

# Hegemonic Urban Planning: Contested Space and Interests in Mid-Century East LA

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The culture and community of the Los Angeles Basin, which for thousands of years had evolved as a network of indigenous tribes, was deeply altered in 1781 when colonized by Spanish settlers. What then became the Pueblo de Los Angeles was transformed yet again almost a century later by the invasion of American troops along with subsequent waves of immigration. These continuous trends of displacement have deeply impacted the ongoing formulation of Chicano identity in barrios east of the Los Angeles River. Urban redevelopment and revitalization, as well as resistance against the negative results of these forces, have played such a significant role in localized Mexican-American community action and cohesion that they have become prominent features of modern Chicano cultural identity in East LA. In this paper I take a postmodern approach to conceptualizing the modernist projects of displacement in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; I investigate the historical political motivation for, and social implications of, redevelopment projects affecting these Mexican communities taking place from the 1930s to the 1970s. This paper highlights a shift in relations between the downtown urban political and social elite and Mexican-American communities throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, motivated by modernist imaginaries of the city as well as recognition and fear of Chicano potential—potential which has conceivably been impossible to actualize within the given economic political order.

A more comprehensive version of this project would present a historiography of planning, social thought, Chicano studies, housing policy, community activism in LA, and a deeper investigation into the historical representations of LA's past. For the intentions of this argument, however, this paper will primarily emphasize discourses engaged with the history of Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles and therefore a history on displacement; on community, cultural, and racial identity; on forms of theorizing resistance in East LA; and on the theoretical grounds influencing all these ongoing dialogues. My project aims to question why there seems to be no space, either metaphorically or physically, for achieving more than meager advancements towards overturning the violence of “internal colonialism.” I attempt to synthesize these currents in the writing of history to articulate how forms of resistance sustained by an increasingly sophisticated race consciousness have been effective but insufficient against the overpowering doctrines of the political-economic environment. I investigate three cases of displacement and subsequent reimagining of community spaces, and conclude with an investigation of an academic project conducted at UCLA undertaken at a turning point in modernism.

To begin this investigation I hope to establish a foundation in an epistemological framework regarding the politics of space and identity. Many urban and cultural studies practitioners analyzing the dynamic landscapes of Mexican-American communities draw from the theoretical foundations put forth by theorists such as Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* and Henri Lefebvre's conceptions of spatial practices.<sup>1</sup> The assertion that geographies are saturated with politics and ideology informs the basis for the work of scholars like Raul Villa, Edward Soja, and Rodolfo Acuña. Soja writes at length about the changing role of capitalism in the experience of cities and the struggle for control over the social production of space. Using Lefebvre's contributions to critical social theory, specifically his understanding of trialectics, Soja asserts the role of place in social praxis and challenges the compartmentalized nature of objective space and conceived space. In his

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production Of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK: Blackwell, 1991).

presentation of Thirdspace, the imagined and material worlds merge, where space can be at once concrete and subjectively constructed.<sup>2</sup>

Soja applauds Lefebvre and his avant-garde peers for discerning the role of space and geography in social production of habitat; Villa argues that this same perception is equally prevalent in the work of Chicano writers and artists in the Southwest. Chicano residents' community knowledge and critical consciousness, individually and collectively, is read as an equally insightful counterpart to scholars of postmodern geography. Villa asserts that Chicano art, literature, and cultural practice in general are not just tools to be analyzed but mechanisms of analysis themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Raul Villa's work draws upon critical theory from scholars like David Harvey, whose 1989 work *Conditions of Postmodernity* outlines how "modernism has been identified with the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardization of knowledge and production. Post-modernism, by way of contrast, privileges 'heterogeneity and difference as liberative forces in the redefinition of cultural discourse.'"<sup>4</sup> The emergence of Chicano Studies and the legitimacy it is recognized to hold can be read in accordance with the "pluralistic stance of postmodernism" that "all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate."<sup>5</sup> The centrality of voice and agency in the field of Chicano Studies emerges not only in more contemporary examples of Mexican-American activism, but also as a deeply present concern in the discourse surrounding the roots of Mexican presence in the Southwest.

Contributing his own voice and perspective to the sphere of Chicano Studies, the historian Rodolfo Acuña provides a narrative of Mexican-American history and identity beginning with Anglo conquest of the Southwest. He contends that the relationship of the incoming settlers with Californios was one of colonization, and that this colonial relationship has continued in some form to this day. The denial of this imperialism, he argues, signifies the effectiveness of the myth of Manifest Destiny. Unlike Villa, Acuña at times characterizes Mexican Americans as politically powerless. However, he presents the ways in which communities struggled to defend themselves against the onslaught of development, and certainly does not regard them as passive actors. His work contributes an extensive depth to this history, beginning with the aftermath of the Mexican-American War. Frequently he narrows in on dislocation as a leading mode of abuse against East Los Angeles barrios, occurring in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as in the postwar city. To Acuña, this period in the 1950s and 1960s was an intentional coordinated attack through use of the media, law, and landscape.<sup>6</sup>

