

## **A Trip to the United States Through Three Cities Representative of the New Economy**

**Juli VALDUNCIEL (2022). *New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles. In Search of the Last Urban Experience*. Santa Coloma de Farners: Arts Gràfiques-Impremta Cantalozella, 166 pp.**  
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**Clara Paniagua**

*Student of the Degree in Geography, Spatial Planning  
and Environmental Management. Universitat de Girona  
U1974495@campus.udg.net*

### **Introduction**

The United States (US) is often considered the nation-state that rules the world and has pioneered several areas that are deeply rooted in our society and still present today. We are referring to its industry, economy, finances, technology, culture, urban planning, etc. With us hardly noticing, these areas have become a part of our lives, and we perceive them as natural. All these have shaped the pretended universal model of social, economic, and cultural development; a model based on the ideas of progress and optimism (González Ferriz, 2020), which has reached fever point with the consolidation of neoliberalism, originated in the US (Harvey, 2003). Therefore, the capitalist and liberal system has been expanded globally through a rise in production to incentivise the purchasing of any kind of product, be it tangible or intangible (Panitch and Gindin, 2015). This approach involves the depletion of many natural resources and increases the purchasing power of the upper classes while reducing that of the lower classes, particularly ethnic minorities.

On the other hand, the US has had a futurist vision and the capacity to carry it out. It has prevailed as the dominant political project on the planet (Hunt, 2007). Indeed, the US was the great winner of the Second World War and found itself in an advantageous position compared to other countries to undertake swift progress, for instance, in the computer and technology field. The US has been the protagonist of the last systemic cycle of accumulation, in terms of Arrighi (1999). These advancements have enabled the evolution of society, mainly in the first world, in such a way that there are mechanisms to

offer a global network capable of shrinking the planet in terms of communications, transport, knowledge, etc. (Harvey, 1989).

These reflections pretend to contextualise the regional framework of Juli Valdunciel's recent work, the US, and three of the protagonist cities of the global economy: New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The book describes the two faces of the country of opportunities, from the most exaggerated opulence to the direst misery that creates social inequalities and differences. It does so from an entirely geographic approach combining the various aspects of the discipline, although it mostly focuses on urbanism and urban landscapes, two fields in which the author is greatly interested.

## Analysis

This book has four chapters and is based on the author's trips to these cities in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The first three are dedicated to each city, and the fourth recollects other places and impressions of Los Angeles, the only city the author visited twice. It is worth noting that many of the pictures included were taken by the author and help visualise what he explains in words, taking us closer to the places he visited. Each picture has a footnote and is later commented on in a differentiated section at the end of each chapter with clear grey pages distinguishable from the white pages of the other parts.

Thus, without considering the chapter division, it is a book whose content can be separated into two parts: a travel journal that presents in chronological order the day-to-day discoveries, perceptions, sensations, etc., and a comprehensive contextualisation of the significance of these three megalopolises.

As expected, the travel journal is written in the first person and covers the first part of each chapter/city. This choice offers subjectivity and contains the feelings that the different spaces evoke. It is worth mentioning that, from time to time, the author uses humour and satire in ways that open the door to understanding his vision of several issues. It is easy to follow the tempo of the author's expeditions because he frequently points out timings, mileage by foot or vehicle, or the hours spent in a place or travelling.

There is a change of register in the part where he provides additional information on the pictures, as the tone becomes more serious and academic. These texts supply the reader with information regarding descriptions of the environment, for instance, the topography, the materials that make up the terrain, the hydrographic network and other factors related to Physical Geography, without overlooking Human Geography aspects. This second perspective describes features related to the inhabitants (demographics, immigration, and the significance of various ethnic groups) and the employment rate, as well as violence and vandalism indexes. Most of these aspects are compared with the rates of closer and better-known regions for the reader, including data on

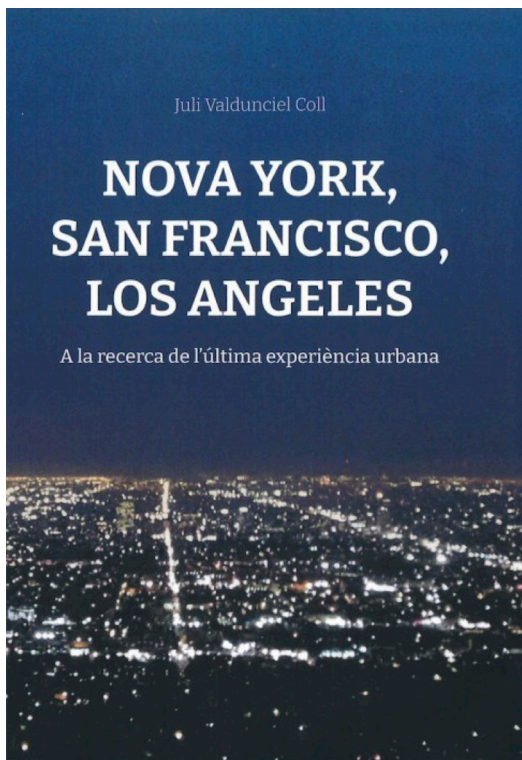
GDP, population density and immigration in Spain or Barcelona. Through these two components, the author shows us how each region works, thereby offering us a more demarcated regional geographical description.

