

# The Urban Ballet of Broadway

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*Broadway in Downtown Los Angeles was once the western equivalent to Broadway in New York. Instead of theaters, the street was lined with the world's most lavish movie houses and elegant department stores. As downtown lost its importance and demographics shifted, the street started to lose its glamour. Over time, movie theaters closed, department stores moved into malls, and the street became somewhat of a dead zone. But life returned with Mexican immigrants in the 1980s, and today Broadway is fully engulfed in the Downtown renaissance. This is the street where I walked to work every day this summer.*

*As the Southern California sun slowly rises over Downtown Los Angeles, the streets slowly wake with life. A crew of city workers in purple polo shirts cleans sidewalks, empties trashcans, and waters planters. At the same time, shop owners arrive at their stores. Most of the actual owners are Korean, but all employees are Hispanic and the only language spoken in this part of town is Spanish. And the variety of stores! Meat markets, sneaker stores, bridal and Quinceañera dresses, everything for 99 cents, jewelry, cash advance parlors, toy stores, and cell phone providers that offer pay-as-you-go with no social security or identification card required. If a woman finds the perfect wedding dress, and has the perfect man at her side, she can walk down a nearby block to get married underneath the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.*

*By nine in the morning, things start to get louder. The shopkeepers are now installing elaborate displays of the merchandise on the sidewalks to lure customers into taking a closer look at their stores. Because merchandise alone might not be enough to stand out among the hundreds of shops, stores are in a never ending fight for the loudest and flashiest signage one can imagine. Visual overload is your constant companion on Broadway.*

*In the meantime, buses roar down the street to unload tens of thousands of workers and customers that will flood the sidewalks throughout the day and evening. However, not too many people are here to shop yet. Most hurry by on their way to work, stopping in small stores to get coffee or sweet Mexican baked goods for breakfast. But then there is one species that instantly stands out – tourists. By noon they are swallowed by the masses on the sidewalk. But right now, they are out in the wide open, walking in their shorts and with their cameras ready, wearing a constant look of confusion on their faces. Somehow, their travel guide recommended Broadway as a special urban adventure and here they are. After a day on Rodeo Drive and in Hollywood, they find themselves in this strange hybrid of bombed out Detroit buildings and Mexico City hyperactivity. And now things are slowly picking up. Because even loud signage might not be enough, each store comes with an additional feature – sound systems that can match those of any club. Some stores don't get that sophisticated and simply put an enormous speaker on the sidewalk. But the end result is the same: the ruthless bass of reggaeton beats hits your stomach every step you take. In addition, all stores have touts on the street who use their voices to get the attention of bypassers: "Senor! SENOR!!!"*

*By noon, the streets are bustling with lunchtime activity and one needs all his attention not to run into other shoppers. The smell of fresh tortillas and fried carnitas is in the air. People are packed tightly into little taco stands, no more than holes in the wall, selling every Mexican dish imaginable. Just ask on the street, and everyone can tell you which stand is most famous for which dish. Walking by, the eye catches huge piles of meat next to towers of corn tortillas. Each stand has its own burly boss who yells orders while teenagers (most likely just arrived from some rural Mexican state) are chopping up onions, limes, and cilantro. This might seem like a shady food option to most Middle Americans, but it is still the most proper lunch option in this part of town.*

*Nothing is more cherished by Angelenos than these street vendors and the push carts that sell bacon-wrapped hot dogs, fresh-cut fruit, and ice cream. There is only one problem: the carts are illegal. If the police get you, the cart is impounded and most vendors will lose their livelihood. To prevent this from happening, everyone works together; as soon as a cop comes close, a warning is passed on by everyone on the sidewalk, and the carts are pushed as fast as possible out of sight into the nearest alley way.*

*And then there are all the characters who are not vendors but have their own special spot on the sidewalk. The old Vietnam Veteran in his wheelchair playing John Lennon songs on his cassette player, the guy with his shuffleboard hustling bypassers for a game, the old lady reading your palms. They are outcasts of society, but on Broadway they are protected. Everyone knows them; no one would ever dare to harm them in any way. This is the magic of this street. Most people live just above the poverty line and many are illegal. As an outsider, this frantic part of the city seems hostile. But everyone here is in it together. They all take the bus, they all buy their \$2 jeans, and they all eat \$1 tacos. And they all live with the constant fear of deportation. Yet on this street, only a few blocks from the financial district, they respect each other and keep each other safe.*

*Changes have come with the recent arrival of expansive lofts in old rehabbed buildings. On the bad side, some of the small stores are replaced with national chains and trendy restaurants. On the good side, Broadway is gaining nightlife. Until recently, the street pretty much shut down once the stores closed. These days, young professionals take their dogs for late night walks, enjoying their status as urban explorers. Some of the old theaters are being meticulously restored, attracting audiences late at night, and side street cafés or pubs are busy until the wee hours.*

*Some are concerned that these new arrivals will ultimately take over Broadway's Hispanic character. But for now, this is still one of the most unique streets in the world. The other day I was walking from my office to the subway station at Pershing Square when suddenly I heard a whistle. "Ahhh... Señor... fresh tacos for you!" A head peaked out of the entrance to a dilapidated apartment building. Inside the hallway was a little stand with four containers of meat, tortillas and a cooler with soft drinks. Next to it were plastic chairs and a table. While eating my illegal \$1 tacos, I started chatting with the cook. "See, this is not Taco Bell. We don't eat no sour cream or cheese. Just cilantro and onions." Indeed, he did have the best tacos I had ever tasted. And this is why I love Broadway.*