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# What is Glamour?

## **The Production & Consumption of a Working Aesthetic**

by **Gordon Douglas**



A popular conception of Los Angeles, or at least of Hollywood, is that of the 'dream factory' and global glamour mecca, a place and an industry in large part responsible for popularizing the understanding and usage of the very word glamour as we know it today. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Terry Nichols Clark and his colleagues find that Los Angeles scores higher for 'glamour' than other major cities (and than the national average) in their data, and find furthermore that job growth across Tinsel Town is strongly correlated with the level of glamour in a given area, while there is little such correlation in Chicago or New York (see Clark's piece in this issue for a summary of this work). It is fitting that glamour would correlate with growth in L.A., just as the link between job growth and 'individualism' Clark finds in New York and the link between job growth and 'bohemianism' he finds in Chicago also fit certain popular images of those cities. But, like any major city, Los Angeles is far more than this one stereotype, as important to its identity as it may be. In some ways and in some places, L.A. is very much the antithesis of glamour, and taking the metropolis at its whole we might even argue that it is mostly something very different, so much so that the correlation above actually surprises us. So what is glamour, and how does it work in the City of Angels?

I examine here how glamour is manifested in different places and among different peoples across Los Angeles, each with different histories, cultures and aesthetics. After initially defining the concept with reference to traditional understandings using the social and spatial history of Hollywood, I develop three ideal-typical categories of glamour (glitz as glamour, status as glamour, and grit as glamour) as heuristics for looking at the many diverse 'glamours' to be found in Los Angeles today: from the film industry to finance, the allure of haute cuisine to the chrome of Latino car culture, the manufactured spectacle of absurdist architecture to the hippest loft conversion. I focus not only on how these different glamours play with cultural identities and the urban landscape, but how they are integrally tied to the production of capital and scenes of consumption.

### **Part I: Glamour in History and in Hollywood**

#### **What Glamour Was**

In their sweeping work on the subject, Stephen Gundle and Clino Castelli (2006) review a number of major components of the 'glamour system' from the early 19<sup>th</sup> through the late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These include the role of the electric and the exotic, of gold and other glittering metals, and even certain colors and materials (all discussed at greater length below). Early conceptions of glamour were associated with the wonders of the early modern city and modernity itself, including the allure of electric lights and grandiose feats of engineering, as well as the consumption of gaudy spectacles from the cabaret to the department store. And finally, glamour has elements of class division, commoditization, and desire. From the beginning then, we begin to see an inherent connection between glamour and capitalism, production and consumption.

Many of these themes are still associated with glamour today, but it was the Hollywood film industry that popularized (and commercialized) the term and made it its own beginning during the 1920s. "Because it was located in California, far from the main centers of

privilege and style," write Gundle and Castelli (2006: 63), "the film industry reinvented glamour as an enticing image that was removed from specific social referents and that relied solely on technique, artifice and imagination... a unique blend that mixed a plausible pastiche of upper-class ways and styles with established spectacular cultures and low cultural appeals." This combination of shimmering wealth and gaudy glitz surrounding the film industry formed the classic American understanding of glamour, created by the culture industries and Southern California boosters with many of the traditional aesthetics repurposed for the media age. This glamour was physically manifest by its champions in Los Angeles in many ways, to mixed results. And nowhere more, of course, than in Hollywood itself – not the multinational industry or the much-maligned 'state of mind,' but the district and its many neighborhoods that form the real spaces in which glamour was produced and consumed.<sup>1</sup>

### **Glamour Manifest**

Far more so in the 1920s, '30s and '40s than it is today, Hollywood proper was an industry town, home to studio headquarters, sound stages, talent agencies, and other film production services, as well as the booming recording and eventually television businesses (see Scott, 2005). Furthermore, it was home to those who created the glamour, from stars and executives in exclusive hillside neighborhoods like Whitley Heights to the writers, costume designers, grips and others in the apartments and bungalows surrounding Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards out to Los Feliz and Melrose and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Finally, it was a site of glamour consumption – for red-carpet premieres at the Chinese Theater or El Capitan, photo ops and celebrity-spotting at Hollywood and Vine, awards ceremonies and galas at the Roosevelt Hotel, and tourism, tourism, tourism.

Other parts of the city were fundamentally shaped by the 'glamour factory' as well. In what is now the Koreatown/Wilshire Center area, the legendary 1921 Ambassador Hotel, home of the Coconut Grove nightclub, played host to three of the first five Academy Awards ceremonies and was one of the most luxurious celebrity destinations. Long touting itself as "the Heart of Screenland," now-trendy Culver City was a "studio town" as early as 1915, home to MGM and others and production site of *Gone with the Wind*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Wizard of Oz* and many other films. Even gritty, urban and business-centered Downtown L.A. also saw the city's first concentration of movie theaters on Broadway, where films such as *The Jazz Singer* and Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* had their premieres. Including dozens of converted vaudeville houses and live stage theaters, by 1931 "Broadway contained the largest concentration of movie palaces in the world" (Irwin, et al. 1986).

