

**NB:** In the following two articles, JDM has taken the editorial liberty of using ***Hoover Style Development*** (Garcetti's strategy) & ***Neighborhood Integrity Initiative*** (Protectionists' strategy) to frame the ideas of these two opposing forces in a manner intended to enable the reader to better understand the nature of the authors' proposed new strategy & the manner in which it differs quite dramatically from the strategies of the opposing forces.

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# Op-Ed

## **Our zoning codes are a relic of a suburban age. There's a better way to plan**

<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-vallianatos-smith-la-zoning-20160811-snap-story.html>



An Expo Line train departs the La Cienega/Jefferson Station on July 9. A new 30-story high-rise complex that has been proposed for construction near the station would reportedly offer upscale apartments, a supermarket, sit-down restaurants and open green space. (Los Angeles Times)

**Mark Vallianatos and Mott Smith**

August 11, 2016

*Mark Vallianatos is a founder of Abundant Housing LA and serves on the Zoning Advisory Committee for re:code LA. Mott Smith is principal with Civic Enterprise Development, adjunct faculty at the USC Price School and a founding board member of the Council of Infill Builders.*

Housing prices in Los Angeles are increasingly out of reach and building permits are unpredictable. These challenges seem as endemic to L.A. as sunshine and food trucks. But they don't have to be. They are merely symptoms of a planning deficit that affects how we live, work and experience the city.

Calls for a fix are mounting, and reformers fall into two camps.

On one side, we have wealthy homeowners who are pushing a measure called the ***Neighborhood Integrity Initiative*** — slated for the March 2017 ballot — that would enforce an inflexible interpretation of existing zoning law. It would restrict new building projects and potentially block tens of thousands of units of badly needed housing.

On the other side is Mayor Eric Garcetti, who wants to overhaul the zoning code and has proposed updating all of the city's 35 community plans within a dozen years - ***Hoover Style Development***.

What both sides miss is that zoning — the focus of planning for the last 100 years — is an inadequate tool for shaping the future of an evolving city. Zoning is a 20th century relic designed to “**protect**” existing residents from the encroachment of people and buildings they see as “undesirable.” Reformers should focus instead on tangible improvements in the public realm.



Why the '*Neighborhood Integrity Initiative*' would worsen L.A.'s affordability crisis

## How we got here

Here's how we got here.

Urban critics in the late 1800s weren't so different from today's. They complained about crowding, pollution and group conflict. They had a point: The Industrial Revolution made cities volatile petri dishes of inequality. Escapists sounded calls for a fresh start somewhere new: the suburbs. Better, they thought, to plan predictable cul-de-sacs on former farmland than face the messy complexity of the city.

The suburban utopians found their muse in Ebenezer Howard, a Briton who published "Garden Cities of To-Morrow" in 1902. Having given up on London for all its pollution, poverty and depravity, he proposed that developers buy virgin agricultural land and develop homes on winding, tree-lined streets, served by new schools, parks and other public goods. All infrastructure costs, he reasoned, would be covered by the rise in homes' values over the crops they replaced.

In the 1920s, suburbanization became national policy in the U.S. when then-Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover launched the "Own Your Own Home" program and assembled a committee to draft model-zoning laws that were subsequently adopted across the country.

These laws promoted two core principles. One of these was that cities should create a regular process for subdividing raw land into new lots for houses. The other encouraged cities to cut up land into zones of different density and "use" (houses, apartments, businesses and industry).

If residents are angry about the current development process, they should redirect their outrage to call for new planning tools that actually work.

The problem with Hoover's zoning program is that it was created specifically to facilitate master-planned suburbs on virgin land. It was never designed to work in existing, built-out areas with many property owners.

This is the reason L.A. grants so many variances — that is, deviations from approved zoning constraints — to projects across the city. It's not because City Hall is in the pocket of wealthy developers. It's because zoning standards for parking, height and setbacks only work when you're building a whole new neighborhood from scratch.

