Going Down to the Place of Three Shadows:

Journeys to and from Downtown Los Angeles' Public Spaces

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This paper aims to offer a reflection on the micro-dynamics of public spaces and their place in the movements of the city. It is inspired by the experience of David, a sociable homeless man whom I met while doing fieldwork on Downtown Los Angeles' public spaces. David was spending his days under the quiet and peaceful shade offered by the trees in Angels Knoll. By the end of the summer in 2010, he had been thrown out of the park. Because of his limited mobility and the place where he sleeps, he was condemned to spend his days in Pershing Square, a place he disliked and had managed to avoid thus far. This journey from one place to another underlines, unsurprisingly, the fact that public spaces, their users and the activities they host are not alike. Considering their heterogeneity and the relative implementation of city rules, the parks are also supervised and controlled in various ways. This variety enables people to choose the place where they want to go, or at least to have some preferences. I understand this act of choosing one place over another as a social statement. Furthermore, David's journey underlines the multiple mobilities used to go to a park and their role when it comes to presence in public space. Being able to reach the park you want to go to, then, is a question of ability; ability in terms of movements and choices, which some authors refer to as motility. I then conclude that the public space issue - especially in the case of Los Angeles, the city of cars - is not only related to a greater supply of public spaces, but also to the improvement of the motility of every citizen, including David.

Keywords: mobility, motility, public spaces, homeless, diversity, planning, Los Angeles

Starting Line

Los Angeles is sometimes known as the City of cars or even Smogtown (Jacobs 2008). It is a metropolis that '[…] never existed as a large walking city' (Bottles 1987). Since the turn of the 20th century, the automobile and automobile infrastructure, urban sprawl, the development of suburbs, and the decentralization of the center have grown and expanded together. As a result, in 1970, one third of the city was covered with streets, parking lots and highways (Davis, 1999: 80). Forty years later, two-thirds of urban space in all of Southern California is devoted to transportation (Los Angeles Almanac 2010).

Concrete and road signs have been emphasized at the expense of public space. Indeed, throughout its history, Los Angeles has never made a priority of spaces where real flesh and blood contacts happen. In 1928, parks covered 0.6% of the metropolis' territory, which is less than in the medium-sized American city, according to a report by the Citizens' Committee on Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches published in 1930 (Davis 1999: 62, 65).

In 2010, parklands covered 5% of the territory (Mia Lehrer & Associates 2010). That amounts to 3.4 acres of park per 1,000 residents; the average nationwide is 6 to 10 acres. Put

differently, only 33% of Angelinos live within a quarter-mile of a park. This figure is 97% for Boston and 91% for New York (Watanabe 2008).

This deplorable situation can be explained by the City's tendency to transfer power to the private sector, especially in times of economic crisis, and, as noted, its emphasis on the automobile. Additional explanations may lie in the fact that in New York and Boston, the reformist movement at the turn of the 20th century saw in parks and public facilities a way to improve the living conditions of the poorer population trapped in sunless apartment buildings. In Los Angeles, the same movement had encouraged the building of single-family houses with a garage and a lawn. There is apparently no need for a public park when you have a private yard. Over the last few decades, implementation of neoliberal urban management strategies affected the public spaces in a particular way; promoting the idea of urban parks and squares as sites where only higher social and economic classes (or at least, their behaviors and activities) should be visible. This notion, developed during the 18th century, was combined with modern technologies of surveillance (Low 2006). The result, reinforced since September 11, 2001, has been the intensification of the division of social groups in public spaces, as well as increased control over them.

As a result, real public spaces are rare in Los Angeles. Those that exist are characteristically poorly maintained and equipped, or privately owned and over controlled, and thus lacking of a real social diversity in their users (Flusty 1994;Davis 1992 [1990]). Many have criticized the unwelcoming design and the lack of public amenities that make public spaces uncomfortable for many of their potential users (Cosulich-Schwartz 2009, Loukaitou-Sideris 1998, Malone s.d, Page, 2009, Scott 2009).