In many ways, the stories of Hollywood and these other parts of L.A. parallel the history of glamour and its changing definitions over the years. In the 1920s, according to one local booster organization, "a whimsical skyline of movie set-inspired hotels and apartments... imbued with the glamour of the stars that called them home" appeared along the major thoroughfares while "suave new restaurants and nightclubs" and "extravagant movie palaces completed the iconic Hollywood landscape" (Hollywood Sign Trust, 2005: 4). Through the 1940s, Hollywood designers set the standard for glamorous fashion while the studio system employed thousands in a highly routinized and vertically integrated mode of culture

production (Scott, 2005: 40). And just as this boom heralded the golden age of Hollywood, so did urban decay herald its decline.

Beginning with McCarthyism in the 1940s and the rise of television in the 1950s, the glamour of the film industry was knocked down a few pegs, the shine tarnished and the plastic cracked. Perhaps nothing symbolized this tarnish more than Marilyn Monroe's short, explosive career and untimely death in L.A. in 1962. As Gundle & Castelli (2006: 83) write, her suicide "revealed that tragedy lay behind the polished image of the wonderful, rich, happy life of the stars." It was a sensational revelation of a dark, exploitative, and sad side of Hollywood – both the industry and the place – soon to be replaced by the comparatively mundane entertainment of television, *The Brady Bunch*, and a house and a swimming pool for everyone. During the 1960s, Hollywood saw an exodus of both residents and film and television production studios over the hill to the decidedly unglamorous San Fernando Valley, while the central Hollywood area entered a period of decay characteristic of many inner-cities during the era of economic restructuring. And while the porn industry – its own 'glamour' perhaps foreshadowed by Monroe's unintentional turn in the first issue of *Playboy* – blossomed in the Valley, Hollywood became "overrun with adult theaters and the 'adult' culture they ushered in: massage parlors, porn shows, adult bookstores, etc" (Hollywood Sign Trust, 2005: 9).

### **Putting Glamour in Perspective**

This rather sour note is not to suggest that glamour was gone – as I argue below it remained and remains very much present in many forms. What I aim to stress here however is that there are centrally important aspects of Los Angeles's space, society and culture that cannot be conflated with glamour any more than any great metropolis can be conflated with a single industry or single part of town. In his influential ethnography *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*, Hortense Powdermaker (1950: 17) argued that "Although Los Angeles stretches in distance for eighty-five miles and has a population of approximately four million, the whole of it is dominated by Hollywood." Whether there was more truth to this observation at the time is debatable, but today it is patently false. The greater L.A. area spreads for nearly 9,000 square miles depending on where one draws the line, and the city alone is 500 square miles. The regional census statistical area is home to some 18 million people – of whom just 210,000 lived in the Hollywood Community Plan Area in 2000. Ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity are staggering in the metropolis, with a minority-majority population in which Latinos form the largest plurality but which also includes the country's largest Asian, Persian and Armenian populations and other such superlatives. Economically, despite having more high-income households than any other county in the U.S. (and among the highest concentrations of billionaires in the world), L.A. County also has many of the very poorest (Cooper, 2000; Vorasarun, 2008). The L.A. Homeless Services Authority (2007) estimates that there are 73,702 homeless people in the county on any given day. Hollywood is part of L.A., but so are Skid Row and Watts, the Wholesale District and the harbor, the shopping malls, subdivisions, trailer parks and slums. Of the epitome of his postmetropolis, Soja (1989: 193) writes that "There is a Boston in Los Angeles, a Lower Manhattan and a South Bronx, a São Paulo and a Singapore."



Such characteristics and countless more help give an idea of a massive urban area that has relatively little in common with Hollywood or our classic image of glamour. The poverty and violence associated with the city's gang problems, for example, prompted one recent article to declare "Little glamour in L.A., 'gang capital of America'" (Serjeant, 2007). As Prendergast (1992: 38) writes, part of the allure of glamour is that "the poor are excluded, [and the] spectacle and the pleasures it promises are a matter of class." As such, an interesting paradox emerges when comparing Los Angeles today to the glamorous electric cities of bygone eras. For Gundle and Castelli (2006: 151), "In all the great cities, it was the rich, the aristocrats of money, who shone most brightly." Yet in Los Angeles, rather than the poor looking in from the streets at brightly lit shops and amusements, it is the rich who look down from their dark and isolated canyon homes on the billions of lights of the teeming city of the poor.

Regardless, the reality is that one would be foolish to argue that Los Angeles is not still heavily associated with glamour. Perhaps it is the persistent stereotype of L.A. as glamorous that suggests the real power of glamour in the first place. It is the Hollywood 'false-front' or design's 'fashion over function,' and in this sense the glove does fit. No one has ever argued that glamour needs to be anything more than skin deep. And furthermore the fact remains that data do suggest that glamour, in some form or another, is economically beneficial in Los Angeles. It is clear then that, with our slightly more holistic (if still necessarily incomplete) understanding of the many sides of L.A., we must look to new and redefined manifestations of glamour in the city and how they are working today.

