

---

## Document 10: Brigham Yen Transcript

Podcast: The Placemakers

Episode: Brigham Yen – Downtown LA & Walkable Cities

Host: Stephen Burton

Guest: Brigham Yen, Urbanist & Pedestrian Advocate

**Stephen Burton:** Today I would like to welcome Brigham Yen, who is joining us from Los Angeles and is our first international guest here on the Placemakers. He has a passion for urbanism in Los Angeles and Pasadena, and he's been involved in creating pedestrian plazas in Pasadena and leading the resistance against car-orientated culture in Los Angeles. He's an urbanist and a pedestrian transit advocate. Brigham, thanks for being here and welcome to the Placemakers.

**Brigham Yen:** Thank you so much Stephen.

**Stephen Burton:** So a little bit of context here, I recently visited Los Angeles for the first time as an adult. I'd been there a few times as a child with my parents. And I went to Downtown LA and I was inspired by the urban environment. I was struck by the visual landscape, the culture, the creativity, but I could also see the obvious challenges that the town was suffering from in terms of homelessness and urban decay. And I thought to myself this must be a place with an amazing story to tell. And so I was wondering Brigham, perhaps would you be able to start off just by sketching out a little bit of the broad story of Downtown Los Angeles and how it got to become the place it is today?

**Brigham Yen:** Yeah, Downtown Los Angeles has a very interesting story. I think it's always been sort of in recent times overlooked as sort of an underdog in the area. But it didn't always start off like that. Obviously at one point Downtown Los Angeles was the de facto center of LA. That's where Los Angeles actually started from as a small little village by the LA River. And from there it grew into the massive metropolis that it is today.

I think we have somewhere around 17 million people in the Greater Los Angeles area, which includes Orange County, Ventura, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties. And so it's this massive sprawling metropolis. Anybody flying into LAX will see as they're landing, this thing is just massive. You look outside your airplane window and you just see endless homes, tract homes, and strip malls and freeways that tie everything together.

And so if you think about that, Downtown Los Angeles is this tiny little island in an ocean of suburbia. And for me as an urbanist, I always saw Downtown Los Angeles as that walkable island. Because for me, I search for **walkability**. I believe walkable communities are more sustainable, they're more exciting, they're more interesting, dynamic places to live and call

home. And in Los Angeles, we just don't really have a lot of places where you can walk and be a pedestrian.

Downtown Los Angeles has the bones of a walkable city because it developed *before* the automobile really was democratized in the United States. Some people may argue that people started to get excited about cars in maybe the 1920s or 30s, but it wasn't yet where every single family had a car. It was probably still very expensive and people just didn't have access to that.

So we did have a fairly large mass transportation system. We had the largest Red Car streetcar system in the world at one point. We had 1,100 miles of tracks throughout the region. And it was used strategically to really fuel the real estate boom in the Los Angeles area. Henry E. Huntington is the most famous historical figure behind this because he owned and operated the Red Cars. And the Red Cars really allowed land speculators to build these neighborhoods farther away and still have access to (at that time) Downtown Los Angeles.

And Downtown LA was the nexus of this transportation system. It was the hub. All the tracks would meet in Downtown LA at some point. And it gave this region a center. So for a long time, Downtown LA really played a vital role as the economic and cultural hub. Broadway still has the most movie palaces—historical movie palaces—in the United States. There's somewhere like 12 or 13 along Broadway already with the Los Angeles Theater, the State Theater, the United Artists Theater, the Million Dollar Theater... there are so many beautiful theaters.

Over time, as the United States really embraced the automobile, and after World War II suburbanization started to really take hold in land use patterns and zoning—where cities were like "hey we're going to start zoning everything out residential now"—single-family homes became the most desirable form of living for Americans. And that, I think, really is what destroyed most American cities. Because at that point, downtowns were competing with the suburbs. And that's when the shopping mall—suburban shopping mall—started to enter the picture. People would drive to malls and downtowns suffered.

There were once beautiful grand department stores in our downtowns, and Downtown LA is no exception—we had the Broadway, Bullocks, May Company... these really beautiful department stores. And they all had to compete with the suburbs. And as time went on, Downtown LA and many downtowns across the country just couldn't compete anymore. And so many beautiful historic buildings started to get torn down to replace them with parking lots because we had to compete with the suburbs for parking.

