



Focus

# STOP THE BUS



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Julie Kim's 'Coffee Table and the City' video has been making waves on the Internet. The two-minute short shows commuters waiting at a Los Angeles bus stop that has been momentarily transformed into a living room, with a coffee table and a vase of flowers. A gentle reminder of the city's neglected public spaces and the people who use them....

Los Angeles often feels like a misunderstood metropolis to me. One of my professional agendas is to clarify misconceptions that outsiders have about the city. It is not just about the fantasy worlds manufactured by

Hollywood and Disneyland, or a place to surf, or a place to cruise around in your Hummer limousine, or a stomping ground for Paris Hilton. For millions of people, Los Angeles serves as a real functioning city where they work and live.



A scene from the video

There are plenty of people who ride transit in Los Angeles but they are 'invisible' because they are not part of the



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The author and her husband explore the city by bike

dominant group (i.e. white-collar professional, Caucasian, young-to-middle-aged adults). People perceive San Francisco and New York as being more pedestrian and transit-oriented than Los Angeles. This is justified because of their density, but I also think that the public more readily acknowledges the non-drivers in those cities because many of

them are white-collar urban professionals. Still, even Los Angeles' densest neighbourhoods lack built features that stimulate the senses and elicit interest at a pedestrian scale. What about the City providing exercise equipment at transit stops, like bars for pull-ups? In the meantime, perhaps the coffee table filled that role momentarily.

**“Still, even Los Angeles' densest neighbourhoods lack built features that stimulate the senses and elicit interest at a pedestrian scale”**

### Happy accident

I design and build furniture, and the 'Coffee Table in the City' video was the accidental result of my need to photograph a coffee table for my portfolio. I knew I wanted to capture people interacting with the table and I decided early on to feature a bus stop as the backdrop because in Los Angeles at least, they are neglected, uninspiring and mundane public places. At the same time, these bus stops are often teeming with pedestrian activity. People wait for a while at these stops - 15 to 20 minutes. This is an opportunity for the City to

engage them. Basically, I thought Los Angeles bus stops deserved some love, and that the bus benches would serve as a good stand-in for a couch when paired with the coffee table. I hoped to manufacture a surreal sort of situation where an out-of-place domestic object mysteriously appeared in a public space.

I planned on just photographing a model using the table at the bus stop but a friend said she wanted to see things taken a step further, that she had no interest in seeing images of a model, and instead hoped to see real people interacting with the table.



**Los Angeles Metro Bus at a glance**

Bus stops: 15,967  
 Service area: 1,433 sq miles (2,306km<sup>2</sup>)  
 Bus routes: 183  
 Bus fleet: 2,228 (of which 173 leased to private companies)  
 Annual boarding: 365,971,760 riders

I liked the idea, and despite its questionable legality, managed to convince my brother, the cameraman, to capture some footage with his camera concealed behind a nearby trash can.

As the role of director behind the shoot, I was incredibly disorganised. For one thing, I chose the filming location about 15 minutes before the shoot began. We all planned to convene at my mother's apartment and I chose a bus stop one block away in a minor epiphany. The bus stop I chose is in front of a County building with a pedestrian street-front that I consider one of Los Angeles' greater urban design tragedies, especially since it serves as backdrop to a bustling intersection in the City.

The original footage ran only for about eight minutes real time. We were unsure what we would do with it. In that span of time, the number and variety of people milling about – workers, kids, the elderly of every ethnic group – surprised me. I thought I would have to shoot for at least an hour to capture anything worthwhile.

Some people commented how the highlights are the little boy smelling the flowers and the woman with the suitcase sitting down to ask the two girls about the table. It never would occur to me to stage any of that, so capturing that footage was serendipitous and wonderful.

I edited the video we captured that day on a lark. I mostly did it to avoid throwing away some intriguing footage that appeared somewhere between still life painting and anthropological study. The music I chose enhanced what I consider a 'Sesame Street aesthetic,' i.e. a soft and friendly urban grit. Best-case scenario, I thought a local urban planning blog might pick up the video. I am still bewildered, but also thrilled, that the rest of the world is interested in watching it.

### True to life

From my observations over the years, the video accurately depicts the people who rely on biking, walking and transit in Los Angeles – the elderly, teenagers, ethnic minorities and lower-income people who cannot afford to maintain a car. Sadly, for a long time, a stigma existed towards Angelenos who used public transit. For whatever reason, this stigma appears to be vanishing as gas prices have skyrocketed and everyone is

interested in saving money. Maybe that's why we see an increased awareness of problems associated with a reliance on petroleum.

Many fail to recognise that it is possible to live without a car in Los Angeles if you choose to live in the right neighbourhood. I live in downtown with my husband and we share a car. He bikes to work every day so he uses our car only once a week. Koreatown, the neighbourhood where I shot the video, is one of the best places to live without a car because of its density and accessibility to transit.

I love Los Angeles because it is full of undiscovered treasures that outsiders, along with many of its local natives, know nothing about. Los Angeles offers something for everybody. You are more likely to stumble on these things once you get out of your car and explore the city by foot, bike, bus or train ●

*Julie Kim, Plic Design*

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