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## Downtown on Parade: The Reshaping of a Traditional Retail Model

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Pacific Boulevard is characterized by narrow stores whose facades are almost completely open to the sidewalk. Photos courtesy Terezia Nemeth.

Pacific Boulevard, the heart of Huntington Park, Calif., is a traditional downtown street. Any aerial view of the city demonstrates this clearly. An intensity of built forms lines up tightly against the edge of the street; each building elbows the others for more access to the main drag, as if it were trying to get a better view of the passing parade.

Pacific Boulevard is a wide street, with a 120-foot right of way, and serves as Huntington Park's historic downtown. The "blue line," a streetcar route that once connected the city with downtown Los Angeles, used to run down the street. By 1950, Huntington Park was considered the "Beverly Hills" of south-central Los Angeles and was a major regional shopping area. But the Watts riots tore through the city, along with the rest of south-central, and a mass exodus of residents and businesses resulted.

Today, as if by magic, Pacific Boulevard is again a major regional shopping street. There is indeed a parade of shoppers along its nearly mile-long core from Florence to Slauson avenues. But the traditional model has been reshaped — first by the ascendance of the automobile, then by the city's expanding Hispanic population.

Today most people arrive in cars or on buses that run along Pacific and

Florence. To accommodate cars without ruining the street's pedestrian nature, the city has been creating public parking areas behind the Pacific Boulevard frontage; people can reach the parking via passages between buildings or through arcades incorporated in newer projects. Diagonal parking on Pacific enhances the pedestrian atmosphere: It creates a protective zone between sidewalk and street, and it slows traffic because cars are constantly pulling in and out.

The shopping street reflects the dominant Hispanic population in several ways. There are a large number of specialty stores, such as "bridal" shops that sell various types of party dresses for the many special events traditional to Hispanic culture and many discount clothing and accessories retailers. There is all manner of specialty food stores, restaurants and quick-eating establishments, selling typical Hispanic dishes like tortillas, beans, rice and meats (you can't find a hamburger anywhere on the street). The signage is typically in Spanish with at most a subtitle in English, as a courtesy to the host country.

The most distinguishable characteristic of the change is the people that parade along the street. The overwhelming majority is obviously of Hispanic descent, many from Mexico.