## Understanding Glamour Today

By the 1980s, Hollywood had become the closest thing L.A. had to a red light district with prostitution, narcotics, and homelessness problems, but was simultaneously home to the city's increasingly influential punk and 'glam rock' scenes. More broadly, the 1982 Olympics brought a particularly hot pink and sunglasses, Van Halen and Randy Newman brand of L.A. glamour to the world stage, while drug-addled industry 'bad boys' like Don Simpson promoted a 'culture of excess' and consumption as the new glamour in film, fusing action, sex and pop music in movies like *Flashdance*, *Top Gun*, and *Beverly Hills Cop* (see Fleming, 1999). Meanwhile, in Downtown L.A. and similar areas, a different glamour – this one centered more on wealth and class than glitz and sparkle, with its roots in the more traditional 'WASPY' aesthetics of Pasadena rather than the new money plasticity of Hollywood – was burgeoning in the form of a shimmering new 'global city core' of high-rise office towers, gourmet restaurants, and the arts.

At the same time, the power of the cultural producers to set the standard in glamour had actually been severely reduced. According to Willis (1990: 84), the 1960s had "marked the beginning of a new phase in the mass consumption of clothes, marked by a convergence of innovative design, youth fashion and the invention of synthetic fibers, under the conditions of full employment and increased spending." The resulting "democratization of style and fashion that undermined the centrality of the designers" happened globally, but all the more so in a city where culture-consumer and culture-factory are so close to one. In this context, street trends had become highly influential on the culture industries and on glamour. 'Anti-glam glam rock' bands like Guns N Roses (originally called 'Hollywood Rose') and funk rockers like the Red Hot Chili Peppers were redefining rock aesthetics at skuzzy Hollywood and Downtown venues, while gangsta rap groups like N.W.A. brought a gritty and violent style out of South L.A. to the erstwhile increasingly glamorous world of hip hop. A film industry long neglectful of Latinos and exploitative of African Americans was increasingly outshone by the potential for myriad distinctive cultural glammers and forced to diversify its own content (see Wood, 2002; Stewart, 2005). Even surfing was overtaken by skateboarding, an enormously popular Southern California youth trend reflecting more the realities of the 'concrete jungle' than the glamour of the Pacific (and which the global market was quick to capitalize on). Rock, hip hop and other popular music styles have remained (and, in the case of hip hop, become increasingly) glamorous in the general sense, but these local-level contributions demonstrate a less glitzy Hollywood culture. Even as the classic aesthetics of glamour have long stopped being the domain only of Tinsel Town, in neighborhoods on Hollywood's fringe (as well as further east in Silver Lake and the downtown Arts District), alternative culture became glamorous in its own right, drawing young people to the allure of 'bohemia' (and its own accordant forms of cultural production and consumption) that Richard Lloyd (2006) calls "grit as glamour."

Over the next two decades, glamour continued to evolve, in both a conceptual aesthetic sense and as manifested physically in the city. New investment saw Downtown become a center not only of financial wealth, but glamorous entertainment and culture in the form of trendy clubs, fashion shows, professional sports, and sparkling architectural landmarks hosting museums and performing arts. The allure of urbanity and bohemia stretched

into Downtown too, as well as the hipster meccas of Echo Park and other 'Eastside' neighborhoods to the northeast. And in Hollywood, a massive federally-sponsored revitalization effort ultimately saw a decline in vice and the restoration of the area's glamorous landmarks (including the Disneyfication of the historic El Capitan Theater) and their accompanying tourist trade, culminating with the massive Hollywood and Highland commercial development and subway station, an architectural ode to Hollywood glamour, mass transit, and rampant consumption all at once.

From the preceding discussion then, one can see different categories of glamour emerging from the recent history of L.A. For the sake of further discussion and analysis, I distinguish here just three of the larger currents of glamour. The more traditionally-inspired glamour of beautiful fashion, luxurious 'high culture,' and professional, spiritual or class aspiration, I call status as glamour. Next, following in Lloyd's (2006) path, I call the allure of alternative culture, creativity, and urbanity itself grit as glamour. Finally, the classic yet always reinvented glamour of bright lights, garish fantasy and frequent architectural absurdity of everything from the original Mann's Chinese Theater to its new and overwhelming attachment at Hollywood and Highland, I call glitz as glamour. This glamour is alluring, but almost unattainable with any amount of consumption except for by those who are part of its production, while the elitism of status glamour can be practiced, and thus achieved by anyone with money for that one special dinner or that one fancy dress (though of course it is practiced every day by those with the means and inclination). Grit as glamour is also readily accessible to those inclined to consume it, whether as true participant or casual cultural tourist, but its production is tied to a pretension of authenticity perhaps harder to conjure up than even glitz or status. Each of these glammers can be seen all over Los Angeles – I concentrate herein on Downtown and the surrounding central city – and all have social and economic implications.

## **Part II: The Many Glammers of the Postmetropolis**

In an era of post-fordist production, post-modern aesthetics, and countless opportunities for the popular redefinition of style, entertainment and consumption, and in a city that contains among the world's greatest cultural diversity, class division, and spatial bricolage, glamour is much harder to pin down or quickly define than that purposefully produced by the culture industries of Hollywood's golden age. In Los Angeles, as suggested by the very title of L.A. architecture critic John Chase's (2000) *Glitter Stucco and Dumpster Diving*, one person's trash is another's glamour. Indeed, as Virginia Postrel (2006: 140) reminds us:

"Glamour isn't beauty or luxury; those are only specific manifestations for specific audiences. Glamour is an imaginative process that creates a specific, emotional response: a sharp mixture of projection, longing, admiration, and aspiration. It evokes an audience's hopes and dreams and makes them seem attainable, all the while maintaining enough distance to sustain the fantasy."