Many American cities didn't have the mass transit infrastructure like our East Coast counterparts like New York or Boston or DC. They're much older, so they were fortunate to be at a time when Americans still embraced public transportation. But Downtown Los Angeles started to wane, and as it continued to sprawl, there was a boom in population in the 50s and 60s, people just started moving to the suburbs. And Downtown LA just was hollowed out. And

I would say that was its very dark time for Downtown.

Then around the time of the late 90s—like 1999—there was an ordinance that was passed called the **Adaptive Reuse Ordinance**. And that allowed developers to take these beautiful historic office buildings that were sitting empty to convert into these really cool artist lofts. And that was the spark.

There was a developer specifically by the name of Tom Gilmore out of New York City. He bought three buildings at 4th and Main—these three beautiful buildings: the Continental, the Hellman, and the San Fernando buildings—and he converted them to 230 lofts. And people thought he was crazy. Because at this time in the early 2000s, nobody could see anybody going back to Downtown LA. It was a no-man's land, it was close to Skid Row... there just was no viable way people thought this downtown could be a place that people could live, do business, work, shop, and dine.

But he believed in Downtown LA. He was from New York, and they were already doing it in New York—in SoHo, converting factories into lofts. So he thought, why not here in LA? So he went through many different lenders, finally found one that would believe in this project. And he made history. Because from there, he proved that there's people that will move downtown. And then one by one by one, many of these beautiful historic office buildings were converted to residential lofts and condos.

And for about 20+ years, we went through a strong boom of pretty much almost unprecedented construction for Downtown Los Angeles—outside of just its original boom in the beginning. You would see cranes everywhere and people were coming back. It was very exciting.

**Stephen Burton:** So the Adaptive Reuse Ordinance, did it encourage the preservation of these historic buildings during their reuse?

**Brigham Yen:** Absolutely. The Adaptive Reuse Ordinance allowed these developers by right to take the existing building that they were sitting on that didn't have any use for office space and convert them to residential. So that in itself ensured that these buildings would be preserved because it gave them a viable use as residential. As opposed to just sitting there empty, there was nothing that was that they could make money off of.

**Stephen Burton:** So we're about where in our history of Downtown LA at the moment? We're sort of in the late 90s, early 2000s while this adaptive reuse is going on and people are moving back into Downtown LA. Offices are starting to open up. So we're seeing a revitalization of the downtown area. Is that essentially where we are at about that time period?

**Brigham Yen:** Yeah. Absolutely. There were some big projects like the Staples Center that was built in the early 2000s (I think it was 2001). That also brought sports back into Downtown LA—the Lakers were based there, the LA Clippers, the LA Kings hockey. So that brought more

people in. And as more people moved into Downtown, a lot of employers thought "Hey this would be a great place for us to open up our offices now because people can walk to work." And many supported that vision.

In addition, Downtown Los Angeles is still the hub of the mass transit network that *does* exist in the LA area. We do have a very limited subway system and a regional rail network called the Metrolink system. So people *were* able to take the train into the city, into downtown.

**Stephen Burton:** And is that still the case today? Has that rail network and transport network been supported and expanded?

**Brigham Yen:** So yeah, the rail network is expanding right now. We passed a few measures in the past... one was Measure M and another one was called Measure J I believe. And that added a half-cent sales tax to our local county tax and that generates funds towards construction of mass transit projects. So right now we do have quite an exciting subway line under construction down Wilshire Boulevard that will connect Downtown LA with the Westside of Los Angeles—which includes Beverly Hills, Century City, UCLA, Westwood. All of these big centers will finally be connected into Downtown LA.

**Stephen Burton:** So would it be fair to say that LA is seeing a move away through these policies from a car-heavy city to a city that's a little bit more focused on the benefits of public transport? Or is it too early to make that claim yet?

**Brigham Yen:** I think it's a little too early because we don't quite yet have the **density** to support the walkability. So the density I think has to be concurrent with the mass transit expansion. And so I think LA is still a very fledgling urban city. There's a book that calls Los Angeles "The Reluctant Metropolis." So it's a city searching for the center. There is no "there" there. There's 88 cities searching for a center.

And so LA... it doesn't quite yet have the walkability because it doesn't have that density. But the transit will hopefully support more dense developments around these stations (TODs - Transit Oriented Developments). And that will hopefully continue to densify these rail stations with walkable neighborhoods and supporting that system.

**Stephen Burton:** So in terms of the story of Downtown LA, we're about early 2000s now and the revitalization program seems to be quite successful from what you've said. So from early 2000s to today—say 20-odd years later—what changed? What has that story looked like for Downtown Los Angeles?

