

MARCH/APRIL 2013



Bringing the Streetcar Back to Los Angeles

The City of Angels had better public transit in 1901 than it does today. Which is why Shiraz Tangri is doggedly talking up his next big idea: Los Angeles Streetcar.

By Matt Alderton



Oftentimes, moving forward requires looking back. When Angelinos began discussing how to revitalize their city's core, they retraced their footsteps by nearly a century to a period when downtown Los Angeles was alive with residents, businesses, and nightlife—and streetcars that connected them.

Now a streetcar is not exactly a trolley, tram, bus, or 'people mover,' the modern streetcar will integrate with regular traffic on the road, but it is on a set rail, which is one of the many benefits of incorporating streetcars as opposed to other forms of public transit. With the historic streetcar a part of LA's history, Los Angeles Streetcar Inc. aims to make it part of the city's future as well.

It all started on Broadway. Home to a thriving commercial and theater district in the 1920s and '30s, it now sits largely vacant, neglected and ramshackle like a sun-kissed Chernobyl. "Broadway, which was the shopping and entertainment district of downtown in its heyday, was becoming increasingly abandoned and dilapidated," says attorney Shiraz Tangri, who serves on the board of Bringing Back Broadway, an

initiative formed in 2008 with the purpose of redeveloping the downtown boulevard. Tangri is also the general counsel for LA Streetcar, which spun off of Bringing Back Broadway with the sole mission of bringing a modern streetcar system to downtown Los Angeles.

As part of its effort, Bringing Back Broadway sent a group of representatives to tour the revitalized downtowns in Portland and Seattle. In the past 10 years, both cities have enjoyed a renaissance in their central business districts that they attribute in large part to their streetcar systems, Portland Streetcar and the Seattle Streetcar Network, which began service in 2001 and 2007, respectively. "The message from the people in Portland and Seattle was very clear: if you want to get downtown to the next level of urban development, you need an urban circulation system," Tangri says.



Streetcars are nothing new for the City of Angels. In fact, the Los Angeles Railway began operating intra-city streetcars, called Yellow Cars, in 1901. At its peak, that system included 1,250 trolleys and more than 20 streetcar lines, including one that ran down Broadway. When railroads and trains gave way to freeways and automobiles, Los Angeles traded its streetcars for buses and ceased operations altogether in 1963.

Of the many public-transit options, it was decided that a new, modern version of the old streetcar system was the best way to stimulate economic development along Broadway. As Tangri says, "Streetcars inspire transit-oriented development by providing development-oriented transit."

Dialogue: Shiraz Tangri

Los Angeles Streetcar general counsel Shiraz Tangri is leading the charge for a new, modern transit system in downtown LA. We asked him about his personal stake in the project.

Why are you personally involved in this project?

I was born in India. I immigrated to New York when I was a young kid. I considered myself a lifelong New Yorker, so when I moved to Los Angeles in my late twenties, I didn't have a driver's license. I thought public transit should be all you need if you live in a real city. Unfortunately, Los Angeles had a reputation for being a city of sprawl and suburbs. It was a car mecca where nobody walked; there was no convenient public transit.

How did you get involved in this project?

I was an environmental lawyer, and I moved to Los Angeles to work on big environmental cases. That was in 1999, which is also when the Staples Center came online downtown. It was a big turning point for a lot of folks in thinking about downtown as a place you'd stay once you left your office building. As I got more involved in the community, I became more interested in planning and land-use issues.

Why this project, and why now?

There are half a million people who come downtown every day. One, there are a lot of real-estate development folks who are interested in downtown. Two, there has been a major residential boom here, so there's greater interest in transit from people like me who are transplants from other cities. Three, there has been a major effort by folks concerned about historic preservation to look at what can be revitalized downtown.

Unlike buses, streetcars' routes can't be easily changed or cancelled, and because they stop more frequently, streetcars can have more development potential than light rails. With a light rail, developers typically only build within a couple thousand feet of the stops, but because streetcars stop every block or two blocks, they increase accessibility to commercial space. "Where you see a public-sector commitment to run a system for decades and put rails in the ground so you know the [system] will go by your door, you see a massive spike in private-sector investment," Tangri says.