The point is not that glamour is lost to the vague inutilities of postmodernism, but rather that it has many quite tangible forms in the contemporary city (which we can classify with the help of our three conceptual categories), all of which we can see by looking at

glamour's original definition and its seminal early modern characteristics. Gundle and Castelli (2006) provide a number of historical cultural-aesthetic features of the 'glamour system' which can be quite useful for parsing the socio-spatial landscape for glamour's new manifestations. On the purest aesthetic level for example it is worth noting that while the palate of L.A.'s built environment is dominated by Mediterranean pastels and earth tones rather than powerful reds or stark geometric black and whites, the visual culture also regularly includes a striking ocean blue, royal purple or electric pink. Blue, to Gundle and Castelli, is the color of mystery, mysticism, godlike beauty, and Madonna, while pink is the color of pop. Other aesthetic features of glamour include the role of the exotic, of gold and other glittering metals, bright lights, extravagant architecture, enchanting entertainment, and synthetics such as plastic. To look at glamour in Los Angeles today, I focus now on the different ways in which all of these components turn up in terms of our three ideal-typical glammers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as manifest in the city beyond Hollywood proper.

## **Status as Glamour**

Like Hollywood, other parts of Los Angeles and the people in them reflect the history of changing conceptions of glamour over time. The search for glamour in the rest of Central Los Angeles at first appears much closer to a search for it in any major city – examples either fewer and farther between, or much more subjectively in the eye of the beholder. But even in the historic core that pre-dates the film industry or the 'global era' financial district and surrounding industry, slum areas, and working class communities that portend to transcend it, the sparkle of glamour is present in many different forms. Downtown L.A. is a particularly pregnant case for the study of glamour in contemporary Los Angeles, not least because several downtown zip codes score among the highest for both glamour and job growth in Clark and his colleagues' initial research, or because the area is generally rather misunderstood (if considered at all). For one thing, Downtown contains the world's second largest wholesale jewelry district and the city's booming garment industry, making glamour production and consumption in central L.A. a quite literal 'diamond in the rough' (discussed below). But Downtown is also the city's original bastion of class and elegance, from the Biltmore and the Bradbury Building to Spring Street's historic banking district. That scene sounds almost anti-glamour in its emphasis on real wealth, conservative aesthetics, and high culture, but these qualities have a sparkle, mystique and allure of their own, the allure of elegance and elite status.

Perhaps today more than any point since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the central city is a major cultural hub for the region, and the social and spatial trends there are increasingly crucial to understanding what is happening in the metropolis at large. According to Mike Davis (2006 [1990]: 71-72), a largely 'old money,' Protestant elite has been focused on maintaining power in Downtown Los Angeles since at least the 1920s, often in direct conflict with an autonomous (largely Jewish) Westside and Hollywood power structure. These downtown elites have come in many forms, but have always been concerned with the concentration Downtown not only of economic and political activity, but cultural weight as well. This has gone hand in hand with an emphasis on the value and cultural significance of a glittering and 'world-class' downtown, complete with stock exchange, opera, symphony and other symbols of bourgeois elitism and wealth with a none-too-subtle air of boosterism aimed at

making sure all would know L.A. is, in this more serious way, the height of urban elegance. Or, as one LA Times reporter gushed about the philharmonic's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, "Glamour: Glamour: Glamour" (Loper, 1994: 7). Such efforts have culminated with what Davis (2006: ix) calls "a 'Downtown renaissance' that promotes super-cathedrals, billionaire sports franchises, mega-museums, Yuppie lofts, and drunken Frank Gehry skyscrapers."

These landmarks are classic glamour (indeed, Gehry's elaborate Walt Disney Concert Hall may cross the line from status glamour into the realm of glitzy architectural spectacle discussed below), and have been followed by countless smaller manifestations including gourmet restaurants and trendy hotels and clubs, at which this elite status can be consumed. A Los Angeles Times reviewer offered a telling description of this sort of glamour in describing a downtown restaurant:

With white-clothed tables and canvas umbrellas set out under the trees, it takes glorious advantage of the city's fine weather. At night, it's a wonderfully dramatic urban space with skyscrapers, every window ablaze, leaning over the smaller, almost all-glass café... Café Pinot feels cosmopolitan, a bit glamorous (Virbila, 1995).

This sort of status-chasing, glamorous in itself, is common in L.A. as the city and its boosters, no longer content with advertising a city only for its sunshine and coastline, realize the desire among residents and tourists alike for a dense, bustling and pedestrian-friendly urban core. The president of the Central City Association described an ordinance to encourage greater density as "an important step in the continued reinvention of downtown Los Angeles... We will finally have an urban planning code similar to what you have in Portland, Seattle and New York" (qtd. in Pierson & Bernstein, 2007). Apartments downtown likewise tout the glamorous advantages of 'New York style living' and a new 'sports and entertainment district' currently erupting near the Staples Center arena has been described as "Times Square West" (Zahniser, 2005).

