It’s an August mid-afternoon in El Cajon. It’s 100 degrees, and the sane people are in the shade, keeping still. Not Mike Davis. For an hour, the most famous social historian of southern California has been walking me through Bostonia, a two-square mile enclave just north of El Cajon, where he grew up in the '50s and '60s. With hat and sunglasses, I’m burning up; head and eyes uncovered, Davis beads a lone ball of sweat. Having lived in Los Angeles, London, New York, and Hawaii, he has once again settled in San Diego. Though he’s fidgety about being back, he seems at home in East County, especially since he’s been writing about the place that made him. The author of *City of Quartz* and other books about L.A.’s past and future woes has, with two local authors, just written a new book, *Under the Perfect Sun: The San Diego Tourists Never See*. It’s a history of local sleaze, in "the most corrupt city on the West Coast," beginning with His Highness of Corruption, Alonzo Horton, and ending with Her Majesty of Folly, Susan Golding.

Later, Davis asks whether I’d like to get a drink at Dumont’s tavern, a Hells Angels hangout on El Cajon Boulevard. "You don’t mind if we get beat up, do you?" In June, the Angels’ clubhouse, near Dumont’s, was raided by a multi-agency task force, and today 18 Hells Angels or associates are in jail. According to the *Union-Tribune*, they’ve been indicted on "a long list of
charges that include drug trafficking, racketeering and plans to kill members of a rival club." While the U.S. Attorney’s Office boasts of having, with this bust, "eliminated [the] scourge" of a "drug trafficking ring" that moved "marijuana, cocaine and methamphetamine throughout the United States from Mexico," Davis looks beyond all that to a kindred vision he has with the bikers.

A radical still at 57, Davis stands with those of whatever stripe who picket, subvert, refuse allegiance to and revolt against the corporate, cultural, and political interests that control our lives. After the fall of Communism, Davis is a political anomaly, whose self-definition is now puckishly ironic: "I am a socialist in the same sense that Billy Graham is a Baptist." With short grey hair and a trimmed beard, Davis exhibits a chumminess more ursine than affable. He loves discussing the militancy of subcultures, be it the Hells Angels or Los Angeles developers, the latter the bête noire of his best-sellers, City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles (1990) and Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster (1998). These books, along with Davis’s teaching, editing, and other writing about California environmental, labor, and social history, have garnered him two prestigious awards: a Getty fellowship, in 1997, and the so-called genius grant, a MacArthur fellowship, in 1998.

Inside Dumont’s, the single-lighted pool table, the cool dark, and jukebox rhythms feel friendly, down home. One Angel behind the bar and another breaking a rack may be all that’s left of the local band. I sense Davis’s comfort in a place most would call hostile; such ease allows him to explain how he, a precocious adolescent, was politicized during the 1960s. "I thought," Davis says, quaffing a beer, that "El Cajon was the heart of darkness. San Diego to me was alive. I loved downtown; I loved coming to the city." That view shattered when Davis joined the civil rights movement in 1962. He discovered the "fanatical opposition to racial justice here" and experienced "the violent reaction to civil rights demonstrations that I was in." It was a time, he says, when the San Diego Union, under editor Herb Klein, was "in league with the Christian anti-communist crusade. I started asking my father about who runs San Diego, and he told me about C. Arnholt Smith and Irving Kahn and the Alessio brothers." Davis had no idea that his beloved city was ruled by robber barons, let alone that he might plumb their exploitation one day with a leftist critique.

Years later Davis would meet David Reid, a political historian and the editor of Sex, Death and God in L.A., who also grew up in San Diego in the fifties. As former San Diegans, the two wondered why this town has "as noirish a history as any city in the Sunbelt" and yet "still manages to get by with its sunny image." The culmination of Davis’s thinking about local political history has gone into Under the Perfect Sun and his 127-page section, "The Next Little Dollar: The Private Governments of San Diego." Two
more sections tap a similar vein. In "Just Another Day in Paradise? An Episodic History of Rebellion and Repression in America’s Finest City," San Diego City College professor Jim Miller documents the role of the Industrial Workers of the World, ethnic-based protest, and unions in the city’s working-class past. In "Life in Vacationland: The ‘Other’ San Diego," City College professor Kelly Mayhew presents interviews with current and former local activists as well as new immigrants. David Reid’s foreword to the book begins, "A city is a body of fate, but unfortunately the world cannot be persuaded that San Diego is anything other than a sunny conglery of tourist attractions. Here, crimes, follies, and misfortunes that would stupefy and amaze if they were set in New York or Los Angeles do not intrigue beyond the county line. Historically, it seems San Diego cannot represent itself, and is barely represented by others."

In a phone interview, Reid discusses with me his admiration for Davis’s work. "The organizing principle of Mike’s books is the urban peril of the working class and the mixed multitudes of the city." There’s "a certain kind of urban sensibility that he had a lot to do with crystallizing. He brought an extraordinary and compendiously learned sociological and geological perspective to this kind of noir environment, which now seems to be so irresistible as to have been inevitable. But at the time" Davis started writing, "it really wasn’t."

