



MIKE DAVIS

A *Boom* Interview

In conversation with Jennifer Wolch and Dana Cuff

Editor's Note: Chronicler of the California dark side and LA's underbelly, proclaiming a troubling, menacing reality beneath the bright and sunny facade, Mike Davis is one of California's most significant contemporary writers. His most controversial books led critics to label him anything from a left-wing lunatic to a prophet of gloom and peddler of the pornography of despair. Yet much of his personal story and evolution are intimately touched by his experience and close reading of deeply California realities: life as part of the working class, the struggle for better working conditions, and a genuine connection to the difficulties here. His most well-known books, *City of Quartz* and *The Ecology of Fear* are unsparing in their assessments of those difficulties.

Remaining a central figure of a discipline at the intersection of geography, sociology, and architecture known as the Los Angeles School of Urbanism, Davis is now in retirement from the Department of Creative Writing at UC Riverside. Earlier this summer, he invited architectural educator and director of UCLA's cityLAB Dana Cuff and dean of UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design Jennifer Wolch into his San Diego home to discuss his career, his writings, and his erstwhile and ongoing efforts to understand Los Angeles.

Dana Cuff: You told us that you get asked about *City of Quartz* too often, so let's take a different tack. As one of California's great urban storytellers, what is missing from our understanding of Los Angeles?

Mike Davis: The economic logic of real estate and land development. This has always been the master key to understanding spatial and racial politics in Southern California. As the late-nineteenth century's most influential radical thinker—I'm thinking of San

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Mike Davis. Photograph by Tao Ruspoli.

Francisco's Henry George not Karl Marx—explained rather magnificently, you cannot reform urban space without controlling land values. Zoning and city planning—the Progressive tools for creating the City Beautiful—either have been totally co-opted to serve the market or died the death of a thousand cuts, that is to say by variances. I was briefly an urban design commissioner in Pasadena in the mid-1990s and saw how easily state-of-the-art design standards and community plans were pushed aside by campaign contributors and big developers.

If you don't intervene in the operation of land markets, you'll usually end up producing the opposite result from what you intended. Over time, for instance, improvements in urban public space raise home values and tend to become amenity subsidies for wealthier people. In dynamic land markets and central locations, nonprofits can't afford to buy land for low-income housing. Struggling artists and hipsters inadvertently become the shock troops of gentrification and soon can't afford to live in the neighborhoods and warehouse districts they invigorated. Affordable housing and jobs move inexorably further apart and the inner-city crisis ends up in places like San Bernardino.

If you concede that the stabilization of land values is the precondition for long-term democratic planning, there are two major nonrevolutionary solutions. George's was the most straightforward: execute land monopolists and profiteers with a single tax of 100 percent on increases in unimproved land values. The other alternative is not as radical but has been successfully implemented in other advanced capitalist countries: municipalize strategic parts of the land inventory for affordable housing, parks and form-giving greenbelts.

The use of eminent domain for redevelopment, we should recall, was originally intended to transform privately owned slums into publically owned housing. At the end of the Second World War, when progressives were a majority in city government, Los Angeles adopted truly visionary plans for both public housing and rational suburban growth. What then happened is well known: a municipal counter-revolution engineered by the *LA Times*. As a result, local governments continued to use eminent domain but mainly to transfer land from small owners to corporations and banks.

Fast-forward to the 1980s. A new opportunity emerged. Downtown redevelopment was devouring hundreds of

millions of dollars of diverted taxes, but its future was bleak. A few years before, Reyner Banham had proclaimed that Downtown was dead or at least irrelevant. If the Bradley administration had had the will, it could have municipalized the Spring-Main Street corridor at rock-bottom market prices. Perhaps ten million square feet would have become available for family apartments, immigrant small businesses, public markets, and the like, at permanently controlled affordable rents.

I once asked Kurt Meyer, a corporate architect who had been chairman of the Community Redevelopment Agency, about this. He lived up Beachwood Canyon below the Hollywood Sign. We used to meet for breakfast because he enjoyed yarning about power and property in LA, and this made him a unique source for my research at the time. He told me that downtown elites were horrified by the unexpected revitalization of the Broadway corridor by Mexican businesses and shoppers, and the last thing they wanted was a populist downtown.