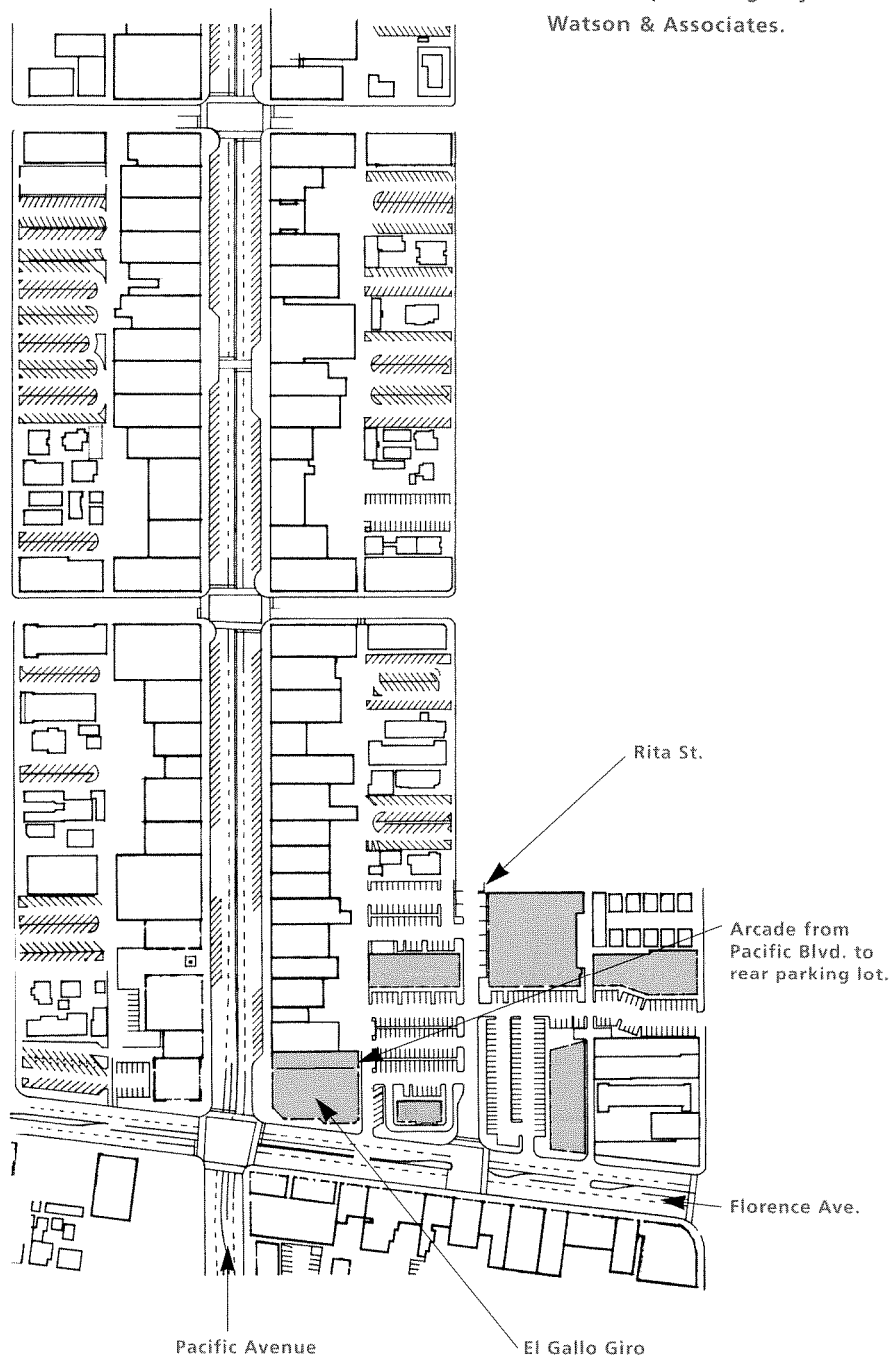
They come downtown in large family groups, bringing many children along. The average length of their stay is several hours, often an entire day. The parade is festive and unchoreographed, people stroll up and down the length of Pacific and browsing in its many stores.

The mere density of people along the street is staggering. The response from shopkeepers is predictable; they try to make maximum use of their frontage — their view of the parade. Shopkeepers vie for the interest of the mass of people by creating large openings along the storefront, both to allow for displays that push as close to the sidewalk as possible and to simplify pedestrian access into the store. In many cases the facade of the shop is a sliding-glass wall that can be retracted or swung into the store, creating a near seamlessness between retail space and sidewalk. At the same time, storefronts have been subdivided into ever-decreasing widths as demand for shop locations has increased. (The city recently issued a regulation prescribing a minimum width of 16 feet for retail stores, for health and safety reasons.)

The effect is chaotic and exciting. The festive activity is intoxicating — people flowing in and out of stores easily, colorful wares displayed as close to the sidewalk as possible, children running up and down the street, vendors setting up temporary stands on any piece of the sidewalk they can find and selling food like fruit kebobs, *chicharron* (fried pork rind) and other delicacies.

This evolution has begun to express itself in the choices made in new investment along Pacific Boulevard. A case in point is Plaza de la Fiesta, a retail complex built recently at the intersection of Florence Avenue and Pacific Boulevard, a prime location at one end of the shopping district. The developer, Watson & Associates (of Seal Beach,

Drawing by Pankaj Vaid.  
Base maps courtesy  
Huntington Park  
Redevelopment Agency and  
Watson & Associates.





El Gallo Giro, owned by a Mexico-based food company, includes a restaurant, retail store, offices, production facility and sidewalk cafe.



