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From Broadway to "Latinoway": The Reoccupation of a Gringo Retail Landscape

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The belief that downtown Los Angeles barely exists continues to be embraced by popular and sometimes even scholarly wisdom. By the 1980s, however, passersby on the freeways have actually been able to see a central business district in L.A., thanks to a new cluster of 1970s- and 1980s-vintage skyscrapers. A new downtown, with a towering visual signature appropriate to its major function as a corporate and administrative financial district, has emerged.

As a social setting, however, the new downtown is disappointing. Like many modern urban and suburban business centers, it was designed largely as a daytime and indoor place. Each morning, tens of thousands of workers enter downtown in their cars, disappear directly into indoor parking garages and zip to their office in elevators. Each day at lunchtime they descend by elevator to restaurants and shops located in indoor mall-like shopping centers. And each afternoon, they return to their cars, re-emerge from the parking garages and join the gridlock on downtown streets and freeways. They can do all this without walking along the streets, which are often void of people.

A vibrant Latino commercial district, characterized by a lively street life, has emerged in Los Angeles' 1920s-vintage downtown. Background photo courtesy J. Diego Vigil. Right photo courtesy the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

LOWE'S STATE

WASH DC

BROADWAY

BROOKLYN

BROOKS

WATER

Bank of America

Bank



Just a few blocks away from this new downtown, however, is the contrasting environment of Broadway, which is as lively as any street in the United States. On most days, and especially on Sunday afternoons, thousands of people stroll along Broadway in the Southern California sun. Because of its setting in the older part of downtown Los Angeles, Broadway has become a unique place where Latino people, culture and trade abound in a built environment that is right out of 1920s urban Anglo America. This vibrant place is light years away from the nearby new downtown in social practices, ethnic customs and functional use of space. And it clearly symbolizes how Anglos and Latinos live together but apart; Broadway is hardly acknowledged or frequented by most non-Latino people in the region, including people of other ethnic backgrounds.

From Broadway . . .

Prior to the turn of the century, Los Angeles' commercial center was near the intersection of Spring and First streets, and it stretched only a few blocks south down Broadway. But construction of the new city hall on Broadway between Second and Third streets in the 1880s was a primary impetus in turning the commercial district southward. For the next few decades, and particularly in the 1920s, the stretch of Broadway from Third to Tenth streets emerged as the primary thoroughfare of a central shopping and entertainment district that served the entire region.

Almost everybody in the burgeoning city rode streetcars to the district, taking advantage of a mass transportation system that fully served the urban area. A number of major department stores, including The Broadway itself, settled along the

street, and hundreds of smaller shops lined Broadway from about Third to Tenth streets. The district functioned as the focal point of a complete business and entertainment center, having retail stores and theaters at the sidewalk level, and doctors, lawyers and other professionals working in the upper floors of the buildings.

Together, these buildings comprised a significant architectural framework executed with bravado in a variety of classical and commercial styles, including art deco, art moderne, Italianate, Sullivanesque, Romanesque, Spanish Renaissance, French Renaissance and Gothic Revival. They incorporated a significant use of terra cotta and metal grillwork for ornamentation and were embellished with signs that came in a plethora of styles and sizes.

Among the most significant structures dating from this era is the Bradbury Building, whose interior is a distinct architectural wonder because of its latticed ironwork elevators and an almost comical indoor network of fire escapes. Another is the Arcade Building, which has a unique facade and glass-roofed interior and once contained many smaller jewelry and clothing establishments that catered to well-heeled shoppers.¹

Also, twelve theaters were built along this stretch of Broadway between 1910 and 1932; only one has been razed. Initially, they offered vaudeville, big band and other live entertainment; eventually they became a prime location for major movie premieres. Theater architecture was even more flamboyant than commercial styles, injecting variety and dazzle into the Broadway streetscape. For example, the two-story Los Angeles Theatre, built in concrete and terra cotta, features French Renaissance design with columns capped by sculptures of urns and eagles.

