



Urban Legends: Adventuring in the City

by Kenneth Hite

"There are a million stories in the naked city."
- - *Introductory Narration, The Naked City TV show*

Ever since the days of *The City State of the Invincible Overlord*, the concept of "city as dungeon" has buttressed the urban roleplaying genre. Every store holds treasure, every warehouse conceals a secret, and every back alley is a wandering monster attack waiting to happen. This notion of the city as a wonderland where the laws of logic and commonplace life can be suspended seems to have begun with the Haroun-al-Rashid stories of Baghdad in the *Arabian Nights*. Apparently, before then cities were just pestilential hellholes to be avoided or ignored in popular tales and fantasy. In modern times, this legend saw a rebirth in the "Baghdad-on-the-Thames" writings of Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, and eventually Arthur Machen and Lord Dunsany. (Although Dunsany is best known for his more traditional fantasy, anyone who doesn't get three or four dozen great game ideas from reading his short story "A Shop In Go-By Street" is probably better off drawing ten-foot-wide corridors on graph paper for another year or two.) To them, London had grown so big and so strange, and was so full of criminals, eccentrics, and mysterious foreigners, that it literally became a fantasy setting to rival the more rustic mysteries of Pegana or Middle-earth. Now, of course, the "big wild fantasy city" is a cliché known to all, which is to say, it's a perfect roleplaying setting.

This archetypal "big mysterious secret city" can work wonders in a horror, conspiracy or secret history game, if you do a little research or a lot of background work. *Vampire: the Masquerade* subconsciously recognized the power of the "mysterious city," and so vampires stay in cities to feed and to shelter from the werewolf-plagued countryside. Although that particular image probably owes more to the Gothic-Romantic notion of the cities as the center of dark forces sucking the life out of the people (Blake's "dark Satanic mills," remember?), putting the two together can make your city a terrifying place indeed. Those dark forces, are, of course, controlled by parasitical conspiracies: the notion of "city as place of evil contagion" and "conspirators as source of evil contagion" works like ham and eggs. The fact that many cities are, in fact, controlled by shadowy coalitions of building developers, political bosses, newspaper publishing magnates, and criminal bosses makes this theme work even better. Doing a little digging into your own city's (or your game city's) history and political culture will repay you with hundreds of plot threads to hang campaigns on. In cities with magical guilds, for example, the question of which sorcerer's guild gets the anti-demon warding contract will have more than academic interest to it if it turns out that they've been skimming the cream and using substandard magical materials when the Lords of Hell show up

outside the gates.

In addition to the secret politics and secret history of your game city, it can be fun to work up a secret geography as well. Not only can the various basements, subway tunnels, coal-delivery systems, and sewers connect into a vast underground labyrinth (and let you use all those graph paper maps again) controlled by the armies of the Rat God, the actual geography of the city can conceal a secret. London, for example, has a number of secrets to its design: the Ludgate neighborhood is named for the gate, dedicated to the Celtic sun-god Lludd, which used to stand there. Solar magic, or magic conducted on August 1 (Lughnasadh, the holy day of Lludd) might be more powerful in Ludgate as a result of the accumulated psychic-magical energies of the site - - in [GURPS](#) terms, it might be one mana-level higher. More dramatically, connecting the five murder sites of the Ripper killings makes a pentagram: what underlying geometric secrets did the Masonic Ripper cult reveal in 1888? (Of course, just about *any* five sites make a pentagram, which you can use to great effect in any urban game, if only to make the players pay paranoid attention to the map.) Alan Moore's Ripper comic book *From Hell* connects the Ripper killings to the "sacred geometry" of Nicolas Hawksmoor's 17th century churches (as revealed in Peter Ackroyd's incredible novel *Hawksmoor*), and when you bring in ley lines, *feng shui* and other cool stuff from [GURPS Places of Mystery](#) or [GURPS Religion](#), the scores can really change. London's layout, for example, owes a lot to the work of 17th-century architect, student of Stonehenge, and Masonic Grand Master Sir Christopher Wren: if he laid out the entire city as a "magical battery" to draw ley energies from stone circles to certain power points, the factions controlling those points could grow mighty powerful indeed. Victorian-London *Feng Shui*, anyone?