Calif.), and the Huntington Park Redevelopment Agency generated the project's concept and acquired the necessary properties, which had been in various states of disrepair.

This major assemblage of land is not a traditional pattern on Pacific Boulevard, where the buildings that constitute the streetwall read as if they are in individual ownership, and the project held the potential for causing a major disruption to the pedestrian-scaled environment. But the agency and the developer made a number of decisions that helped Plaza De La Fiesta become a positive terminus for the shopping district.

Plaza de la Fiesta is designed to continue the streetwall along both Pacific and Florence, and it extends the prevailing retail rhythm, with store widths of generally 14 to 20 feet. This contrasts with typical L.A. boulevard-oriented "mini-mall" development, in which an "L"-shaped row of shops is set against the back property line and frames a parking lot open to the corner.

The redevelopment agency was particularly adamant that the streetwall be maintained at the intersection of Pacific and Florence, which is not only a terminus for the shopping district but also a gateway into the city. Now the corner is anchored by El Gallo Giro, a Mexico-based food company. McDonald's had expressed serious interest in the location, but the developer correctly assumed that El Gallo Giro would fit more appropriately into the street's existing activity.

El Gallo Giro's mixed-use concept and street-hugging design activate the corner in many ways. There is a restaurant, a food store that sells fresh meats, baked goods and imported specialties from Mexico, and a production facility in which specialty food items like tor-

tillas and *masa* (freshly made dough) are manufactured for wholesale and retail sale. Upstairs the company has its offices. Finally, there is an outdoor cafe built into a section of the street that had been devoted to parking — further enticing activity out from the building and into the street. The festive colors of the umbrellas, plantings and cafe, combined with the bustle of people, make an appropriate finale to this active street.

The choice of El Gallo Giro was risky, as the company had no other U.S. locations and lacked the recognition, marketing back-up and success of an international chain like McDonald's. But the uniqueness of the concept has worked marvelously here; El Gallo Giro supplements Pacific Boulevard's tremendous regional draw and is inarguably a better addition to the street than a chain like McDonald's, which would not have been unique to this place, environment, or clientele.

Plaza de la Fiesta also is successful at drawing the Pacific Boulevard parade into its core without physically disturbing the scale and nature of the street. It includes an interior ring of stores that surrounds a parking lot, as at a typical shopping center. Pedestrians can move between Pacific Boulevard and the interior shopping area through an arcade lined with small shops (and an entrance to El Gallo Giro); they also can reach the interior via Rita Street, which bisects the parking lot and connects to Florence Avenue.

Because of the easy availability of parking nearby, Plaza de la Fiesta includes only three parking spaces per 1,000 s.f. of retail space, as opposed to the standard five. This makes a perceptible difference: The proportion of building coverage to parking area is clearly more conducive to pedestrian

retail traffic, upon which the viability of the project depends, than a traditional parking arrangement would be.

Another key component of the project was the acquisition of an old Ralph's Supermarket on Florence and Rita. The supermarket was converted into a mini-mall that serves as the second anchor for the project: It includes about 40 small, independent retailers who sell specialty goods like leather goods, jewelry and clothing accessories in a bazaar-like atmosphere. The mini-mall serves as an "incubator," allowing for small, start-up, locally-owned enterprises in a location that traditionally would be occupied by a large, national or retail chain store.

The success of Plaza de la Fiesta required the foresight of a proactive redevelopment agency and an enlightened local developer who could understand the needs of the people of Huntington Park and the involved presence of a large Hispanic community. Other developers were approached by the agency but were uninterested or unable to recognize the potential of a project that does not fit currently accepted retail formulas.

The local freestanding J.C. Penney store is an example of a large corporation's difficulty in understanding local conditions. After the 1992 riots in south-central Los Angeles, the store covered its street-level windows with stucco, raining on the Pacific Boulevard parade. Happily, Penney is now installing display windows reminiscent of traditional downtown department stores — adding a yet another dimension to the life along Pacific Boulevard.