If residents are angry about the current development process, they should redirect their outrage to call for new planning tools that actually work.

## Planning better

Here's a way forward. Instead of trying to preordain exactly what is or isn't allowed on every single piece of land, we should abandon micromanagement and — simultaneously — think big by funding improvements to infrastructure.

We should begin by eliminating parking requirements and easing up restrictions on commerce in residential areas, which can make neighborhoods more walkable and diverse.

We should reverse the bans on density that hindered L.A.'s ability to absorb new housing units in the early 1970s, resulting in today's affordability crises.

We should undo community planning policies that exclude low-income residents from "high opportunity" neighborhoods by limiting where multi-family housing can be built.

Opening up the city to more small and medium scale projects can empower families, building groups, co-ops and community corporations to become their own developers and city shapers, rather than trying to block change in order to feel heard.

But such tweaks will only take us so far. If we want a better city, we as a community need to build a framework for productive growth, more equitable access to opportunity, and a more sustainable future. A safer street grid, expanded transit, well-maintained and shaded sidewalks, sustainable water and energy systems, more parks and adequate city services are the real pathways to a city that works for everyone.

If we focus on public projects that benefit us all, a better city will evolve around them.

***Editor's Note:** This is a shortened version of an article that appeared online-only in July. This version also appeared in print. You can read the original [here](#) (link to the below August 1, 2016 article).*

# Op-Ed

## L.A. isn't a suburb. We need to stop planning it like one.

<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/livable-city/la-ol-zoning-density-housing-20160729-snap-story.html>



**A Victory Park man waters his lawn.**

(Los Angeles Times)

**Mark Vallianatos and Mott Smith**

August 1, 2016

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Living in Los Angeles can be frustrating. Traffic is frozen, housing prices out of reach, building permits unpredictable, and streets too often unsafe for drivers, pedestrians and cyclists alike. These challenges are as endemic to L.A. as sunshine and food trucks. But they don't have to be. They are merely symptoms of a planning deficit that affects how we live, work and experience the city.

Calls for a fix are mounting, and proposed solutions are divided into two camps.

On one side, Mayor Eric Garcetti wants to hire more planners to update, in the next 12 years, the way we zone all of the approximately 800,000 pieces of land in the city - ***Hoover Style Development***. Garcetti also supports an effort to rewrite the city's 1946 zoning code using clearer language.

At the same time, wealthy homeowners, angry about new development, are pushing a measure called the ***Neighborhood Integrity Initiative*** — slated for the March 2017 ballot — that would severely restrict building altogether by forcing an inflexible interpretation of existing zoning.

Unfortunately, neither of these approaches will work.



### **L.A. has a growing mansionization problem**

While zoning is a perfectly fine strategy to map new suburban cul-de-sac subdivisions and to stop growth, it backfires when we try to use it to guide the future of an evolving, dynamic city like Los Angeles. Zoning is a 20th century relic designed to “**protect**” existing residents from the encroachment of people and buildings they see as “undesirable.”

**Zoning is a 20th century relic designed to 'protect' existing residents from the encroachment of people and buildings they see as 'undesirable.'**

Think of the challenges L.A. is facing: rising homelessness and rents, hotter weather and severe drought from climate change, ongoing divides between wealthy and lower-income neighborhoods. To tackle these issues, we need our built environment and economy to evolve, which they can't when we lock them into old patterns.

Instead of doubling down on our failed system of planning-by-zoning, we should learn from history what has worked to shape great cities and take back control of our shared future.

## **How we got here**

Urban critics in the late 1800s weren't so different from today's. They complained about crowding, pollution and group conflict. They had a point: The Industrial Revolution made cities volatile petri dishes of inequality. Escapists sounded calls for a fresh start somewhere new: the suburbs. Better, they thought, to plan predictable cul-de-sacs on former farmland than face the messy complexity of the city.