**Brigham Yen:** The story has changed because the world went through a pandemic. Mainly. And we here in LA got hit very hard. And so I think one of the biggest issues right now confronting downtown is so many people **work from home**. So it's very difficult to reach that mature urban status when you don't have enough people on the streets. It's very important to have people to activate our cities.

And part of the picture was the office workers. They're a big missing piece of the pie now so to speak. Although office workers are slowly returning in a hybrid schedule (Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays), for me, I live in Downtown LA and it's erratic to me. I still don't know exactly what days are going to be busy and what days are going to be empty. I can say now Sundays are fairly empty, but you know... It's unpredictable and that's not good for urbanism. You want a city that is more often than not vibrant and predictable when a city is going to be active and vibrant and people are excited to partake in that.

**Stephen Burton:** What did Downtown LA look like before COVID?

**Brigham Yen:** Oh Downtown LA before COVID, it was on the upswing. The momentum... oh gosh it was... it makes me sad to think about it because it was a lot of hard work to get to where it was in 2019 (or early 2020 before the pandemic started). And it was just very vibrant. Monday through Friday was activated—you had the office workers coming in. I would sometimes say Downtown LA felt like a little mini-Manhattan, New York City. Wow. Because there were just so many people walking everywhere. Office workers coming out for lunch, breakfast, happy hours.

We had somewhere around half a million people coming into Downtown LA to work. That's a huge number. It's a staggering huge, huge number of people coming into the city. And if you can imagine all those people needing to come out to grab a bite to eat, to go to the store and grab maybe a gift or something, or go to happy hour... so you could feel the electricity in the air. It was palpable. It was so exciting.

And as a result of that excitement, a lot of other indirect benefits came from it. Hotels for example. Hotels were opening up. There were so many exciting boutique hotels like the Nomad and the Freehand and Ace Hotel, the Proper, the Hoxton... there was all these great hotels. And they fed off of that indirectly as well because people are people on the street walking... So then you had other people from Los Angeles that just wanted to come and experience that. And people living here—we have somewhere around I want to say 80,000 people now living in Downtown LA—and all those people made Downtown LA what it was: an exciting, dynamic, vibrant urban center. And that has waned dramatically significantly since the pandemic.

Although the people still live here—there's still around 80-something thousand I want to say—but the office workers, they're not here. And as a result hotels are not as filled up, and there's just not as much energy. So stores have kind of left or they're not as busy. And so it's very sad.

**Stephen Burton:** So office workers obviously were a huge part of that mix. What would you speculate would be commercial vacancy these days in Downtown LA versus what it might have looked like before COVID?

**Brigham Yen:** Well I can say there's two types of vacancies right? There's vacancy on paper

and then there's vacancy in real life. Because of the hybrid work schedule right now and how lax employers are with their employees coming into the office... you might have a certain amount of space in an office building that's officially leased on paper, but how many people are actually coming into the office? We don't know. Sometimes an entire floor might have a handful of people, right? But it could have accommodated much more than that. So I don't know if anybody really has that number right now. I haven't seen it.

**Stephen Burton:** So the decline of Downtown LA post-COVID... what's been done to arrest that change? Has there been government intervention, local government incentives to turn this around? Has there been community activation, community organization? What are some of the things that is being done to reverse this situation?

**Brigham Yen:** Um, I think the big one is really trying to apply the Adaptive Reuse Ordinance to *more* buildings now. So there's talk about possibly converting more of these high-rise office buildings into residential or hotel or some other use. I'm not a big fan of that because I understand just experientially—just in real life—people that work from home, they just don't go out as much. And it's not the same as having office with office workers coming in. And more often than not, it used to be office workers would *have* to leave at lunch. They wanted to get out of the office, they wanted to go out for a cup of coffee, take a break. That is what fed the street with life and activity.

And to convert more of these towers into residential... well then you don't have a real mix of uses anymore. There's less of a mix. And that means there's going to be large chunks of the day where there is still going to be some lull in activity. So that's what they're talking about as a potential way to address this, but I don't think it really is going to be effective when it comes to urbanism.

**Stephen Burton:** So in the context of Downtown Los Angeles, what do you think the most important ingredient would be for creating successful public places in Los Angeles downtown area?

**Brigham Yen:** Again, I think it's got to have a mix of uses. You gotta have sources of traffic from all different types of places—whether it's office, residential, hotel, retail, restaurants, cultural, recreational activities. You gotta have multiple different sources of traffic. And for Downtown Los Angeles, I think... I mean it's nothing that we can really control, but hopefully more people will come back to the office.

