

LYNELL GEORGE

Deconstructing the City of Angels

Lynn Garrett's keys to the virtual city

Lovers and detractors agree: navigating life in Los Angeles is mostly a matter of interpretation. Those “72 suburbs in search of a city” that Dorothy Parker so indelibly defined and dismissed in one quick laceration is one way to characterize Los Angeles and its meandering sprawl, and a roots-deep Angeleno might read the Parker analysis not as insult but elucidation. That difficult-to-pinpoint character is what makes many die-hard Angelenos stick it out, despite the perpetual swirl of bad press that surrounds LA. Some see their city as episodic, others as a series of situational non-sequiturs. You can't sum up Los Angeles in a sentence; it always demands a deeper look.

It isn't easy to jack-hammer through LA's glossy surface-story, the beamed-to-the-world simulacrum the world thinks it knows because they've seen it on TV. Yet Lynn Garrett, is attempting to do just that. She didn't just step into the fray but in a sense created one, a necessary forum of her own design—a place to explore and talk about the city without qualification or apology. Her lively blog and website, Hidden Los Angeles, along with its corresponding Facebook page (nearly 300,000 members strong) is dedicated to the daily endeavor of “going deeper”—in a city where people often interpret the very word “deep” as spurious: an oxymoron or the lead-in for a late-night comedian's joke. To Garrett, Los Angeles is a serious subject for analysis and a constant source of surprise.

“Oftentimes, when people come to Los Angeles, they really don't see it,” she observes. “They think they have an solid, informed opinion of it. Even though they only stayed one night. At a hotel. At the airport. What on earth would you learn about any city that way?”

Since 2009, Hidden Los Angeles has presided over a lively 24-hour virtual town square—linking current city-dwellers and expat, multi-generational natives to the casually curious from around the globe, feeding them into conversational threads that explore both place and perception, past, present and future.

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Boom: A Journal of California, Vol. 3, Number 1, pps 50–55, ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2013 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/boom.2013.3.2.50.

Part old-school news editor and part 21st century content curator, Lynn Garrett single-handedly offers a regular flow of informational/conversation-prompting posts—video, photographs, news links—that fold in breaking news, history, cultural studies, recreation, city planning, conservancy, and nature/ecology. She has transported a famously elusive city into a virtual place, and attempted to give it shape and form.

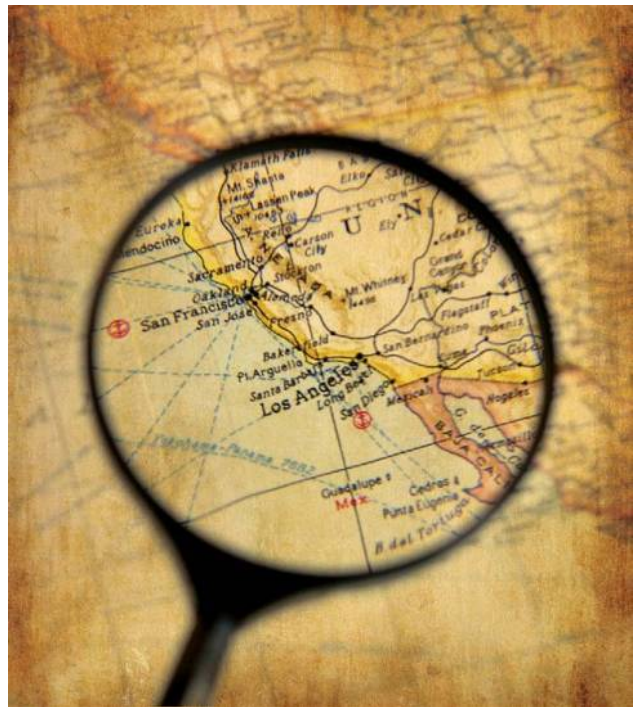
Over three decades (on and off) kicking around Los Angeles, Garrett, an accomplished artist and graphic designer, has worked variously as a jazz singer and tour guide, for Disney Consumer Products as a senior designer of toy packaging, and for a time, as a senior art director at Mattel, where she designed board games. You see a little bit of all of those incarnations in the range of content explored on Hidden Los Angeles—in the online environment she’s created and the improvisational flow of ideas that dovetail to the next big thought.

Taken as a whole, Hidden Los Angeles is a fully interactive community—a virtual tour/online magazine of the city. It doesn’t ignore Hollywood as an industry but puts it in the context of the rest of Los Angeles—its ethnic communities, its flora and fauna, the curious factoids about LA in its earlier incarnation (a “horizontal” city, suburban sprawl, the old sky-scraper limits)—in other words, what it really means to live here.

The real city, Angelenos know, blooms along the edges of outsiders’ perceptions of it. What might appear arbitrary is actually the many chambers of its complex, working heart and how it fits into the world. That was the big question Garrett asked herself when she began her inquiries.

Part of really *seeing* Los Angeles, she has learned, is a simple act of shifting one’s perspective. “When we go to visit other places, we seek out and are often attracted to the cultural things. The history. It’s as if we have different expectations for Los Angeles.”

