

After the Rush

As a colloquial phrase, the “California Dream” dates to the rush years of post-WWII suburban growth. Although it functioned as a developers’ slogan, it faithfully captured the mood of millions of Americans who migrated to the West Coast for good employment in a gorgeous setting with great weather.

The dream became reality. On New Year’s Eve, 1962, Governor Pat Brown celebrated “Population Day” to mark the symbolic moment when the Golden State overtook the Empire State as the nation’s most populous.

Regrettably, the business of growth was not balanced by the practice of rootedness. Twentieth-century California society was the antithesis of a leathery sapling of coast live oak—a slow-growing native species adapted to fire and drought. Instead it was a showy, full-grown Canary Island date palm trucked in and replanted on recently graded and newly turfed property, sprinkler system included.

In 2015, California’s palmy dreamscape still attracts tourists in force, yet it no longer exerts a magnetic pull on prospective residents from other U.S. states. Since 1992, California has been a net push-out state: Out-migration has exceeded domestic in-migration in all but two years.

A slowdown is a good time to breathe deeply and reconsider old patterns. For example, Californians know from experience that freeways are not free; they have endless external costs. If the Lone Star State wants to one-up postwar California in developing environmentally profligate car-based megaburbs, let Texas frack Texas.

California dreaming in our time of climate change and diminishing water may seem pathetically humble, or melancholically post-imperial. It’s tempting to re-romanticize the L.A. boosters of old who diverted rivers across deserts and transformed a harborless city into a megaport.

But humility can be transformative, too. It is humble to imagine the once-forsaken Los Angeles River becoming a center of civic life again. It is humble to imagine the once-polluted San Francisco Bay becoming a local food source again. And it is humble to imagine the fields and orchards of the Central Valley producing social justice and environmental sustainability along with copious almonds for China.

Jared Farmer is the author of *Trees in Paradise: A California History*. This piece originally appeared in *Zócalo Public Square* in January 2015 as part of the round-table forum “What Is the California Dream Now?”