Lost LA
Food & Discovery

Why L.A. Has Clashing Street Grids

By Nathan Masters
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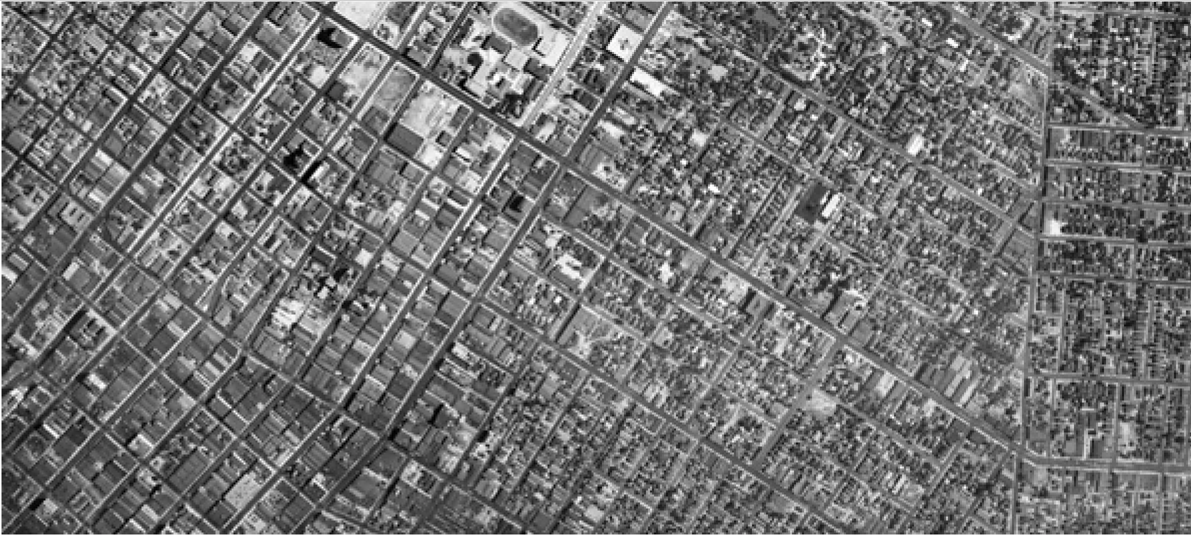
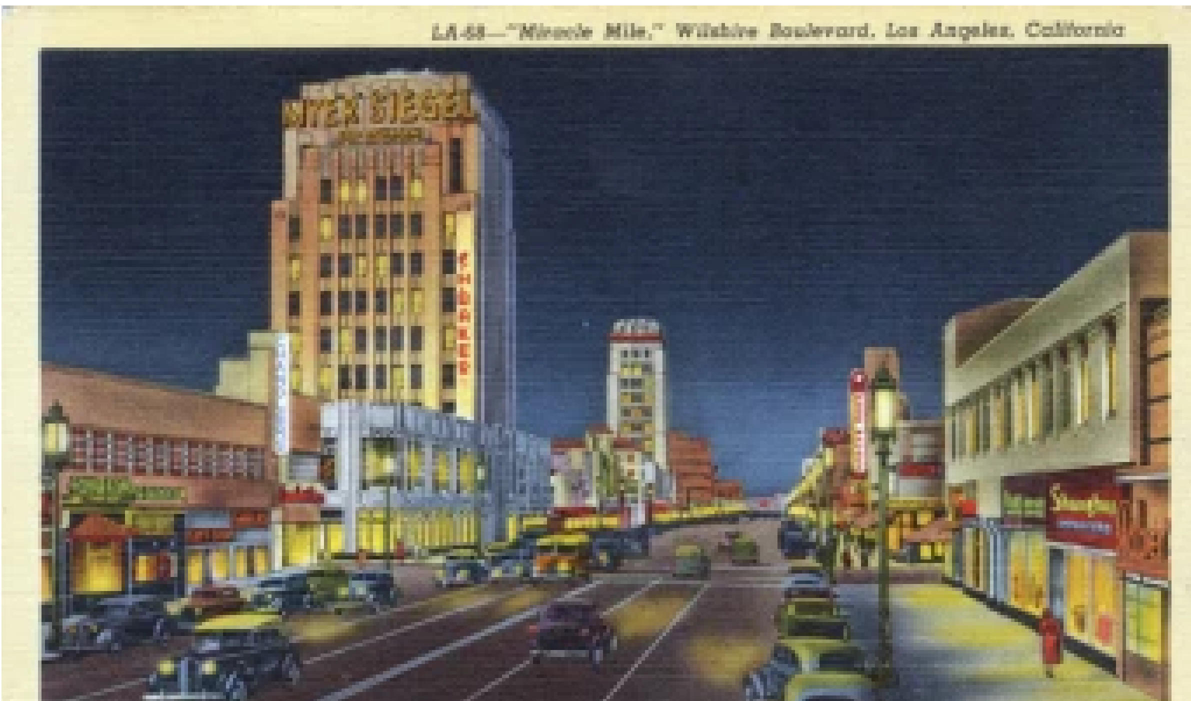


Street grids clash in this 1939 aerial photograph of Los Angeles. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

Los Angeles is a city with its vision so firmly pointed toward the future that traces of the past often escape its sight. Headlines proclaim new mega-developments downtown and transportation projects on the Westside. Even historical reminiscences of the city often focus on what was lost—**hills**, **tunnels**, and **Victorian mansions**—rather than what persists. But in fact traces of the past surround us, even in places where new construction has completely refashioned the surface of the city. Several distinct political and cultural regimes have passed through Southern California, and each has left its unique mark on the region's built environment. The result—clashing street grids, along with errant boulevards defying the grids' attempts at order—is a palimpsest of past cultural influences on the Los Angeles cityscape.

