

Providence and Los Angeles are no Longer So Different

Two years ago, my wife, daughter, and I moved from Los Angeles to Providence, Rhode Island. Night and day, right? That's what I thought going in, but now I've concluded it's more like dusk and dawn, not exactly the same, but in many ways, parallel.

The differences between the two cities seem so obvious that they function by way of cliché. Los Angeles: sun baked megalopolis crammed with hopeful exiles trying to get rich, La La Land, Lotus Land, Hollywood, earthquakes, riots, fires, roller skating kooks, and suburbs and swimming pools that never stop gobbling up the desert, mountains and whatever else hasn't already been subdivided, malled and themed. Los Angeles: massive wide-open sunny basin on the Pacific where the freeway (that sluggish conduit from pitch meeting to yoga studio to plastic surgeon's) is a place unto itself.

Contrast this day-glo thumbnail of Southern California with one of Southern New England. Specifically, Providence: a maritime mix of colonial elegance and post industrial grit, a mini city whose heyday was the 19th Century. Providence: a city of neighborhoods where the past hangs heavy and cemeteries abound, home to a branch of the Ivy League tree as well as a mob trunk, wet and cold at least six months of the year, compact and hemmed in. And finally, Providence, the self styled Renaissance City, revitalized by former mayor Buddy Cianci, now in federal prison in New Jersey on corruption charges.

Despite the differences, I see many similarities, including a love affair with the car. It's a given about Los Angeles that the roads are clogged, the streets empty of pedestrians and everyone drives. Providence is Los Angeles's if not identical, then at least fraternal twin in this respect. The automobile obsession goes hand in hand with a suburban ideal and the dominance of national chains in the retail economy. Topographically, a trip on the jammed 95 through metro Providence is like a trip on the jammed 405 through greater Los Angeles. But it's more than the familiar city/industry/suburbs mix, it's the ever widening national (and global) homogenization, *chainization* really, in which stores and shopping areas everywhere are interchangeable.

The Whole Foods on North Main Street in Providence is a quick double for the Whole Foods on Riverside Drive in Sherman Oaks: same mix of natural fibers, sensible shoes and Volvos, same middle class patina of eco friendly values, same exorbitant cantaloupe. In fact, Providence's entire University Heights shopping plaza, which in addition to Whole Foods includes McDonald's, PETCO, Staples, Radio Shack, and Boston Market, is identical to what one would find in the San Fernando Valley, or anywhere really.

A little to the south of University Heights is the Providence Place Mall, a clone of the Westside Pavilion: Nordstrom, The Gap, Old Navy, Crate and Barrel - all of the usual suspects are present. And, in both Providence and Los Angeles, same traffic jam getting out of the massive parking structure, same loud-mouthed teens on the escalators, same overpriced cookie in the food court, same cart where they will put your picture on a mug or T-shirt. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

If you leave the mall in search of things you actually *need*: an extension cord, a snow shovel, dish towels, that type of stuff, well, it's off to the familiar suburban cluster of Target, Sears and Wal-Mart, a configuration found throughout the entire country. And you need close-outs on area rugs, cheap toys for the kiddies, and seasonal junk? The Ocean State Job Lot is indistinguishable from Big Lots.

The differences in size, ethnic mix, history, climate, architecture, and culture between Los Angeles and Providence are, of course, many, but we tend to look for differences, so much so that we become stuck on them and overlook that cities are tending towards convergence, not difference. Very few of us are engaged in prototypically regional pursuits (clamming in Narragansett Bay, screen testing at Disney). Most North Americans spend the bulk of their time in the quotidian office parks, malls, and parking lots which are everywhere the same. Demographics, marketing and transregional and transnational corporations determine a great deal: the minivan disgorges toddlers in front of the ranch house in suburban Warwick, just like in Woodland Hills; the Brown University student wears the same Urban Outfitters' hip huggers as her UCLA counterpart.

Advances in communications and transportation technologies, and the advent of mass media and mass marketing, have served as great flatteners. Places such as Providence and Los Angeles that were radically different one hundred years ago, are now not so far apart. There are, of course, still contrasts between the two, and not only that, pluses and minuses, but before toting up the points on one side of the ledger or the other, or launching into *vive la difference* style toasts, it's important to keep in mind the essential sameness now underlying everyday life in these two cities.

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