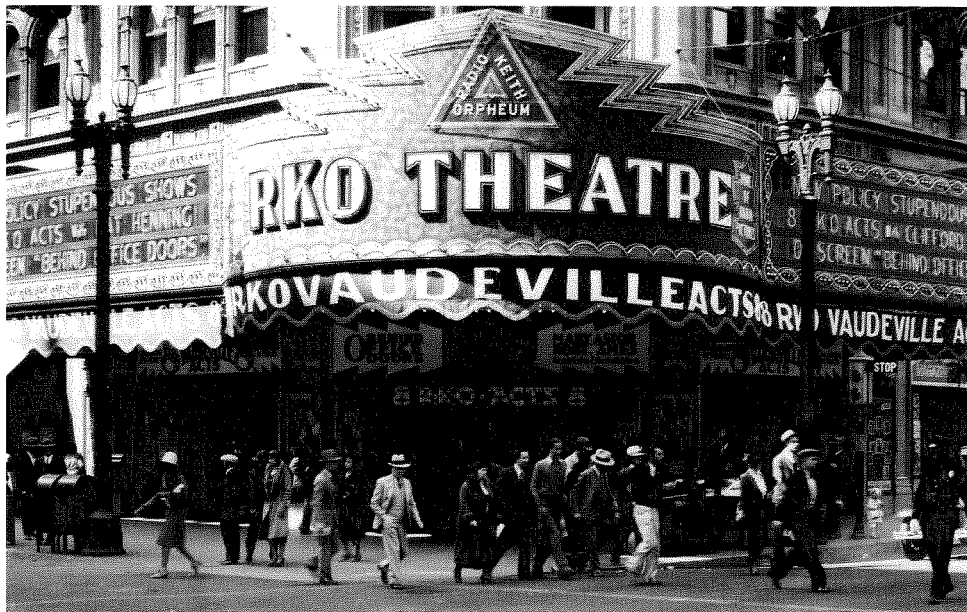


Left: Broadway looking south from Sixth Street, 1923.

Opposite page, top: The Los Angeles Theatre, 1938.

Opposite page, bottom: RKO Orpheum Theatre, ca. 1931.

Photos courtesy the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.





... to "Latinoway"

Mexicans have always been a part of Broadway, although they first established a business district around the original plaza area, founded in 1781 just to the north of what is now downtown. At first, the Anglo-American settlers used this district as if it were their own; yet as the Anglo commercial district drifted southward on Broadway, relatively small numbers of Mexicans moved along to shop and watch movies with the rest of the citizens.

Broadway retained its Anglo orientation through World War II, but by the late 1940s the Million Dollar Theatre was hosting live shows by Mexican entertainers and showing a Spanish-language film once a week; nearby movie houses soon followed suit. In the 1950s, the increase in Mexican population living around downtown made it profitable for some businesses to cater to the Spanish-language trade.

The Broadway district began to transform further as the pace of demographic change in the region accelerated. The closing of the streetcar system and reliance on the increasingly diffused freeway network weakened Broadway's role as a central shopping district. The flight of white Los Angelenos to outer suburbs picked up pace as a partial result of the Watts revolt and other civil unrest in the 1960s; downtown retailers followed their clientele by opening satellite stores in suburban malls and then abandoned downtown altogether. Meanwhile, the volume of immigration from Mexico into central city neighborhoods increased; by the 1980s other Latinos (mainly Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Nicaraguans), Asians and other immigrants were joining the resident Mexican-American population.²

Today, activity along Broadway is dominated by Latinos, particularly people of Mexican origin. Business is commonly trans-



Broadway's vibrant commercial life primarily activates ground floor retail spaces. Often, however, the upper floors of these historic buildings are vacant. Photos courtesy J. Diego Vigil.



acted in Spanish, and the atmosphere is dictated by Latino culture and custom. "Latinoway" differs from other business concentrations in places like East Los Angeles, Boyle Heights and Alvarado Street. Its central location, near the city's public transportation hub and at the junction of many freeways, gives it access to more customers from a wider radius. Other Latino business areas primarily serve their nearby residential populations.