Davis is a rare bird: a Marxist academic and an urban/environmental historian that people, outside academe, read and take seriously. (Sales of City of Quartz has, by Davis’s estimate, topped 150,000.) I’d wager that most San Diegans know little about Davis; however, his influence in university and political circles, especially in Los Angeles, is legendary. When running for mayor of L.A., Richard Riordan invited Davis to lunch, but left soon after Davis told him, "We have absolutely nothing in common politically." Davis tells me that "All my books are written with a desire to annoy or anger people who have power and money. They are all partisan." Davis was among the first to rail at the overbuilt and overcapitalized southland. His articles, many for socialist reviews and labor periodicals, bristle with phrases like "the privatization of public space" and "the globalization of fear."

Writing about San Diego has not been at the top of his "intellectual work list." But when Davis returned—in early 2002, his wife got a job at Mesa College and Davis became a tenured professor at the University of California, Irvine, commuting from San Diego to teach three classes per week—he joined forces with two "wonderful young activists" (husband and wife, Miller and Mayhew), who were analyzing the city beyond its pro-military, pro-GOP past. The book got him "to think about the political history of San Diego and the private wealth-strategies that underlie and drive that political history."

Most historians who write about an urban political economy, Davis says, see it as a "growth
machine, a coalition of interests that use city government to promote a certain kind of growth. I’m arguing," in Under the Perfect Sun, that "it’s a lot more complicated than that. What has to be reconstructed are particular wealth strategies, whether it’s old money, trying to re-capitaliz downtown real estate; or it’s John D. Spreckels, trying to control all the key infrastructures of the city; or it’s Irving Kahn, trying to use Mafia-tainted Teamster money to accelerate the development of North County; or it’s John Moores, trying to transplant himself into downtown as a developer—these are not just interests, they’re strategies, projections of interests, which then get translated into politics."

San Diego, Davis believes, is remarkably different from other major American cities where "you have greater countervailing forces exerted by labor, the civil rights movement, environmental groups, or other constituencies. Here you have, with the exception of the Pete Wilson years, exceptionally weak city government and exceptionally well-organized and powerful private interests able to take city and county politics and play them with real virtuosity, beginning with the great John D. Spreckels himself." Davis thinks the San Diego government is a "private utility," that is, whatever business leaders and developers want is rubber-stamped by planning boards and city councils. In our time, one need only recall the carte blanche given to the sports enterprises of John Moores and Alex Spanos. To accomplish its growth, San Diego seeks its investors from elsewhere, and every decade or so invites in a new multimillionaire carpetbagger. In the last decade John Moores has filled the bill. But Moores, as-yet unindicted, may end up facing jail for the collapse of Peregrine Systems, so, Davis wonders, "who’ll be the next corporate savior?"

Ask any San Diegan on the street for a decent chronicle of San Diego’s past and you’ll come up empty. For Davis, San Diego historiography is a wasteland—"bits and pieces," he says, "nothing serious." In any standard book on southern California or the Sunbelt, San Diego "is off the map." Even State Librarian Kevin Starr, who’s finishing a multi-volume history of the Golden State, has "1 chapter out of 100 chapters on San Diego." Davis isn’t sure why our fair city is blind to its own past. He ventures a couple of ideas. "One is the huge oppressive weight of the Union-Tribune, which set about not just to be a newspaper but to control history, opinion, heritage, everything. Second is that those who might write that history leave San Diego."

Since Davis has studied growth doctrines of the Los Angeles region, I wondered how he would contrast theirs with ours. Los Angeles grew very fast in the post-war era because "it sacrificed landscape for industry." San Diego grew at a slower pace—until recently—because the city tended to preserve landscape from industry. Preserving open spaces was, of course, a good thing. But wealthy fathers here did this not because they loved geraniums and the gardening creed of Kate Sessions. Nor were San Diego’s canyons and coasts protected because elected officials were representing the people’s will. On the contrary, Davis says, they did it knowing...
that "landscape is a form of capital that attracts a particular kind of economy and social system." Indeed, San Diego attracted a professional middle-class, but it never barred the door. As a result, our mesas have been engulfed by sprawl. Additionally, Los Angeles's labor movement, a costar of industrial expansion, was much more powerful than San Diego's nonunionized working class. People of color have been essential to Los Angeles's political livelihood; minorities in San Diego have seldom had much influence, even now. Despite San Diego's being on the border, the Latinization of this community has been slower than Los Angeles' because of, Davis says, the lack of local manufacturing jobs.

Beers quaffed, we're driving on Main Street through the "new" El Cajon, that is, redevelopment central. In most American cities, nearly all the classy urban landmarks, such as El Cajon's old downtown theater, have been leveled in the misguided notion that trendy malls and dance clubs will draw people back. It's nuts, Davis says. When cities "tear down the pre-'50s stuff, a few years later they end up rebuilding some faux version of it." Describing the vagaries of El Cajon, Davis's voice plies equal parts sarcasm and tenderness. "It's the heart of darkness," he says, "and it's not."

2.