Los Angeles urban planning policies, or lack thereof, in terms of public spaces have been harshly criticized, especially by members of the Los Angeles School. This group was formed in the 1990s and is composed of geographers, historians and urban planners working on the City of Angels. Together with many others who share the same opposition to the strangulation of public spaces in the neo-liberalized world, the Los Angeles School challenges their lack of public space, their closure to social diversity, and their general orientation towards consumption. In Los Angeles more than elsewhere, along with Disneyland and Hollywood, the reconstruction of

Bunker Hill and the dominance of private interests, public spaces are considered by many to be dead.

Despite the diagnosis of the death of Los Angeles' public spaces and criticism of the cities' negligence in maintaining its unique and essential urban places, this diagnosis was scarcely researched and documented.

Therefore, in 2008-2009, I engaged in an ethnographic study to evaluate the social and cultural vitality of five downtown public spaces, observing presence, activities and interactions. The parks I studied were Plaza Olvera, Pershing Square, the Watercourt at California Plaza, Grand Hope Park, and Vista Hermosa Natural Park, each of which fell within a five miles radius of Downtown. I sought to observe whether there was a variety of users in the parks, and whether they interacted with each other. Other research questions were 'How did security mechanisms and rules, as well as the orientation toward consumption, affect their attendance and the exchanges that took place?' I found that each space is used by a (limited) variety of people that engage in a small range of activities while informal contacts, based on the respect of shared norms, nourished numerous representations and contestations of public spaces. In other words, each space presented a unique combination of limited heterogeneity and dynamic social life.

This paper[1] aims to offer a reflection at the convergence of mobility and public space in Los Angeles. Mobility is at the heart of relationships to the urban environment. As Rémy puts it: 'The city relies on the capacity of movement and of encounters in places of convergence that are spatially scattered. The city is a kinetic space because mobility is constituent to living in a city' (my translation of Rémy 2001: 27). The uniqueness of each public space should reflect different patterns of movements to reach them in terms of distances and means of transportation. In light of the emphasis on automobiles in the City of Cars, are people keener to drive to go to a specific park, rather than walk to their neighbourhood park?

To explore the mobility around public spaces in Los Angeles, I introduce the case of David, a sociable homeless man whom I met while doing fieldwork in Downtown Los Angeles' public spaces. I will first present Los Angeles in terms of travel and public space, on the basis of my observations in five of the public spaces of Downtown L.A. in 2008 and 2009, and then I will introduce the term motility, which will be illustrated by David's motility. My main objective here is to underline the importance of motility for the vitality of Los Angeles public spaces.
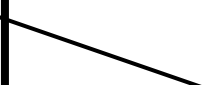
Users and Their Origins

Given that this paper focuses on mobility and park access, I will briefly present some data about the users I interviewed and their commute to the parks where I spoke with them. My main methodology was observation, but I did conduct brief semi-structured interviews with 10 people in each park.

Among other things, I asked the interviewees how far they travelled to reach the park where we were, and how they got there. I considered the park as being the main goal of their journey. If they came to work that day by car, travelling more than 20 miles, but were in the park to have lunch (within a five minute walk) , I would enter this as 'by foot, less than 1 mile.' On the opposite end of the spectrum, tourists from out of town visiting a specific park would fall into the long distance category. This categorization can be considered as relying on my own subjectivity, and as reflecting my personal agenda. But, firstly, it is the best way to quantify qualitative information about the users, that is, their geographical origins, their purpose for visiting a specific public park, and their social representation.

The results show that most of the users came to the parks by car, a quarter took a bus and/or the metro, and very few walked. This, of course, reflects regular usage of the parks rather than their usage during occasional special events.

Vista Hermosa Park
- Built in 2008
- Nature public park
- Playground, picnic tables and paths
- Spacious, with an open field to encourage spontaneous activities.