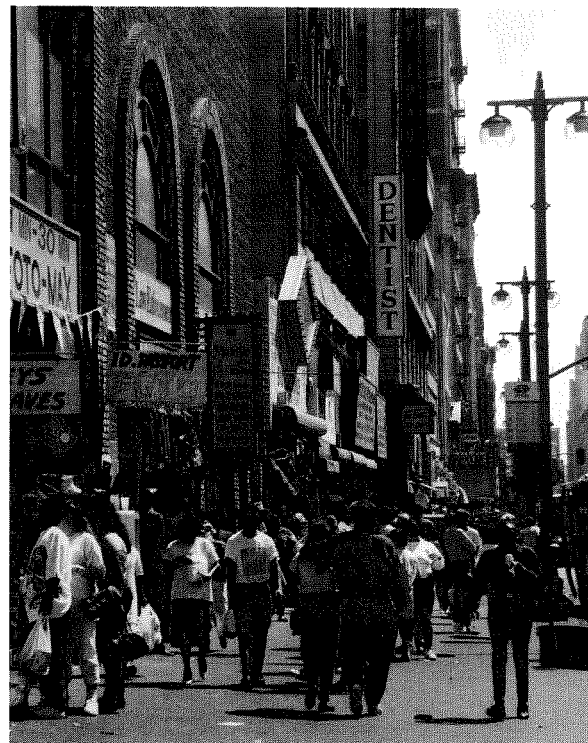
At first, in the 1960s, Anglo Angelenos resented the Latino behavior patterns on Broadway — people hawking wares on the sidewalks and streets, pedestrian crowding on the sidewalks and, worst of all, people talking in Spanish. But with the new occupation complete, a new spirit has arisen: New kinds of music have appeared, as have vendors of flowers, *paletas* (Mexican Popsicles), *tortas* (Mexican mini-submarine sandwiches) and *chicles* (gum, often sold by children).