"I find, upon thinking about Hell, that it must be still more like Los Angeles."
- - Bertolt Brecht

You can play the mystick geometry game with any city, of course, and contort secret history to prove that Daniel Burnham was in the pay of the Lost Tribes of the Hollow Earth when he designed Chicago, or that Baron Haussmann's Rosicrucian connections were the key to his redesign of Paris in the 1860s and 1870s. Fritz Leiber does a tremendously spooky job of urban horror and mystic geometry in San Francisco with the magickal discipline of "megapolisomancy" in his novel *Our Lady of Darkness*, and Dean Motter, et al., did much the same thing with the fictional Radiant City in the comic book *Mister X*. I personally had a great deal of fun building a secret mystical geometry for Los Angeles in my recent *Call of Cthulhu* campaign, and I figure I'll use some Los Angeles examples to demonstrate what I'm talking about in the next few paragraphs.

Stolen Water

Los Angeles owes its very existence as a major metropolis to secret history and conspiracy. The Los Angeles Basin is a desert, watered only fitfully by the runoff from the San Gabriel Mountain snowfalls into the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers. In 1904, a combine of city politicians, developers, and publishing barons sent former mayor Fred Eaton to the Owens Valley, 230 miles north of Los Angeles, to purchase the water rights to the Owens Valley. Eaton used forged credentials to pass himself off as a federal official, telling the Owens Valley farmers that the water rights were going to a federal dam project. Once Eaton owned the rights, the combine hired the brilliant engineer William Mulholland to build an aqueduct to carry Owens Valley water south to L.A. The combine convinced the voters to pay for the

aqueduct by dumping the city's reservoir water out to sea, convincing the voters that a drought was imminent. By routing the aqueduct through desert land in the San Fernando Valley that the combine owned, Eaton and the others were able to make millions of dollars when the Valley suddenly became an agricultural paradise. Roman Polanski's movie *Chinatown* portrays a barely-fictionalized version of the conspiracy; GMs looking deeper can no doubt find great significance in the vampiric theft of life-giving water to feed the city. Did Mulholland create a new ley line as well, drawing mana from the sacred lands of the Chumash into the Dream Factories of Hollywood?

Bradbury Building and Mount Wilson Observatory

The Bradbury Building, a rococo fantasia in the heart of downtown Los Angeles, and the Mount Wilson Observatory, high in the San Gabriel Mountains to the northeast, have one thing in common: they were commissioned by nonhuman entities. The architect of the 1893 Bradbury was an amateur who received the plans and inspiration while communing with the spirits on a ouija board. Is the Bradbury Building a collector for ectoplasmic energy, or a gateway between Summerland (the place where spiritualists of the 1890s believed that ghosts lived) and the land of Endless Summer?

George Ellery Hale built the Yerkes Observatory in Wisconsin for the Rockefeller family's University of Chicago, and while there received a visit from a small green man who told him to build a much larger telescope in Southern California. According to Hale, the small green man continuously advised him on financing (Rockefeller money) and constructing the telescope, and on the administration of what became Mount Wilson Observatory. Later, the small green man told Hale to build yet another observatory, although Hale died before the Mount Palomar Observatory outside San Diego could be completed. Was the little green man a Martian or Alphan trying desperately to signal his lost mothership? A fertility god hoping to build a modern megalithic network between Chicago and Los Angeles (where Route 66 eventually became America's Ley Line)? A faerie prince playing an elaborate practical joke?

Devil's Gate

Devil's Gate Dam sits just west of Pasadena and just south of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and Caltech. Here, rocket scientist Jack Parsons tested his revolutionary formulae for solid rocket fuels during the 1930s and 1940s. Parsons is the only avowed black magician, therefore, with a crater on the Moon named after him. Jack Parsons was, it seems, a ritual magician, a disciple of Aleister Crowley, and a practicing alchemist. (Perhaps if he'd practiced a little more, he wouldn't have blown himself up along with his home laboratory in 1952.) In 1946 and 1947, Parsons engaged in a number of workings, attempting to incarnate himself as the Antichrist, summon the Whore of Babylon, or create a magickal homonculus. Was the wave of UFO sightings in the Southwest the result of Parsons' opening a gate that should have stayed closed? Early Mojave Desert UFO contactee George Adamski had occult connections to, among others, the pseudo-Nazi Silver Shirt and Soulcraft movements of William Dudley Pelley. Between Jack Parsons and Wernher von Braun, the GM can build any number of exciting plots involving Nazis, UFOs, secret Moon missions, and NASA. Many researchers into this kind of thing believe that sites named after devils (such as Devil's Gate Dam) become reservoirs of black-magical or bizarrely dangerous energies - - or that those energies subconsciously influenced the person who named the site in the first place. Get out your street maps and think what kind of spiritual energies worked on the naming of your city's landmarks.

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Article publication date: May 15, 1998

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