Ernesto Galarza has expressed consideration of the timing of this assault, and its correlation with a strengthening collective demand for cultural independence. He suggests that these disruptions were the response of the establishment to the growing political potential of Chicanos in East Los Angeles.<sup>7</sup> I would interject that these two trends have rather been mutually reinforcing: flourishing potential certainly was a threat to the control of dominant powers, but cultural cohesion also came into being in response to the increasing likelihood of dislocation and eradication.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward W Soja, *Thirdspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Raúl Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition Of Postmodernity* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1990), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America* (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> Ernesto Galarza, Herman E Gallegos, and Julian Samora. 1969. *Mexican-Americans In The Southwest*. (Santa Barbara: McNally and Loftin).

Similarly, Norman Klein investigates the realities behind blight removal and the invisible damage it causes. His discussion of how social imaginaries become public policy will be applied later on to a deeper investigation into the underpinnings of urban planning methods.<sup>8</sup> His work attempts to demystify the ways in which the growing instability of white hegemony has contributed to the intensity of reactions in urban planning, whereas Acuña considers changes in planning as a tool of postwar growth machinery, an aspect of emerging neoliberal city building. Both challenge the dialogue to search for a deeper underpinning directing the progression of urban planning.

A gaping hole in the historiography presented thus far is an examination into the variety present within Chicano identities, particularly applying a lens of gender in experiencing urban space. Dolores Hayden brings this to light through exposing the shaky divisions between public and private life, and the limited access to space of groups based on race, class, and gender. She argues that “the body, the home, and the street have all been arenas of conflict” for women.<sup>9</sup> The same applies in intricate ways for other victimized classes, and would doubly apply to their complexity of experience for Latina community organizers. Like Klein, Hayden engages with conceptions of social memory. Her work makes the assertion that public history can be utilized as an emancipatory practice.

On the other hand, Klein, writing a few years later, presents a thesis that seems to push against this vision, or at least investigates the power of public history and its potential for malice in addition to preservation. He discusses the idea of “collective forgetting” and presents memory as being largely informed by myth, which can in turn assist to eradicate the past.<sup>10</sup> This is a decidedly postmodern argument. Returning to Harvey’s claims regarding the importance of heterogeneity in postmodern discourse, we see how historians and social theorists alike begin to reject totalizing discourses and metanarratives. Utilizing this approach, Klein investigates how neighborhoods that were predominantly Mexican were reimagined as criminal, unfixed, and disposable, and in turn were more efficiently destroyed.

Hayden also examines the ways in which those able to assert themselves as the dominant power altered physical community spaces over time. Drawing on histories of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Californio life previous to the Anglicization of the region, particularly from scholars such as Richard Griswold del Castillo who study Los Angeles barrios during the first decades following the Mexican-American War,<sup>11</sup> Hayden argues that Californio families and communities lived in communal ways that were disrupted but not eliminated by conquest. The effects of this limitation of communal space continue to this day, making the Western theoretical division of private and public spheres a perplexing duality for Chicano communities. These matters regarding the lived realities of day-to-day life in East Los Angeles Mexican American communities will be valuable for an exploration of localized community defense mechanisms.

Additionally, comprehending the dynamics of a collective struggle for neighborhood preservation must be informed by an examination of the groundwork of our social infrastructure, namely the legal system, in order to see what has continued to affect and shape our political structures and the lived realities of Americans. The United States’ first comprehensive housing act, passed in 1949, created low-rent public housing for poor and low-income families as well as financial assistance for urban renewal projects, which largely included the aspect of slum clearance. Alexander von Hoffman exposes the contradictions apparent in this act and its complicated effect on low-income families,

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<sup>8</sup> Norman M Klein, *The History Of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, (London: Verso, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The Power Of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>10</sup> Norman M Klein, *The History Of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, (London: Verso, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

and criticizes its reliance on simplistic solutions. In practice, public housing developments as well as de-slumming efforts ended up fostering the conditions they were intended to reverse.<sup>12</sup>

Slum clearance as it played out ended up having enormous political allure. The narrative that America's poor city dwellers were living in horrible conditions of corruption and squalor elicited both sympathy and fear, fueling the support for removal of seemingly blighted neighborhoods. According to Gail Radford, early 20<sup>th</sup> century housing laws created a two-tiered system for federal policy.<sup>13</sup> The middle class was given programs that assisted with mortgages and private industry development of housing, while the "poor people's program" of public housing provided housing directly through the government.<sup>14</sup> A subsection of planners opposed this division, suspecting correctly that public housing would never have a broad base of support. In the 1940s, as the white middle and upper classes migrated to the burgeoning suburbs, economic interests and city officials became alarmed about the condition of urban blight across the country, considering it a threat to the economic endurance of the city as a whole.