Concerning the argument of the book, a recognisable feature is how urban terminology is introduced. For example, the term urban sprawl appears recurrently in most destinations. It refers to an almost forced expansion of cities due to a rise in the population, at the same time, related to migration, social class differences and cultural, economic and political inequalities. It is common in areas where newcomers live, usually on the outskirts of cities, that coincide with the neighbourhoods that are more degraded and marginalised. Therefore, there is no obvious centre in the design of some cities. This phenomenon translates to a style of urban planning grounded on the now typical US grid as a measure of expansion.

Another repeated feature throughout the book is the impact of gentrification and touristification, a consequence of the new trends in urban planning and tourism that started in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The author accurately describes the different parts of the cities to plunge into these trends. In general, he starts with the oldest sector, which usually is downtown, and continues by the adjacent neighbourhoods until reaching the suburbs and other areas of interest. All in all, the latent atmosphere of grandiosity and excessive dimensions is evident for the European visitor. The proportions of this country

are immense, and these seem contagious to its architecture and infrastructure. The work picks apart these and other features of urban planning.

The first chapter is about New York, which the author visited in 2017 and presents as the global centre of finance. He starts by looking back at 1624 when New Amsterdam was founded between the Hudson and the East Rivers at the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Straightaway, as is the norm in US cities from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the historical centre has seen the construction of skyscrapers because of the progress of global capitalism. This process has eliminated most historical buildings and has



opened the path to modernity, setting the stage for the model of the contemporary city. From there on, he names familiar spots such as Broadway, Wall Street, Soho, Chinatown, Little Italy, etc. He continues the route and takes us to Midtown, the largest central business district on the planet, where we find the Empire State, the Grand Central Terminal (the largest train station in the world in dimensions), the headquarters of the United Nations and what is considered the Crossroads of the World, Times Square, with its famous video screens. The following day, he visits Uptown, the more residential area and the renowned Fifth Avenue, Madison Avenue, and Central Park. Finally, on the last day, he transports us to Brooklyn, crossing its famous bridge with its spectacular views of Manhattan. He ends his trip to the capital of the world by entering the Bronx which, according to Valdunciel, instils that “gloomy feeling portrayed in films: burnt apartment blocks, graffiti-painted subways, and misfits wandering the streets ready to mug you for four dollars” (p. 21). For this reason, he decides to embark on a tour with a specialised guide, although he claims that the neighbourhood is not dangerous, but the urban degradation is evident.

In the second part of the chapter where the pictures are described, he emphasises the noticeable financial identity that distinguishes the city and takes us on a tour through the history of this activity starting in 1817. He examines the era of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the second half of the last century, with the downfall of Fordism and the neoliberal policies that favoured capital circulation. Transformed into a financial hub and with the headquarters of most large businesses, New York leads the commercial, housing, artistic, educational and media sectors. The author briefly comments on the 1867 Act that regulated public health and housing, which required installing the popular fire escapes on the exterior of buildings. These buildings are known as tenements.

In 2018, he flies again to the US to discover San Francisco, the global hub of technology and the birthplace of counterculture. Initially, he introduces us to the downtown, through well-known areas such as Market Street (the thoroughfare), Tenderloin (the area he crosses to reach the downtown, which has transformed into a congregation place of homeless people due to the degradation of its buildings and activities), Powell Street and Union Square, the commercial centre and the departure point of the famous cable cars. The following day he goes to Western Addition to undertake the Victorian tour with the painted ladies considered architectural heritage.

In terms of counterculture, he highlights San Francisco as the liberal-progressive metropolis of the US. This is primarily related to underground culture, which is easy to see in the North Beach, Haight, and Castro neighbourhoods. From the 1950s these neighbourhoods accommodated artists from the Beat Generation who promoted an alternative culture, the hippy movement (with ideas of peace and free love combined with psychedelic music and narcotics), and the first LGTB+ collectives who started fighting for their rights. The chapter

also addresses Silicon Valley, in the south of the Bay Area, a name related to silicon, the material used to build chips and semiconductors for the electronic technology of the third industrial revolution. Silicon Valley is home to Apple, Google, Facebook, Twitter and Netflix, among others. The journey ends at Twin Peaks, 281 m above sea level with the best views of San Francisco and its unique fog that covers the whole city.

