

multiculturalism

Immigrants have always brought much more to the United

States than just their national recipes and traditions. Those who fled to America escaping injustice, persecution or impending war, and those who came in search of opportunity have all infused this nation with its own reason for being—freedom. They have come with an energy and an enterprising spirit that make America more American.

In a *Holiday* magazine article written in 1950, Hamilton Basso called Los Angeles "The most American of all American cities." L.A.'s all-American ambiance then resulted largely from the area's lack of foreign immigrants. Contrary to New York, which had welcomed the world's huddled masses, Los Angeles was populated and imagined by white Midwesterners seeking paradise as part of their American patrimony. Rather than the sweat, strain and struggle in the cramped tenements and dingy factories of eastern cities, with neighborhoods whose air was redolent with foreign sounds and smells, Los Angeles was space-sunny, suburban and secure.

Now, more than 50 years after Bay State's statement, Los Angeles is touted for its multiculturalism and called the world's premier global city.

Ironically, it is still the most American of cities. America is the archetypical new world

country. People become American because of an idea: the concept of freedom. Other countries are bound by ethnicity and nationality, heredity and history. In the United States, a new citizen no matter where they originally came from, can watch the Olympic Games and cheer on the team as an American—no less an American than an low-born member of Daughters of the American Revolution.

For immigrants, no other city seems to better represent the essence of American freedoms than Los Angeles, which continues to attract more foreign immigrants than any other North American destination. Despite critics who claim L.A. is riddled with caste and class warfare, it is a city known around the world as a place where people from many lands can feel comfortable.



Ironically, Los Angeles has become the world's premier global city because it is still the most American of cities. Photo by Rex M. Oppe

The number of various ethnic groups in Los Angeles is staggering. It includes African-American, Native American, Mexican, Japanese, Israeli, Tongan, Indian, Persian, Chinese, Irish, Armenian, Ethiopian, Swedish, Korean, Samoan, Guatemalan, Russian, Arab, French, Cuban, Italian, Fijian, African, Australian, Honduran, Scottish, Hungarian, Danish, Malaysian, Filipino, English and Turkish.

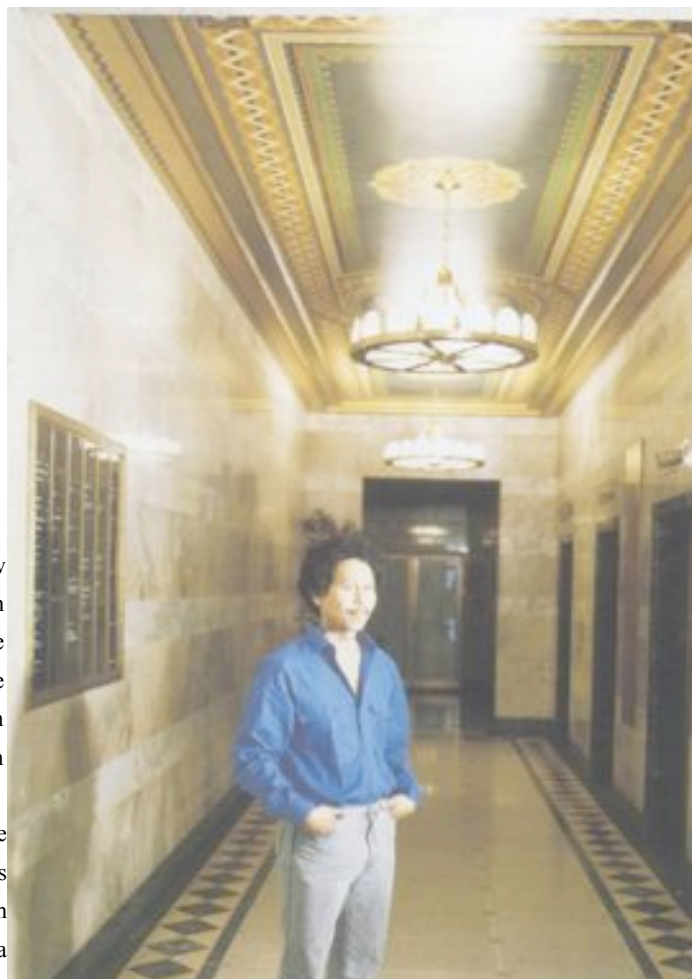
According to *Ethnic Los Angeles*, a book from UCLA researchers that presents possibly the most comprehensive study of immigration in Southern California since 1970, immigrants are integrating into society at all levels in a multicultural L.A. The book also states that "although Los Angeles remains a highly segregated city, blacks and whites moved further toward integration between 1970 and 1990 than in any other major, non-southern metropolitan area."