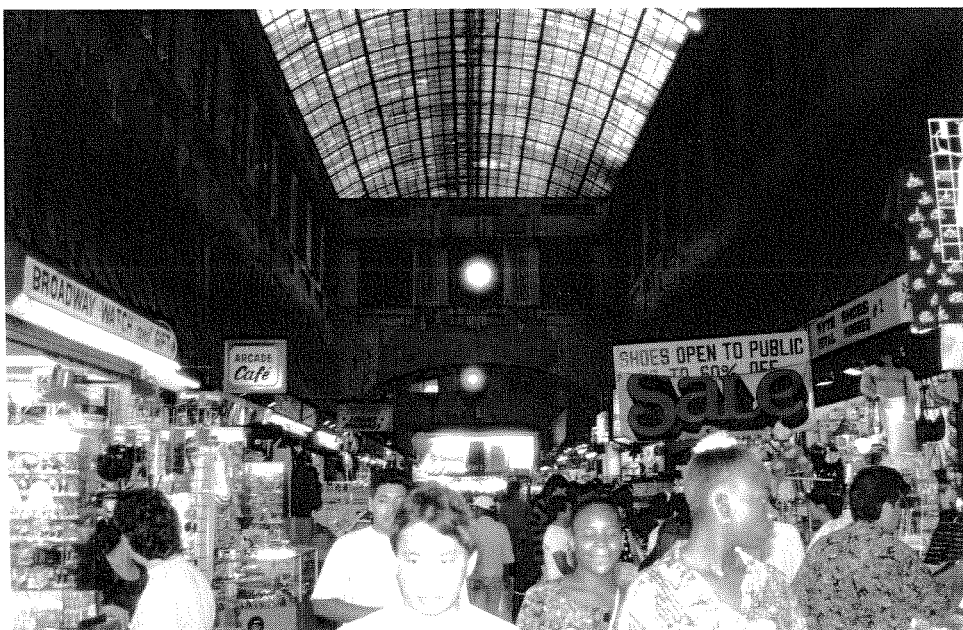
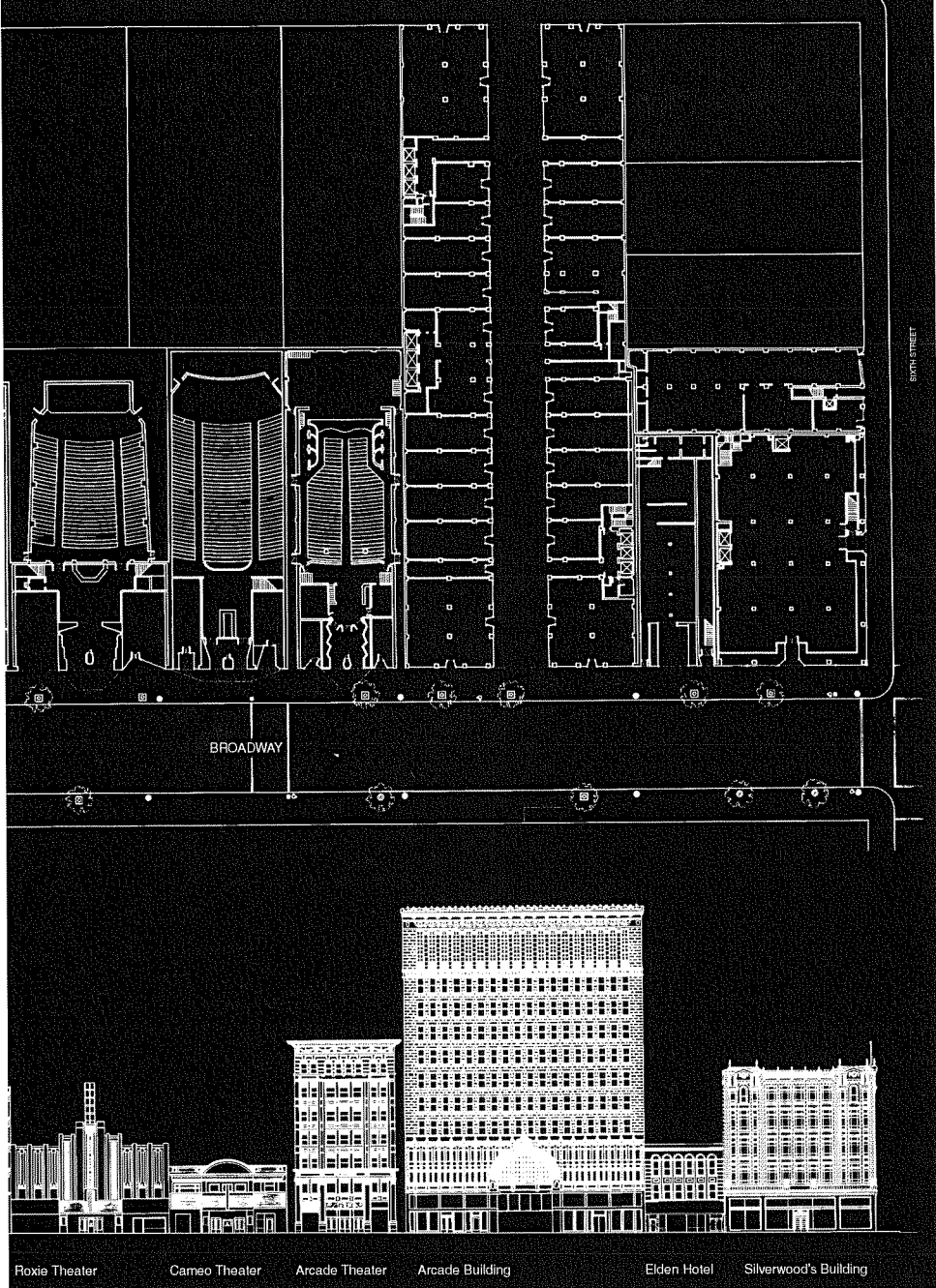
Now the shops are small; retail activities and displays crowd the fronts of stores. Clothing racks, shoe displays and sundries tables spill into the sidewalk, and salespeople can be seen on the sidewalks waving items in front of passersby (in the historic department stores, where retailing took place in elaborate interior selling floors and the only connection to the streets was display windows). The product range suggests a "street K-Mart"; inexpensive clothing, shoes, toys, jewelry and a wide range of consumer and electronic gadgetry dominate the retail scene. The economic activity is often informal; considerable amounts of bartering and trading are conducted.

Entertainment takes on several forms. On the street, clowns and gamesmen working "skills" compete for people's attention. Blaring music emanates from some stores. Several theaters still show movies, most of them in Spanish, although the movie premiere extravaganzas of yesteryear are gone.