Crucially, beyond fulfilling a need to have such glamorous options in L.A., high culture commodities also provide the potential for anyone with the means to partake, to strive for elite status themselves through consumption. And as Davis (2006: 102) notes, "Los Angeles has always had a far more porous elite culture than New York, Chicago, Philadelphia or San Francisco" with new waves of wealth more able to take part and mold the culture in their own way. After the high-rise office boom of New York and Japanese investment firms in the 1990s (and the subsequent downturn), more recent real estate mavens have invested in upscale loft conversions and condominiums where "as decrepit commercial buildings gentrify, glamour is making a comeback" (Rasmussen, 2006: B2). With Downtown suddenly trendy, the Sunset Strip's glamorous Standard Hotel opened a financial district branch in 2002, and Patina, one of L.A.'s most elite restaurants, moved from Hollywood to Bunker Hill in 2004. At the same time of course, manifestations of status as glamour are to be found all over Southern California, including not only Beverly Hills, Century City and Santa Monica, but in the Valley, South Bay, and Orange County as well. Even south of the 10 freeway, once-sleepy Culver City now boasts a burgeoning 'urban village' scene including hip art galleries and trendy clubs, restaurants and wine bars – and, perhaps not coincidentally, saw massive job growth between 1990 and 2000. There is no doubt that these recent

ideal-typical manifestations of glamour as wealth and status should have positive economic implications. But this is not the only reason that parts of Downtown and other areas score very highly in Clark's research for both glamour and job growth. A newer type of glamour is increasingly widespread as well, and (despite its pretensions to the opposite) is also clearly tied to consumption.

### Grit as Glamour

Today, the blossoming of a token post-restructuring global city center in the 1980s and much-lauded resurgence in trendy urban residential living over the past decade are not even the only reason to look at the area as a glamorous scene in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A more complex type of glamour, perhaps, can be seen in the neighborhoods further east of the condo and office towers, sports complexes and cultural sites. Though the attraction of bohemianism is nothing new, the appeal of the inner city and accompanying gritty urban lifestyle are what is so remarkable about the situation in which, as Lloyd (2006: 17) puts it, "a landscape of postindustrial decay was increasingly interpreted as edgy and glamorous." This conception of glamour - the gritty yet cosmopolitan city living epitomized for many urbanites by the early days of New York's SoHo, TriBeCa, or more recently its Meat Packing District - clearly has a great deal of traction in Los Angeles, as evidenced by the remarkable rate of loft conversions and ground-up residential developments in some of the



most industrial or blighted sections of the city over the past ten years, including much of Downtown (Moses, 2003).

That Lloyd's 'grit as glamour' would have any appeal in L.A. may seem surprising in a city that is not only stereotypically running away from its urban reality but stereotypically without any urbanity in the first place. German cultural critic Anton Wagner (qtd. in Davis, 2006: 50) complained in 1935 that "in spite of the artists, writers and aspiring film stars, the sensibility of a real Montmartre, Soho, or even Greenwich Village, cannot be felt here. The automobile mitigates against such a feeling, and so do the new houses." Such sentiments could well be found among some tourists today. Yet the allure of the city's underbelly can be traced back at least to the mean streets of Chandler's noir, which in fact remains an attraction of L.A. for some to this day (see Garrison, 2008). But it is perhaps better understood, as Lloyd (2006: 22) simply puts it, as "the inherent glamour and drama of young people participating in the hip consumerism offered by the big city." In Los Angeles, the spread of 'bourgeois bohemian' gentrification has marched steadily east over the last decade since the influential alternative magazine the *Utne Reader* named Los Feliz one of the 15 hippest places in North America in 1997. *Utne* had also noted Silver Lake as up and coming, which it certainly was, having since thoroughly established itself as the epicenter of L.A. hipness by the turn of the century, followed in turn by Echo Park, Atwater Village, and now neighborhoods even further east such as Highland Park, Eagle Rock, and Boyle Heights.

East of Downtown L.A., in the warehouse districts running all the way to the Los Angeles River that are home to wholesale and manufacturing activities during the day, the L.A. 'Arts District' began to take shape in the late 1970s when the first artists began working and (often illegally) living in the industrial loft spaces (Nelson, 2007). Within a decade the city had legalized the lofts and hundreds of artists and others had moved to the neighborhood in search of affordable space in a quiet part of the central city, while legendary underground performance spots like Madam Wong's and Al's Bar were among the first to provide venues for (and capitalize on) creative expression. Joel Bloom, an activist, playwright, and "unofficial mayor" of the Arts District, explained the appeal to the *L.A. Times* in 1994: "There's a spark here – hopefully we can light it. I get a feeling here I haven't gotten anywhere else. It may look desolate, but it's not. There's no place I'd rather be. It's kind of a Mayberry filled with bohemian artists" (qtd. in Nelson, 2007). Bloom opened his 'general store' in the district that year, and before long several trendy restaurants and cafés had found their way in nearby, followed by the relocation of the Southern California Institute of Architecture and several new residential buildings. The area remains quiet and industrial despite these signs of gentrification, and a few venues, including the no-frills DIY warehouse venue the Smell keep up the underground rock tradition in the face of rent increases. As Lloyd (2006: 104) notes of his own neobohemia in Chicago, "even as the neighborhood became more popular and more expensive, the local aesthetic continued to display the image of grit as glamour."