Originally, the El Cajon Valley—where Davis's parents first settled in California—was a Spanish land grant, called the El Cajon Ranch. In the late 1800s northern California millionaires, like "Lucky" Baldwin and Isaac Lankershim, who were flush with Comstock money, came south to buy land. With a partner, Lankershim purchased the San Fernando Valley, then gobbled up the El Cajon Valley by himself, subdividing it into three ranchos and making raisins the big crop. The northern part of the valley was sold to investors from Boston who named the tract, Bostonia. Years would pass before this swath of land, teeming with small citrus farms, would raise a mercantile center.

Davis shows me a house in Winter Gardens, just north of Bostonia. This is the house that his father, Dwight Davis, built with the help of two Yugoslavian butchers. Davis's parents bought the lot in 1937, nine years before Davis was born. His father believed the El Cajon Valley was Eden. A photo of the time shows Dwight Davis slouching jauntily with Western hat beside his wife and relatives in front of his gated parcel. Above the gate is a wooden arch on which "Ranchito" is painted, a common nickname for tiny estates. Davis compares an old photo with the remodeled home before us. "This would have been called an urban farm lot. A couple of acres of trees and a cottage." Depression-era boosters promoted the land in Bostonia and Winter Gardens as "99 dollars for two acres with piped water," perfect for raising fruit trees and chickens. The thing that attracted his father, Davis recalls, was the "franchised vision—the little
bungalow out of *Sunset* magazine. During the Depression, you didn't have to sell a place like this. The place sold itself." Living in Winter Gardens before the war "was the single most happiest time in my parents' lives."

World War Two spirited the Davis family to Fontana, just west of San Bernardino; there his father had the only white-collar job of his life, conducting "background loyalty investigations for the federal government," Davis relates in an e-mail. Mike Davis was born in Fontana. He later wrote a bittersweet chapter, in *City of Quartz*, called "Junkyard of Dreams," tracing the rise and fall of this community. In 1951 the family returned to San Diego, his dad's eye still on a back-country prize. They lived first in East San Diego where Davis’s mother, Mary (Ryan) Davis, an urban spirit who didn’t drive, cherished the proximity to downtown. Two years later, when Davis was six, the family moved to Bostonia, and a house on Flamingo Avenue.

Describing his family, Davis says they were "as close to a 1950s average as you can get. My mother was a Catholic; my father came from a Protestant background. My mother was a Republican; my father was a trade-union Democrat, a party-liner. My mother was a big-city Irish girl, who grew up in Germantown, the Catholic neighborhood of Columbus, [Ohio]; my father was a farm boy" from western Ohio. Davis’s Ohio heritage accounts for his "Midwestern ethnicity" and makes up half his identity.

Davis’s father worked at Superior Meat Company in downtown San Diego. He spent "equal parts of the day selling meat, cutting meat, and delivering meat, half white-collar, half blue-collar." Davis’s uncle, who lived on Mount Helix and owned a wholesale meat-packing company, "was a gambler and a very charismatic guy. Everyone adored him." Though his businessman uncle "should have been a Republican," he was a registered Democrat and both of his kids married people of color. Interracial marriage was the only "unusual" thing about his family. Jim Stone, Davis’s cousin’s husband, would be one of the founders of the Congress of Racial Equality in San Diego. Joining the group in 1962 with his girlfriend and a buddy, Davis learned firsthand about racism, San Diego style.

This crack in the family’s political affiliations inspired Davis once to visit the place of his father’s heritage—the Welsh-speaking community in Venedocia, near the headwaters of the Wabash River in western Ohio. There, looking through the graveyard, Davis found "row after row of my relatives" who died at Antietam and Shiloh. "Then the penny dropped: this was an abolitionist stronghold. These Welsh farm boys weren’t fighting to save the Union; they were fighting to end slavery. My theory is that the liberal inclination in the family history comes from the Welsh side with some religious-based abolitionism."
Davis’s mother was a pistol. She was "like one of those old Appalachian women with a corn-cob pipe, who’d chew your ear for two hours." She was also an ironist. Davis once asked her, "‘Do you think there’s been any truly good statesmen in America in the twentieth century?’ ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘Calvin Coolidge.’ She always felt trapped in Bostonia because she was a big-city person. She hated El Cajon as much as my father loved it." And yet his parents couldn’t understand why their son wanted to leave the state after high school. After the trials of the Depression, "they thought this was the land of bread and honey."

Of his parents, Davis says they were "extremely loving but utterly uncomprehending of me. I grew up in a home where the only books were the Bible and one volume of Reader’s Digest Condensed Books. My father read the newspaper, cover to cover. My parents were high school graduates," with few interests, "beyond the drama of family life and sports. My rebellions and problems caused them tremendous consternation and pain. My father always attempted to be understanding. My mother was very tough like a Marine Corps drill instructor. I’d come home from elementary school and say some boy picked on me; my father would say, ‘Don’t worry about it. Just turn the other cheek.’ My mother would drag me out in the yard and say, ‘You’re fighting Irish, and if you don’t go out and fight that kid, you’ll fight me.’ And the kids, no matter how big they were, were always considerably less terrifying to me than my mother." His mother so identified with the Irish cause that when she visited Ireland, even in her 80s, she "shook her fist at the British army."