Many smaller stores have been converted into Latino eating places where people sit, stand, or walk while eating, whatever suits their mood. Some eateries reflect the increasingly multicultural flavor of Los Angeles, serving Mexican/ Chinese or Indian/Mexican fare. During the last two or three years, American fast food places have also invaded: Major chains like McDonald's, Taco Bell and Pizza Hut each have established at least one outpost on "Latinoway."

This is a family place, especially on Sunday at midday and during the afternoon. Latinoway reflects the importance Mexican/Latino culture places on family outings and public gatherings on Sundays; in contrast to the quiet Sundays on Broadway in the past. Three-generation families are a common sight; strollers and meandering kids add to the cacophony on the streets. Several bridal shops line the street, and next to one of them is a shop selling paraphernalia for baptisms and holy communion celebrations, underscoring and celebrating Latinos' deeply held belief in Catholic ritual tradition and the importance of marriages, births and religious faith to Latino family life.





The Persistent Built Environment

What makes Broadway distinctive today is the contrast between the human activity there and the built environment. “Latino-way” exists within essentially the same urban and architectural frame as that which characterized Broadway during its Anglo heyday in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of the buildings that housed department stores, theaters and office buildings remain intact, except, in most cases, for modifications at street level.

A close examination does, however, reveal some differences: Most buildings are utilized only at ground level, where store configuration and facades have been modified and new signs, in English and Spanish, have been added. Little activity can be found above street level; most upper floors are vacant and many of the buildings are in disrepair (the careful viewer can detect numerous signs for stores from times past).

Broadway’s wide sidewalks, designed to accommodate crowds walking to and from department stores, now are cluttered with tables and racks that present merchandise directly to passersby. Generally, two types of retail stores exist. One is the sidewalk-oriented store, often narrower than a typical American retail shop and sometimes occupying only the front half of the interior ground floor space inside the building. The other occupies a large interior space, like the historic Arcade Building or a converted large department store (such as the former May Co. building), that offers a large, free-flowing area for walking, talking and shopping, all in one motion. These spaces distance people from the street and sidewalks, providing a more secure and safe environment for children. The retail mix in the Arcade, which has numerous children’s apparel and toy shops, reflects this orientation.

Dozens of ’teens- and ’20s-era buildings in this part of Los Angeles have been preserved in a passive manner. Their survival in the face of the economic change along Broadway is the product of a myriad of factors, one of which may be paramount: Since the 1960s, the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency has created a new downtown for the city in the Bunker Hill district, just to the west. Using large amounts of public money, the CRA has stimulated numerous new projects, including skyscrapers in the financial district, hotel and indoor shopping center complexes, and residential developments. The locational choice for these integrated developments allowed buildings in the older downtown to stand, unmolested, by modern urban development.

Consequently, the older downtown, including Broadway, has retained a distinctive ’20s flavor — an imagery that can be seen especially above street level. Some classic building elements can still be found. Metal fire escapes, old flag poles, faded signs and other unchanged components of the upper floors are repeated from block to block, with little interruption by any modern buildings or facades.

One of the more distinctive aspects of these buildings is their uniform height. Until the late 1950s, buildings in Los Angeles (City Hall excepted) could not exceed 150 feet in height because of the earthquake hazard. During building booms in the ’teens and ’20s, dozens of buildings were built right up to the limit. In 1926 and 1927 alone, 47 new 12-story buildings were completed in the Broadway neighborhood. The resulting landscape permits many multi-block vistas of buildings having uniform heights.³

The atrium of the Arcade Building, once a jewelry mart, now serves Latino shoppers.

Drawings courtesy Chuck Lagreco, USC School of Architecture.

Photos courtesy J. Diego Vigil.



Broadway's Next Move: From "Latinoway" to Common Ground

To the framers of Los Angeles' forthcoming Downtown Strategic Plan, Broadway is at a critical juncture. To the west is "the city," characterized by modern office, hotel and residential towers and flashy cultural facilities. To the east is "the markets," an active and economically successful industrial, warehouse and distribution center.

But Broadway, largely a Latino-oriented retail district, is showing signs of weakness. Latinos are moving to the suburbs and shopping there, too. Some of the grandiose movie palaces, which have shown Spanish-language films for years, are being used as religious halls and for swap meets. The upper floors of the buildings that constitute Broadway's magnificent architectural frame have long been vacant.