As stated by Richard Freeman, by the 1960s, policies regarding the creation of public housing were replaced with a focus on removing the poor, primarily through President Lyndon Johnson's "Model Cities" program. Under this program, minorities were displaced from their communities, giving developers the license to establish more expensive residences. This dispersal of slum dwellers only served to eliminate social networks and stability, in addition to merely creating new blighted areas where families in poverty would relocate.<sup>15</sup>

Confronting this powerful tide in history stood community structures struggling for preservation and self-determination. Studying the endeavors and dynamics of these groups reveals a number of counterhegemonic lessons that had emerged during noteworthy moments of oppressive spatial assaults. It also raises matters of consideration regarding what freedom may indeed be possible in the given political-economic environment. To conceptualize the historical nuance of these assaults it is vital to look towards the actions and motivations of the dominant elite powers both during, prior to, and following the events in question.

Through investigations into a number of historical occurrences in which the interests of the downtown elite emerge, the most clear and consistent motivation has been capital. In the 1930s, when community organizational structures were less sophisticated or cultivated than they would become by the '50s and '60s, the elites valued the barrios of Los Angeles primarily for their ability to be commodified and consumed.<sup>16</sup> This becomes blatantly clear through an examination of a promotional video of Olvera Street in 1937, "A Street of Memory," directed by William M Pizor. For whose direct benefit this was made is undocumented; regardless, it was created to benefit the tourism industry and put the Mexican quarter on display.

Olvera Street is located west of the river, and is in the heart of the downtown. This area was the site of the city's economic and cultural development under Spanish colonial rule until Mexico's independence in 1821, and under Mexican rule before California was ceded to the United States in 1847. Due to the construction of the railroad and the city's massive growth in population by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to William Estrada, it became "a forgotten remnant of the city's

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander von Hoffman, "A Study in Contradictions" (2000).

<sup>13</sup> Gail Radford, "Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Era," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Alexander von Hoffman, "A Study in Contradictions" (2000), 303.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Freeman, "The 1949 Housing Act versus 'urban renewal'". EIR Volume 23, Number 50, December 13, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege*, 1984.

Hispanic roots as Anglo-American cultural hegemony set in.”<sup>17</sup> After decades of neglect and poverty, the street had in fact become a center for disenfranchised Los Angelinos, often serving as a meeting place for working-class movements, as many immigrants from the 1910s were influenced by radical politics in their countries from which they emigrated. Beginning in 1926, Christine Sterling, a white newcomer to Los Angeles, took it upon herself to restore the historic Avila Adobe, saving it not only from dilapidation but complete destruction from the proposed development of Union Station. Her project eventually expanded to the complete reconstruction and reimagination of the street, a romanticizing and commercializing undertaking.<sup>18</sup> Olvera Street is idealized by Sterling, as well as in this short film, as timeless “Old Mexico,” connected to a nobler, simpler past.

While this presentation is condescending, the street does indeed have a past that reaches back to the earliest days of Los Angeles as a settlement. However, the nature of that past is obscured in how the street life is displayed in the film, reflecting not the history of resistance, strikes, political action, and poverty, but happy, simple Mexicans. The voice of Wallace MacDonald, the narrator, describes the scene thusly: “Populated with people in Mexican and Spanish costumes, their shops adorned with gay awnings, Olvera street throbs with the spirit of the past.”<sup>19</sup> Towards the end of the promotional video he insists, “The courtesy of the past is maintained. Soft voices, soft footsteps, soft music, the busy world is forgotten. Around the corner they still live as they did yesterday.”<sup>20</sup> With a more complete understanding of the political agenda dictating Olvera Street’s existence, it is obvious that much has changed in the lives of the residents throughout the previous decades, and certainly transformed since Los Angeles’ founding around this area. Construction of a new, groomed historical narrative indicates the modernist need to impose rational order, and raises the question of *why* these community members and spaces of communal social life had to be mythologized.

The people of this community are not portrayed to exist for themselves, but primarily for the needs and interests of the visitors. Describing a scene of a man at a pottery stand, sitting along the street with a guitar, the film narrates: “Truly a street of memories. Soft speaking olive-skinned guides, languid in business. You buy or you don’t buy, what does it matter. Happiness is his when humming an old love song, and he is lost without the inevitable guitar.”<sup>21</sup> Not only do these characters exist for the amusement of the visitors, but they are ostensibly happy to do so. Estrada articulates how this demonstrates “a deep political symbolism and a clear expression of cultural hegemony”, which emerges when considering “the dialectical relationship between who is doing the ‘preserving’ and what is being ‘preserved.’”<sup>22</sup> The act of violence at play here is not singularly the displacement that accompanied Olvera Street’s commercialization, but additionally its transformation into a defanged tourist site in order to assert and stabilize the power of elite civic interests.