"It’s funny, I was about thirty years old and I suddenly woke up one day—I’d been thinking my entire life that I was a chip off the old block, that I was like my father. I realized I wasn’t like my father at all. To an occult extent, I’m like my mother, even when it comes to my ethnic identification. I automatically say I’m an Irishman." This affinity for the Irish—the other half of his identity—drew Davis to marry an Irishwoman in 1981. Roisin, a daughter from that marriage, and Jack, a son from another marriage, have lived much of their lives in Ireland, where Davis visits them every summer.

"I would say of the kids and families I knew I was extraordinarily lucky to have had so much love. But even the love couldn’t compensate for the savagery and the stupidity of El Cajon at a certain point. Racism, religious fundamentalism, the cultural desert, the emptiness of it—I could see this eating away even at my mother, her deep unhappiness. Just merely living in East San Diego had been so much better," for her since she "could take buses and get around. I saw this in all my friends as well. I saw them taking flight from families, from divorces, from fathers and mothers battling. My other great rebellion was against this class. This began to be apparent, maybe in sixth grade, junior high school, then catastrophically in high school, where class or status divisions became clear."
Bostonia’s downtown, at Broadway and Second Street, is nothing like it was in the ’50s. Fry’s Hardware has been replaced by an auto parts dealer; the Bostonia store, one of the oldest general stores in the west, lasting from 1886 to 1960, is now a Chevron station; and Smokey Rodgers’s Bostonia Ballroom, where Spade Cooley, the King of Western Swing, once played, is today the Red Mill restaurant. As we drive by, Davis remembers that “Bostonia is like many other communities in southern California: little agricultural hamlets and crossroads that bore post office addresses but were never incorporated.” Such outposts “disappeared beneath the lava of post-war development.”

As we walk through his old neighborhood, Davis points out several narrow yet deep lots. Why deep? For chickens. Citrus trees needed five years before they yielded fruit while chickens provided immediate income. We pass the site of Val’s chicken plant, once thriving, now an empty field. “This was an enormous plant where they killed and plucked chickens. Chicken waste you can smell a mile away. The plant depressed home values but it also gave the neighborhood its character.”

Davis is fascinated by how individual communities, each with its own story, can be different from the cities they become lumped into. Consult the 2000 census and you’ll see that Bostonia’s population is 15,169, which is about 7800 people per square mile, the same as the density in the city of Los Angeles. By contrast, El Cajon has 6800 people per square mile and San Diego, less than 3800 people per square mile. Why are Bostonia and El Cajon so dense? Starting in the 1960s, both towns welcomed something most communities do not—retirement homes. Davis says the El Cajon Valley became “a kind of receptacle for sick people, aging people, poor people, and troubled people. I charitably describe it as the social dumping ground for San Diego.” Once the 94 freeway was constructed, “then El Cajon could really become a dormitory for the city.”

We pass Greenfield Drive, home now to auto repair shops, still one of the main entrepreneurial enterprises of East County. We pass the rubble base of an air-raid siren that used to blow (as a test) Mondays at noon and approach Davis’s old home on Flamingo Avenue. The house is a modest bungalow, now with a garage addition, the whole, 1000 square feet. It’s in good shape. Davis lived in this house from 1953 until he graduated high school in 1964, one of three valedictorians at El Cajon Valley High.
Davis observes the neighborhood and summons dozens of scenes from his boyhood: retired farmers from Minnesota who lived across the street; early girlfriends; boys whose dads were swabbies and worked at the 32nd naval station; a next-door neighbor who to Davis’s delight put in a go-kart track in his backyard. But tragedy—always unelaborated by families—also stalked the block and nearby homes. Across the road was a bully name Gordon Neumann, in Davis’s mind, "the devil." In 1993, on Mollison Avenue in El Cajon, Neumann shot six children, killing one of them, and shot to death a 40-year-old woman. Neumann then burned himself alive in his apartment. "I saw that story, didn’t see the name, but I instantly knew who the man who hated children was. I remember in second grade, right there, with him sitting on top of me, pounding me. My father came out and almost killed him."

The supreme horror of his childhood took place in 1958 around the corner from Flamingo on Second Street. "I remember on summer evenings in Bostonia," Davis says, "we used to burn our trash in our backyard. Very frequently you could hear somebody being beaten—usually a woman or a child. People didn’t speak about that." When he was 12, he was walking around with a friend and came upon the bungalow of the Pendergasts, where a family of six lived, and there Davis saw "every sheriff’s car in the world. I was later able to peer in one of the windows: It looked like somebody had taken a bucket of red paint and thrown it on the walls. The guy who lived here had four children, and he moved in a 16-year-old boy with his family. While he was at work, the boy, whose name was Carl Eder," slit the throats of the wife and the children. (Davis says it was later reported that the father had forced himself sexually on Eder; learning that fact bothered Davis as much as the killings did.) Caught a few days later wandering in Mission Beach, Eder said he did it because the kids were making too much noise. He also said, "I flipped my lid." At 16, he was ineligible for the death penalty. In 1974 he escaped from prison and has never been captured.