Plaza Olvera
- Built in 1781
- Historic public plaza
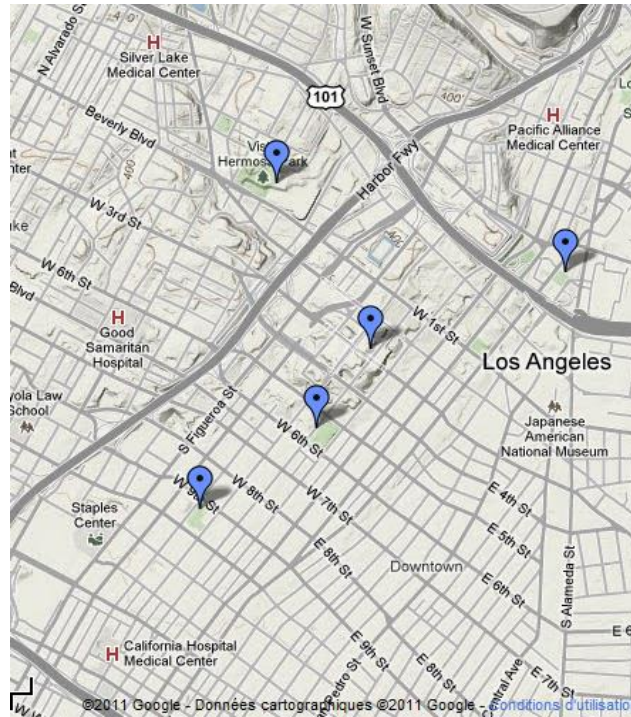- Redesigned in the 1930s as a touristic area representing a Mexican past

Fig. 1 - *Parks, squares and plaza studied* (Google and Sanborn 2011)

Some places have a strong power of attraction. The Plaza Olvera, a historic site, is highly promoted as the Mexican Los Angeles and aims to present to tourists the historic core (although commodified through the marketing of the Mexican identity) of Los Angeles (Krase 2012, Estrada 2008, Ryan 2006). People I spoke with came from as far as New Orleans, Montana (both by train) and Las Vegas (by car); and the Old Pueblo, located across the street from Union Station, was on their list of places to visit. Pershing Square and Vista Hermosa Natural can be understood, in terms of travel time to reach them, as a neighbourhood square and park. Pershing Square is situated right in the middle of Downtown, which is not highly residential (Los Angeles Times 2009) but well served in terms of public transit (the main means of transportation to reach it). Vista Hermosa Natural Park is in a residential neighbourhood, and has a large but underutilized parking lot. Most of the users I met came by foot, although the people who came by car and public transit came from far away (up to 30 miles!). The park — planned and used as a

natural park with walking paths and plant interpretation signs — is unique in the city and, for at least one person out of ten, seems to deserve a long-distance ride.

This is not the case of Grand Hope Park. People did not travel long distances to reach it. It is used as a neighbourhood park and a school lawn, which is exactly what it is. The Watercourt, the place less travelled to, is widely used by white-collar workers employed in the office tower surrounding it, or by people living in the adjacent residential towers. It is hidden from the street, not well known, and empty on evenings and weekends, with no people-watching to do and few trees to lie under.
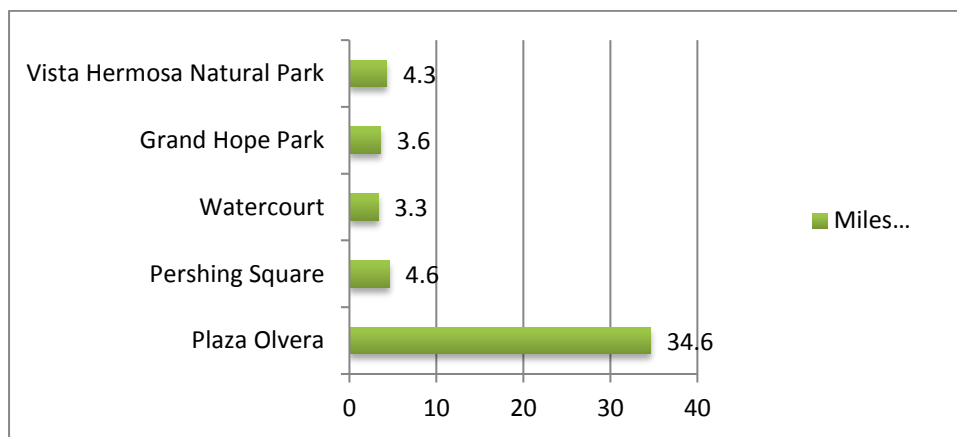

Chart 1 - *Miles (Average) Travelled to Downtown L.A. Parks*

Although my sample was not constructed based on a scientific representation of the Los Angeles population, or even the American population, these mobility experiences among my informants are quite different from what people in the County would do to go to work. Statistics from the 2000 Census reveal that at County level, unsurprisingly, a larger proportion of people use their car to go to work (Los Angeles Almanac 2010). In my data, more people go to the park by foot than by car. This is unexpected, considering the fact that in Los Angeles parks are rare, which would make them barely accessible within a walking distance from home or work.

