

# What I mean when I say heartless L.A.

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'Lifestyle centres' are a failed attempt to introduce a sense of place to city's sprawling nothingness



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After a few days in Los Angeles, I have a refreshed appreciation for places with a sense of place.

I celebrated the Canada Day/Independence Day holiday weekend in the suburbs of the San Fernando Valley. Actually, I spent most of my time on the jammed freeways of Southern California, hurrying at the L.A. pace from one place to another in search of anywhere that had any sense of place.

Westlake Village, where I stayed, was anything but a village and little more than yet another anonymous suburb. It was impossible for me to distinguish Westlake Village from Thousand Oaks or Thousand Oaks from Agoura Hills or Agoura Hills from Simi Valley. These are merely place names but hardly real places.

They are highway exits at business parks full of two storey buildings and surface parking lots. They are wide landscaped boulevards lined with the backsides of countless walled residential subdivisions. They are endless strip malls with hostile expanses of black-topped parking lots out front.

Eerily, the streets are devoid of people, except those in cars. In the early evening, with fewer cars on the street, everyone seems barricaded behind the walls of their "planned communities", cocooned in their comfortable ranchers. The evening stroll seems to be outlawed. But come to think of it, few streets have sidewalks.

You would think that the most frightening view of Los Angeles is probably from high in the air, with the sprawling nothingness in built-form creeping as far as the eye can see in every direction.

I would argue that the most frightening view of Los Angeles is from the

multi-tiered parking garage of "The Grove."

The Grove is one of the few new "lifestyle centres" that planners and developers have created in an attempt to turn shopping into "an experience" while at the same time trying to reintroduce the character of small town America by building a "main street" lined with the stores you would find in a typical mall.

These new centres are one in a small number of new tools aimed at "repairing" the suburban environment we created.

Thousands drove like me to this destination in West Hollywood on a Friday evening. We parked our cars in a monolithic garage that dominates the neighbourhood streetscape but is carefully hidden from the contrived "main street".

Looking down at the main street from the fifth floor of the parking garage, I quickly realized how the solution can sometimes be worse than the problem.

The Grove and places like it were created to introduce a "sense of place" almost as an oasis in a suburban desert. They pay little attention to their surroundings. Most have little or no residential development. People drive to these places simply to be with other people, walking around outside a bunch of shops.

The urban design detail is commendable but contrived. The architecture is dramatic but Disney-like.

There was a band playing in the "civic square" at The Grove. People were milling about. Others were seated at a number of outdoor restaurants that lined the square. Artists and buskers were sprinkled about around the central fountain and street vendors lined the sidewalks of the "main street."

This was the Friday night gathering place for people from the suburbs of Los Angeles near and far. Suburbs with names but without a heart — without a sense of place.

The Grove is little more than a stark reminder of how much we have neglected to provide for what people really need when we built our suburbs — not simply places to drive to and shop, but places to walk to from home, gather, interact with each other and create "community."

The Grove is the best they have come up with so far in Los Angeles to tame an urban monster.

I am happy to be home.

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