

Incessant Film Shoots Leave Residents Reeling

Some neighborhoods of L.A. fight for a voice in how projects are shot. Industry opposes idea.

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Not long after moving into his downtown Los Angeles loft, Jonathan Jerald awoke at 3 a.m. in a panic, blinded by a bright white light cascading across his bed.

"I thought I was being kidnapped by aliens," he said. "I was terrified for a second, and then, of course, I knew what it was."

It was a film shoot, one of thousands of commercials, television shows or movies filmed on city streets each year. The film industry says such shoots — 44,000 days of them in Los Angeles and unincorporated county areas last year — are minor annoyances that fuel a giant economic engine.

But in some areas of Los Angeles, such as Westwood, Pacific Palisades and downtown, residents complain that their neighborhoods have been turned into virtual studio back lots.

And now they are fighting back, urging the City Council to give neighborhoods more say in the way film shoots take place on city streets.

The film industry has reacted as though the council was about to slap an X rating on their top summer blockbuster. It warned that if residents are allowed to micro-manage film permits, studios will move their productions elsewhere, taking thousands of jobs with them.

"Producers have a lot of choices these days ... from as close as San Diego to as far away as Australia, Canada, Eastern Europe," said Melissa Patack, vice president of the Motion Picture Assn. of America. "This is the reality of what has become a global business."

After representatives from the film industry flooded City Hall and raised the specter of massive job losses, the council backed away from Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski's plan to give neighborhood councils a say in drafting new regulations for the agency that hands out film permits.

Instead, the council asked an accounting firm to hold community meetings and come up

with a way to heed residents' concerns without scaring away the industry and the billions of dollars it pumps into the local economy each year. The meetings will begin this week, and both sides say they are hopeful.

Still, in many neighborhoods, the anger and frustration about filming have reached the boiling point.

"I bought a house on a residential street," Van Nuys resident Joe Montoya complained to the City Council. "I didn't buy on a back lot."

From the Valley to downtown to the Westside, residents say their streets are crowded, their parking spaces are blocked and their sleep is interrupted by blazing klieg lights and bangs and screeches from simulated shootings and car crashes.

What's more, the residents say, they've been treated like the lowliest grips and gofers — especially by the embattled Entertainment Industry Development Corp., a nonprofit agency overseen by city and county elected officials that handles the permits for shoots in city neighborhoods.

Council members say they are listening.

"It is a heartbreak every time we hear of the industry going other places," said Councilwoman Janice Hahn. "But our concern is also for the people who live in the communities.... It is their quality of life on a daily basis. Their quality of life and their peace of mind."

Central to any solution will be the EIDC, which since 1995 has served as a one-stop shop for companies seeking to film in Los Angeles County. Before the agency was created, producers had to scramble hither and yon through the city's bureaucracy obtaining permits from the Police Department, the Fire Department, the Bureau of Street Services and many other agencies.

Now, a producer makes one call to the EIDC, which can take care of a permit in hours or days, clearing the way for a caravan of white trailers and giant lights to sweep onto a residential street. Shoots involving explosions or helicopters take a little longer.

"The industry needs the ability, particularly with television, to move quickly," said Lindsley Parsons Jr., interim director of the EIDC. "That's what keeps them here, rather than running them out of town." The program is especially necessary because other countries, such as Canada and Australia, offer financial incentives to lure filming, he said.

Last fall the EIDC came under fire after the Los Angeles County district attorney's office began investigating it for misuse of funds. The agency is now being overhauled. But many residents say a larger problem was virtually ignored by the probes: the way the agency ran roughshod over their concerns, ignoring their phone calls and allowing

producers to do whatever they wanted in their neighborhoods.

"There have been abuses that weren't being properly managed," said Miscikowski.

Jane Usher, who lives in Windsor Square near Hancock Park, likened the EIDC's employees to "gunslingers in the Wild West" who routinely ignored their own rules for protecting neighborhoods.

"The rules seemed to be window dressing," she said. "On any given day, there would be vehicles parked wherever they pleased. The hours [of filming] would start earlier than promised and end in the middle of the night.... You could have filming as frequently as McDonald's serves French fries."