**Stephen Burton:** So what are the streets of Downtown Los Angeles like now? What are some of the things that you wish you could change if you had a magic wand?

**Brigham Yen:** Um, I think anybody that has come to Downtown LA recently—and you mentioned urban decay—it's very sad to see. We were on the upswing, it was getting cleaner, and it was getting safer. But now there's been an uptick in the homeless population. And drug use. I don't know when the fentanyl crisis started, but there's a lot of hard drugs on the street

now. And that has made it very uncomfortable for people to be around. And so that has kind of detracted people from coming to Downtown LA as well too.

It seems like such a shame because when we were in the car on the way to Downtown LA, the driver was kind of like saying, "Well why do you guys want to go to Downtown LA? Like what are you doing down there? Do you really want to go there?" Pretty much. And we explained that we were actually doing a Downtown LA food tour. Because I'm a big food fan. And so we were meeting some people and they were taking us around to some fabulous restaurants and bakeries and eateries and so on. And in that experience, I discovered a whole bunch of things about Downtown Los Angeles. And obviously the homelessness and the drug use was there on the street.

But also on the street was so much **creative energy**. I could see it everywhere, I could feel it. I've spent a reasonable amount of time in New York City and in Manhattan in the early 2000s and it had that vibe about it for me. It had that edginess, it had that creativity, it had that urban decay next to beautiful things in the urban environment. And there was just so much to like about the place. And so I feel like it's just such a shame if some things need to be addressed that perhaps aren't being addressed that could really help kick Downtown LA back to where it really belongs.

**Brigham Yen:** You know, it's really interesting that you mentioned that sort of edginess. I think before the pandemic, Downtown LA had sort of that right balance. I mean it was still a little bit more on the edgy side but there were so many new developments coming in that sort of helped balance that. And there was something really beautiful about that juxtaposition between that urban sort of edginess, that decay, that grittiness, and the new developments that were happening. There was a nice balance. To me at least, knowing and seeing that from before, this is kind of edging towards a little *too* edgy. A little *too* gritty. For most people's taste I think. At least if you knew what Downtown LA was like before.

And it's not to say that Downtown LA before the pandemic was perfect. We were going through some issues related to crime even back then. But it was manageable. Like it wasn't something that dissuaded people from coming to downtown. And I think now there's been sort of too much of that.

And so when you're talking about what is it going to take to get Downtown LA back on track... well there's got to be a citywide effort to really control the homeless population. And that's a statewide issue, it's a US issue honestly, but it's a statewide issue. And the drugs. Because that leads to the crime and people feeling very uncomfortable walking on the streets. And it's bad for business and it's bad for communities.

**Stephen Burton:** Brigham, final question for today. What do you think some of the lessons are that other cities can learn from the experience of Downtown Los Angeles? The good and the bad. What are some of the takeaways perhaps even that we can take away from the LA

experience here in Australia?

**Brigham Yen:** I think the good is that Downtown LA showed that even in a city as car-oriented as Los Angeles—a city where people are addicted or obsessed with their cars—that even in a city like this, Downtown LA (and Los Angeles as a whole), there's a niche. People yearn for a place to walk. They yearn for that urban experience. And Downtown LA offered that to Angelinos.

And I think that was what was most beautiful about the Downtown LA revitalization. It was so special. And I was so proud to be a part of that revitalization effort. Every time I saw people come to Downtown LA and walk (and I would give walking tours as well of Downtown LA), I was always so glad to see them smile. Because they were just so excited walking in Los Angeles. You know, and to me that was just... that was beautiful.

And I think that shows other cities that I think no matter where you're at, you will have people that want to be able to walk and experience good urbanism. Right? You want people... Because to me urbanism is about connecting our built environment with the people. We have created cities in the US now that have disconnected people from people and the environment. People live in their cars, they drive to a giant strip mall, they shop at Walmart and Target, they get back in their cars, and they go home. You know, and they sit on the freeway in traffic.

Good urbanism brings people together. And it's more sustainable, people walk, they take public transit, it's healthier. And I think Downtown LA showed that there is a demand for that. But we just gotta do it right. We gotta clean it up, we gotta make it safe and clean, and people will come back.

**Stephen Burton:** Brigham, you've been so wonderfully articulate about the challenges and the opportunities facing Downtown Los Angeles. And thank you so much for joining us today on the Placemakers.

**Brigham Yen:** Thank you so much Stephen.

**Stephen Burton:** Thanks for listening to the Placemakers.