, you had to learn a whole new language every time you were going to visit somebody, because everybody there knew who belonged

and who didn't belong. That's when I first started to understand what was happening to people's psyche. When I was in college, Columbia reached out to a number of young black students to try to increase diversity—this was in the '70's. It was a result of a lot of protests and what not that had happened in the precinct. Kids would come into Columbia with academically strong records, but socially had never been outside of those ghetto-ized communities.

OA How does *The Wire* deal with the political handling of the projects?

BW David Simon (the head writer, creator of *The Wire*) clearly describes the inherent ironies, the conflicts, the contradictions that certain policies have, and they get manipulated by those in power, and that's how poor people get destroyed by mistakes. And that's what kept us all there. Now, in terms of solution, I don't think anybody's made a show about solutions.

OA Wasn't the power of the show that fact that it didn't offer solutions?

BW Yes. And that's what made that narrative so powerful, because it was so clinically defined—what the nature of an American city was. So you could take, Baltimore as Camden, as Patterson, as Pittsburgh, as a bunch of American cities, the East Coast cities, particularly, where the middle class had been moved out or tried to move out, black folks took over the center city and there was decline. We saw that up and down the East Coast. The show had value in the 2000's, describing to a larger group of Americans who were born after the 80's to catch up on some of that history, to try to get the sense. But as we move into the middle of the second decade of the 2000's, I think at some point we have to figure out, what are possible solutions? And, that's really daring. I don't know of anybody that can take that on, but I'd like to think that's the kind of show, as an actor, I'd like to take part in. We jump from shows like *The Wire* to science fiction shows, but there's nothing reality-based that looks at the positive sides of American politics and the political decisions that shape our cities. We are in the worst, most cynical understanding of politics we've ever had.

We have no faith in the political system. Hence, twenty-two percent of people vote in national elections, and less in local elections—twelve percent in some places. That's what's happening. Those are people who will fight to the teeth; they own the store down the street, the flower shop in their neighborhood. They'll turn out for that, or the dog park.

But in terms of how the wheels get turned, if they can go in and have immediate influence and pay their politicians directly in the pocket and get their voice heard, that's as close as they get to activism. So activism is becoming a neutered choice, because protesting from the outside doesn't have the impact that it once did. It's an insider's game.

OA Let's talk about Los Angeles a little. I had a friend visiting from the Netherlands, and I took him to South Central L.A. He was a documentary filmmaker and he couldn't believe it. He said this looks like South Africa. Coming from the East Coast, how do you see the neighborhoods in L.A.?

BW See, for me, when I came from the East Coast to California, and I remember driving through Leimert Park. I was like, this is ghetto? I mean, you had houses, lawns, manicured sidewalks and the whole thing. I was like, this wasn't the ghetto where I grew up. But still, I met people who grew up in L.A. who had no idea of what was south of the 10 Freeway.

OA They don't. They still don't.

BW That's the story right there. The investment is passed on from generation to generation. We invest in this area and your life is invested here. You have no interest in the rest—that is somebody else's place. And so we have all of these neighborhoods. To this day, I have a very, very clear idea that I don't go to Orange County. That place has a certain kind of meaning. And I don't even know if I can articulate outside of, you know, white, blonde.... It's very mainstream, middle class, consumer-oriented, but if there were a massive activist protest that grew out of Orange County, it would shock me today. Those aren't the people you expect to, in any way....

OA Must be, they don't have anything to protest.

BW Growing up, you go into an old neighborhood and the food was rich and full. Then you start having the new population come in, and they don't like it cooked with so much fat. And so there's a little less put in, and all of that and there's nothing left. That's the American invasion.

OA And so this is what's really happening with gentrifying the neighborhoods. Looking for culture and beauty in the city, and as soon as it's found, it is turned into nonfat.

BW Yeah, pre-packaged. They also want urban safety as the number one value. So you see the mothers here in their carriages with their

babies, they don't want anything that will threaten their walks during the day; they go shopping and they have no ambition beyond that, you know. So this gentrified thing is now the perfect little, nondescript kind of ghetto.

OA You travel to different places, especially Morocco—how do you view the cities there? How do they function?

BW Casablanca has all of the trappings. You stand up on a rooftop in Casablanca and you look over the city, just televisions everywhere. Satellites. You look up at the sky and you see the electricity wires. But inside...inside, you still have a life that's shaped by the Koran, that's shaped by always taking care of a neighborhood. Even though the people in Casablanca pay modern prices for their neighborhoods, they still have the place where they go buy their bread—the one that bakes bread for that community, and the corner shop where they get milk, and the same way of running other things. Then you go to Fez, to Marrakech, and to all the smaller towns, and you see cities that are run intuitively by this same kind of people with the same practices that generations before established. And that living arrangement is shared. You take care of the person down the street the same way you take care of your family. And that person takes care of you and looks out for you. All of these things are part of urban living. And contrast to over here, we have none of that shared intuition on how to service each other. Growing up, there was a white woman who lived across the street from us. She would have me run down to the corner store, almost every day, get her newspaper, the Washington Star, and a bottle of milk, and I'd come back and she'd give me a nickel. That was Miss Colder. It's a neighborhood family.

OA And it still exists in black neighborhoods.