The suburban utopians found their muse in Ebenezer Howard, a Briton who published “Garden Cities of To-Morrow” in 1902. Having given up on London for all its pollution, poverty and depravity, he proposed that developers buy virgin agricultural land and develop homes on winding, tree-lined streets, served by new schools, parks and other public goods. All infrastructure costs, he reasoned, would be covered by the rise in homes' values over the crops they replaced.

Los Angeles was ahead of the curve in this suburban style of growth with its first-in-the-nation 1909 citywide zoning ordinance. In the 1920s, suburbanization became national policy in the U.S. when then-Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover launched the “Own Your Own Home” program and assembled a committee to draft model-zoning laws that were subsequently adopted across the country.

These laws promoted two core principles of zoning. One of these was that cities should create a regular process for subdividing raw land into new lots for houses. The other encouraged cities to divide up land into zones of different density and “use” (houses, apartments, businesses and industry). Hoover believed that this sort of regulated suburbanization would strengthen America's economy.

Hoover's zoning program, however, was created specifically to facilitate master-planned suburbs on virgin land. It was never designed to work in existing, built-out areas. So it should come as no surprise that today's city planners struggle to shoehorn urban diversity into suburban zoning schemes that assume car-dominated mobility and a neat separation of uses. This is the reason Los Angeles grants so many variances – that is, deviations from approved zoning constraints -- to projects across the city. It's not because City Hall is in the pocket of wealthy developers, as critics often allege. It's because our suburban zoning scheme largely doesn't allow for sensible urban development.

Unless we radically change what we mean by “planning,” Garcetti's proposal to hire staff to push **Hoover-style Development** will just take us further down the rabbit hole.

The **Neighborhood Integrity Initiative**, meanwhile, if passed, would make matters even worse, potentially blocking tens of thousands of units of badly needed housing, and preventing L.A. from adapting to the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century city.

## Planning better

There was a time before Hoover's suburbanization initiative when city planners did what common sense tells you they should do: They regulated buildings, built infrastructure to improve public health and made cities more beautiful and productive. Daniel Burnham and Edward H. Bennett wrote a plan for Chicago in 1909 that, unlike most urban American plans, created the change that helped define one of the world's great cities.

Unlike L.A.'s community plans, which micromanage what thousands of property owners can and cannot do with their land, Burnham and Bennett focused on the public realm – reshaping parks, roads, the lakefront, civic buildings and so on. Their effort produced a physical framework for a growing city – a street grid, an effective transit system, a network of parks and other useful infrastructure – that guided development better than any zoning code ever could.

L.A.'s Hoover-style attempts to indirectly shape every plot of land in the city, on the other hand, have largely failed.

Instead, we should be following Chicago's approach by focusing on public spaces, infrastructure and other common assets. Thankfully, there are exciting plans being created around transit, the L.A. River and parks and open space. Now is the time to knit these goals together into a compelling, holistic vision for the city.

L.A. should jettison parts of zoning laws that attempt to regulate the city like a vast homeowners' association. Eliminating parking requirements and relaxing bans on appropriately scaled commerce and apartments will make neighborhoods more walkable and diverse.

Decades of downzoning has created a self-inflicted housing crisis. L.A. should return to allowing housing units for up to 10 million residents, as it did until 1970, when the city began slashing capacity.

Community planning and zoning have helped exclude low-income residents from “high opportunity” neighborhoods by limiting where multi-family housing can be built. More affordable housing in wealthy areas and more market rate housing in low-income communities can help desegregate L.A.

Opening up the city to more small and medium scale projects can empower families, building groups, co-ops and community corporations to become their own developers and city shapers, rather than trying to block change in order to feel heard.

Shortly before the release of the Plan for Chicago, Burnham wrote: “Remember that our [children and grandchildren] are going to do things that would stagger us.” It's time for L.A. to follow Burnham's lead and embrace the future, not fear it, by rediscovering and reinventing what planning truly means.