

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A WIRELESS L.A., BUT WITH STRINGS ATTACHED

Blanketing the city in Wi-Fi could prove to be a disconnect, leaving the poor and public spirit behind.

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MORE than a few obstacles stand in the way of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's plan, unveiled with some fanfare last month, to blanket all 498 square miles of Los Angeles with wireless Internet access by 2009.

But let's assume the mayor can work out a deal with EarthLink or another service provider—as San Francisco, Houston and Philadelphia have done—and put a plan in place that would allow anybody within the city limits to open a laptop and surf the Internet either free or for a modest monthly fee. And let's assume that the service proves attractive even if, as some critics have pointed out, it's little more than a faster, large-screen version of the access we can already get on cellphones and BlackBerrys.

What would it mean as an urban phenomenon, for the way we experience the city and interact with one another? What would a wireless Los Angeles look like?

In the sunniest scenario, the one sketched out rather persuasively by the mayor and his speechwriters, the plan would not only help make online access more affordable and available but expand the public sphere, turning every corner park and sidewalk bench into a possible home for the kind of coffeehouse culture that has always been a defining feature of urban life. It would send a message that the digital realm is a kind of public utility, as accessible as water and electricity.

A more likely effect, frankly, is a noticeable increase in the odd sort of public, shared alienation already on display in cafes everywhere, with people packed in next to one another but staring into their own individual screens. And given the sort of Angelenos who are most obsessed with being always connected, wireless access might fall far short of creating a new kind of social interaction or a revamped notion of communal space in the city. Ultimately, it might do little more than let a thousand PowerPoint presentations bloom in the open air.

Those issues aside, though, the plan's most intriguing aspects have to do with the way we think about the various borders that define the city and its limits. Even as wireless access could make architectural boundaries less important—since networks will no longer have to be contained, as most are now, within the space of four walls—it promises to draw civic ones more indelibly.

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For most of its history, thanks to its unusual, sprawling shape and the piecemeal way it expanded over time, thirsty for new sources of water, L.A. has been a city with soft edges. It's often hard to tell when you've left Los Angeles and entered Gardena or San Fernando or Bell. The relationship between urban and suburban areas can also feel turned entirely inside out in Southern California, with the peripheries of L.A. proper often sleepier and less dense than many neighborhoods that lie just outside the city limits. As a result, the line between city and region has always been more faintly drawn here than in any other American metropolis.

A universal wireless plan would likely make that difference more pronounced, since access would end abruptly at the city limits. [Imagine if your cellphone stopped working at the Santa Monica or Pasadena border. You'd learn pretty quickly exactly where those borders lie.] This is especially true given that L.A. controls the utility poles on which the wireless-network equipment would have to be installed. Since many neighboring cities do not, they may trail us in the wireless race by several years, if not longer.

In that sense the project is one of many defining Villaraigosa's administration as a departure, in salesmanship if not yet in substance, from those of his predecessors. Fending off various secession campaigns, previous L.A. mayors have spent a good deal of their time in office trying to convince residents of the Valley or Hollywood that they are getting a decent return for their tax dollars when it comes to city services. At least rhetorically, Villaraigosa is trying an aggressive rather than defensive strategy, painting a picture of an L.A. that gives its various neighborhoods more trees, more new housing and more high-tech amenities than they would get as independent cities.

ERODING ALTRUISM

HE'S helped in that effort by a rising sense across the country that big cities are safer and more livable now than they have ever been. Urbanity and density are now seen as positive qualities that can attract residents rather than send them fleeing to the suburbs. The wireless plan is part of that package, a digital perk that Los Angeles aims to offer before the rest of the region.

Still, this is hardly an administration that is pushing bold initiatives in the old-fashioned manner of legendary political operators such as New York's Robert Moses or Louisiana's Huey Long. Villaraigosa's wireless effort, rather than announcing new public-sphere muscle, is instead yet another twist on the far weaker public-private partnership model.

A subway to the sea qualifies as a bold initiative. A wireless plan that creates significant benefits for a private-sector company is something else—something more symbolic of the way cities make and remake themselves now. It has a good deal in common, in fact, with the Grand Avenue plan approved last month by the City Council and county Board of Supervisors, which also weaves strands of public and private benefit [and risk] in a way that makes them almost impossible to untangle.

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Tony Cardenas, a city councilman and champion of the wireless project, has suggested optimistically that it would help poor children here “grow up advantaged, not disadvantaged.” And in Houston, where EarthLink has joined with the city in a plan to create the biggest wireless network in the country, covering more than 600 square miles, Mayor Bill White predicts the technology will “bridge the digital divide” and “lift people up educationally.”

But free wireless service doesn't mean a whole lot if you can't afford a laptop. And the structure of the plans that have been taking shape in other cities suggests that ours may not match the populism of the press-conference talking points. The service in Houston may cost as much as \$21.95 per month [with possible discounts for low-income residents]. San Francisco may offer parallel services, a subscription plan from EarthLink and a slower, free alternative from Google loaded with targeted advertising.

That sounds quite a bit like the digital equivalent of a highway system split between private toll roads and sluggish public freeways. And it raises the question of how precisely to measure civic progress as nearly every corner of city life undergoes commercialization. If you put a drinking fountain on every corner but allow a private company to charge for each sip, even if it's only a few pennies, can you really make a case that you're improving access to clean water?

In that sense, what rings most hollow is the claim from the mayor and his allies that universal wireless is designed primarily to help the city's electronic have-nots. If that's the goal, why not take full advantage of the fact that L.A. owns its utility poles, turn this into a wholly public project and make access universal and free? The answer, of course, is that cities feel they can't manage even a moderately ambitious initiative these days without the capital and marketing muscle the private sector can provide.

Tellingly, one of the city's first experiments in wireless technology has come in Pershing Square downtown. Though that project, spearheaded by the Community Redevelopment Agency, offers free online service, it isn't meant to deal with the digital divide as much as aid the city's continuing—and largely unsuccessful—effort to burnish the square's reputation. It is essentially an electronic version of the public-safety and trash-collection crews that patrol parts of downtown. Like the mayor's broader wireless plan, it is more about image than access.

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