

## History & Society

# Stunted Progress: Belmont Tunnel and the Repurposing of a Faded Los Angeles Dream

By Hadley Meares

December 13, 2013



## Energy

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The small locked park, containing what remains of Belmont Tunnel and the Toluca Substation and Yard, is nestled in a deep pock between decay and so called progress. If ever there was a "valley of the ashes" in Los Angeles, it is this part of the Westlake neighborhood, centered underneath and around the Beverly Boulevard Viaduct.

It's only a mile from downtown, but when I visited on a recent Sunday afternoon I couldn't have felt farther away. There were old wooden lean-tos, trash-strewn sidewalks, and the steps I descend to reach the park were steep and covered in bright graffiti. I felt someone staring at me. There was a man, standing in the window of a decrepit apartment house. I looked at him and he turned away, but not before giving me the finger.

These are things I saw while trying to find Belmont Tunnel. A hipster with a small dog, and a man I assumed to be homeless, both with lined faces, surreptitiously greeted each other before disappearing into an apartment covered in tarp. Two plump women laughed as they cooked chicken on a smoking coal grill, outside a leaning garage. A little girl squealed with delight as a slightly bigger boy pushed her in a tire swing that hung over the sidewalk. Two boys threw a football clear across the street as smaller children cheered them on. Most of what I saw was joyful, and all of it was entirely human.

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Embedded into the complex is the tiny park where the sealed entrance to Belmont Tunnel still stands. Artist Tait Roelof's glow-in-the-dark mural of a red trolley car seems to shoot out of the entrance, like a slightly sinister ghost of the past. Next to it sits the Toluca Substation, once covered in graffiti, now a government issue grey. The squares of grass in the park are unnaturally green Astroturf, and two shiny grills stand at attention at either side of the substation, ready to service a football cookout or a craft cocktail party.

The gates to the empty park are high, and no matter how I twisted the handle of the electronically locked door, it would not budge. I trudged back to my car and took the surface streets to my home in Los Feliz, though the 101 was only seconds away. Something about my visit had made me feel resentful towards L.A.'s freeways and the isolation they afford.

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the vast system of subterranean passageways that great metropolises must have in order to sustain themselves. -- The Los Angeles Times, 1925 1

By the 1920s, Los Angeles was facing a traffic crisis. In 1901, Henry Huntington (of Huntington Gardens fame) bought the city's privately owned electric streetcar system and formed the Pacific Electric Company. Los Angeles soon had the most extensive aboveground public transportation system in the country. The Yellow Car line took

passengers short distances. The more iconic Red Car line connected Los Angeles with its already considerable urban sprawl. However, it soon became inadequate.

Cars were fast taking over the streets and competing with trolleys, causing massive traffic jams in downtown Los Angeles. Downtown was the commercial, financial and cultural heart of the LA metropolitan area. Residents in growing suburbs like Glendale, Burbank and Santa Monica wanted easy access to downtown stores and a painless commute to work. Leaders in these suburbs were also eager for more efficient rail service. The better the transportation, the easier to convince people to move out of the city proper. In turn, downtown businesses were clamoring for the patronage of these outlying citizens, especially the "lady shoppers" with disposable incomes and free time.

Throughout the early 1920s, grand plans for a subway system to rival New York and London were discussed. It was not only considered a necessity, it was also a point of civic pride. It is out of these grand schemes that our Belmont Tunnel was born. It was believed that the tunnel would be "the forerunner of a subway system which will enable the city to take care of all its transportation problems as they arise during the years to come."<sup>2</sup>

Known at the time as the "Hollywood Subway" or the Pacific Electric Subway, the mile long concrete and steel tunnel began in a downtown terminus below the massive new Subway Terminal Building, at 417 South Hill Street. It resurfaced near where Glendale Boulevard intersected with First Street and Beverly Boulevard in Westlake. Upon exiting the tunnel, Red Cars entered the Toluca Yard and split onto multiple tracks connecting to the long running Glendale-Burbank, Hollywood, Santa Monica and San Fernando Valley lines. By bypassing downtown traffic and eliminating local stops, it was estimated the subway would cut between twelve to fifteen minutes off daily commutes.

