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SUNDAY

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## OPINIC

CHARTER REFORM

## Humanizing L.A.

The City's
Future Is in Its
Neighborhoods

By D.J. Waldie

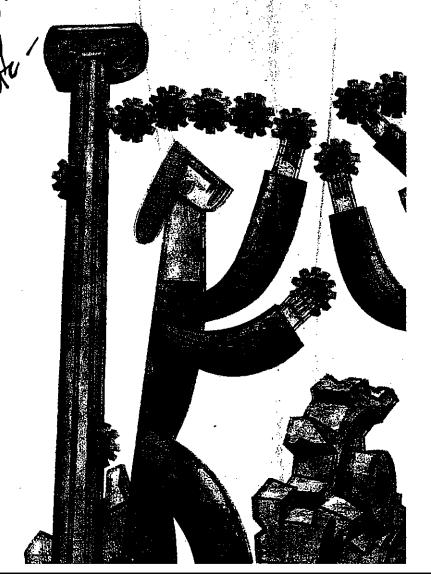
rom the perspective of the small cities that ring the Los Angeles Plain, the city of L.A. is both incomfortably close and reassuringly distant. It's only among urban theorists that Los Angeles is the capital of the place we share. Never in our hearts. The cities of the plain made other choices—often, it was not to be L.A.—and now they have separate histories that permanently constrain how they relate to each other and the looming, if not completely real, presence of Los Angeles.

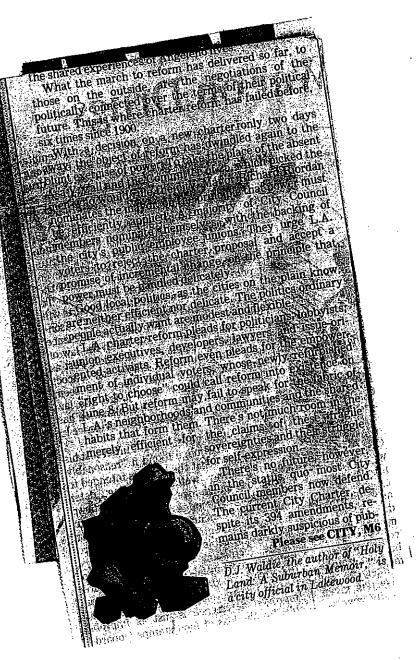
There are 80 cities on the plain (out of 88) with populations under 125,000. Think of them collectively as the Canada of Los Angeles County. They are sovereign in ways that matter locally but invisible to the big political and corporate egos that claim to be L.A.'s future. When they register at all, it's generally as backdrops for one interminable freeway car chase after another.

When L.A. writhes in communal violence or political muscle flexing, these cities look for shelter.

Seen from the margin, charter reform for Los Angeles seems both necessary and unavailing. Necessary, because the charter approved in 1924 placed ultimate political responsibility in the hands of a tiny social and economic elite that has since passed away. Unavailing, if reform only revises the calculus of political power in Los Angeles and does little to change the shared experiences of Angeleno lives.

What the march to reform has delivered so for to





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lic life and its messy reliance on communal experience. It contains the cruel assumptions of the era of its drafting, that the city's working class people should be politically neutral the city's governance should be in the hands of dispassionate technicians and its elected leadership should be a bland board of directors. The charter also assumed that the city's Latino population would be permanently exiled east of the Los Angeles Riversafely beyond city boundaries and its tiny, minority sof African Americans would minority sof African Americans would remain invisible Everything has changed, and yet Los

Angeles is still governed posthumously by white Protestant men who used professionalism and prejudice to make their Los Angeles a perfect Midwestern small town.

It stopped being that at least 40 years ago. What L.A.'s civic culture might have become has been held in suspension, which partly explains the city's tendency to go up in flames.

e No wonder, then, that Los Angeles residents of color or immigrant background see only an eyeless mask, instead of a comprehending human face, when they turn to a city government framed on these principles. Or that middle class Anglo voters, because they were urged to turn their backs on it, accuse city government of being remote.

The life of any city is a story. Beyond the edge of Los Angeles, the civic stories contain their share of failure and heroism? The stories also are familiar small scale secessionist longing in the San Fernando and believable. Very few Los Angeles syalley and at the harbor, although that residents believe in their city sunrealistic serves an untried idea too much credit. Story about itself, because that story. At least, they would bring governance contains so little about them and what in Los Angeles closer to the standard of

The second second

THE REPORT OF STREET PRINTED IN mayor, who can be checked by council veto, makes executive authority accountable and gives it a citywide identity

 Legislative authority Angexpanded City Council, if Amendment 3 or 4 is approved, makes legislative authority more accountable to community-specific interests and gives it a neighborhood identity.

• Land-use planning. A democratized राजिलामा इंता च

zoning process, with more planning commissioners and neighborhood-oriented warea commissions, gives the current

respectability in the conflict over expansion of authority over expansion of authority in the mayor's office has pushed the creation of neighborhood councils to the periphery of reform. That's unfortunate. Although they would be only advisory neighborhood councils, supported by their own department, general manager and board of neighborhood commissioners are the reform charter's most radical break with the city's past They would do the most to give Los Angeles a shared civic culture to replace the elitist one that has failed.

Neighborhood councils respond to the communitarian impulses that come with the cultural experience of the city's immigrant populations. They can substitute for the corporate boardrooms, mostly long since departed, that ongelinculated the city's leadership. They orgoes analytemative to the increasing privatization of life in Los Angeles and to the silence that swallows the sounds of ordinary Angeleno voices whenever they speak in public. Neighborhood councils may even diffuse

they yearn for .

They yearn for accountability identity and decency. In its compromised way, they council member for every 11500 resire form charter points toward these values, and every 11500 resire the ones that sustain communities likes the plant of the level they are most comprehensible: comprehensible: neighborhood council appeared in every climited historically co-executive authority. A stronger district of an expanded City Council, local mately heroic choice.

government could have a human face for every 30,000 residents, perhaps even fewer so the second sec

A human face does not mean that neighborhood councils won't become captive to the values of homeowner and business determinists, or be subverted by suspicious City Council members or be drafted as the mayor's cheering section. Neighborhood councils face many risks not the least of which is the brittleness of the system in which they would operate.

area commissions gives the current.

developer-drivent process a fig leaf of ability of computer technology to be respectability and to surrous optimally efficient. Think of your troubled irelationship with Microsoft Windows and the actors in with microsoft, with cows and the actors are looking gode needed to accomprodite decade soft less than optimal achoices according to the charter had been smaller bring back the industries that produced is middle class change its that produced its middle class change its overall pattern or land itse or sevel its

rigorous sorting of populations by race, and economic status.

Charter record won't address the rigidity in government financing. When yoters approach Propositions 13 and 218, they shifted they cost of many municipal services from property pwners to consumption based taxes and userfees. Turn sumparon-vascutaxes and user rees. Turning citizens into mere consumers let formeowners disayow their property-cased obligations to each other. Bewildering layers of municipal fees made city government look anefficient and greedy. Also, the shift made the state Legislature not lead your meteors are supported by the same consultants. not local voters, ultimately responsible for the city's budget Los Angeles, and every California city struggles with the implica-tions.

L.A.'s story was once only a sales pitch for a Caudasian utopia of middle-class health wealth and happiness in the sanshine My clays story, like many from the margins, was deliberately more modest, though still in incomplete solution to the problem of from we can live together. Los Angeles volers have the opportunity Tuesday to make their story more realistic and that sprobably a good thing. It's a limited historically conditioned and hiti-mately heroic choice.

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