The large amount of pedestrians and cars in downtown LA means a system that crosses traffic at every block is infeasible. But a streetcar doesn't need the right-of-way because it runs along with traffic. "When a streetcar isn't there, a bus, car, or bicycle can go there," Tangri says. "It fits well with the notion of a multimodal urban environment." Streetcars also are clean—they are electric-powered, have zero-emissions, and consume minimal energy, making them economically and environmentally advantageous.

"The people who move downtown want to be in a more pedestrian-friendly environment," Tangri says. "They're making a personal choice to get out of their cars and limit their vehicle miles traveled by living close to where they work. A modern streetcar system appeals to those folks."

LA Streetcar is counting on that appeal. Although its proposed streetcar system—a four-mile, fixed-rail loop along Broadway, Eleventh, Figueroa, Seventh, and Hill streets—would ultimately be operated by the City of Los Angeles, building it will require a public-private partnership. Of the project's \$125 million construction budget, \$1 million was contributed by the city and \$10 million from the former Community Redevelopment Agency. Another \$51.5 million will be sought from federal grants, and the remaining \$62.5 million would come from downtown residents, who voted on the issue in December 2012.

"It's essentially a parcel tax," Tangri says of the tax, which is based on a property's land area, with property owners located directly along the streetcar line paying 45 cents per square foot, those located one to two blocks away paying 32 cents per square foot, and those living three blocks away paying 16 cents per square foot. "The cost to the vast majority of residents will be under \$100 a year. If you look at folks who are already paying hundreds of dollars in parking fees a month or risking a \$70 ticket every time they park their car and miss the meter, it's a no-brainer."

With local funding secured, the next step is obtaining matching federal dollars, then determining a funding source for operating the system once it's built. Construction is hoped to begin in 2014 with service beginning in late 2015.

"Los Angeles is a city that's going to continue to grow, and we've reached our limit with how big our roadway system can get," Tangri says. "We hope that the [period in which] people in Los Angeles only drove their cars will eventually be a comparatively small blip in the city's history."

REAL ESTATE & DEVELOPMENT

TRANSIT-ORIENTED

Share This Story | [f](#) [t](#) [e](#) [p](#) [+](#) [0](#)

QUICK LINKS

[Download Media Kit](#)

To Advertise:

[E-mail](#) Laura Heidenreich
(312) 447-2394

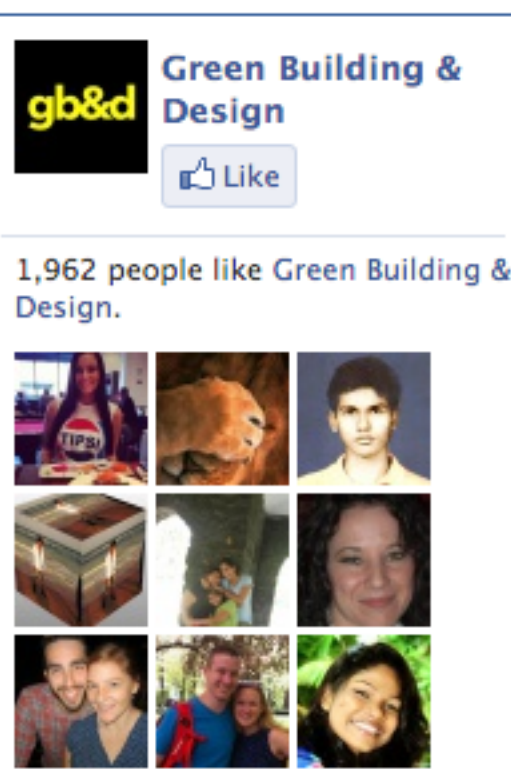
For Editorial Consideration:

[E-mail](#) Patrick Farnham
(312) 447-2390

Download the iPad App:



FIND US ON FACEBOOK



LATEST TWEETS

- Really cool gadget by @ThinkEco that helps you reduce energy use by cutting off power to appliances when not in use: <http://t.co/oB6AIXF3cJ>
- @cswaback13 Thanks! He has such a great story. Good to hear from you!
- Macerich builds the al fresco @SantaMonicaPic for a greener, more sustainable shopping experience for the future: <http://t.co/eqq911SpdN>

SOCIAL LINKS