The narration directly or indirectly commodifies or sexualizes Mexican women’s bodies a number of times in the 8 minute 43 second video. When describing the delicious food available at La Casita, the camera moves down from the restaurant’s hand painted sign to show a young woman preparing food. As the shot fixates on the woman, MacDonald exclaims that the enchiladas and tamales are

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<sup>17</sup> William D Estrada, “Los Angeles’ Old Plaza and Olvera Street: Imagined and Contested Space” *Western Folklore* 58 (2). Western States Folklore Society (1999), 119.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> William M Pizor, *A Street of Memory*. (1937). Los Angeles California. Accessed through The Open Video Project, Digitized 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> William D Estrada, “Los Angeles’ Old Plaza and Olvera Street: Imagined and Contested Space” *Western Folklore* 58 (2). Western States Folklore Society (1999), 118.

“served hot in more ways than one” with a tone that one might imagine would accompany a wink.<sup>23</sup> The suggestive comment about her beauty serves to make the young woman herself a commodity available to be consumed, her beauty another confection to be feasted on by outsiders, who are present on the street to peer into the lives of these “Others” and collect trinkets to flaunt their cultural depth. Later the narrator remarks, “Beauty in every booth, if not in the article, surely in the attendant.”<sup>24</sup> As a young woman working at the market greets her customers goodbye, she turns her body away from the camera as the narrator sighs an “mm-hm!” of approval. The remark is not kind nor complimentary, but illustrates the entitled masculine lens that places the unnamed woman, along with the entirety of the street, as existing for the pleasure of the tourists both male and female. Foucault’s assertion that the body is the site at which repression is ultimately registered is most apparent in the simplification and sexualization of Mexican women in this context.<sup>25</sup>

The film additionally serves to glorify and simplify the lives of Mexican-Americans as workers. Discussing the trend of buying cactuses as souvenirs, the narrator shares how “you may have the pottery that holds your cactus painted to individual design. No noisy machinery here to spoil the pleasure of a day’s work in creating attractive combinations. A never-ending procession of different designs.”<sup>26</sup> A man in a sombrero, smoking a cigarette is shown using a fine brush to pain the pottery. He sits on the ground, with his feet stretched out in front of him, one crossed over the other. The implication that machinery spoils an otherwise pleasurable task is one that portrays the community as living in the peaceful life of the past. The culture of this street is commodified to the extent that any claim to authenticity is lost; as stated by Harvey, “history becomes a contemporary creation, more costume drama and re-enactment than critical discourse.”<sup>27</sup> A historic building, la Golondrina, is shown in the film as having been painted with the label “The Quaint Mexican Café” in bold red capital letters, further providing the place with a Disneyesque feeling of illegitimacy.

The project that this film undertakes of connecting Olvera Street to a genuine Mexican-American history is a fascinating insight into what threads of history the dominant elite conceptualizes as important to Los Angeles Mexican identity. It exhibits for the viewers the adobe house of Commander Robert Field Stockton U.S.N., which was established as headquarters when America took possession of the town in 1847. The narration shares how “between 1927 and 1930, through the loyalty and civic pride of the descendants of the early settlers, romantic, colorful and picturesque glory of the past was restored.”<sup>28</sup> This segment raises the question of whose history deserves to be protected and preserved; it positions the defeat of Mexican rule as something to be celebrated by 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican-Americans, divorcing them of their cultural lineage for the sake of their American nationality and their new depoliticized identity.

The tourism promotional film ends with the scene of a child sitting outside on a fountain, with the city hall building visible in the distance; it postures, “Who can say which is the envious one? The aged plaza that lifts its tired eyes to the modern admired city hall of Los Angeles, or the sun burned building that looks down on the peace and restfulness of this street of memory...” before fading to black.<sup>29</sup> Olvera Street’s reconstruction is a distinctly modernist project, apparent through its lack of historical continuity and imposition of social order.

Commercial interests of enterprises such as the *Los Angeles Times* exercised this force, as the Chandler fortune was used to launch Sterling’s undertaking. This was in part to establish Union

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<sup>23</sup> William M Pizer, *A Street of Memory*. (1937).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition Of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 48.

<sup>26</sup> William M Pizer, *A Street of Memory*. (1937).

<sup>27</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition Of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 62.

<sup>28</sup> William M Pizer, *A Street of Memory*. (1937).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Station in a location that would better impact his own real estate, but was also conceivably a means of indirectly silencing free speech that had taken place at the plaza, as suggested by Estrada. The radical thought and action that had blossomed around the plaza was read as posing a significant threat to the established political and economic order. The reconstruction not only redirected the futures of the Mexican-Americans who were displaced, but manipulated their perceived pasts as well. Estrada does concede that although it clearly denies Mexican agency, Sterling's project may have served to ease anti-Mexican sentiments, complicating the dichotomy of persecution one might assume between her and the residents and workers of Olvera Street.