That’s been the case since its inception. The city was often seen as an antidote: a cure for the body and soul; a site of reinvention, a launching pad for dreams. Its own story—its indigenous riches, how it came to be, who shaped it—took second billing. For frequent visitors, the city is a palimpsest upon which to write their own story. “People think the past is gone, but it’s around every corner—it’s there, and so is meaning,” Garrett says.



“Go Deeper.” Logo for Hidden Los Angeles website and blog.

LOGO DESIGNED BY LYNN GARRETT.

Excavating this tangible sense of place in a virtual world means that, in the day-to-day, Garrett is a bit of the ring-master overseeing layers of fervent back-and-forth opinions and assessments, first-person recollections and sometime virtual “filibusters in real-time. Ostensibly, her hours stretch from dawn to dusk—but often in the wee hours you might catch her logging on to set a thread of conversation back on track. “I just have to be really careful that people aren’t using the site to promote themselves,” she says, pausing to acknowledge one of the truest clichés about LA. “Yeah, we’ve got a lot of self-promoters here. I wanted it to be *about* Los Angeles, *not* a giant press release.”

Garrett mediates much of the content from home via the various keyboards and handhelds strewn across her dining room table or tossed into her handbag. The online wordplay of her vast online community has an arc of its own; it’s sometimes shrill, sometimes snarky. It’s often passionate and frequently playful. But all of it—even in its polarizing disagreements—is an attempt to get beyond the easy clichés and assumptions about Los Angeles.



Lynn Garrett at Farmers Market, at the postcard stands. PHOTO COURTESY OF LYNELL GEORGE.

What might Hidden Los Angeles feel like to a first-time visitor? Well, imagine having several thousand highly opinionated Angelenos sitting at *your* dinner table—often talking all at once—sometimes informed, sometimes not so much—but no matter; they discourse with authority about LA history, the LA River, the best east/west routes, downtown gentrification, the Valley’s old strawberry farms, childhood earthquake memories, riots (both of them), The Olympics, the elusive borders of neighborhoods—and quite often, one of longtime Angelenos’ favorite topics—which lost architectural treasure stood at the corner of some long-vanished intersection often rebuilt many times over.

Given the vast spectrum of strongly-held opinions, what keeps Hidden Los Angeles from swerving into the thicket of troll-infested shock talk—all noise and emotion but no grist—is Garrett’s quick, decisive and hands-on facilitation. Hidden Los Angeles has a guiding voice and point of view, and it is fully Garrett’s. She can keep conversation aloft like a vigorous match of volleyball, but knows when to spike and

shut it down if it’s edging toward nasty. (“Just this morning,” she says, “I had to tell a guy to stop being a ‘dick’—he was just making rude remarks about other members.”) She’s quick to right some toppled bit of logic or break up heated exchanges edging toward virtual fisticuffs. “I don’t like to, but I ban people if they get too out of hand,” she admits. “But every year I do a ‘turkey pardon’ and give them another chance. This is for them. They need to be respectful of others and their opinions.” In many ways, what Garrett has mapped isn’t simply a website, but a milieu, an online replica of those 72 suburbs—a distinct “neighborhood” unto itself.

We walk into the stark white light of an August afternoon—the first break in a three-week, three-digit heat wave. Garrett has agreed to walk away from the screen (one smartphone in her bucket bag, just in case) to let her community “talk among themselves.” Though sometimes it’s difficult for logistical reasons to do so, getting out is it is precisely what she prescribes to her followers. In fact, she encourages

people to move out into the world. She's been hosting meet-ups under the Hidden Los Angeles banner almost since the site's inception—cocktails at the venerable Musso and Frank, late grunion runs, kayaking the LA River and just recently she's launched a series of participatory philanthropic events, working with Downtown's Los Angeles Mission and the Hollywood-based My Friend's Place, focused on assisting the homeless—as a way for the community to experience one another as well as Greater Los Angeles.

It's a postcard day in a neighborhood studded with tall, listing palm trees and a handsome collection of 1920s stucco and red-tile duplexes. Picking one of the main thoroughfares, she moves with the purposefulness of a seasoned tourguide—two steps and pivot, to explain the terrain. before us: past the high-end boutiques on 3rd Street, Mid-City, scouting for a coffee and a quiet chat. Despite her LA Doyenne status, she's dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a simple, black, V-neck T-shirt. Garrett points out the French place and the Greek place and the Spanish place and the neo-all American diner place. And all of those languages drift out of open doorways and swirl above the small sidewalk patios—packed even in the pause between breakfast and lunch. She settles on the French place, where the ceiling is painted a vivid cobalt and the waiter knows her well enough to ask her only to specify her drink's size. “You can find a little bit of everything you want here, depending on your desire or mood,” she says, “but that's the key. You have to look for it.”