To a Downtown Park

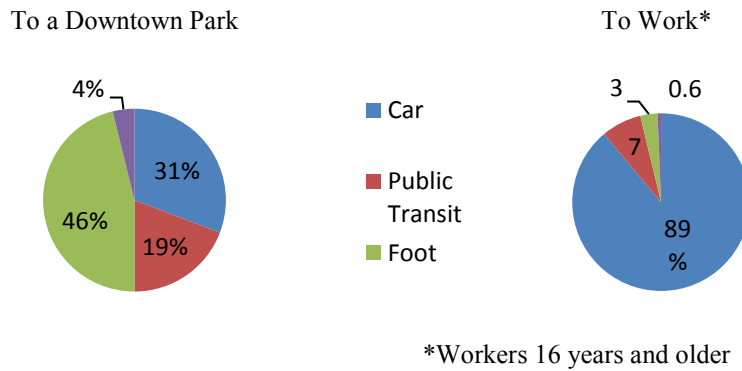To Work*

*Workers 16 years and older

Chart 2 - *Principal Means of Transportation to a Downtown Park and to Work* (Los Angeles Almanac 2010)

This data brought my attention to the fact that some of the people I interviewed were able to choose the park they would go to, and how they would reach it; indeed, some parks like Plaza Olvera and, to a lesser extent, Pershing Square and Vista Hermosa Natural Park, attract people from far away. Among the deciding factors about which park to go to and how to get there, there is the type of park (does it have a playground for my kids?) and its accessibility (is it too far for my lunch hour?). I wish to explore here other factors that are less explored: the social representations of public space and motility.

Towards the Social Signification of Park Attendance through Motility

The anthropology of space offers concepts to explain how certain places are known to belong symbolically to some individuals, even when they are not present. Lévy and Segaud (1983) call this identification. Because the people identified with a place are part of the atmosphere that radiates from it, the space becomes the bearer of the characteristics of that group. Low (2000: 156) noticed such identification in two different plazas in San José, Costa Rica, which were appropriated by different groups in terms of class, gender and age. The different atmospheres maintained by symbolic boundaries were so strong that people would not go from one plaza to the other, some users would avoid crossing them, and their representations of cultural life were seen as competing and mutually exclusive. Even though they are close to each another, these two plazas represent, in Low's view, two different dimensions of the culture of Costa Rica: one is

traditional, Spanish, hierarchical, very masculine and oriented towards a catholic past; the other represents modern culture, youth, masculinity and femininity, and North America.

A space used by a group associated with violent behaviour will more often than not be seen as dangerous. Some parks in Los Angeles where a high number of homeless people gather are considered to be dirty and dangerous. This is what Low calls spatialization, that is, the physical, historical or conceptual localization of relationships and social practices in space (Low 2000). This affects not only the behaviours of the persons in the space, but also their attendance (Taylor 1988).

Indeed, such identified space has an impact on urban mobility. Because the space bears the characteristics of the people attached to it, to appropriate a space is to appropriate its characteristics. According to Duranti, to choose to go to a particular place is an interaction performance. 'Being seen by others while approaching a particular place, being publicly recognized, and in some cases being invited to occupy a high-status position are all highly interactional activities through which social identities are negotiated …' (Duranti 1992: 659). Based on the representations of villagers in Northern France, Bozon's research reveals that the social classes perform in public spaces through an appropriation of these same places. Ideally, one is able to choose where one 'hangs out', when and with whom.

Mobility associated with the appropriation of space is therefore linked to power. 'The power is the ability to move. The power is to have control over a reality, to really have the means to change it, to move it' (Cresswell 1975: 177). Many times in history, urban space has been used by the elites as a space for self-assertion and class reproduction. Furthermore, data show that the wealthiest Americans do more mileage daily in their cities (38 miles per day per person in households with an annual revenue of $40,000) than the average person (29 miles per day per inhabitant) (Ascher and Godard 1999: 179).