The combination of grit and glamour is even more acutely visible in the newer locus of gentrification to the south of the original Arts District. Like the older residential movement to its north, initial occupants have still primarily been creative types looking for live-work spaces and inner-city 'edgyness,' but they are less emphatically bohemian, lofts are advertised as 'luxury,' and one will soon find "a gourmet restaurant and market that promises

homemade pastas, gelato and a wood-burning oven for pizza" in the shadow the factories and warehouses (DiMassa, 2008: B1). The just-quoted Los Angeles Times article, entitled "From Gritty to Glamorous," offers one resident's take:

*"We've gotten to know our neighbors," said Cindy Rodriguez, who lives in a long, narrow unit in the Molino Street Lofts, in the shadow of the 4th Street Bridge. "It feels a little bit like New York. We're years away from it, but you can feel the energy."*

Lloyd's (2006: 124) words describing Chicago's West Side fit Downtown L.A. like a glove, an area "evolving into a glamour zone of warehouses-turned-nightclubs, new-wave restaurants, and noir-themed bars." That said, as the resident quoted above suggests, the current state is still very far from what we (or presumably these new residents themselves) would objectively call 'glamorous' even in the SoHo or Meat Packing District image. There is something further about the gritty side of Downtown that makes it such a valuable place to look for glamour in L.A.: these parts of the city center are also, on a level comparable to Hollywood, a major site of the production and consumption of glamour in its most physical commoditized form.

Since long before the finance boom or bohemian entertainment production, the city center has been a sight of glamorous production and consumption just below the surface. South and southeast of the city's historic core lays a bustling industrial and manufacturing district that is home to L.A.'s thriving garment industry, or as it has glamorously named itself, the Los Angeles Fashion District. Ironically, the glamour-job growth link is here turned on its head: garment manufacturing, by some accounts the largest glamour-related job provider in Los Angeles, is in fact endangered by the residential and commercial growth in industrial areas just described (Christopher, 2008). Yet one must also remember that the design and production of glamour in a sprawling industrial district and its consumption in bustling wholesale bazaars does not necessarily make for a glamorous scene. Also, although hip neobohemian scenes create less direct job growth, their associated entertainment services jobs, neighborhood-level culture production, and the long-term investment they tend to predict may ultimately represent more growth potential than manufacturing. When the two are combined, as is increasingly the case with hip young fashion designers, architects and artists working out of the same industrial warehouse space in the same bohemian neighborhood, and even front-end manifestations such as fashion week (and a season-long visit from television reality program "America's Next Top Model"), one can see the connection between the production of glamour, job growth, and trendy scenes of consumption that are at once elegance and grit as glamour, with a little Hollywood glitz thrown in for good measure.

### **Glitz as Glamour**

As mentioned above, in the earliest days of the film industry the movie palaces of Broadway were the first to help redefine glamour in the New World. The place remained a center of sorts into the 1930s and '40s, but even by then it had long since begun a 'decline' to a grittier inner city better described by *Bladerunner's* dystopia than MGM's glitz. But even in, or perhaps because of, this context, some of the most garish and enchanting examples of glamour a city can produce can be found. For example, to the degree

to which traditional glamour is closely associated not only with consumption, but with consumption of the exotic, L.A. carries on this tradition as a sort of ceaseless, city-wide world's fair of diverse global consumption opportunities. Downtown, this was enabled by "favorable rent conditions and the lack of existent cultural definition" that drew a "mosaic of multi-ethnic and multicultural" businesses (Meshkati, et al. 2005: 1, i). And the opportunity for exotic consumption includes not only the allure of new foods, styles and products that have helped define the multicultural city during the wave of hemispheric immigration and Pacific Rim economic globalization since the 1970s, but decadent indulgences of the wealthy (such as *nyotaimori*, or 'body sushi') and the exotic-inspired aesthetics of the Sunset Strip's glam rock scene at the pop level.

Today, Broadway and the surrounding 'Historic Core' serve as the major shopping area for the primarily Latino and Asian residents of the central city, and also the center of the Los Angeles Jewelry District, the second largest wholesale jewelry district in the world. This bustling center for the sale of perhaps the most obvious material manifestation of glitzy glamour imaginable was made possible by "the immigration of several ethnic groups into an area left largely vacant by the outflow of overseas investment and by suburban flight during the 1970s and 80s" (Meshkati, et al., 2005: 1). Many of the historic theaters on Broadway are still standing as well, though many have been repurposed as Pentecostal churches or electronics stores. An effort by the business improvement district and other local interests to bring movies back to some – and restore the original lighting to all of them – has seen some success. Boosters talk of restoring building facades, street lighting, and even a revived streetcar line. Another vestige of an older era, the neon sign, is also being seen in a new light. Electric lights are one of the earliest sources of the dazzling and overwhelming attraction of glamour in the city described by Gundle and Castelli (and of the urban commercial culture studied by Baudelaire and Benjamin), an aesthetic given value in a Los Angeles increasingly aware of its short past where many rooftops and streetscapes (not to mention the Museum of Neon Art) are being given renewed electric attention.

Likewise, glamour has long been associated with the very architecture of consumption and commoditization. The physical spectacle of everything from the Crystal Palace to stores like London's Whiteleys, Fortnum & Mason's, and Harrods defined 19<sup>th</sup> Century urban glamour, with grandiose façades and interiors that gave the sense of temples, museums or theatres (Gundle & Castelli, 2006: 37). This sort of glamour is of course consumed not only in theatres and performances, but in nightclubs, which Head (1959: 122) called "the 'theatre' of our day in terms of glamour." Taking this to the tackiest extremes of absurdist pop architecture, many of LA's more infamous buildings fit the bill, including an oversized KFC franchise designed to give the impression of a bucket of chicken, and a coffee shop housed in an enormous replica of the bow of the Titanic (and suitably filled with memorabilia from the Leonardo DiCaprio film, of course) – both on the same Koreatown boulevard.