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Excavating during the construction of the Pacific Electric Railway subway tunnel at Glendale Boulevard and First Street | Security Pacific National Bank Collection, courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library

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opening of the Hollywood Subway on the Pacific Electric Railway | California Historical Society Collection, USC Digital Library

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The L.A. Times described the thrilling scene that followed:

Thousands gathered in the street and on the sidewalks outside the terminal, long before the departure of the train which was waiting for the delegation of dignitaries who had attended the luncheon. Policemen guarded the entrance to the subway, crowds pushed and shoved and were let in once the dignitaries were safely through. A train of five cars was in readiness to take the travelers on their journey to the end of the tunnel, but before climbing aboard, they were detained to have their pictures taken and to witness the ceremony involving the breaking of a bottle, containing, it was said, ginger ale, on what would have been the prow, had the train been a ship. The signal was given and the first subway train to leave Los Angeles was under way. The passengers enjoyed the ride hugely, the crowded cars reminding one of a lot of school children on a lark. Some of the old timers aboard fell into reminiscence, telling of the time forty or more years ago when they had been aboard the first wobbly horse car that ever traversed the streets of Los Angeles. There was not time for entering into long, historical recitals, however, for in a short time somebody said 'I see daylight,' and in a minute more the train had reached the terminus of the tunnel at First Street and Glendale Boulevard. Careful persons aboard, who had kept time, said the journey had been made in just four minutes. 3

The Glendale-Burbank line was the first to utilize the tunnel. Starting at 5 a.m., sixty-seven trains ran daily from the station below the Subway Terminal Building Street to Glendale. Thirty-two ran to Burbank. In the next few months, the Hollywood and San Fernando cars joined them. Hundreds of streetcars were taken off busy downtown streets, easing surface traffic considerably. The new Subway Terminal Building on Hill Street became the most fashionable business address in Los Angeles. At the exit of the tunnel in Westlake, Red Cars whizzed by, mechanics worked on deficient cars in Toluca Yard, and Pacific Electric employees made sure the Toluca Substation, which provided power for all electric cars, ran smoothly.

Although thousands patronized the Hollywood Subway throughout the '20s and '30s, plans for a great interurban subway system stalled. In 1934, Mayor Frank Shaw admitted that Los Angeles was at least ten to fifteen years behind other cities in developing a mass

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All was quiet on the Pacific Electric Subway front early yesterday morning, and tower man Ira McIlwain was busy making his morning reports. Suddenly, a light flashed on the indicator board announcing that something had entered the subway at the intersection of Beverly and Glendale Boulevards. "That's funny," mused McIlwain, "there's nothing due yet." ... Tensely, he peered at the curve which marks the beginning of the end of the mile and a quarter long subway ... Two headlights turned the dimmed tunnel into daylight as an automobile bounced to a stop ... "What's the matter, are you lost?" McIlwain yelled, as the noise subsided. A bareheaded figure climbed from the car. "I don't know," the driver said, "I didn't know the Second St. tunnel was so rough, and when did they start running streetcars through it? 5

Due to fuel rations and an increased temporary workforce, use of the subway reached its peak during World War Two. It is estimated that around 65,000 passengers traveled through the tunnel every day throughout the war years. Belmont Tunnel was also designated as an air raid shelter that could hold up to 10,000 Angelenos.

But as the city settled back into post war normalcy and car ownership increased, the aging fleets of Red Cars saw their daily commuter population plummet. Buses took over many of the routes formerly run by the Red Cars, and the city began building the epic freeways that now dominate Los Angeles. In 1952, what remained of Pacific Electric was bought by Metropolitan Coach Lines, "whose intention was to convert all rail service to bus service as quickly as possible."<sup>6</sup> On June 19, 1955, the last Red Car on the route made its way out of the Subway Terminal Building terminus, a banner reading "To Oblivion" stretched across its nose.

The Subway Terminal building was closed. The train tracks were ripped out of Toluca Yard. Belmont Tunnel, Toluca Yard and the Toluca Substation were all abandoned, leaving the gutted remains of what could have been. The city was gifted the now useless tunnel in 1966, prompting the L.A. Times to joke: "City given hole in ground as gift -- now must fill it up."

