

Democracy Takes Command: New Community Planning and the Challenge to Urban Design

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Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science: they bring it within the people's reach, they teach me how to use and how to enjoy it.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, volume 1

In America the people form a master who must be obeyed to the utmost limits of possibility.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, volume 1

When Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America*,¹ traveled through the United States in the 1830s, he was struck by the high level of citizen participation in local decision making. He also noted what he called the “vast number of inconsiderable productions [buildings]” that populated the landscape of this democracy, a few monuments, and what he called the “blank” between these two extremes.² This could almost be a description of the urban design of Los Angeles today. Think City Hall, a new cathedral, Disney Hall, the new Morphosis Caltrans building, a few OK skyscrapers, and a vast “blank” middle landscape. Exploring this void reveals that democracy, at least in Los Angeles, is now designing the middle zone into a clear reflection of both the needs and aspirations of the people who live there.

Three situations in and near Los Angeles illustrate the state of this