He also answered a question that long vexed me. "Kurt, why this desperate, all-consuming priority to have the middle class live downtown?" "Mike, do you know anything about leasing space in high-rise buildings?" "Not really." "Well, the hardest part to rent is the ground floor: to extract the highest value, you need a resident population. You can't just have office workers going for breakfast and lunch; you need night time, twenty-four hour traffic." I don't know whether this was really an adequate explanation but it certainly convinced me that planners and activists need a much deeper understanding of the game.

In the event, the middle class has finally come downtown but only to bring suburbia with them. The hipsters think they're living in the real thing, but this is purely faux urbanism, a residential mall. Downtown is not the heart of the city, it's a luxury lifestyle pod for the same people who claim Silverlake is the "Eastside" or that Venice is still bohemian.

Cuff: Why do you call it suburbia?

Davis: Because the return to the center expresses the desire for urban space and crowds without allowing democratic variety or equal access. It's fool's gold, and gentrification has taken the place of urban renewal in displacing the poor. Take Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris's pioneering study of the privatization of space on the top of Bunker Hill. Of course, your



Dingbat in rear next to fenced-in modern complex.

museum patron or condo resident feels at home, but if you're a Salvadorian skateboarder, man, you're probably headed to Juvenile Hall.

Cuff: Would you include architecture in your thinking about real estate? Weren't you teaching a course about this at SCI-Arc [Southern California Institute of Architecture] some years back?

Davis: When I was first hired at SCI-Arc in 1988, I confessed to Michael Rotundi [then Director] that I knew nothing about architecture. He replied: "Don't worry, we do. Your job is to teach LA. Get the students out into the city." It was a wonderful assignment and over the course of a decade, I participated in a number of remarkable studios and site studies, working with the likes of Michael Sorkin, Joe Day, Anthony Fontenot, and other radical architects.

My own vanity project was demonstrating the feasibility of a community design studio that addressed the problems of older neighborhoods and suburbs. With the support of a leading activist in the Central American community, Roberto Lovato, now a well-known journalist, we focused on the Westlake [MacArthur Park] district just west of Downtown.

I knew the area fairly well, since in the late 1960s I had lived there while briefly managing the Communist Party's bookstore on Seventh Street, oddly near the FBI's old office building on Wilshire. This was right after the final evictions from Bunker Hill and most of its residents had been dumped in tenements near MacArthur Park. Walking to the bookstore I several times encountered the bodies of these elderly poor people on the sidewalk—who knew what dreams had brought them to LA in the 1910s and 1920s?

We finally settled on studying Witmer Street, between Third and Wilshire, because it had an almost complete declension of multifamily building types: a single-family home from the 1890s, a bungalow court from the 1920s, dingbats from 1960, even an old masonry apartment building that was used as a set for *Hill Street Blues*.

Students divided up into teams, training themselves as building and fire inspectors, and we took the neighborhood apart molecule-by-molecule over two semesters. One group studied fire safety issues and other hazards such as unprotected roofs where small children played. We looked at the needs of home workers, seamstresses and auto mechanics;

studied problems of garbage collection; looked at issues involving gang rivalries and elderly winos. With Lovato's support, we got inside apartments—typically studios for three to five people—and analyzed how families organized their tiny spaces. We researched who owned the buildings, calculated their rental profitability, even visited and photographed the homes of the Downtown slumlords who were living in Beverly Hills and Newport Beach.

The only form of housing that was generally popular, where the tenants had been there for a long time—everybody else was in and out—was the one courtyard apartment complex, with its little gardens and a fountain. The most despised were not the older 1920s tenement fire traps but the dingbats—low-rise six- to twelve-unit apartment buildings with tuck-under parking, built in the fifties and sixties on single family lots. They were designed to become blight in a few decades and constitute a major problem everywhere in Southern California. The other multi-unit types were still durable but it was hard to imagine any alternative for the stucco rubble other than to tear it down—which in fact developers have done, only to replace the dingbats with four- and five-story "super-cubes" that are just larger versions of the same problems.