A native Californian, born in San Diego, Lynn Garrett spent a lion's share of her early life in Los Angeles. She lived for a time with her maternal grandparents and grew to love LA through their eyes. “When you're from San Diego, the default is to hate Los Angeles. But I had history here. My great-grandfather and grandfather painted murals at Charlie Chaplin's house and at Pickfair [Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford's mansion]. My grandmother, when she was 19, preached with [the evangelist] Aimee Semple McPherson, and used to babysit her kid. My grandma Beulah. So I had a huge family in LA.” Consequently, she interacts with the city like a native, finding pieces of her past everywhere, a vivid sense memory—an old traffic light on Sunset Boulevard or the spinner-racks of artichokes and postcard stands at Farmers Market—just around the corner.

Her appreciation grew even stronger as she began to navigate the neighborhoods on her own and without a plan

or map. Eventually, for a time in the 1980s, she set down roots here and began to map her own personal version of the city. She let serendipity lead her: “I'd fill my tank with gas and just drive around. No destination in mind She'd let herself be pulled by whim or the itch of curiosity. But truly finding her heart connected to the city was a more complex affair; it didn't happen overnight.

By the 90s, burned out on LA in its post-riot, post-earthquake-post-O.J. Simpson murder trail period, she picked up and moved for work to San Francisco, but there she was struck by the persistent chorus of anti-LA sentiment. “It just seemed like a one-sided conversation,” she recalls. She found herself routinely defending Los Angeles. Her San Francisco acquaintances recommended that she needed to get a sense of humor, “but instead I started writing all the things down that people hated about LA.”

It got so bad that for expedience and sanity's sake, she began to keep her origins and alliances close to the vest. She believed you should be allowed proud of where you come from. And so, her thinking was, “If you don't like it, change it.” Not the place, but the conversation around it.

That list in hand, she returned to Los Angeles with an idea to write a tour book—one targeted at the people who think they don't like LA. The guide would focus specifically on LA as a culture, what makes it move—the art, the literature, architecture, the distinct neighborhoods. To get herself into the writing rhythm, she designed a blog to help work out theme, tone and voice. A friend suggested Facebook as a way to promote the blog, to which Garrett recalls responding, “I'm not 13. I don't need to be on Facebook.” But the social-networking site would change everything. Creating a Facebook page, Hidden Los Angeles, to publicize the blog, Garrett circulated invitations among her Facebook community, her friends, acquaintances, and her network of jazz contacts. The fan page then moved, she laughs, through the Burning Man community—“and, well, they have *very* strong following.”

As it turned out, *lots* of Angelenos felt the way she did. In the spring of 2010, her fan page went viral, spiking to 137,000 from 3,000 in four weeks. “Once you get over 60,000 members it's like having a monster in your garage,” she says a little ruefully. “No one else has a monster in their garage, so there's no one to talk to about it. And there's no book to tell you how to do it. I had to figure it out.” And

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while Garrett would like to also “figure out” a way to monetize the site and hire a fulltime staff, she wants to do it in a way that makes sense and is in the spirit of the site and its goals.

For a virtual place, Hidden Los Angeles has done a real service. In a subtle yet indelible way, it attests that our sprawling, anonymous city isn't always so. “I've watched the craziest, random things happen online,” she says. “I might post a picture of some event or place from thirty, forty, fifty years ago and suddenly people are tagging one another and [these people]—who haven't seen each other in years—begin having a reunion online.”

In this respect, Garrett sees the site as a corrective and a colloquium that allows the city's story to be shaped from the ground up by residents who actually experience it. A flowing, people's history. And the interesting thing, she says, is that “forty percent of the people who are on Hidden LA don't live here. Some of them used to, some of them are curious about visiting so they begin to get a sense of what it is by watching the posts. Some of them have been in the military serving in both Iraq and Afghanistan. So many of them come here when they are feeling homesick and they want a dose of home. Something I really wanted when I lived away.”

While reminiscing is key to her page's allure and success (other LA pages—like have Vintage LA or Decaying



Lynn Garrett's dog, Zoe, who is the Hidden LA mascot, at Olvera Street, Downtown Los Angeles:

PHOTO COURTESY OF JINNA KIM PHOTO ([HTTP://WWW.JINNAKIMPHOTO.COM/](http://www.jinnakimphoto.com/)).

Hollywood Mansions, or Who Remembers in East L.A? have grown up in the months she has been in operation), Garrett is committed to a mix that isn't simple nostalgia. She wants Angelenos to get up and go out and experience their city—so that the places and events that we enjoy now don't go the way of the vanished mom-and-pop shops we so romanticize. These conversations reveal the layers, the many cities Los Angeles has been over time, and what has been built on top of them.

To really unearth and understand Los Angeles requires that you not be passive but be a participant. "I'm just

lighting a fire under them, inspiring them to get out in it," Garrett says. "Just sitting at your keyboard giving the stink-eye honestly is not helping the cause." But in common with her online community, she is well-aware that LA has its rough edges, its doggedly singular take on what it is to be a city. "LA is messy. It's like a hot mess of a T.J. Maxx. Not organized. Not neat. But if you lift something up, you'll find some wonderful, unexpected treasure. LA is like that when you turn the corner. You'll be surprised. But no one is going to point that out to you, you have to go out and find it." **B**