Not being able to go to a place because we can't — owing to insufficient financial means (Low 2005: 197), for example, or because we are kept from doing so - or because we don't want to (in uncomfortable places for example) - corresponds to what Rémy calls a non-urbanized situation. This means a situation where mobility is reduced, maybe restrained (Rémy 1972). In the city, movements in space are often a way for underprivileged groups to ensure a minimum of well-being (Casey 2008). Indeed, mobility is defined as a mean to transgress power structures

(Cresswell 2001), and as such it has an emancipatory power (Cresswell 1997, Adey 2006), hence the ambition in the Western World to control mobility (Cresswell 2006).

The work presented here do not focus on politics of movement, nor on the 'deterritorialisation' process in the 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000, Sheller 2004). It is also to be distinguished from the 'cooperative motility' proposed by Lofland (1998), which is about decoding the intentions of others while in movement as a principle of social life. The main objective here is to explore the survival conditions of neoliberal public spaces that are related to the capacity of their users to physically reach them (as in the empirical observable reality of movement) (Cresswell 2006). I will then turn to the concept of motility proposed by Kauffmann (2006) to illustrate the potential of mobility. It is not the movement so much as the physical ability, the aspiration to move, the technical system of transportation and access to it, and the knowledge related to this movement (such as a driver's license). Factors related to Kauffmann's motility are the general conditions for using the offers of movement, the competences required by the offers, and the appropriation of the offers within one's own plans.

In the case of public spaces, motility then refers to the information given to the general public about what types of parks exist, where and what they offer, how and when to reach them, and whether or not they can be used as one wishes the integration of a public space use as one wishes. It also underlines the individual capacity to call upon the best competences and the social net and infrastructure that will allow this enterprise to succeed. Furthermore, the concept of motility puts forward the very unique value of each space within the offer of public space and other activities at large.

Motility acts within the city, as well as within public spaces. During my observations in Los Angeles public spaces, I noted that the motility related to the public spaces is expressed as a dynamic use of space. Pershing Square can be visited simultaneously by various groups of people (white collars, families, and homeless people), but each of them will use a different area within the square. Whyte also observed this in Central Park (Whyte 1980: 198). Uses may also overlap when a group leaves and another replaces it, or while the first group stays. Teenagers hanging around Vista Hermosa Natural Park after school hours flee the park when parents arrive with little ones. Some users are subject to schedules that prevent them from attending public spaces at any time. This is the case for white collars, who are rarely present in the Downtown public spaces

in the mornings and afternoons. Finally, some people may orient their public space use according to events and activities they host. The Farmers' Market on Wednesdays in Pershing Square attracts an important number of locals and white collars, among others, who impose their presence over homeless regulars. In those cases, motility is the ability to position oneself within the physical limits of a public space and at certain hours, according to the presence of other groups (whom one may recognize as strangers or familiars, people with whom one may or may not want to identify and activities.

David's Journey

While in the field, on July 16, 2009, I met David (a pseudonym, of course). Actually, a friend of mine visiting Los Angeles met him before I did. While taking a walking tour of downtown by herself, she got lost and came upon this homeless man in a park, who quickly introduced himself and struck up a conversation. A few weeks later, I was exploring the Watercourt of the California Plaza and its surroundings, trying to get a sense of the place. I took the stairs on the East side of the Plaza, below the Angel's Flight, the then non-operational funicular. Midway between the Plaza and South Hill Street, my attention was caught by this very green, quiet, shady space on the south side of the stairs. Half of a lot was levelled to the height of Olive Street, planted with grass and trees, equipped with benches and a fence that separates the park from the rest of the lot, left in a steep hill diving into Fourth and Hill Street. This discreet park, which made an appearance in the movie *(500) Days of Summer* (Webb 2009), is known to some as Angels Knoll.