Starting before Sterling's recreation of Olvera Street, the majority of Mexican residents were being relocated either by force or choice from "Sonoratown" across the Los Angeles River. The barrios that were established mostly contained dilapidated and overcrowded housing, but mutualistas, or mutual aid societies, were prevalent in the communities as well as a growing number of newspapers, *The Belvedere Citizen* and *The Eastside Sun* being of particular significance. By the 1940s, there was a shift in *The Los Angeles Times'* coverage of Mexican Americans, from glorifying to increasingly negative. The press' portrayal of violence made the Mexican community more vulnerable to slum clearance.<sup>30</sup>

Despite these negative changes, this period showed increased Mexican American involvement in Democratic Party politics. However, postwar development and division of labor made it increasingly difficult for groups with little power or resources to reach government. The federal government had a policy following a growth philosophy, increasing their assistance to big business. A number of Mexican organizations formed which took an accommodationist approach, advocating working within the system. Issues of concern were on the rise—threats of evictions from public housing projects and displacement due to urban renewal was ever increasing. Nineteen-forty-nine saw the passage of the redevelopment act, as well as the election of Edward Roybal to the City Council, as the first Mexican-American City Council member. Roybal was a consistent advocate of his community, often singlehandedly going against the votes of his fellow councilmen. His contestations against urban transformations were incredibly significant: both in the fact that he was able to enact positive, albeit minor, changes, but also in that his presence represented the potential for Mexican political movements to gain traction. The events of what came to be known as the battle of Chavez Ravine solidified his standing as a genuine representative of the community.<sup>31</sup>

After the National Housing Act of 1949, Chavez Ravine, a working class Latino community, was targeted to be a site for public housing. After years of community pushback and organizing the government eventually acquired the land and the majority of homes were demolished by 1953. However, a number of families remained in the area; the Arechigas were the final family to be displaced, and had to be forcibly removed from their home the day it was bulldozed.<sup>32</sup> Studying the coverage of *The Los Angeles Times* on the Chavez Ravine controversy and the portrayal of the Arechiga family exposes the antagonism of the civic elite towards the Mexican community of Chavez Ravine, and the Mexican community on a city-wide scale.

The *Los Angeles Times* during this period was extremely conservative, and was widely regarded as the mouthpiece of the Republican Party. The paper regularly used its power to influence planning in ways that would profit its own class interests, as well as those of its allies in city government. It aggressively supported the election of conservative Norris Poulson for mayor in 1953; it was also

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<sup>30</sup> Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege*. 1984.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas S Hines, "Housing, Baseball, and Creeping Socialism: "the Battle of Chavez Ravine, Los Angeles, 1949-1959". *Journal of Urban History* 8 (2): (1982). 123-144

considered by some to have playing a major role alongside him in sabotaging Chavez Ravine.<sup>33</sup> In the May 14, 1949 publication of the *Los Angeles Times*, two pieces were published outraged over emerging information regarding the Arechiga family, originally printed by the *Los Angeles Mirror News*.

The first article ran with the title, “Hold Property Worth \$75,000.” It claimed the family was “squatting on a real estate cushion of 11 homes... flabbergast[ing] both sides of the Chavez Ravine dispute.” It had received “nationwide sympathy” from supporters who “went publicly for them as poor, destitute people.” Its tone and wording make the family out to be scamming the city as well as the nation, for considering the offering of \$10,050 for its two parcels “insufficient.”<sup>34</sup> In actuality, a private appraiser had valued the property at \$17,500, and numerous members of their extended family occupied the homes described, a number of which were only being rented.<sup>35</sup> This misrepresentation and defamation speaks to the extent of the interest the planners, politicians, and corporations had for clearing the land, and the lack of respect Harry Chandler and his paper held for the residents of Chavez Ravine.

The same day’s issue included the piece “Mayor Bitterly Flays ‘Rigged’ Chavez Pleas,” comprised of a transcript of Mayor Poulson’s statement to newspaper, television, radio and newsreel representatives. He claimed that this emerging information “exposed the hypocrisy of this whole rigged demonstration.”<sup>36</sup> He criticizes other councilmen for not upholding the laws they swore themselves to when they took office; he alludes to Councilman Roybal, not by name, accusing him of seeking limelight. He remarks that “the television actors who jumped to their defense competed with one or two of our City Councilmen for recognition as the greatest clowns of the year.”<sup>37</sup> This need to attack Roybal for supporting the Committee to Save Chavez Ravine demonstrates his desperation to ensure that the public would not sympathize with the organizers.