Though the mass murder disturbed him, Davis doesn’t think he was traumatized. "We didn’t deliberately repress it. We had no context. This was the problem with growing up here. We didn’t have contexts, or points of comparison, or larger universes. I remember as a kid, I was incredibly patriotic until I was 15. And I’d always be thinking how I would explain to some Russian boy my age how wonderful the United States was. But then I’d get to the point of explaining El Cajon to them and I would always falter. The unspoken thing—the sound of somebody being beaten, the religious intolerance, and above all, the sheer stupidity of it. Not that the people were stupid. The people I grew up are fully as smart as I am, some of the smartest people I’ve ever known. We were growing up in the depth of the ’50s cold-war culture, which now, for some reason, 30somethings have nostalgia for—Formica and Eisenhower."

Religion, then and now, is "a huge factor" in El Cajon. Davis’s family was Catholic and hardly
mixed in the Bostonian stew of fundamentalists, Mormons, and Baptists. An atheist at ten, Davis was interested in science and "quickly determined that science and religion were incompatible. Being Catholic in a ridiculously fundamentalist town meant you got into far too many fist fights over religion."

Despite Davis's penchant for science, he began to turn off to school, ironically, because his bookishness was singled out in sixth grade. "All my rebellion," Davis says, "goes back to that." In the wake of the Sputnik launch and the first monkey in space, school officials pressed IQ tests on promising students. Davis scored very high, and his science savvy was identified as a weapon in the war against Communism. Davis didn't want to be singled out, however; he wanted to remain with his friends. And yet his desire to belong was as troublesome as it was natural. The same conundrum came up for Davis in 1967, when he struck back at the American political system and joined the Communist party. Within two years, he was kicked out for being anti-Soviet.

Indicative of how rigid class assumptions were during the 1950s, Davis recalls meeting another malcontent, "Stinky" Lenois, at Grossmont Continuation High School. Lenois was "considered to be the first or second toughest guy and the dirtiest fighter in El Cajon. A hoodlum. Everybody kicked him out of school; teachers despised him. One day he invited me to his house. He told me he was going to show me something, but it was a secret, and if I divulged this to anybody else he would kill me." (At this point, I'm laughing. It's a rich tale. Davis only smiles, and that to himself. At times it's hard to gauge the ironic innuendo.) "So I'm very excited. Maybe he's going to show me a gun, maybe some marijuana, which we'd heard about but nobody had seen, maybe some pornography. Whatever it was it was going to be really good. He reaches under his bed, pulls out a little box, and takes out several of the Mentor books—[one] by Will Durant and [another] the thoughts of Plato—and he says, 'I want to talk to you about philosophy. But if you tell anybody about this, I'll kill your fucking ass.' These people did not go on to become part of the editorial committee of the New Left Review like I did. But they were the people whose refusal to accept the boxes they were put in was enormously important to me."

One such person was Davis's high school girlfriend, Darcie Whitacre, whose commitment in political activity equaled his. When they graduated, Davis left with a four-year scholarship while she pocketed a $25 certificate to a local beauty college. Whitacre "stayed and prospered" in San Diego, by starting a Montessori school. For him, Whitacre is a local hero, one who farmed while others fled. Though he has no regrets about leaving El Cajon, he still has a "feeling that somehow I let her down."

The teenage Davis, of course, couldn't resist acting his age. The day before graduation he "held
a can of beer" and watched a friend smash the school’s windows with a baseball bat; for a time, Davis stole cars, before his mother turned him over to the police; he drank often and one night barely survived being pinned under the car in a terrible wreck. A buddy, Brent Lawson, pulled him out and saved his life. A foot-and-a-half-long scar from that accident courses along his left thigh. His adolescence was one of group rather than individual consciousness. The group he joined then would "be like the Goths today. We tried to look like beatniks." He was differently called and sought not to hide his calling. His last time trick-or-treating in junior high, he went as Fidel Castro.

4.

In many ways, Mike Davis has become the Fidel Castro of urban political theory—uncompromising, audacious, built to last. To get there entailed the grind of study—at 28, he began with UCLA; moved on to the University of Glasgow, in Scotland; returned to UCLA and passed his Ph.D. exams but never finished his dissertation; then went to Belfast and finally to London, where he joined the editorial committee at the New Left Review and worked at Verso, the radical publisher. His first book, Prisoners of the American Dream came out in 1986, the result of transatlantic study. In it Davis examined why the American working class is different from working classes in other industrialized countries and what this meant in the age of Ronald Reagan. Soon, Davis was in the states once more, writing City of Quartz. That book was new in two important ways: one, no one had ever so fully documented how Los Angeles and its surrounding communities had so quickly lost their paradisal sensibilities to the rapacity of developers; and two, in order to render a city as hard and opaque as Los Angeles, Davis forged a prose style that cut and uncovered with surgical precision.

During the hours I interviewed Davis, he spoke non-stop. His writing clips at the same gait. One critic notes that Davis’s sentences possess a kind of "breathlessness," making him like Noam Chomsky, another "rebel without a pause." Talking or writing, Davis builds up strata of facts, statistics, data, analysis, historical incidents, zoning ordinances, planning regulations, school-board decisions—all of it buttressed by hundreds of footnotes. The effect is a kind of multi-level assemblage, a rhetorical Horton Plaza, where an open-air slit is traversed by walkways and escalators that invariably get people both immersed and lost. Davis’s own metaphor appears in a 1994 interview with the Chicago Review, in which he called his style "sheer bricolage. It has to do with what a good bricklayer does or somebody building a stone fence." His key influence has been the German social critic Walter Benjamin: "Reading him taught me that small concrete things could be pregnant with the whole, that oblique points of view could sometimes render things visible in more depth." Such is the
technique of  
_City of Quartz_
: using this indirect method, Davis makes his critical points apparent though he never states them in so many words.