Our goal was to bring all our findings together in a kind of *Whole Earth Catalog* set up as a website, and then invite everybody in the world to write and contribute ideas around generic issues of working-class neighborhoods like trash, play, working, graffiti, gangs, social space, parking, and so on. Our point was not to create a miniature master plan but to build up an arsenal of practical design solutions based on careful, realistic analysis that could help residents frame demands of landlords and the city. We imagined collaborations of architects, artists and artisans, acting as toolmakers for community self-design and activism. I still believe in the idea but my own tenure at SCI-Arc ended when our merry prankster and guiding light, Michael Rotundi, left.

Cuff: The idea of toolmaking instead of master planning is useful. A group of urban humanities students at UCLA focused on Boyle Heights, which, like Westlake, is experiencing development pressure. The tools that the community partners asked for were pretty straightforward, like a manual about how to turn abandoned spaces into parks. It was an interesting conversation with the humanities, architecture, and planning students about their own agency. Could you *not* deliver what they wanted and still be a socially responsible



partner with community groups? The discussion was interesting because the agency of the students came into play, from architecture students who are ready to do something even if they don't have much information, to the humanities students who are reluctant to act since they feel like they don't know enough or have the right to intervene.

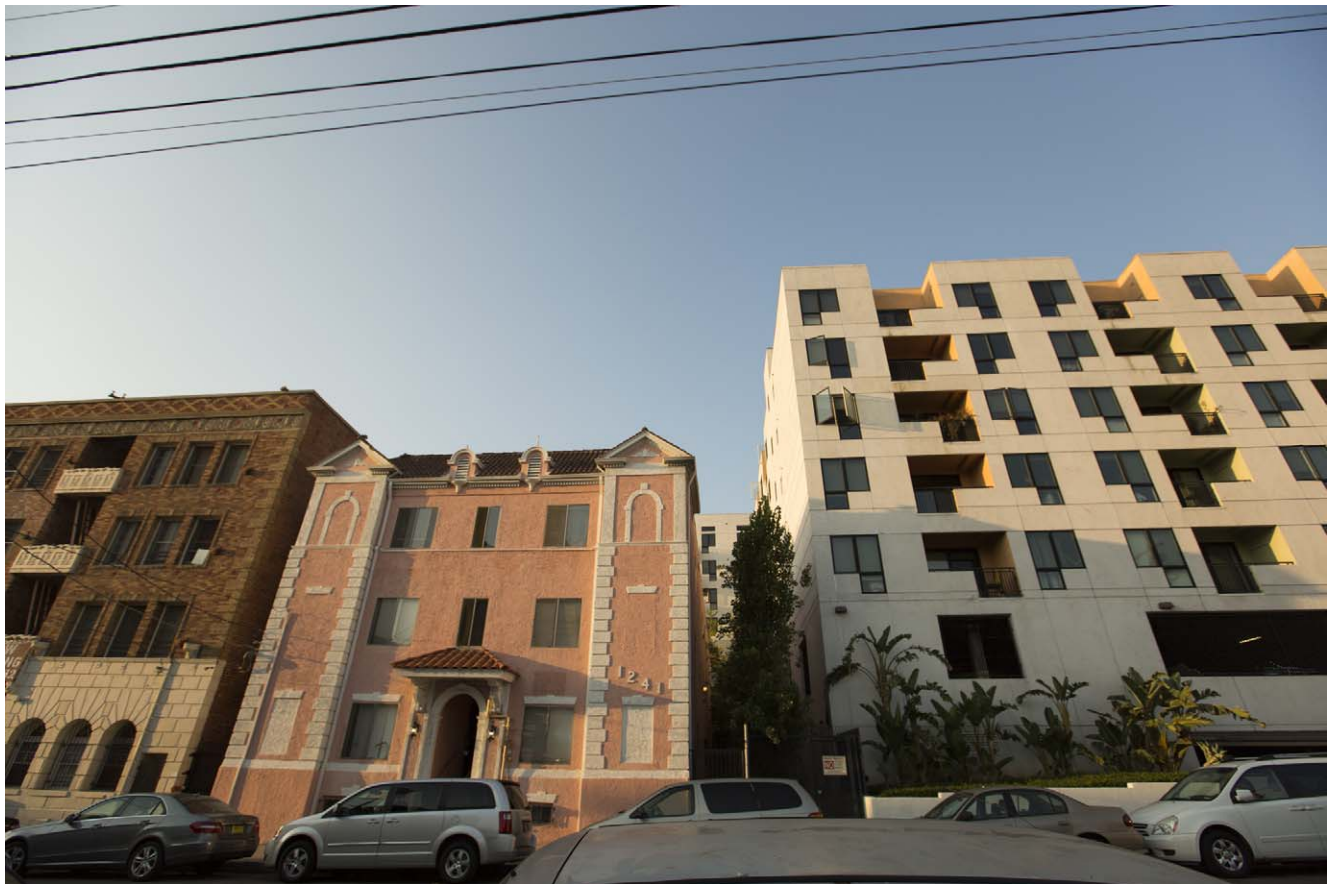
Davis: That kind of conscience might be good for some of the senior architects in LA who regard the city as a free-fire zone for whatever vanity they happen to come up with, regardless of urban context or history. In *City of Quartz*, I criticized Frank Gehry for his stealth designs and over-concern with security. It really pissed him off, because he comes from a social-democratic background and hated my tongue-in-cheek depiction of him as architecture's "Dirty Harry."

