

A FORGOTTEN PART OF LOS ANGELES HISTORY

People driving along Glendale or Beverly boulevards near Downtown Los Angeles may have noticed a peculiar tunnel embedded in a hillside. Most people don't know what it's there for aside from an example of urban decay: The building alongside it is a canvas for graffiti artists and homeless people are known to live around it. Locals refer to it as "The Belmont Tunnel" or simply as "The Tunnel." Many are unaware what the tunnel was actually used for.



Although Los Angeles has a popular modern subway line running from Downtown L.A. to North Hollywood, very few are aware that the city once had a subway 75 years ago.



Decades before Southern California was known for its freeways, it had the largest trolley system in the world -- the Pacific Electric Railway. "The Big Red Cars," as the locals called the trolleys, spanned 1,100 miles throughout Southern California and was the primary means of transportation in the pre-freeway age. Back then, Downtown Los Angeles was a highly active, bustling city center, and a typical street would be indistinguishable from those in New York or Chicago at the time. Downtown was also the hub of the Pacific Electric.

In the 1920s, automobiles and streetcars were equally popular, and streets were full of both cars and packed trolleys. But the rising presence of automobiles already led to congestion and traffic jams, which slowed down the speeds of the Red Cars, which traveled mostly on tracks

embedded in the streets. The Pacific Electric decided to build a "subway," which was more of a shortcut for trolleys going to Hollywood or the San Fernando Valley. The "Hollywood Subway," as it was known at the time, was only one mile long and did not ever reach Hollywood proper, but it allowed trolleys to/from Hollywood to bypass Downtown street traffic entirely. Trains entered at the portal near Glendale Blvd. and stopped at the Subway Terminal Building at Hill and 4th Streets.



The subway opened on November 30, 1925 and cost \$1.25 million to build. It was in operation for about 30 years, until June 19, 1955, a victim of the gradual dismantling of the rail system. The Red Cars rolled until 1961.

THE TUNNEL TODAY

Today the area is run-down, frequented almost exclusively by graffiti artists and the homeless. Men from the nearby neighborhood use the former Toluca Yard area just outside the mouth of the tunnel for impromptu soccer games.

The tunnel was used temporarily for storage, and was largely intact until 1967 when the city filled in the portion between Figueroa and Flower streets to provide for the foundations for the Bonaventure Hotel.

The gritty, urban appearance of the tunnel was also used in movies and TV; like the 1980s mini-series "V" and the Red Hot Chili Peppers' music video, "Under The Bridge."

Many Angelenos wrongly believe that subways are unsafe structures in so-called "Earthquake Country," They fail to realize that other cities in the world experience seismic activity, and many of those cities (San Francisco, Tokyo, Mexico City) also have subway systems which are never damaged during major quakes. Today's Metro Red Line subway hardly got a crack during the 1994 Northridge earthquake. The most surprising fact is that the Pacific Electric Subway, built 75 years ago and un-maintained for 45 years, has survived three major earthquakes and has no major damage!

- 1) Summarize each paragraph in 1-2 sentences; then write a summary to the entire text
- 2) The city of Los Angeles is planning to demolish the tunnel area in order to build apartment blocks. These would be needed a lot (see headline below). However, there are opponents to these plans, arguing that the area is either a historical monument (refer to the text above) or that the tunnel could be better used for re-introducing a new underground railway line – finally Los Angeles has a very bad working public transport service and many congested inner city streets. Write a letter to the city board exposing your personal opinion (preservation as a monument/ re-introduction of subway system/ construction of new apartment blocks). Give well thought logical arguments!

The END is VERY near!?

Suddenly, in early 2004, word spreads that a low-income apartment complex is about to be built on the site. Such housing is desperately needed in the area... but will all vestiges of the Hollywood Subway and Toluca Yard be obliterated?

Here are some arguments of Los Angeles residents:

- I appreciate the fondness many have for the old Pacific Electric railway, but what, exactly, is worth preserving of the tunnel entrance? It's of no visual value, and the land is not being used productively. Housing in LA is desperately needed, yet this cement hole takes precedence over new apartments? Whaaat? I'm baffled, but would love to hear why this needs "preserving"
- Well... ok I understand where you're coming from when you say Los Angeles needs more housing! So, why don't we just go to Carrol Street and start knocking down houses that just take up too much space? That's the problem with people today, no value for things that really count in life, people cherish the time they have, and had at Belmont, whether it be playing ball...painting, or just spending your weekend there just watching what goes on. But the fact of the matter is...when reality kicks in, buildings will be put up ,people will live there so why not make the tunnel entrance and building a small park like atmosphere ,on the side of the buildings, a place where artist's can go ,as they've been doing for many, many, years "piece"fully! Let the tenants of this new building have it to go chill out with they're kids and watch actual art in action, "legally" and peacefully let them learn culture right next door to they're homes, I'm sure the building and area would be respected as it has been for as long as people have painted there, to this day: preserve the tunnel and building for the artist's! Not all of us are trouble makers... it's for the love of it. :)
- Hey, I am a grafitti artist from Los Angeles... I have been going to the tunnel for a few years now without problems (well during the day) but recently rampart police division arrested me on grounds of code 602 otherwise known as trespassing... I was wondering if there is a form of some sort I can printout to show the peace officers that we are allowed to perform art at the tunnel, or if they were right?!?! PLEASE SAVE BELMONT PEOPLES!!!
- It is official. This past weekend me and some friends decided to check out what's new in the Belmont Yard since it's been a while since we last painted there for a few of us. The word has been spreading like never before, the end of the Belmont Yard is coming in 3 months. I'm still not sure if this is true but the veteran Graffiti artists that were present that day weren't kidding around when it comes to news like this. I've heard stories like this in the past such as "The Belmont Yard will soon be a mini-mall" which was back in 2002. Today it is said that the property was sold and it will be the future site of some apartment buildings. I'm not too enthralled with the situation at all considering I had good times there. My Graffiti art career started there as well back in 2001 and it will be a slight painful feeling to know such a thing is going away for good. Right down the street is Belmont High school, where I graduated and everyday after school on my way home I would ride the 14 that would go over the bridge and see a nice view of the Belmont Yard, tunnel and Toluca Portal. It would be sad to see all that replaced by some damn apartment buildings. Peace.
- Yes it's true. A company called Meta Housing has bought the Toluca yard and adjacent parcels and will be building a 260-unit housing/commercial complex. It appears to be a "done deal," so my thought is perhaps the developers can be persuaded that their apparent interest in improving the area would also be served by at least creating some sort of monument or display about the historic significance of the site.

Los Angeles was again ranked the **most congested city in the United States**. The **Santa Monica Freeway (I-10)**, is one of the **busiest in the world**, carrying over 400,000 people per day.

Traffic is in both directions – Eastside and Mid-city residents go to **Westside jobs and recreation** as much as Westside residents go Downtown.

Traffic also spills over onto **boulevards** and **residential streets**, impacting neighborhoods with noise, pollution, and safety hazards. And traffic **killed 1,666** people in L.A. County, including **215 pedestrians**, in 1998 (NHTSA).

But there has been **no real alternative to driving**. The transit-dependent suffer **long, slow bus rides** – like two hours cross-town to get to Westside jobs.

Freeway widening is a poor solution; it causes more congestion during construction and **threatens neighborhoods**, only to add more noise, pollution, and sprawl as it fills with yet more traffic.

We have begun a better way in Los Angeles, beginning with the **Long Beach Blue Line** in 1990. It is considered the most successful new light rail line in the U.S., with over 70,000 riders per day. The **Pasadena Gold Line** opened in July. An Eastside extension will begin construction soon.