The city used portions of the tunnel intermittently. Cold war rations were kept there, including 220,700 pounds of crackers. These could feed almost 70,000 people for 14

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Tunnel an internationally recognized monument to the new art of graffiti.

Last day of service, 1955 | Metro Library and Archive/Flickr/Creative Commons

### The Epicenter

It's urban hieroglyphics. -- The Los Angeles Times 7

What is viewed as abandoned has already been redeveloped by the community to serve a specific need that the city has failed to provide: public space. -- Moises Medina, Westlake resident 8

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and the walls that surrounded the yard. The Toluca Substation was turned into a multidimensional canvas, and completely painted.

The best of the tagging community put up pieces at the tunnel. The risqué, daring, and competitive culture of illegal graffiti at Belmont Park was covered by magazines and documentarians, and visited by leaders in the art world. Mike Angel, who was involved in the graffiti scene during this time, remembers his experiences as a tagger at Belmont Tunnel in the early 2000s:

Growing up, I looked up to the L.A. graffiti legends such as Saber, Revok, and Fishe from KOG. During my high school days I always had the rush to hit up some of Los Angeles greatest areas that only the known talented artists would hit up, I guess because it seemed impossible to do. But I always accomplished to get my name up in the certain areas, and one of them was definitely the Belmont Tunnel. That would be the best of the best. The first time I painted there, I would say I was 16 years of age. One of my favorite moments was when I was with one of my friends. We changed into some jogging clothes and set to meet up at 3:30 am. By the time we got to Belmont Tunnel, it was around 4:30 am. I remember feeling the best adrenaline rush ever. I never had fear -- I felt like that would attract negative energy. We scoped out the spot that we wanted to hit up. We didn't want to disrespect anybody's art that was up -- although we did end up having to paint over some stuff whose style we could definitely outshine. I remember we took our time. We buffed two pieces out with white water base paint. It was fun. A bum helped us out. For payment, he asked us to hit a cap with a few sprays of paints so he could huff it. We started the pre-outline and filled it in with colors, shadowed it, then outlined it again. The rush was indescribable. I felt like I was one bad ass for hitting up on the Belmont Tunnel with my name next to the artists I looked up to growing up. We had our spot running for three days, before we got painted over by someone else. 10

Though graffiti was a crime in Los Angeles, city officials often looked the other way in regards to Belmont Tunnel and Toluca Yard. By the early '90s, the city was spending tens of millions of dollars a year cleaning up graffiti -- but Belmont Tunnel's no-man's land status meant that it was spared.

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Toluca Substation, 2004 | [Amayzun](#)/Flickr/Creative Commons

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Belmont Tunnel in 2005 during construction of the apartment complex | [Steve Rotman](#)/Flickr/Creative Commons

In 2002, Meta Housing Corporation bought Toluca Yard, and announced plans to build a 276 unit apartment complex that would include 57 affordable housing units. Neighborhood activists fought to save the yard. They claimed that taggers and underserved Westlake residents had created a park and artistic space of considerable importance on the property. In 2004, the tunnel and substation were granted historic status, but activists' request that it be a graffiti art park was denied. The cleaned up and filled in tunnel and grey-washed substation were integrated into the apartment complex's design, and permission to begin construction was granted in December of 2004.

So, that is where we are today -- a giant apartment complex, and a shut off and antiseptic park. A positive addition to the neighborhood is the new Vista Hermosa Park, which sits on a hill on the other side of the Beverly Boulevard Viaduct. When I visited this lovely green space, I was blown away by its spectacular views of downtown. I was heartened to see men and women playing soccer on a beautiful sports field, and families taking portraits in the clean smelling air.

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<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>7</sup> "Old tunnel may be tagged" Los Angeles Times, September 15, 2004

<sup>8</sup> "Housing plans for old subway site gains" Los Angeles Times, December 9, 2004

<sup>9</sup> "L.A. then and now" Los Angeles Times, February 8, 2009

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the author, 2013

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