This idea fits with another of Gundle and Castelli's (2006: 85) qualities of glamour as well, for glamour producers have always "employed cheap, brash materials to create an illusion of luxury, pleasure and abundance," something for which L.A. design (and its culture) are often criticized. Indeed, in a town where 'false fronts' are actually physical structures, these aesthetics can be seen to reveal their cultural importance in the most unlikely of places –

the passion with which Los Angeles transportation planners, elected officials, and concerned citizens have debated the color identification for a new Metro rail line since 2004 is just one example (Douglas, forthcoming).

This excess of 'fashion over function' is perhaps best encapsulated by Frank Gehry's landmark Walt Disney Concert Hall, which famously required sandblasting to reduce a "blinding glare" that was irritating motorists and neighbors and allegedly even causing "temperatures in the vicinity to rise" (Glaister, 2004: 14). The building serves as an ironic metaphor for glamour itself, the image of a certain pristine perfection, a squeaky clean, soft-focused, air-brushed, and professionally edited image. And this is where L.A. is at once glamour and anti-glamour: "At the end of the day," write Gundle and Castelli (2006: 159), "Hollywood was 'tinsel town,' a showy façade in which the glitter was the substance and the glamour was not backed up by education, culture or breeding." This is essentially the paradox of the final cultural-aesthetic of glamour described by these authors, the allure of plastic. "The ultimate triumph of plastic," writes Stephen Fenichel (1996: 5), "has been the victory of package over product, of style over substance, of surface over style." And this too is exactly why L.A.'s stereotypical image not only has some justification, but is the very definition of glamour.





## Concluding Thoughts

Powdermaker (1950) tells egregiously of “Hollywood’s domination of Los Angeles,” but regardless of the role of the film industry in producing and cultivating its brand of glamour that has become the world standard, the Los Angeles of today only fits the classical Hollywood understanding of the concept in limited ways. Glamour is undoubtedly a part of the city, even an important part of its identity, but how exactly it ‘works’ in the city, both as expressed in certain combinations of amenities and real terms in the social, cultural and physical environments of the city, is complicated. On the one hand, classical glamour is tied to the allure of glittering wealth, impossible beauty and clean perfection, something which, despite any number of Malibu sunsets, extravagant mansions, or manufactured shopping promenades, Los Angeles most certainly is not.

But it is glamorous in numerous other ways, drawn from the most fundamental understanding of the term yet in every way L.A.’s own. It is clear that to even begin to fully appreciate the role of glamour in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Los Angeles, as both cultural meme and economic engine, one must look well beyond Hollywood and the traditional power structures that shaped the city during the 20<sup>th</sup>. As perhaps the most obvious example, one cannot examine glamour – or any cultural topic – in L.A. without consideration of its largest ethnic group, Latinos. Not only is this population highly culturally diverse but economically diverse as well. Davis (2001: 58) describes both a “poor, new-immigrant core” in Downtown and South L.A. and “affluent Chicano suburban belt,” as well as huge Latino populations in Hollywood and other highly ethnically diverse neighborhoods west of Downtown. To top it all off, Los Angeles is by far the largest Latino consumer market in the United States (ibid: 22).

Historically Mexican-Americans and other Latinos were “hardly thought to be the height of glamour” in Los Angeles and in film (Wood, 2002).<sup>3</sup> By the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, some of this had begun to change, with women like Salma Hayek and Jennifer Lopez taking major roles and personifying red carpet glamour. Regardless though, the real glamour of Latino Los Angeles has much less to do with movies than with the varied popular aesthetics of a diverse demographic that now numbers more than 50 percent of the city’s population. To be fair, most of the aesthetics that Davis and others associate with L.A.’s Latino inhabitants are more of the traditional rather than glamorous end of the spectrum, from public plazas and Mission-style architecture to an almost Eisenhower-era penchant for well-manicured single-family homes (see Davis, 2001: 62-27). There is much glamour to be found here though, and as we have come to expect, it comes in different forms and in unlikely places, and the ideal-typical categories of glamour developed in this study suggest one way of describing them.

For example, Latino cultural and aesthetic traditions include much that fits with the type of glamour I have associated with elegance and aspirations of elite status, such as quinceañera celebrations. Other traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly their Latin American incarnations, also suggest a sort of mystical aesthetic of glitz as glamour for what is the largest Catholic archdiocese in the United States. This glamour is produced in the form of religious iconography as well as Chicano history and legend, consumed in the form