As to his unlikely success as a socialist author, Davis wonders "what I should complain about? Is it the people who’ve attacked me or is it the people who like my books for all the wrong reasons? I actually think the stranger phenomenon is, why did _City of Quartz_ become so popular? This is a book with an almost 100-page chapter on homeowners’ associations. It’s not a book I ever expected to sell more than 100 copies. Not only did it sell decently but it gave me this entrée to people and worlds which were actually the targets of my critique." Davis says developers called him to discuss planning codes because no one understood the "architecture of control" in Los Angeles as he did. Indeed, Davis’s sober conclusions helped to fuel the late-’80s "Stop Los Angelization" movement beyond L.A. Preserving open space is now central to the environmental consciousness of cities everywhere.

With Davis’s third book, _Ecology of Fear_, the honeymoon ended. In a chapter called “The Case for Letting Malibu Burn,” Davis argued that an inordinate amount of city services and money went every year to battle fires in tiny-populated Malibu, and these resources were re-directed from the larger and needier population of Los Angeles. Not surprisingly, Davis was attacked by Malibu realtors with such ferocity that the _Los Angeles Times_ assigned one of its reporters to check every Davis footnote (831, to be exact) for miscues. (The _Times_ found a few errors and minor exaggerations but, worse, according to Davis, refused to publish his response; other publications, like _The Nation_, supported Davis.) The _Times_ attack in the late 90s was a painful period for Davis, in part, because his five marriages were touted as proof of his untrustworthiness. Today he avoids the "showmanship" of media relations. Moreover, he won’t allow others to play politics with his private life. Ad hominem invective, a legacy of the anti-Clinton years, is still double-barreled against the left by the likes of Ann Coulter and Roger Hedgecock. "This isn’t politics or political analysis," Davis says. "It’s a political culture," run amok, "which is the problem."

Though Davis believes he chronicled how urban pressures are threatening our lives, critics, he says, misread him. _Ecology of Fear_ has been "described as nothing but pure darkness when, in fact, the whole point is, southern California’s disasters and apocalypses are social
constructions." Davis has been lumped in with the fantasy seekers who, as one critic put it, "love to see Los Angeles burn." Kill the messenger, and you need not heed his message, he says. What most people won't recognize is that "the whole genre of urban apocalyptic literature" is a "racialized discourse," with a "surprisingly sinister undertone." In other words, people intent on destroying Los Angeles seek, with élan, to wipe out the multicultural collective that southern California has become.

Apartment density and racial profiling in southern California, however, are merely human-engineered; nature's coming inferno will be far more lethal. As Davis cataloged the natural disruptions in Los Angeles's history—tornadoes, mud slides, fires—he was surprised by three things: disasters occur regularly; the media covers them unequally; and they are always labeled "catastrophes, unusual, exceptional," which, in Davis's mind, makes them the opposite of what they really are: to be expected. "Far from having had too many earthquakes recently, we've had too few," Davis continues. "Far from experiencing extreme weather recently, we're not yet back to the extreme weather patterns," of California's long history, "regardless of global warming. In other words, here's a whole civilization constructed on a mis-recognition of nature, built on records too short to capture the natural fluctuations of the environment. We've mortgaged our safety and prosperity against it. And then, when what I call 'ordinary' disasters happen, they are, of course, the end of the world."

Urban calamities today distort our thinking. People confuse, Davis says, "the social with the natural—so that natural disasters appear to us as manmade, and social problems are naturalized. We talk about the 'wildings' of street gangs. They have the properties of wild animals. Coyotes get confused with gang members. Everything is mixed up. And it's particularly mixed up by people who live on the urban edge, next to nature, which remains truly and magnificently wild despite all our efforts to tame it. And, of course, in San Diego as much as in Los Angeles, people want to live near that wildness but they want an impermeable boundary between themselves and it. It doesn't exist."

For a range of original ideas about the stresses of urban life, Davis received, in 1998, a MacArthur fellowship, $315,000 in cash. Utterly surprised, he was told by a former MacArthur winner and friend that the award would be "a mixed blessing." Today he agrees. "The foundation people are wonderful," he says. "They just give you the money. No strings attached. But I find the whole idea of the MacArthur odious. I wouldn't defend the MacArthur. At the same time, if the Brinks truck comes in my neighborhood and the money sack falls off, I'm not taking it to the police department because, for one thing, my family would lynch me if I did. I took that windfall but always wished," for another outcome, "as in my favorite movie, The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner —the working-class kid is about to win the race for his reform school and he refuses to win because he refuses to be a success for them. At some level it would have been hugely
satisfying to just throw it back in their faces. But it would have been treason to give up the
money."