One day, a few years later, he called me in to see him. "Okay, big shot, look at this." And he showed me the latest iteration of his Disney Concert Hall design, which had park

space wrapped around its non-Euclidean perimeter. "You criticized me for antidemocratic designs, but what is this?" And of course, it was clever integration of the elitist concert hall with space for local kids to play and homeless people to relax. It invited rather than excluded residents from the poor Latino neighborhoods like Witmer Street that surround Downtown. This was more or less unprecedented, and he had to wage a long battle with the county who wanted the Disney fenced and off-limits. In this instance at least, celebrity architecture fought the good fight.

Jennifer Wolch: Absolutely. However it's an important question particularly for the humanities students, the issue of subjectivity makes them reticent to make proposals.

Davis: But, they have skills. Narrative is an important part of creating communities. People's stories are key, especially about their routines. It seems to me that there are important social science skills, but the humanities are important particularly because of stories. I also think



a choreographer would be a great analyst of space and kind of an imagineer for using space.

I had a long talk with Richard Louv one day about his *Last Child in the Woods*, one of the most profound books of our time, a meditation on what it means for kids to lose contact with nature, with free nomadic unorganized play and adventure. A generation of mothers consigned to be fulltime chauffeurs, ferrying kids from one commercial distraction or over-organized play date to another. I grew up in eastern San Diego County, on the very edge of the back country, and once you did your chores (a serious business in those days), you could hop on your bike and set off like Huck Finn. There was a nudist colony in Harbison Canyon about twelve miles away, and we'd take our bikes, push them uphill for hours and hours in the hope of peeking through the fence. Like all my friends, I got a .22 (rifle) when I turned twelve. We did bad things to animals, I must confess, but we were free spirits, hated school, didn't worry about grades, kept our parents off our backs with part-time jobs and yard work,

and relished each crazy adventure and misdemeanor. Since I moved back to San Diego in 2002, I have annual reunions with the five or six guys I've known since second grade in 1953. Despite huge differences in political beliefs and religion, we're still the same old gang.

And gangs were what kept you safe and why mothers didn't have to worry about play dates or child molesters. I remember even in kindergarten—we lived in the City Heights area of San Diego at that time—we had a gang that walked to school together and played every afternoon. Just this wild group of little boys and girls, seven or eight of us, roaming around, begging pennies to buy gum at the corner store. Today the idea of unsupervised gangs of children or teenagers sounds like a law-and-order problem. But it's how communities used to work and might still work. Aside from Louv, I warmly recommend *The Child in the City* by the English anarchist Colin Ward. A chief purpose of architecture, he argues, should be to design environments for unprogrammed fun and discovery.



Wolch: We have a completely different question, Mike. One of your books that we like the most is *Late Victorian Holo-causts*. It's not about cities or about the West. How did you decide to link up global climate-change history to famine and political ecology? It seems like something of a departure.