L.A.'s new downtown strategic plan will try to boost Broadway by drawing in more workers and tourists, according to Robert Harris, a University of Southern California architecture professor who co-chairs the plan's public advisory committee. It will suggest stronger connections between Broadway and the "city" and "market" districts, the Union Station transit hub and the expanding convention center; set out architectural and programming ideas for reviving Broadway as an arts and entertainment center; and recommend strategies for keeping Broadway cleaner and making it feel more secure.

This plan is likely to be more sensitive to downtown's cultural, economic and architectural character than the bulldoze-and-rebuild approach that

shaped the redevelopment of nearby Bunker Hill (part of what the strategic plan calls "the city"). It will propose a set of "catalytic projects" — for example, a trolley running from the Union Station transit hub to the convention center and connecting with new subway and light rail lines. Another is the reconstruction of Angels' Flight, a funicular railway that was ripped out during redevelopment and would provide a "direct, dramatic connection" between Broadway and Bunker Hill office towers.

Striking a balance between attracting new activity and maintaining Broadway's Latino-oriented commercial character will be challenging. Planners want to encourage more projects like the Yellin Co.'s rehab of Grand Central Market, an important through-block building that links the funicular railway's Hill Street terminal to Broadway. Here, the renovation, restoration and expansion of the historic market was completed without dislocating the small-scale, independent food shops that have thrived on the main market floor for 75 years.

The hope is Broadway will retain its Latino-oriented shopping character but emerge as something more — a place where office and warehouse employees come for lunch; where Latinos, Anglos and others come for entertainment and shopping; and where residents, workers and tourists mingle on the street. Planners hope that by connecting Broadway better to its surroundings and the city at large, and by nurturing projects that create potential for diverse activities and peoples, they can turn Broadway into a sorely needed common ground.

— Todd W. Bressi



Future projects along Broadway would be characterized by east-west connections to adjacent districts, like Bidby Mason Plaza. Courtesy Burton and Spitz, landscape architects.

Tianguis

The transition from Broadway to “Latinoway” has been marked by new cultural uses for existing spaces and buildings. While the street remains a place to shop, its role as a place to visit, socialize and browse has expanded. Activities like eating, shopping and viewing movies and entertainers continue as before, although they now involve a more intense use of the sidewalk and street, taking advantage of and basking in the sunlight that is ubiquitous in Los Angeles. In a sense, the open air market concept, formalized in the *tianguis* (from the Aztec word for “market”) of Mexico, has been superimposed on an urban environment that Anglos built — an environment that, ironically, occupies a place previously inhabited by Native American and Mexican settlers.

What the next transition in the landscape will be is anybody’s guess. The area has been awarded limited protection as a historic district, and preservation advocates may seek additional measures; their interest might increase the pressure for tourist-related activities to emerge along Broadway, as has occurred in other preservation districts, and push out the stores that serve the Latino community. While some planners observe that Latino shopping districts elsewhere in the region are gaining strength relative to Broadway, L.A.’s new rapid transit system will have a hub near Broadway and reinforce its central role.

Similarly, these buildings’ upper floors are being rediscovered as viable office space, perhaps infusing a new, and somewhat different, clientele for the shops along the street. A major renovation project at the north end of Broadway, involving the Million Dollar Theater, the Bradbury Building and the Grand Central Market, is currently underway; downtown government agencies are expected to move into the Bradbury Building.

Because of the sluggish economy, “Latinoway” may remain just that for the time being. But in the long run, the Latino occupation of Broadway may be more vulnerable than the street’s magnificent, historic architectural frame.

Notes

1. National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, Broadway Theater and Commercial District, 26 December 1985.

2. In 1960, almost ten percent of the six million people in Los Angeles County were of Mexican origin. In 1990, about 27 percent of nine million people in the county were of Mexican origin and an additional 12 percent were Latinos with other national origins, primarily countries in Central America.

3. The height limit is probably one of the reasons why downtown Los Angeles gained the dubious reputation of having no downtown. If people could not see downtown from afar, one might reason, they could easily conclude no downtown was there.

Preservation, redevelopment and the suburbanization of Los Angeles’ Latino population will shape the next chapter of Broadway’s story. Courtesy J. Diego Vigil.