The researchers' data also contradicts the notion that immigrants and ethnic minorities form an isolated underclass ruled by an educated white elite. Findings show that the gap between the rich and poor in Southern California cuts across ethnic lines, One of the largest divisions between the haves and have-nots exists within the African-American community, where better-educated blacks are much farther removed from poor African Americans than they were in 1970. Although levels of success vary, similar divisions hold true for other ethnic and immigrant groups.

Yes, many new arrivals toil in menial jobs for low wages Yet large numbers of immigrants work in various professions, and immigrant-run businesses are an essential part of the economy in the nation's pre-eminent multicultural metropolis.

Today, Los Angeles, sometimes demeaned as the capital of the Third World, is rather a settlement in a fourth

left Muller, a Dutch-Indonesian restoration artist, restored the lobby of the old Banks Huntley Building for its current owners, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) Muller removed the acoustical ceiling, revealing a mural. The restoration artist then mixed pigments to re-create the colors and other original effects. Tom Zimmerman Photograph



world: a new universe of human interaction. There is nothing more American than anything else in this city.

Anybody can be anything in Los Angeles. The freedom people find in L.A is a

natural phenomenon that has drawn those seeking
cape, rebirth, salvation and success for decades. It bubbles up out of the earth like Texas oil
and scents the atmosphere with the pheromones of fantasy and desire.

In Los Angeles. American means Mayberry mixed with Manchuria, Mogadishu, Mecca and Mexico City. It is
possible to travel for miles and rarely see a sign in English. Huge shopping walls are covered in billboards and neon

Los Angeles, American
teens Mayberry mixed
with Manchuria,
Mogadishu. Mecca
and Mexico City
Photo by
Roe M. Oppenheimer



written in Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese,
farsi or Hindi Does this represent a
divided city, or is it just cultural
dentification within the larger
context of the new multicultural
society?

's an American Romance.
ew Years Eve 1998 at the
Mayan dance club in
downtown Los Angeles
Tom Zimmerman
Photography



Yes, cultures butt-up against
each other and there is friction. Communities impinge on each

other and there is rancor. There are outbursts, such as the 1992 civil disturbance. Yet no matter
what the ethnic mix, people can always find reasons to divide into "us" versus "them" stances.
Even rival sports fans sometimes clash violently.

Similarities rather than dif-ferences are what is creating the new immigrant experience. In
addition, immigrants, no matter how tenaciously some may hold on to their language and tradi-

tions, have always sought to become American. Earlier European waves of immigration to the United States, such as the Germans, Irish, Italians, and Jews all experienced prejudice. For physical safety and financial security they often banded into neighborhood enclaves. The local population saw them as different and as a threat. But basic human similarities eventually eroded many of the barriers that divided all the disparate and sometimes warring factions who arrived on America's shores,

Although language and other cultural barriers maintain some separateness, the forces of familiar human feelings are acting on today's immigrants. The daughter of a Vietnamese shopkeeper might fall in love with the son of a Latino school teacher-and it's an American romance.

It may not be a melting pot or a mosaic, it is Los Angeles, where the uncommon is common, and humanity is spilling across borderlines the way one idea can form in many minds, and in many different languages.