of votive candles, rosaries, and artwork, an aesthetic that also spills over into fashion, murals and cars. And Chicano car culture alone is worthy of mention, including the 1960s cruising scene and sexy, attention-grabbing low-riders souped up with loud ‘cherry bomb’ mufflers and dramatic paint jobs. There is also grit as glamour to be seen among L.A.’s Hispanic population, giving some small challenge to the assumption that neo-bohemian gentrification is often tied to the displacement of a working class minority as in Lloyd’s case. Davis (2001: 66) describes a number of ‘Latino bohemia’s, such as where “hip Chicano art dealers and booksellers have given sleepy downtown Whittier – Dick Nixon’s hometown – a new lease on life, making it, in effect, the west San Gabriel Valley’s Greenwich Village.” Indeed, Whittier Boulevard in East L.A. is currently undergoing a multi-million dollar revitalization project (Gold, 2008). Lastly, one cannot forget the role played by thousands of Latinos in the physical production of glamor commodities, from garment manufacturing and entertainment-related service work to performance, design, production etc. in the culture industries.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, this brief foray into the cultural aesthetics of just one hugely diverse ethnic group only begins to scratch the surface. The potential is staggering for different cultural conceptions of glamour not only among the Latino population, but the city’s African American, Korean, Armenian, Native American and other communities, its Jews, Mormons, and Muslims, recent immigrants, multi-generational dynasties, and Native Americans, gay, straight and transgender, poor, wealthy, and working class. In a city as diverse and disconnected as Los Angeles today, we should not expect to find anything less than hundreds of definitions. As we’ve seen, even Hollywood’s own history has in many ways paralleled glamour’s many manifestations, from the golden age of red carpet premieres to urban grit and vice to a plastic, disneyfied resurgence.

Curiously, these many and evolving definitions bring us back to the question of whether Los Angeles is so exceptional in the first place. To be sure, people have always gone to L.A. for something – the weather, the film industry, the mountains and landscape, different values or spiritual callings – and one does see this in a different attention to home, car, body, and individual. But this also means people drawn from all over the world. And, in Joel Garreau’s (1991: 3) well-known words, “Every American city that is growing, is growing in the fashion of Los Angeles.” People come to Hollywood to consume glamour; but it is a glamour so consumed all around the world. And Hollywood itself, still known as the space and place tied to the elusive concept of glamour, is glamorous today for other reasons. No longer the studio center (though still home to much studio-related commerce and employment), Hollywood now produces glamour through its maintenance of the Hollywood image. In other ways, classical glamour has not only remained in Hollywood, but transcended it. For example, the glamour of high fashion has not lost one bit of its silver screen magnificence: the elegant gowns, garish furs, and gaudy jewelry of Gloria Swanson and other pioneers are still to be found everywhere from movie premieres to hip-hop videos. Likewise are the lifestyle amenities popularized by these stars of the golden age of the silver screen – mansions, swimming pools, limousines, and a high-rolling social life – still the carefully cultivated image of celebrity glamour presented daily on MTV or E! Television. Yet for every time MTV’s *Cribs* shows us around a star’s Beverly Hills mansion, they might show

us another's in Miami, Connecticut, or suburban Kansas City. And for every leading lady in a sequined gown at the Academy Awards, there are a hundred kids in the Bronx with fur coats, gold grills, and other glittering bling. In other words, while this facet of glamour is very much alive, it is by no means any longer the exclusive domain of Tinsel Town.

Finally, and crucially from all this, we can see how culture becomes commodity. Our three ideal-typical glammers, and their physical manifestations in the city, are valuable tools for understanding this potentially powerful concept, and all suggest the direct link between glamour and consumption. Whether seeing the philharmonic or a Lakers game, coming home from a punk show to a newly-converted loft, or going to see a movie at the Chinese Theater (or a theater in China), glamour is commoditized. "Any theory of glamour," write Gundle and Castelli (2006: 8-9), "would have to take account of its imaginative appeal, seductiveness and artificiality. It would also need to refer to persistent class divisions, the alienation of modern capitalism and the frustrations of consumer culture." But, as Paul Willis (1990: 21) explains, "human consumption does not simply repeat the relations of production – and whatever cynical motives lie behind them. Interpretation, symbolic action and creativity are part of consumption." Perhaps it is this aspect of glamour production and consumption that really makes L.A. so very glamorous today.

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#### NOTES:

- 1 Even a straightforward geographical definition of Hollywood is contentious, as the district's precise borders would likely be differently (and vaguely) defined by any two Angelenos. Fortunately, the California State Legislature deigned to officially establish borders in 2005. Though perhaps too precise for some locals and real-estate agents, their reasonable delineation includes, as many people would, the East Hollywood communities such as Beachwood Canyon, Thai Town, and Little Armenia, all of L.A.'s enormous Griffith Park and its surrounding residences, as well as neighborhoods such as Los Feliz and Melrose, stopping just east the former to exclude the emphatically not-Hollywood neighborhoods of Silver Lake or Atwater, Hollin, and and and on the south just in time to be distinct from sprawling Mid-City and Koreatown.
- 2 See R. Davis, 2003, for a sweeping archival account of the people, famous and nameless alike, who made Hollywood during the studio era.
- 3 For example, though Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio won a 1933 search for the "most perfect feminine figure in Hollywood" by Photoplay magazine, she and other early Latina actresses achieved success by downplaying their ethnicity, while Mexican actors like Anthony Quinn were generally cast only in subordinate roles. Welsh actress Catherine Zeta Jones was controversially cast as a Latina in *Zorro* as recently as 1998.

- 4 For more on the roles of Latino labor in culture production see Davis (2001: 114) and Scott (2005: 89).

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