He asserted that the family received due process, but instead flouted the law and “themselves chose to be evicted by force,” leaving no alternative. Prompting the question being asked by readers and the LA public as a whole, Poulson poses the question, “Is the Arechiga family a destitute victim of the government? Not at all. The Arechiga family is a victim of its own eagerness to extract from the taxpayers more than it was granted by valid court decisions. The family used its own children as pawns to gain sympathy. It was obviously, plainly, publicly, shamelessly, flouting the law.”<sup>38</sup> He subtly incites racial prejudices when arguing that “The Arechiga case is a good example of mob hysteria and how it can be inflamed by some people in prominent places. We have no room in America for mob action. We need calmness, reason and a respect for our society and laws.”<sup>39</sup> The use of the image of a mob elicits a racially charged response, pushing the white audience to mistrust the intentions of the Chavez Ravine community. Racism is employed to leverage dominance over the situation, paralleling Harvey’s argument that “ideological and political hegemony in society depends on an ability to control the material context of personal and social experience.”<sup>40</sup>

Through the voice of the *Los Angeles Times*, the elite interests attempted to launch a smear campaign against the Arechigas, and ultimately succeeded in doing so. Their motivation for this was

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<sup>33</sup> Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege*. 1984, 71.

<sup>34</sup> “Hold Property Worth \$75,000; 11 L.A. Homes Owned by Chavez Evictees: Income in Rents Revealed” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File) - Los Angeles, Calif. May 14, 1959.

<sup>35</sup> Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege*. 1984, 75.

<sup>36</sup> “Mayor Bitterly Flays ‘Rigged’ Chavez Pleas” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File) Los Angeles, Calif. May 14, 1959.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition Of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 226.

certainly not due to a prioritization of public housing as a necessity for the city; Poulson orchestrated a complex deal with the Dodgers' owner, Walter O'Malley, cancelling the construction of the housing units and appropriating the land for the private, commercial use of constructing a baseball stadium.<sup>41</sup> It was integral that the public not sympathize with the plight of the Arechigas and the other community organizers of the campaign to save Chavez Ravine, in order for the civic powers to continue their sweeping assault against the Eastside residents, not only in this particular incident but the ongoing waves of displacement taking place.

Not all Angelinos were swayed by the media presentation put forth. Mexican-Americans and other Los Angeles communities defended alternative perspectives on the Chavez Ravine case. Joseph Eli Kovner, publisher of the *Eastside Sun*, was consistently an outspoken advocate for the community, condemning the actions of the city regarding Chavez Ravine in addition to numerous instances of land clearance. Across the river, the liberal political magazine *Frontier* was published in Westwood, Northeast Central LA. Positioning itself as "the Voice of the New West," in June of 1957 it covered the history of Chavez Ravine, "the story of a helpless minority whose rights were indifferently brushed aside by a city administration responding to the real estate lobby."<sup>42</sup> The *Frontier* special report additionally gives insight into the dirty politics of the *Los Angeles Times*. As Poulson was elected during the decade long "battle," the incumbent Mayor Bowron, insisted on "fair treatment for the lobbyless people of Chavez Ravine, [bringing] down upon his head the imperial wrath of the *Los Angeles Times*... In the last three weeks of the election the *Times* gave Poulson 1,019 inches of space to only 219 inches for Bowron."<sup>43</sup> The report shows not only how manipulative the *Times*' approach to news coverage was, but that there were numerous opponents who questioned its power and vested interests in private enterprise and expansion.

However, the *Frontier* has been considered by some to be "a lonely voice within a political wilderness."<sup>44</sup> The power of commercial interests dominated the 1950s, and there was only so much change that opposition could incite. Nonetheless it existed to promote "the idea that a progressive revival in Los Angeles and California was possible, even with a business-dominated mayor and a conservative governor."<sup>45</sup> The need to clear Chavez Ravine, despite being a cohesive community, displays the motivation the politicians of Los Angeles were guided by to prioritize the interests of private enterprise over its own citizens. Photographs from the eviction show the presence of a significant amount of police officers, as well as the media presence that sensationalized the story.<sup>46</sup> One photograph in particular captures the moment of trauma this was for the children, crying and confused by the mass of people.<sup>47</sup> Images of the bulldozer's actions document the destruction as well as the presence of community life existing; surely the majority of the cars pictured were there for the events of the day, but the houses visible serve as a reminder that this was in fact a stable community, not just a slum to be eradicated.<sup>48</sup> Although replaced with a commercial venture that

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas S Hines, "Housing, Baseball, and Creeping Socialism: "the Battle of Chavez Ravine, Los Angeles, 1949-1959"." *Journal of Urban History* 8 (2): (1982).

<sup>42</sup> "Public Housing and the Brooklyn Dodgers: Los Angeles: Double Play by City Hall in the Ravine," *Frontier*, June 1957, 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Gottlieb, "Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City," (Berkeley, CA, USA: University of California Press, 2004), 28.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>46</sup> Miller. *Chavez Ravine Evictions*. May 8, 1959. Los Angeles Examiner Collection, 1920-1961, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>47</sup> Snow and Paegel. *Chavez Ravine Evictions*. May 8, 1959. Los Angeles Examiner Collection, 1920-1961, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>48</sup> Miller.

itself embodies modernist ideals of pro-growth, the intended housing project represents the modernist development of rational and functional environments, as modernism saw the ideal city as functioning like a machine.