The second part of the chapter offers several pictures describing historical and current issues, such as the origin of the downtown, the significance of the Gold Rush, hippy and hipster culture, the Spanish mission of Saint Francis of Assisi (1776) and its corresponding colonial urban planning. Finally, there is a relevant historical explanation of the development of the largest electronic and technological industrial cluster in the world: Silicon Valley.

In the third phase, the author resumes his adventure willing to discover the postmetropolis of Los Angeles, a term coined by Soja (2000) when referring to this city. As usual, he starts by the downtown, which he describes as deteriorated, and climbs up a skyscraper because altitude always helps to understand the landscape. The panoramic view of the city is composed of huge office blocks, a network of highways, and as far as the eye can see, an urban sprawl with a continuous horizontal network of low buildings. Only when looking north can one discern the dry hills cramped with luxurious houses and the unmistakable Hollywood sign. He returns to the ground to walk a bit more on the streets, and only three blocks away he stumbles upon an impacting contrast: the transition from a central business district full of skyscrapers to pavements with tents where mainly African Americans have set up camp, in the middle of the street.

The following day he visits the beaches in Santa Monica and Venice. The first, loyal to US films, has a lot of sand, palm trees as the dominant vegetation and the unique lifeguard huts. On his way back he goes through Abbot Kinney, considered the trendiest street in the world and then Beverly Hills, the glamour mecca, located 10 km from the city centre. The next day, he walks 3 km to reach Paramount Studios, where the main cinema, music and video game companies work on their sets. To finish off his first stay in Los Angeles he hikes to Griffith Park (the hills he could see from the skyscraper on the first day), where he confirms he finds himself in front of a sprawled city where it is difficult to distinguish the downtown from the rest.

In the following section, he details the origin of the city, founded in 1781 and which grew at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the help of oil, the railway (1876), cinema (1910), and the housing sector. Its demography was multiplied tenfold in 40 years (between 1920 and 1960), with a post-Fordist metropolitan design that consisted of an immense garden city in the outskirts for the middle classes, which was doable because of the widespread use of cars. He spends some time describing the distinctive trait of Los Angeles: Hollywood and the cinema industry, from its beginning up until now.



The fourth and last chapter, “I Love LA”, talks about the vast surface of this city. As it is the second time he visits the city, he chooses to discover other spots. He admits that he was astounded on his first trip and has wanted to repeat it driven by an almost irrational will of the heart. The parts that stand out in this new adventure are his experience with highways, their usefulness in connecting different areas of the city, and the incorporation of the underground in the urban landscape. He also adds information about the ethnic diversity of the city, as well as the homeless district. Furthermore, he veers away from the municipal term to visit Disneyland, 45 km from Los Angeles, which he describes as fantasy urban landscape. Along these lines and those of hyperrealism, it is almost mandatory to stop at Las Vegas.

In the city of Nevada, luxury hotels replicate different cities around the world and great monuments of humanity, such as Luxor, Paris and Venice, with all kinds of details. To end the journey, he reveals his excuse to visit Las Vegas: the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley, where the classic Westerns were filmed. The chapter concludes with a reflection on Los Angeles and his impressions. To cite it textually: “Paraphrasing the architect Reyner Banham, when a city presents the intensity, diversity and creativity we find in Los Angeles, form — and I would add aesthetics — are secondary” (p. 135).

## Final Remarks

Overall, the book provides a wealth of details about the cities visited. What stands out is that the more enjoyable segments to read are those written in the first person, in which the author relates his perceptions, emotions and beliefs. These texts are the most absorbing part because it is easy to put yourself in the author’s shoes and delve into the adventure of travelling and uncovering new places. Likewise, the book at times seems as if we were sipping a coffee with a friend who has just returned from a trip and shows us the pictures and shares his experience.

Instead, the part that focuses on providing details through personalities, dates and historical facts adopts a more objective stance. In any case, these aspects are comprehensively described and help to contextualise and understand the cities. The author is well-documented and knows how to express all this information. However, at times, data can be excessive, particularly the verbose references to key protagonists in building the landscape, such as engineers, business owners, architects, etc. In conclusion, the combination of these two writing styles is well-threaded, so it is a complete and educational book.

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