Davis says the gift at first resembles the old Millionaire TV show from the 1950s, where a man
shows up out of the blue and bestows a million dollars upon a needy person. "It doesn't work
that way. There's an old boy network. MacArthurs nominate [new] MacArthurs. Somebody told
me once that if you get a prestigious fellowship, then you get the others, which seems kind of
senseless." These fellowships, though, arrived when Davis was, as a single parent, barely
staying afloat, teaching at four different schools. "I needed the equivalent of two full-time jobs to
make ends meet."

A decade before his awards, Davis was driving a truck six days a week, hauling
blanket-wrapped furniture to Las Vegas, and teaching at UCLA the seventh day. The few hours
he spent before the blackboard were far more lucrative than the money he earned behind the
wheel. By earning a college degree, he says, "I took the easy way out. I'm a tenured professor."
Davis holds a nostalgia for truck-driving and disparages where he's at now. His professional
class is "overpaid and overindulged while blue-collar people are running in place" in an
economy today that insists on "longer hours and harder work" than at any time since the 1930s.
What did he do with the MacArthur and Getty money? "I wasted it on travel, gave it away to
family and dependents, bought revolutionary posters," which bellow in reds and grays from
nearly every wall of his Golden Hill home. "A smart person would have banked the money,
bought property. Not me."

5.

In early August, 1960, San Diego teens and young adults were racing their cars at Hourglass
Field, an old airstrip, under the supervision of the San Diego Timing Association. According to
Davis's "'As Bad As the H-Bomb,'" an article from his collection Dead Cities (2001), the Navy
shut down that drag strip, thereby disenfranchising hundreds of kids. On Friday, August 19, up
and down El Cajon Boulevard, a street pulsing with drive-in restaurants, youngsters received a
handbill announcing a "mass protest meeting" the next night at El Cajon Boulevard and
Cherokee Avenue, between City Heights and Normal Heights. The organizers of the protest
were mad at the "criminalization of their sport," to quote Davis. The next evening, nearly 3000
teenagers and young adults "blocked off a long section of El Cajon Boulevard and were
cheering on racers in a miscellany of vintage hot-rods and customized family sedans." The
police arrived and battled those assembled for three hours, "wielding batons, lobbing tear gas,
and driving their patrol cars onto the sidewalks . . . to disperse the crowd." "Eventually 116
'demonstrators,' including 36 juveniles, were hauled away in paddywagons." Though Davis
wasn't at the riot—"I was too young to drive and was curfewed at home" that night—many of his buddies were there. As participants and supporters, Davis recalls, they felt it was the "bitchinest' event of our lifetimes."

Davis contends that the youth rebellion of the '60s—yes, the counter-culture—started in San Diego with the El Cajon Boulevard drag strip riot of 1960. "I'm trying to argue," he tells me, "against people who are doing histories of the '60s. They're looking at far too much from the top down, the media-appointed celebrities, old-guard leadership, the rich kids who became the Weathermen. They're not looking at the rank-and-file kids. They're not seeing how the '60s were cultivated and made possible by this massive anti-authoritarian youth rebellion that began in the late '50s. First of all by first-generation, young black northerners. Then amongst white kids of all kinds. My kind of pre-politics was with this stuff—drinking, racing cars, breaking windows, stealing cars. It wasn't just trivial. There was a deeper and very serious aspiration."

It didn't take long for the teenage Davis to spiral away from Bostonia. On weekends he visited a Communist bookstore in Tijuana and was impressed that books, banned in the United States, were for sale across the border. He also hung out at Wahrenbrock's bookstore where he met writers and beatniks. The store carried a line of new literature from New Directions books: "We could sit in the basement for hours and read, and they wouldn't hassle us." Then the civil rights movement landed in San Diego during the 1950s because this city, Davis says, "was a Southern city in every sense." Jim Miller, in his section "Just Another Day in Paradise?" from Under the Perfect Sun, documents the racism of the time: African-American leaders complained about discrimination in access to businesses and in the labor movement. One black leader said that San Diego was "the worst place on the coast in discrimination practices," citing a higher unemployment rate locally among blacks than in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

In 1962 Davis began picketing with the Congress of Racial Equality every Friday at the all-white Bank of America branch at Sixth and Broadway. This bitter protest, which featured numerous arrests, was condemned by "Mayor [Frank] Curran, members of the city council, judges, and police," according to Miller. Eventually, Bank of America gave in and hired African-American employees. Davis also recalls the excitement of Freedom Summer, when civil rights workers registered black voters throughout the South. He notes that San Diego CORE members used to listen on a special telephone hookup to progress reports of the registration drive. "Nothing could have been more dramatic." Sadly, Freedom Summer culminated with the murders of three civil rights workers in Mississippi by the Ku Klux Klan.

Then, a blow—in 1962, Davis's father, who was an excellent golfer and bowler, had a massive
heart attack and was hospitalized for a month. The effect was "catastrophic." Since insurance paid only 80 percent of the bill, Davis quit high school in his junior year and worked as a meat cutter to support the family. Later that year he re-enrolled as a continuation student and was in a class with kids who’d been expelled from high school or served time with the California Youth Authority.