BW It still exists. But because of gentrification, this family is broken up and some of them live here, some live there; I moved from the East Coast to the West Coast, and now I'm like, living in this box, you know. I talk to everybody in my building. When I first moved there, I knew everybody, and we all knew each other. And some evenings when it got hot, I used to leave my door open, and people would come out the elevator, and they would just see my door open, and shout out, hey, Bob! You know, it was just shared space. And I watched as some of the older residents moved out, I've been there now 25 years, so I've seen them all come and go. Different and younger people come in now, and it's like you stand in the elevator with them and some of them don't speak, you know. And I start a conversation, "How are you doing? Good morning, good morning." And they feel confronted by that kind of thing, I see the culture clash. I think that's what I want to fight for, to keep it humane—in the way that we live together, keep the meaning of social life alive. Just to acknowledge each other, say good morning. The blocks in the brain that you develop to keep you from saying good morning to your neighbor, it's a huge thing.

OA Like you said earlier, these people, the new people, they don't have any cultural incentive in any of this. To them, it's a place they rent. They pay their thing and that's that. That's as far as they're going to know people. And they think whatever happens there, it has no bearing on their life.

BW And the idea of a rental is a stepping-stone to something else. They're not going to live there 25 years. So then they buy something, and then once they do that, then the next thing they do is they have a kid or start a family, and they've already bought into a subscription. And that's where they get you in the chain. You're in the chain. You're going to move to this, to this, to this. And more and more safety. More and more homogenous living.

OA A few years ago there was a Beverly Hills, Chamber of Commerce meeting. They didn't want a Metro station there. They didn't want a Metro station.

BW And that divisive map still exists.

OA That discriminatory map exists. And, is institutionalized under a veil.

BW I would drive around Beverly Hills at night, there was more of a chance of being stopped driving through, when I had my old Volvo. Now I have a hybrid—it's a different kind of profile. But once upon a time, I would get stopped going through there. So I would drive down to Venice and come into West side through Venice. And these are the kind of things that... and it's about the map, you know.

OA I don't think a lot of people realize the scale of this problem.

BW It's self-perpetuating. Once upon a time, you didn't see these communities, or the accessibility of these other communities. It didn't matter to you. Now, you look on the internet and you see this other way of living, things people have.

OA I want to specifically ask you this—you have maintained quite a constructive state of mind and a unique position as Bob Wisdom. You're an artist, and you cannot be a good artist unless you're aware of social issues, the environment you live in—you're aware.



That's what makes art beautiful. How do you maintain all that, in terms of all this stuff that you see around? How do you maintain a certain outlook in life that is healthy and beneficial to people who might listen to you?

BW That's a strong question. You know, I had my mother and father until I was in my forties and fifties. My mom died when I was in my forties. I had a real sense of how hard they worked to create a life for us, my two sisters and I. I got a strong introduction to social activism and art making in my college years through a really, really great artist, one of my best friends. He's a great photographer, filmmaker, and through osmosis—not anything he taught me directly—just the way he balanced his art making with his life, I learned a lot. You know, I was around a whole generation, in the '70's, of artists who never broke through to mainstream work. They self-sabotaged or didn't know how to sit at the table when the time came. And, what I learned through that was—don't rely on Hollywood to validate. Really develop a sense of yourself—trust that and live by that. It goes back to that first. When I came out here, the first thing we talked about was my rent-controlled apartment. I live there to this day because it allows me to a sense of my freedom, a sense of my spiritual freedom. It's my spiritual practice ground. I'm not chasing money and projects to pay for my house. I basically can pick and choose what I get to do, and I can always make provisions. I often think, when my nephews see this, what will they think? I don't take any roles that exploit or manipulate my culture.

If I did, I could probably advanced my career. I just choose not to play; I know what the cost is. I'm really happy being a well-received character actor. That's satisfying. I didn't have the ambition to be a movie star, a big name, sit in fancy tables at the restaurant, all of that stuff. I get to meet a lot of beautiful people that are moved by the projects, which is different than people who just want to see you because you're a movie star. People talk to me about the shows that I've been in. This is my validating myself and my life. I'm proud of my father being a janitor, my mom being a domestic, them putting their pennies together to get us the best education—that keeps me true to my true morals.

OA What are you working on now?

BW I'm working on this show called *Flaked*. And it's a potential idea, it's for Netflix. But it's a bunch of guys who live in Venice, California. The story is they're watching how Venice is changing. Their values are being challenged by the way Venice is changing. They're all sober, that's their common bond—they were all in a program, so it's about that. It's a comedy. Then I'm also on this HBO series called *Ballers*. It's all about the NFL. So, that's fun. Yeah, those are the two things that are in progress right now. There are a couple things I have dreams to do, but I'll keep quiet on that until they come.

OA Thank you.

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## Contributors & Colophon

**Victor Jones** is an architect and a writer. He has authored *(IN)Formal L.A.: The Space of Politics*. He is an LA Forum board member and principal of Fievre+Jones.

**William Leavitt** is an artist known for paintings, photographs, installations, and performance works that examine the vernacular culture of L.A. through the filter of the entertainment industry. He draws on 'stock environments' and design of films as well as the literature of the place.

**Ilaria Mazzoleni** is an Italian architect, biomimicist, and founder of IM Studio Milano/Los Angeles. Her book *Architecture Follows Nature: Biomimetic Principles for Innovative Design* (CRC Press) explores animal skin systems as they relate to building envelopes. She has gained attention in the fields of sustainable architecture and biomimicry, and has participated in international conferences and workshops.

**Rob Sullivan** received his PhD in geography from UCLA in 2012. In 2014 Ashgate published his book, *Street Level: Los Angeles in the Twenty-First Century*. His work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Sun*, *Between C and D*, *LIFE Magazine*, and the *Village Voice*.

**Bob Wisdom** is an American actor who has appeared in many different TV shows and movies throughout his career. He is well known for his roles in *The Wire* and *Prison Break*.

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