There was David, in deep conversation with a woman, in her thirties, probably a white-collar worker. David was going on about life, the city, trees, the buildings, travels, etc. There were only a few people in the park: a security guard, two people sleeping in the grass (their goats feasting on the dry grass across the fence), and the occasional passerby. When the woman left, David came to me and asked me for the time. He recognized my accent, and started talking for nearly 40 minutes! His monologue was mainly the same he had shared with the woman, with a few questions about where I was from and what I was doing. He kept on saying what a gem this place was in the Downtown Los Angeles landscape, a green luxury in the area, which he knew well. He talked about the buildings, their owners, their history and the people he saw. I understood that he spent his nights in the Olive tunnel, so Angels Knoll was a stone's throw from

his night place. When I asked what he thought of Pershing Square, a park a few steps to the south (0.2 miles / 300 m. / 4 minute walk) with a great number of homeless people among its users, David said he disliked the place. Too much concrete, barely any trees; Pershing Square made him uncomfortable. Because of the sunlight reflecting on the adjacent glass buildings, it is the kind of place where you can suddenly have three of your own shadows following you around. How crazy is that? This was not something David could bear, and Pershing Square was certainly not a place where he could hang out. In a way, in Angels Knoll, David radiated an undisturbed happiness.

My fieldwork continued. I chose the Watercourt as the place from which I would study the California Plaza. As I sat there, two or three times a week, observing who was in the Watercourt and what they were doing, I quite often saw David coming up from the Angels Knoll to get something from the upper-end convenience store. He would always greet me with some French salutations from across the Plaza. Sometimes, he was just sitting in the amphitheater, eyes closed, listening to the fountains whose rhythm he knew by heart.

On November 4, 2009, I was walking around Pershing Square, noting the users and their activities, when I heard this now-familiar voice calling my name with all the French nuances from the South West corner of the Square. I was quite surprised to see him there, knowing how much he hated the Square. When I asked him the reason, he explained to me that he had been kicked out of Angels Knoll.

It was a few days before September 11. A few nights in a row, some people had drawn graffiti on the park's rules sign with warnings of new attacks. Each morning, David would find the security agent erasing the paint with growing anger. At some point, the guard accused David of doing the damage, which he denied given all the love he had for the place. The accusations were made based on footage caught by some cameras on the site, apparently showing David's mischief. Since the graffiti kept on coming back, threats of expulsion followed the accusations. Feeling harassed and unfairly accused by a guard who was 'sleeping or washing his car on the job and lying about cameras that didn't exist,' David decided to leave Angels Knoll and headed for Pershing Square, the place of the three shadows, down the hill.

David carried with him a lot of anger towards the guard and this frustrating situation. He did have some friends and acquaintances in Pershing Square, and I saw him at first hang with other homeless users of the park, but it was not a place where he felt at peace. As time went by, I

could see the effects of this unwanted situation. Each time I saw him in the square, what he called a 'rat hole,' he was more and more distant from the group, at some point even being totally separated (although on the same long bench), saying then that he hated their company. His physical appearance, surely reflecting his physical health, declined: his nails became black, his clothing dirtier, and his face older. His discourse became chaotic, and it was harder to have a proper conversation with him. He still recognized me and I spoke with him as much as I could.

During our conversations, and seeing his physical and mental health declining, I asked him if he would consider going to Grand Hope Park. As one of the greenest parks downtown, I saw it fit for his taste and disposition. He knew the place, of course, and told me it was too far (0.7 miles / 1.1 km / 13 minute walk) to go and he couldn't imagine himself walking up there with all his belongings on his sore legs. It was also too far from his night spot to make the daily commute (0.9 miles / 1.5 km / 18 minute walk). On my last visit to Pershing Square, the day before I flew back home, I brought him a leaflet of the Skid Row Photography Club I came upon during an exhibition. Located in Skid Row, this Club was working with homeless people through photography. They lent cameras, printed the pictures when the cameras were brought back, and put together some exhibitions as a way to reach out to and raise awareness on homeless conditions. I thought this would please David, who seemed to have some knowledge about photography and had a very interesting way of seeing his environment. At first disappointed by the limits of the material that was lent, he grew more interested when thinking of the potential of what he saw every day in the Square. And a hop to Skid Row was possible. I left him on this happy note, and we wished each other good luck, him in the sun, me in the snow.

Reaching the Destination?

