URBAN ODYSSEY

*The Making of Modern Los Angeles* (Nick Patsaouras. ORO Editions, 624pp, $30)

An inspiring story of a penniless Greek immigrant, who emigrated to the US for an education, established a successful business, and spent the next 40 years helping to make his adopted city of Los Angeles more livable. It should be mandatory reading for the xenophobes in the White House, assuming any of them can read anything longer than an X post. Patsaouras quotes Plato: “The price good men pay for indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by evil men,” and that’s certainly true today at the national level. Thugs are more exposed in local politics, and the besetting problem of LA is not fascism, but a dispersal of power and lack of leadership.

The mayor’s authority was downgraded nearly a century ago in response to municipal scandals, when LA was still a provincial outpost. Two recent commissions-- one elected, one appointed--fought over revisions to the 1935 city charter, making incremental changes but leaving the key elements intact. The mayor has to share decision-making with 15 City Council members and five County Supervisors. Add to this confusion a scelerotic bureaucracy and a jungle of regulations, and it’s no surprise that the metropolis has repeatedly failed to realize its potential. Some might say the same of New York and other great cities, but it’s a sad contrast to Paris, which can still make grand plans to stir one’s blood.

Though Patsaouras credits Jim Birakos as co-author, his book is a meandering mix of personal experiences and raw notes on specific urban issues he observed or helped shape. Its chief value is that of an insider’s observations of turf battles between power seekers and special interests. As such it’s a book to consult, rather than read straight through. Public transit and utilities are unglamorous topics, but Patsaouras recognized their importance to the everyday life of the city and used his influence to make reforms and take meaningful action. As a result, LA now has a skeletal light-rail system (to replace the Big Red Cars, the streetcar network that served it well until it was dismantled in the 1950s). But the recent disbandment of the Transit Police Force at the insistence of the LAPD has led to increased crime and a drop in ridership.

LA has a record level of homelessness—nearly 70,000 at last count—and its efforts to alleviate this human tragedy have fallen far short. Proposals to build more affordable housing have been constantly frustrated by NIMBYism, outdated zoning regulations, and the tortuous process of securing permits—driving up costs to unacceptable levels. The author explains why. The mayor can make extravagant promises but the Lilliputians rule; each council member feels an obligation to neighborhood groups fearful of low-income people invading their community, and less affluent residents afraid of gentrification. LA has a great concentration of progressive architects who have developed innovative low-rise, high-density housing but they’ve received little encouragement beyond a handful of non-profits dependent on private donations. The adjoining municipalities of Santa Monica and West Hollywood have a much better record.

It might help if there were more dedicated public servants like the author. It’s hard to measure his accomplishments, since all were dependent on collective action, but his sharp perceptions and the range of his interests are impressive. He recalls the successful effort to improve air quality, banishing the smog that had become a symbol of LA, introducing a fleet of non-polluting express buses, and building such defining landmarks as Walt Disney Concert Hall. He provides a candid account of a $1.6 billion boondoggle; the misconceived, mismanaged widening of Interstate 405, the main north-south artery of West LA, which is now more traffic- clogged than it was before. The mayor likened the project to throwing a sponge into the ocean. Failures were offset with successes. Patsaouras extols some of the architects, developers and administrators who made a difference and expresses guarded optimism for the future.