Davis: After the 1992 riots, I got a huge advance from Knopf to write a book about the city's apocalypse. Through my political activities I had gotten to know the mothers of a number of key players in these events, including Theresa Allison, whose son, Dewayne Holmes was a prime mover in the Watts gang truce. I also knew Damian Williams's mom—he was the chief villain, the guy who almost beat the truck driver to death at the corner of Florence and Normandie. Through their eyes I had acquired a very different perspective on cause and effect, right and wrong, during the course of the explosion. But at the end of the day, I could not find any real justification for the kind of journalism that makes authoritative claims through selective quotations and

portraits of people who generally have no control over ultimate manuscript. In the 1930s, this kind of social documentation or second-hand existential narrative—Dorothea Lange's photographs or James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, for example—could claim that it was an integral part of a crusade, the New Deal or the CIO, that was fighting to improve the lives of the victimized people who were its often unknowing subjects. But now, in our post-liberal era, such work runs the danger of simply being sensational and exploitative. Frankly, as much as I wanted to write the book, I couldn't find any real moral license for looting folks' stories and their personal miseries for my greater glory as LA's voice of doom. So I gave the advance back and moved my base of operations to the Cal Tech earth science library and immersed myself in the research on environmental history and disaster that became *Ecology of Fear*.

I also discovered another topic where there was no ethical ambiguity—indeed, a project that perfectly aligned



conscience and my zeal for research. Tom Hayden contacted me in 1995 or 1996 and asked me to contribute to a volume he was editing on the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the Irish holocaust. At first I demurred. Brilliant young Irish historians were reinterpreting the Famine, and I had no expertise in this area. But he persisted. “Well, maybe there’s something else that happened at the time that you could write about.” Then I discovered the famines in China and India during the 1870s and 1890s that killed some twenty million people but had long gone unmentioned in conventional histories of the Victorian era. The result was *Late Victorian Holocausts*, a kind of “black book” of capitalism, about the millions of unnecessary deaths that occurred as European powers—above all, England—force-marched the great subsistence peasantries of India and China into the world market with disastrous results.

Wolch: We have one last question, about your young adult novels. Whenever we assign something from *City of Quartz* or another of your disheartening pieces about LA, it’s hard

not to worry that the students will leave the class and jump off of a cliff! But your young adult novels seem to capture some amount of an alternative hopeful future.

Davis: Gee, you shouldn’t be disheartened by my books on LA. They’re just impassioned polemics on the necessity of the urban left. And my third LA book, *Magical Realism*, literally glows with optimism about the grassroots renaissance going on in our immigrant neighborhoods. But to return to the two adolescent “science adventure” novels I wrote for Viggo Mortensen’s wonderful Perceval Press. Above all they’re expressions of longing for my oldest son after his mother moved him back to her native Ireland. The heroes are three real kids: my son, his step-brother, and the daughter of our best friends when I taught at Stony Brook on Long Island. Her name is Julia Monk, and she’s now a wildlife biologist doing a Ph.D. at Yale on pumas in the Andes. I’m very proud that I made her the warrior-scientist heroine of the novels, because it was an intuition about her character that she’s made real in every way—just a remarkable young person.



Writing these tales was pure fun. The original inspiration was a trip that my son and I took to East Greenland when he was seven. This became *The Land of the Lost Mammoths*. Stories like this write themselves, especially because they're real kids and you're projecting their moral characters in situations of fantastic adventure and danger (although some of the most outlandish parts of the books are true and based on my life-long obsession with mysterious islands). In a way, it was like the four of us really went on expeditions to Greenland and the strange, bewitched island of Socotra.

But let the kids continue the adventure. I've become a homebody in retirement, focused on learning everything I can about nature and geology in Southern California. My only organizational membership in recent years (of nonsubversive groups, that is) is in the American Geophysical

Union. My wife enjoys a good novel at bedtime. I read strange tomes on igneous petrology and paleoclimatology. I even have a Stephen King-like text somewhere [about the street I live on] called *33rd Street Ecology* because there is nothing natural in this neighborhood, from the Arundo to the Sicilian snails, which if they ever hit the Central Valley could do a few billion dollars' damage to crops. Crows didn't exist here, nor did the sinister brown widow spiders who now live in my patio furniture. To me this is great noir stuff—the neighborhood taken over by the aliens and the inhabitants don't know it. **B**

Note

Photographs of the neighborhood in and around Witmer Street by Matthew Gush.