The most ancient imprints are so old as to qualify as *pre*-historic. Wilshire Boulevard is today a 16-mile stretch of roadway and commerce linking downtown Los Angeles with Santa Monica's Pacific shore. It was also L.A.'s first highway, likely blazed by mammoths and other **Pleistocene** mammals in search of food and water on the ***cienegas*** of the L.A. flood plain. Later uses of the meandering trail—an Indian path connecting the villages of the Tongva people, an ox-cart road for transporting asphalt pitch from the La Brea Tar Pits to the Spanish pueblo of Los Angeles, a dirt highway linking the Mexican ranchos west of the city—hint at the layers of cultural influences that underlie L.A.'s landscape.

Some animals traveled the ancient precursor to Wilshire Boulevard looking for water but found only death at the tar pits of Hancock Park. Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library Photograph Collection.



On its sixteen-mile trek from One Wilshire to Palisades Park, the ancient highway traverses multiple street grids, each oriented toward a different point on the compass and only one pointing toward the cardinal directions.

It begins as part of the city's oldest street grid, where streets slant toward the northeast. That skewed orientation is a legacy of L.A.'s origins as a Spanish colonial outpost, **as Jeremy Rosenberg recently explained for KCET Departures**. When Felipe de Neve founded the town in 1781, the Laws of the Indies dictated that the city's plaza—the social and political center of Spanish colonial settlements—be oriented 45 degrees off the cardinal directions. (Because of the vagaries of the **Los Angeles River**, the *pobladores* only ever achieved a 36 degree skew.)

When the Americans conquered the city in 1847, one of their first tasks was to impose American cartographic standards on Hispanic settlement patterns—a prerequisite for converting city lands into private property. U.S. Army engineer E. O. Ord was the first to survey Los Angeles, marking with his chains an orthogonal grid of city blocks that extended south from the plaza at a 36-degree angle. Ord's 1849 map—the first ever of Los Angeles—would define downtown L.A.'s development in subsequent years, enshrining what D. J. Waldie names L.A.'s "**crooked heart**" into the city's urban morphology.

Where Wilshire crosses the Harbor Freeway, it encounters a slight variation of the downtown grid. Streets here points 28 degrees north, tracing the tidy lines of another early American surveyor, Henry Hancock. While Ord limited his survey to those parts of the city already settled or under cultivation, in 1857 Hancock mapped the entire 16-square leagues that King Charles III had granted the pueblo in 1781. With the vast majority of those original city lands still unoccupied, Hancock sectioned the landscape into square tracts. As these tracts passed into private ownership, the city built streets along the property lines, and Hancock's lines survive today as public roads such as Rampart Boulevard and Alvarado Street.

Detail of a map combining Ord's and Hancock's city plans. Courtesy of the Map collection on Los Angeles, California, the United States and the world; UCLA Young Research Library.

Wilshire Boulevard transitions from a Spanish to an American street grid at Hoover, as seen in this circa 1930s photograph by Dick Whittington. Courtesy of the Dick Whittington Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

Crossing Hoover Street, Wilshire leaves behind the original Spanish pueblo of Los Angeles and enters the national survey grid of the United States. Established by the **Land Ordinance of 1785**, this vast orthogonal system of meridians (running north-south) and base lines (running east-west) divides much of the United States between Ohio and California into a series of townships, each 36 square miles. Each township is in

Bernardino Base Line intersect. (Baseline Road runs through several San Gabriel Valley foothill communities along the latter line.) Civil land grants like the Los Angeles pueblo and the Mexican ranchos are not included within the Public Land Survey System, but other lands are: Hollywood is part of Township 1 South Range 14 West (T1S R14W). U.S. survey lines, preserved first as property lines and later as public streets, are still a visible part of the landscape in mid-city Los Angeles. Today, Santa Monica Boulevard and Vermont Avenue both trace section lines drawn by U.S. Army surveyor Henry Washington in the 1850s.

A streetcar travels down Santa Monica Boulevard where it intersects with La Cienega. 1952 photo courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library.

Workers remove streetcar tracks from the middle of Vermont Avenue in 1948. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, UCLA Library.

Across Los Angeles, an occasional errant street like San Vicente or Venice interrupts the orderly gridiron patterns. These boulevards, soaring across the city at odd angles, represent the imprint of the late-19th and early-20th-century growth machine made possible by interurban rail lines. Tracks once ran down the middle of Culver, Exposition, San Vicente, Santa Monica, and Venice boulevards—and in many cases, the tracks preceded paved road.

Further west, Wilshire encounters even more street grids, where other features defined property lines and rights-of-way. Beverly Hills's business district is oriented toward the Pacific Electric line that once angled through the town along Santa Monica Boulevard. The town of Sawtelle was laid out in relation to the border between the Mexican-era land grants of Rancho San Vicente y Santa Monica and Rancho San Jose de Buenos Ayres.

Finally, when it reaches the city of Santa Monica, L.A.'s "**grand concourse**," as Kevin Roderick termed Wilshire Boulevard, enters a grid patterned after the Pacific shore. Santa Monica's numbered streets reflect the southeastern direction of the shoreline. Wilshire Boulevard and other intersecting streets, meanwhile, proceed toward the ocean, their bearings directly perpendicular to the cliffs of Palisades Park.

This 1931 aerial view of Santa Monica shows the shoreline reflected in the city's street grid. Courtesy of the Santa Monica Public Library Image Archives.

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