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LANDING IN L.A.

## Meet Olga Garay, head of LA's Cultural Affairs

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Wally Skali, Los Angeles Times

**OUT AND ABOUT:** Olga Garay, the new head of the city's Cultural Affairs Department, stands in front of a mural in Los Angeles.

**The executive director hopes to reach out and open doors to the city's art centers, galleries and theaters.**

By Charles Koppelman, Special to The Times  
May 18, 2008

*This is part of a series of occasional articles observing newly arrived cultural figures as they seek to get the lay of the land in Southern California.*

LATE IN the afternoon you might imagine that Olga Garay, the executive director of the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, is primping for an L.A. Phil concert at Disney Hall, an art opening on Wilshire Boulevard or a premiere at the Ahmanson. Instead, she clutches the steering wheel and fights surface street traffic getting to San Pedro for a 6 p.m. appointment.

She's on her way for a tour of a shut-down former firehouse where her department plans to invest a little money. ("Just to warn you," the note on her schedule says, "it's pretty unappealing inside.") This is Garay's method for getting to know the complex shape of L.A. It's grass-roots, do-it-yourself and hands-on. Of course, having recently arrived from New York, where she was based for nearly 10 years, she needs a little help.

"On my first 10 days working here last year, I got so lost I was practically crying," she says, turning down the jazz station she normally listens to. Typically, this is a story she tells on herself, not the least embarrassed. "I got one of those GPS things and I told it where I wanted to go. But nothing happened!"

She continues, straight-faced. "So I called the emergency GPS number and spoke to this guy," who couldn't believe she was talking to the device. She throws back her head and cackles: "I'm like a mental midget!"

While Garay may need briefing on new technology, she's a quick study when it comes to what is happening in the world of arts and culture. The self-deprecation masks her thrill at the challenge of putting the city of Los Angeles front and center in supporting, promoting and underwriting the arts. Being outgoing and gregarious, she has the temperament for a job that requires frequent public meetings and encounters with new acquaintances.

The Performing Arts Firehouse in San Pedro is emblematic of Garay's priorities -- supporting disparate grass-roots arts communities, being strategic with limited and shrinking funds and enabling greater access and usage of the city's various facilities.

"I'm trying to be responsive on the ground to what the community and the artists are telling us and what the City Council members are saying," she said earlier over lunch in Venice when she had reverse sticker shock ("I thought I was going to get a little salad. This would cost \$20 in Manhattan!").

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The inner sanctum is decorated in dark-brown hues and there's a painting behind the mayor's desk by Robert Graham, an L.A. scene more ideal than surreal featuring an empty freeway. Near the mayor's desk is a child's drawing with the salutation, "To: Daddy/Mayor."

As it turns out, the mayor simply wants to make introductions between Garay and Davidson: "You should get to know each other -- it'd be important to take advantage of Davidson's credibility and standing in the arts community to figure out some kind of joint effort."

Davidson, no slouch when it comes to understanding the connection between resources and programs, asks about Garay's budget.

"It went down under (James) Hahn," Villaraigosa interjects. "He actually tried to eliminate Cultural Affairs, but I stopped that."

The discussion turns to philanthropic sources and how, like the city library, Cultural Affairs should set up a parallel nonprofit charitable organization to attract non-government funds. Efforts to do that are underway.

Not long after that meeting Garay was told, in light of the city's financial squeeze, her budget was going to be cut by 40%. "When I heard that I had a cow!" she says. "And I reminded Ray Cortines I hadn't unpacked my bags yet." Whether it was her warning or Villaraigosa's commitment to culture, the figure changed. Instead Garay's department faces a 6% reduction.

Garay finds Los Angeles vibrant and accessible. "I think there is more going on in L.A. than people give it credit for. It seems to be more open. In New York, you have to know people to get involved. Here, people are more willing to let you into their circle. It's more celebratory than it is in New York -- a more forward-looking spirit that says, 'I can make this happen!'"

Still, Garay hankers for the density and intensity of East Coast neighborhoods. She recently leased a condo in the new complex at Sunset and Vine. "The vibe is alive with pedestrian traffic and I can walk to the Hollywood farmers market."

Following the tour of the firehouse, she attends a concert up the street at the Warner Grand Theatre, also a Cultural Affairs property. This is a sold-out show -- the Evergreen Symphony Orchestra from Taiwan is making its North American premiere. The young women wear long dresses of evergreen velvet, their hair up uniformly in buns.

Councilwoman Janice Hahn begins by inciting local cultural pride: "Don't you love it that this orchestra is not downtown at Disney Hall or at the Music Center? But here in San Pedro at the Warner Grand Theatre!" Big applause.

Afterward, Garay follows through on a lead she picked up at a pre-concert reception concerning a state Assembly bill that would tax art sales and spend those revenues to benefit the arts. She wants to get Arts for L.A., an advocacy organization, involved. While walking back to her car she phones the director, Danielle Brazell.

"They hadn't heard about the legislation," Garay says on the drive back downtown. "For once I connected the dots." Although the legislation did not pass this year, efforts are underway to revise it and resubmit it.

When not in meetings, making presentations, or driving freeways she'd rather avoid, Garay can be found having dinner or socializing with friends such as arts activist Lyn Kienholz; Diane Rodríguez, associate producer at the Center Theatre Group; Philip Himberg of the Sundance Institute; or Josephine Ramirez, a vice president of the Music Center and a Cultural Affairs commission member.

For now, on the way home from San Pedro late at night, Garay is ready to get time to herself. "I refuse to read nonfiction on my own time. I want to read literature." On her night table in the apartment she shares temporarily in Silver Lake, she says, is F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Beautiful and Damned." When there is time, she plans to take up tennis again, and continue exploring the nooks and crannies of Los Angeles -- by foot if possible, but on the freeways if necessary.

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