As argued by Rodolfo Acuña in *A Community Under Siege*, these “urban renewal programs victimized the poor.”<sup>49</sup> Slum clearance was utilized as an excuse to displace and demolish places that were undesirable for the downtown economic and political interests. Another snapshot of modernist tensions regarding urban renewal took place in 1968, with Boyle Heights’s inclusion in Los Angeles’ Model Cities planning program. Again, the *Los Angeles Times* serves to subtly misrepresent the misgivings of the community in its May 26 article, “Boyle Heights Boils over Federal Grant: Some Don’t Want It.” It quotes an unnamed community spokesman asserting how “Deterioration in Boyle Heights is getting out of hand. Unless the area is given some direction it’s going to get worse—hopelessly worse.” The article goes on to say, “Now in its second year, the controversial Model Cities program is the federal government’s newest attempt to correct the physical and social problems of cities by encouraging broad locally-developed planning and action programs.”<sup>50</sup> Here, we observe an episode of history that accomplished similar goals of the original Chavez Ravine housing project, those of dictating a deliberate order to daily life and the physical space in which it takes place.

Framing the opposition as resentful, it presents the intentions of the program as almost indisputably good, “tying together locally developed approaches to problem-solving and existing federal grants-in-aid.”<sup>51</sup> It brushes over the fact that the neighborhood had been promised by officials that it would not be included in the Model Cities application. The article emphasizes the community organizations that do lend support to the proposal, including the East Central Area Welfare Planning Council and the Los Angeles Community Service Organization, both of which are criticized by Acuña for playing a role that he considers reactionary. The *Times* piece obscures the doubts of the opposition; stating that the concern “centers around the threat of urban renewal or urban renewal-like tactics in physically upgrading the neighborhood,”<sup>52</sup> it fails to directly acknowledge the issue of displacement. Arthur Montoya is quoted, a community activist and president of the Maravilla and Belvedere Property Owners Association, who published a regular column in Kovner’s *Sum*. It quotes him as stating how “the mere pumping of federal money into the area won’t improve it,”<sup>53</sup> but fails to include an actual defense of why this is true, leaving the readers to likely disregard his position.

Another subtle message underneath the writing comes out in the statement of how East-Northeast neighborhoods have “remained largely untouched by [the central city’s] sphere of influence.”<sup>54</sup> This would easily be read as a falsehood when there has been a huge influence of downtown visible in the *lack* of support the area has received throughout its history. “Furthermore, there is a suspicion in the community, which has a reported 70% rate of homeownership, that ‘big interests’ have purposely kept the neighborhood downgraded for future exploitation.”<sup>55</sup> The implications of terminology like “suspicion” delegitimize these concerns, and clarifies that these *Times* pieces are written to lend support to particular modernist narratives.

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<sup>49</sup> Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege* (1984), 48.

<sup>50</sup> Ray Hebert, “Boyle Heights Boils Over Federal Grant: Some Don’t Want It, Resentment Rises Over Boyle Heights Planning,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File) Los Angeles, Calif. May 26, 1968. 1-3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

The fourth and final source I investigate to support my analysis of modernist development projects is not regarding one particular historical event, but is rather a publication from the *Aztlán* journal at UCLA that provides tactical information for barrio defense projects against urban development, published in 1974. In recognition of the forces of capitalist development and state planning, editors Mario Barrera and Geralda Vialpando of *Action Research in Defense of the Barrio* synthesize three interviews with Chicano community activists in order to provide practical knowledge for grassroots community efforts. As Don Parson claims when discussing Chavez Ravine and Bunker Hill, “With the demise of the urban liberalism as a way to channel popular protest into a formal political structure, direct action became the means to combat modernism.”<sup>56</sup> Written at a turning point in modernism, with shifts in the discourse surrounding urban renewal and the emergence of neoliberalism, this text attempts to serve as an intervention, providing knowledge and initiating conversations regarding what forms resistance might take.

The pamphlet states two purposes in its existence; calling attention to policies and processes impacting Chicano communities, in order to “stimulate the formation of barrio defense projects in other areas that are being similarly affected,”<sup>57</sup> as well as present examples of the integration of action and research. The introduction goes on to state,

Since the dislocation of Chicano communities appears to be wide-spread rather than an isolated phenomenon, it is logical to assume that there are broad social forces at work here. A more detailed investigation of the topic may provide important clues concerning the relationship of Chicanos to the larger society today, and to ways in which that relationship may be changing or resisting change.<sup>58</sup>

The interviews express the role of “metropolitanization—the growth of super cities and the swallowing-up of smaller, more human communities that stand in the way of the developmental plans for the giants.”<sup>59</sup> The introduction touches on the “internal colonialism” present in these communities, creating powerlessness and exclusion from decision-making.