This part of David's story illustrates the very limits of his motility. Although he was a knowledgeable man, he saw his movement ability restrained by physical (weak legs) and material (many bags and luggage) conditions. Some spaces were prohibited to him, some too far away. What were left were spaces he disliked and found undesirable. He certainly manifested some ability in calling upon social institutions like the Skid Row Photography Club, but he was vulnerable to others (like the security guard at Angels Knoll).

When talking about lively public space, we are not only talking about a design that is welcoming to all groups and free of charge. We are talking about a range of different spaces that attract different people for different reasons. As a result, the vitality of public spaces should be should be evaluated in terms of the city's supply of public space. Because each space bears signification and emotions on top of having specific amenities, although a park is near to you, you may travel further to another place. An example of this is provided by David Kennedy, who shared his appreciation of Grand Hope Park on a blog: 'I remember when Grand Hope Park opened back in the early 90's. I lived on the westside [sic] and didn't really know downtown. I read an article about a new park downtown. I was intrigued. So I loaded up the car with some kids and headed downtown for a picnic. I vividly recall the thrilled look on the six year old's face as clock tower tolled on the hour. We'd never heard anything like it. (Sadly, the clock tower is no longer working.) It was the beginning of a long and happy relationship' (Kennedy 2006).

The ability of a public space to host substantial social heterogeneity is, among other things, a matter of being accessible and desirable to many different people. When considering its public space supply, a city should not only think in terms of acres and percentages of total land. It should pay attention to the general motility of its citizens in terms of their knowing about, and being able reach, the parks they wish to go to. The mobility and the motility of all citizens should be enhanced so that public spaces (and many more things) are easy to access.

Many people would not appreciate seeing the homeless population's mobility enhanced, and feel safe in Grand Hope Park precisely because 'Unlike Pershing (which I live across the street from) there are no residentially challenged individuals making comments about how I look that morning while I try to eat. It's not that I'm anti-homeless people; it just gets exhausting after a while' (Yelp, 2009 #1535). But as David's story shows, not all homeless people enjoy Pershing Square either, and if more possibilities were offered to them, they might not all concentrate in such high numbers in Pershing Square. As Welch, Rahimian and Koegel (1993) show, parks are among the facilities that 'often act as substitutes for points of return in a daily routine' (Welch and Rahimian 1993: 161). In Skid Row, there are two parks: Gladys Park and San Julian. The former is known for its small basketball court—a recent investment by Nike, the Recreation and Parks and the LA84 Foundation — and chess game table (Richardson 2008). The latter, sometimes called Sober Park, is a tiny park where drugs, if not consumed inside the park, are

everywhere around it. These neighbourhood parks have an atmosphere completely different than that of Pershing Square, the other nearest place, and other parks in the city like Vista Hermosa Natural Park. Do they know about those places and how to reach them?

Of course, the potential for mobility depends on not only motility, but also the urban environment. It has been said elsewhere that in Los Angeles, mobility and environment are structured unequally according to ethnicity, class, and gender (especially by Byrne, 2007, on parks). As the Bus Riders Union of Los Angeles has been claiming for many years, mobility is related to spatial justice, political rights and citizenship. 'No longer an individuated autonomous body, the mobile body presented by the Bus Riders Union is marked as different – as transit dependent, and as a connected to both the humanly created world of things (buses, roads, train tracks, etc.) and the environment' (Cresswell, 2006 #1301: 173).

In terms of reviving public spaces, I wanted to bring back to our attention the depth and complexity of public space attendance. Los Angeles public spaces are certainly not well known. How many people know that Griffith Park is one of the largest urban parks in North America? How many Angelinos know where to go for a walk, at the playground, for a historical atmosphere or for a breath full of oxygen?

Many Angelinos judge the city from their cars and aren't able to evaluate the distances that are walkable, the proximity services offered to them, and the extent of the natural environment encompassed within the city limits (Vista Hermosa Natural Park is an unknown treasure). Working on better outreach and improved access to and inclusion of public spaces in people's personal plans, which would improve Angelinos' motility, should be considered as much as building and investing in new parks and river banks. At stake are the survival and revival of public spaces, which depend on making sure all Angelinos know what is available to them and how to access it. The public space issue - especially in the case of Los Angeles, the city of cars - is not related only to a greater supply of public spaces, but also to the improvement of the motility of every citizen, including people like David.

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