Meet Burbank

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IT MAY BE THE MOST FAMOUS SCENE in movie history: the closing moments of *Casablanca*, as fog and darkness shroud the Lisbon, Portugal–bound plane on the tarmac while Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman speak their final lines to each other. Any idea where it was filmed?

Here’s where it wasn’t filmed: on location in Morocco, at an airport, or anywhere in Hollywood. That climactic scene unfolded on a soundstage in Burbank, California.

For decades Burbank has served as a largely uncredited location for film and television production, but these days, the city of 108,000 residents bordering Los Angeles is taking its turn in the spotlight. Home to more working studios than Hollywood, and boasting a vibrant, redeveloped downtown shopping district, the self-styled “Media Capital of the World” has cast off its image as a boring suburb. Burbank is attracting new and younger residents who appreciate its relatively light traffic, big-city amenities, quaint residential neighborhoods, and high quality of life.

“A lot of people my age have opted to stay and raise their kids here because Burbank is a big town with a small-town feel,” says Chris Habitz, 35, an agent with Dilbeck Realtors and president of the Burbank Association of Realtors. “You can feel that vibe, that energy that people know everyone and look after each other.”

Located at the eastern end of the San Fernando Valley and just 15 minutes from Hollywood and downtown LA, Burbank has always benefited from its strategic location and sunny climate. For most of its 90 years, the city’s economic base was built on two industries: entertainment and aviation. Lockheed Corporation made its headquarters here starting in the late 1920s, and during World War II, the defense giant employed close to 100,000 workers to design and build aircraft. At the same time, the entertainment industry was becoming an enormous economic engine in Burbank, with local studios such as Warner Bros. and The Walt Disney Co. cranking out hit movies and television shows.
As Burbank expanded, however, scant attention was paid to amenities. In the 1960s and '70s, the popular TV comedy Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In and The Tonight Show’s Johnny Carson took turns lampooning “beautiful downtown Burbank,” then a haphazard collection of industrial buildings and blighted commercial strips.

“In the early 1980s, Burbank was the entertainment capital of the world, but there wasn’t a single movie theater here,” observes Michael Cusumano, a managing director of Cusumano Real Estate Group, the largest privately held landowner in Burbank.

City leaders began plans to revitalize the downtown area in the 1970s, but it wasn’t until the early '90s that their efforts bore fruit with the opening of the Burbank Town Center shopping mall, now anchored by Macy’s, Sears, and Ikea and offering more than 100 shops and restaurants, as well as movie theaters. More recently, downtown has undergone more than $300 million in redevelopment that includes new residential and office buildings, a 16-screen theater complex, and dozens of new shops and restaurants. Nearby, the site of the old Lockheed Aircraft plant that made the iconic P-38 Lightning fighter jet has been transformed into the Burbank Empire Center, an aviation-themed shopping and restaurant complex. In homage to the site’s history, replicas of Lockheed aircraft are perched on pylons at the entrances to the center. (Lockheed merged with Martin Marietta Corp. in 1995 to form Lockheed Martin, headquartered in Maryland.)

Today, Burbank’s leaders understand the importance of fostering a sense of community and local identity. The city promotes a host of events designed to bring residents together, such as the Mayor’s Cup Charity Golf Tournament in April, a twice-yearly Fine Arts Festival, free summer concerts, and the popular fall food fest, Taste of Downtown Burbank. Many events benefit local school programs and social-service organizations such as the Burbank Community YMCA and the Boys and Girls Club. If that sounds a bit small-townish, that’s fine with most Burbankers.

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Johnny Carson's legacy lives on in “beautiful downtown Burbank”

The area of late-night talk shows is glutted with competing programs, and battles between hosts are now conducted on air, in print, and online. So unless you’re of a certain age, it may be hard to believe that once there was a simpler time when only one late-night host really counted for anything.

Johnny Carson was the “King of Late Night,” reigning over America’s primetime dreamland hours for 30 years. Starting in 1962, The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson was broadcast from New York for a decade. Then the show moved to Burbank, and so began the 20-year relationship between a city and its most famous star.

Carson, who died in 2005, was uniquely suited to helm the beloved show. Born and raised in the Midwest, he was a glib conversationalist who had the charm, dry wit, and intelligence that allowed him to chat easily with guests ranging from Ronald Reagan to Tiny Tim. But Carson was first and foremost a superb comic, with a self-deprecating sense of irony and an ability to deftly improvise before an audience of millions. Famed film director Billy Wilder once called what Carson did the “salto mortale,” circus lingo for a death-defying somersault on a tightrope—without a net.

When Carson announced his retirement, the focus of attention from Carson could make or break a guest’s, or a city’s, reputation. A host of comedians owe careers to appearances on his show, and for Burbank, too, the attention had a positive side. Former Burbank mayor Marsha Ramos told the Los Angeles Times, “The Tonight Show put us on the map. Without that line from Johnny Carson about beautiful downtown Burbank, most people wouldn’t even know that we exist.”

Carson retired from The Tonight Show in 1992, passing the torch to frequent guest host Jay Leno. Leno has a far higher profile in Burbank than the famously private Carson had, locals often spy Leno, an avid car collector, tooling around town in one of his attention-getting vehicles. When Conan O’Brien took over the show last year and it moved to Universal Studios Hollywood, it marked the end of an era for Burbank. It also signaled a further fractionalization of the late-night playing field. Earlier this year, as the rivalry between Leno and O’Brien heated up—resulting in Leno reassuming his hosting duties—more than a few entertainment-industry observers noted that Carson would never have needed competitors in public.

When Carson announced his retirement, the City of Burbank honored the legendary host by renaming a public park after him. Johnny Carson Park is located behind NBC Studios, around the block from the area where, each weekday afternoon, lines of Tonight Show audience members would snake down the sidewalk. The small green space features a monument bearing a plaque that reads, in part, “Dedicated to the King of Late Night for 30 years of keeping America up late and laughing.” That serves as a fitting epitaph for Carson.