In the third of the three interviews, the organizer Rosalío Muñoz reports on the efforts of the East/Northeast Committee to Stop Home Destruction, defending the Lincoln Heights area of East Los Angeles from forced displacement. In addition to his work with the Committee, Muñoz has been published as a journalist in the *Eastside Sun* and other well-known sources that are outspoken in questioning the effects of urban planning. Muñoz speaks well of the community he lives in, but emphasizes the “lack of political power and the condition of economic independence.”<sup>60</sup> Muñoz’s analysis in addition to the remarks of the editors expresses the significance of this work at this particular time, of an unsettling turn in cultural development. Activists like Muñoz, who had to reconceptualize the dynamics of the world his community existed in, were taking part in a redefinition of cultural discourses.

He presents in the interview how the process of displacement operates through the city’s master plan. New developments create jobs but not positions the community members are qualified for,

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<sup>56</sup> Don Parson, “This Modern Marvel: Bunker Hill, Chavez Ravine, and the Politics of Modernism in Los Angeles,” *Southern California Quarterly* 75 (3/4). [University of California Press, Historical Society of Southern California]: (1993), 335.

<sup>57</sup> Ernesto Galarza, Guillermo Flores, Rosalío Muñoz, Mario Barrera, and Geralda Vialpando, *Action Research* (UCLA: Aztlán Publications, 1974), 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

and serve to force out the homeowners through rising taxes. Community residents recognize representatives of the elite, the Housing Development Corporation, the Planning Commission, and the Community Redevelopment Agency, as mediums of implementing unwanted change. Seeing these organizations as centers of power and control, community organizers filled the vacancies in the Housing Development Corporation's Board of Directors—before the City Council shut it down through cutting off funding.<sup>61</sup> Through these histories it becomes apparent, although not directly articulated by Muñoz, that despite a growing knowledge and political leverage of the barrio residents, the city power structures continue to have a larger arsenal of weapons.

Muñoz calls attention to the fact that there is no cohesive Mexican American stance on these issues. However, he criticizes the groups who hope to develop the economic power by cooperating with the white interests, getting “caught up into gabacho related kinds of things.”<sup>62</sup> He considers these individuals as sellouts, vendidos, arguing that “developmentalism doesn't work without political power behind it or without the say-so of the people that are being affected.”<sup>63</sup> It is apparent to Muñoz that the values of the urban elite are so antithetical to Chicano interests that working inside the system will always fail to implement substantial change. His arguments laid out in the interview can be read as reflective of emerging postmodern inquiries, as he rejects the totalizing narratives of order and rationality presented to him through city planners and officials.

Speaking facetiously from the presumed perspective of the city's intent behind these forces, Muñoz says, “There's too many of them Mexicans. They're spreading all over the place. It's too hard to keep them gerrymandered, they're going to start electing politicians, they're going to start taking over the city and getting political power.”<sup>64</sup> He and his peers recognize the important political force Mexican-Americans are beginning to pose. In order to prevent its arrival, those holding power intentionally disperse minorities and make the city instead an ideal space for the white middle class.

The interview with Muñoz provides an argument for the importance of community space and an understanding of the threat that displacement poses. He states, “Being concentrated in a barrio provides a base for getting political power. It's harder to get singled out and divided and conquered... Also, it's a way of maintaining our culture.”<sup>65</sup> This returns us to the themes expressed by Raúl Villa, centering the importance of community consciousness in its ability to formulate responses to the onslaught of dislocation due to urban planning and revitalization, as well as to provide healing and social networks of support. Returning to Harvey's assertion that “one of the principle tasks of the capitalist state is to locate power in the spaces which the bourgeoisie controls, and disempower those spaces which oppositional movements have the greatest potentiality to command,” we can determine that the community spaces Muñoz and others work to defend, are being targeted specifically because of the growing political threat they pose.<sup>66</sup>

As neoliberal logics have guided contemporary urban planning for the past four decades, so too did dominant modernist ideologies dictate the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This investigation into modernist social thought within planning has revealed a reality of dominance and oppression under a veneer of equality, indicating the insufficiency of action that does not additionally combat the political-economic environment of capitalism itself. Regardless of their eventual fates, analyzing the recognized potential of spaces such as Olvera Street, Chavez Ravine, Boyle Heights, and Lincoln

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 31-32.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>66</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition Of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 237.

Heights illustrates the qualities of thriving sites of resistance that hold significant potential for social emancipation.



Fig 1. *Chavez Ravine Evictions*, by Miller, 1959.



Fig 2. *Chavez Ravine Evictions*, by Snow and Paegel, 1959.



Fig 3. *Chavez Ravine Evictions*, by Miller, 1959.

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