Part of the problem, according to Christine Peters, a member of the Echo Park Elysian Neighborhood Council, is that film permits are issued so quickly that neighbors don't have any time to react.

Her neighbors took up a petition recently against a plan to crash cars on a residential street as part of a shoot for the cable television show "Monk." But 72 hours later, when residents had gathered more than 100 signatures, the cameras were already rolling, the cars careening into each other and the petition a useless piece of paper.

"That is the exact example of what is wrong with the process," said Peters, who is a costume designer for the film industry. "I want to support my industry, but I do also need to support my community, which is saying we need more information, we need more flexibility."

Parsons, a former producer who took over as interim president of the EIDC after past president Cody Cluff resigned under pressure, acknowledged that there have been abuses in some neighborhoods.

"What we're trying to do right now is cool off the hot spots," Parsons said.

In the past, he said, those issuing film permits at the EIDC "were trying to help the industry, and perhaps they went a little overboard with it."

Parsons said producers understand the concerns and want to work with neighborhoods. But he warned that strict regulations limiting shooting across the city, as some residents have proposed, are not the answer.

"The picture business is on wheels," he said. "We'd be in San Diego or Phoenix in the morning, depending on the weather."

Pamm Fair, deputy national executive director of the Screen Actors Guild, said city officials must keep in mind the very real threat to jobs as they draft new regulations.

"We certainly recognize the problems that neighbors are facing," she said. "But everyone has to recognize this is an industry that employs workers who need the work."

Fair proposed steering production into neighborhoods where many industry workers live, such as the West San Fernando Valley, on the theory that they might be more supportive.

"We want to work with neighborhoods and residents to minimize the impact that filming has on their lives," said Patack, the executive director of the MPAA. "That being said ... the streets and places in and around Los Angeles are ... the factories of this business. Our companies need access to those.... So the question is, 'How do you strike a balance?'"

Ideas include appointing neighborhood outreach workers and stepping up enforcement of permits to make sure film companies do only what they say they will.

Perhaps the trickiest place to solve the problem will be downtown Los Angeles, where graceful old buildings in a largely industrial setting have made the area a stand-in for almost any American city. Countless car commercials are shot there, as is the television show "The District," which is set in Washington. Feature films from "Pearl Harbor" to "Spider-Man" have been filmed there too.

"There almost isn't a television show that doesn't shoot downtown," said Daryl Seif, vice president of the EIDC.

Location managers say that when they want an old-fashioned street scene, there are few alternatives to downtown.

But in the last few years, many of those old buildings have been converted into expensive residential lofts, and surrounding businesses have sprung up to cater to them.

"This is no longer an abandoned warehouse area where they can come in any time and close off the area," said Charlie Woo, whose downtown toy store is often inaccessible to customers because of shooting.

"I'd rather have the homeless than the film crews," said resident Tom Guiton, who compares the crews to street gangs and wants to see filming stopped. "The homeless don't keep you from getting sleep. They don't blow things up and set fire to adjacent buildings."

Residents say there were more than 200 days of shooting in downtown Los Angeles last year, and many say they often received little warning beforehand.

In one case last fall, film crews erected a fake homeless encampment, complete with ersatz cardboard shelters and shopping carts brimming with old clothing just a short walk from the dwellings of thousands of actual homeless people. The encampment, created for a scene in Lifetime Television Network's "Strong Medicine," coincided with a gallery opening on East 3rd Street. The gallery owner had no idea what was going on and said he

feared his patrons would be frightened away.

Guiton said he is so fed up that he and his wife plan to move. Some residents have even pledged to take to the streets to disrupt shoots. Others said they would just like to see a little less filming. And they would also like to see the film companies make a direct financial contribution to their neighborhoods.

Although many companies pay landlords a fee for shooting in the area, many residents are renters and rarely see a dime.

"The neighbors should perceive that they get some benefit," said Jerald, the downtown resident who awoke in terror because of bright lights in his bedroom. He suggests that production companies pay to repair streets or fund neighborhood councils. He serves on the downtown neighborhood council.

"We are not secret agents from Canada, which I have been accused of being," he said. "We don't want to get rid of production. We just want it to be reasonable."