Ultimately, Davis says his antiauthoritarian adolescence was seeded neither by poverty nor by disadvantage. Despite his unsettled high school years, he won a scholarship to Reed College. Though Reed was "everything I hoped for," Davis notes, he "was out of there in two months." Academically, "I couldn’t cut it; I felt like a country bumpkin, an idiot." The educational promise of Davis’s early life had been hollowed out by his rebellion. He realized that he could, through his own penchant for reading and study, educate himself. "By the time I was 19," he says, "I was living New York City." There, no longer a student, he joined Students for a Democratic Society and began organizing sit-ins and protests.

6.

Two friends from Davis’s youth—Brent Lawson and Skip Jensma—join us for dinner at El Cajon's Pernicano’s. Inscribed on its green awning is "Since 1946," the year each of them was born. Lawson, a mechanical engineer with the county, is a big man whose heart is easily moved. Skip Jensma, a clerk with the superior court, remains the most "hippy" of the group, his liberal values born in the sixties. Two years ago, Davis’s Bostonian buddies, organized a reunion—the first get-together in 35 years. Among those who attended were Lawson and Jensma; the Fry brothers, Richard and Ron, whose father ran Fry’s Hardware store; Don Bokovoy, an attorney in Escondido; and Darcie Whitacre. The peripatetic Davis wasn’t able to make the first reunion; but he has, having returned to San Diego to live, made subsequent ones.

Lawson says that at such reunions, "You apologize for things you did that you think bothered the other person for years, but then he can't even remember it." In truth, Lawson was "especially choked up" to see his companions, several of whom remained in southern California. He wonders why he "wasted 30 years" before he made contact. "I needed somebody to talk to so many times—" his voice trailing off with emotion. The get-together was, for Lawson, "overwhelming" as was the long hiatus. After all, he had surfed, slept on the beach, gotten drunk in Tijuana, and raced cars with these guys and then they had just vanished from his life. Jensma has more contented memories. Today’s Second Street, with its "typical Taco Bell and Carl’s Jr.," was once lined on both sides with "pepper trees, walking paths, no sidewalks, and horse ranches. It was beautiful. It was a nice place to grow up. When we were little kids,
especially during the summer, I would leave in the morning and, as long as I was home for dinner or by dark, everything was fine. We just took off." And Davis adds, "As long as you did your chores."

Jensma clearly remembers Davis’s talents with science and reading. He was "always in a different place from the rest of us." When they were in fifth grade, Jensma says Davis had his own home chemistry lab, with Bunsen burner, and he was doing sophisticated experiments. Politically, Jensma’s and Lawson’s parents were "very conservative"; they didn't talk about San Diego graft at the dinner table. Jensma says that Davis’s parents had such discussions on occasion, particularly his father who was "charismatic" and knew San Diego’s most powerful men, having made meat deliveries to their restaurants and hotels. The Davises were "exceptional people. I never met anyone like them. I remained friends with them long after Mike left" San Diego.Davis’s mother had a lasting influence on Jensma’s life. His liberal views about "the race issue, religion, equality, came from her."

Lawson went with Davis and his girlfriend to meetings of the Congress of Racial Equality. "My parents didn't like me hanging around with him because he had such strong views at 16. He was way ahead of us." At those meetings, Lawson recalls stuffing envelopes and "being very quiet, listening. I was out of my element" because he, Davis, and Davis’s girlfriend were the only white kids. Lawson also remembers that Davis was a "voracious reader." His room, in high school, was "wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, loaded with everything. Tolstoy and Marx." Davis read and "talked about the downtrodden, but he didn't try and covert us to anything." Isolated in El Cajon, Lawson knew little about the outside world, so Davis’s untypical ideas fascinated him. The year was 1964 and they graduated from high school, only to face the military draft. Almost immediately, Lawson got snagged for duty in Vietnam, and Jensma, though he went to college, eventually quit and enlisted, then served in the war as well. Davis, of course, became eligible for the draft after his expulsion from Reed College. Called for his physical, he put up such a fight—telling the Army personnel that he belonged to several Communist groups—that they "threw me out of the induction center," deeming him "temporarily unsuitable" for the military.

Later, we’re sitting in Davis’s black Toyota Tundra truck. He tells me that most of those he grew up with "felt our lives were trapped, [felt we were] surrounded by people in a town that was politically, culturally, religiously intolerant, suffocating, and totally segregated." And yet why was Davis so inclined to become a political renegade? Why weren't more of his buddies radicalized? "A lot of my friends," Davis says, clutching the steering wheel, "are more responsible than I am. They took greater responsibility for their families, their siblings, and people they loved." It’s very "Thornton Wilder, the content of so much American experience." He admits to not being one of "those different souls who are trapped because they're responsible."
We talked about memoir then, and the inherent pitfalls of telling our own stories. Davis dislikes memoir. He terms the form "a terrible genre," self-referential, self-serving, untrustworthy. He says he'll probably never put down his own peculiar journey, but he has thought a lot about "why a person such as myself, out of such an average background, ends up with the belief system I have, who leads the itinerant life that I have, who embraces the things that I do. It's not clear to me how certain predispositions to certain beliefs or lives exist." And yet, if Davis never writes his story, we'll never know how he got out of Bostonia more different than anyone he knew.