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Identity and Social Distance in Los Angeles

Greg Hise

ABSTRACT Scholarship on Los Angeles is steeped in place promotion; how enterprisers, elected officials, and residents developed actual places remains largely unexamined. From 1850 forward members of a regional growth coalition intent on attracting émigrés broadcast images of an edenic landscape. However, contrary to their claims of natural advantage, historical analyses of place reveal the significance of race and social distance for city-building in Los Angeles. Histories of property and land use, of identity and social relations reveal location to be a good, something produced over time. Functional segregation—assigning zones for particular activities—and social segregation—the sorting of people in place by race-ethnicity, income, or gender—are signature aspects of American cities. The means and methods Angelenos have employed to articulate and maintain boundaries and zones in the urban landscape—through myth, popular culture, social reform initiatives, policy, and regulation—are the primary subject of this essay.

KEYWORDS Place promotion, functional segregation, social segregation

Since the real "Border" is more racial than geographical, it is the line of racial contact rather than the Rio Grande which must be crossed in order to reach the Mexicans.

—Vernon Monroe McCombs (1925, 70)

The lines and shapes we draw on the land reflect the lines and shapes we carry inside our own heads, and we cannot understand either without understanding both at the same time.

—William Cronon (1993, 19)

PROPERTY, VALUE, AND SEGREGATION

Common wisdom equates property value with location. When we recite the well-known and oft-repeated mantra “location, location, location” most people assume a site and its context are a given, that value is intrinsic to particular points in space, and that the attribute or attributes that make one site more or less valuable than another site are “natural” or naturally occurring. In other words, we perceive location, and by extension value, as nature’s capital. In such a calculus of nature and its services, valued attributes—elevation and physical prominence, a pleasing vantage, proximity to water or other landscape “features”—are a prod-

uct of geomorphology, geology, hydrology, and climate, or of human intervention in the natural world, say for example earthmoving and landfill, tapping aquifers or damming rivers, planting and pruning. A second set of attributes—access to services and systems (transportation, power, and water), proximity to select institutions and public goods (schools, hospitals, and libraries), as well as distance from activities and functions (such as industry, airports, and highways) and associated externalities (noise, dirt, and pollution) considered nuisances—we classify broadly as land use. Taken together, nature’s capital and the oversight and management of land and its use are acknowledged generators of “location” and hence of value.¹

However, contrary to claims of natural occurrence, historical analyses of place reveal that location is a good; rather than being intrinsic, it is, in fact, an artifact, something produced over time. The production of value is implied in the management of land. That management can be informal—that is, based in custom and precedent such as covenants restricting the nature and quality of improvements; it can be based on common sense—such as a shared understanding that it is better to cart wastes to a spot beyond the edge of town rather than leaving these in the streets; or it can be both. Management of land can also be formal, that is, legal. The legal authority to designate and regulate land use, a police power we delegate to municipalities, has been established and elaborated via courts with landmark rulings such as *Euclid v. Ambler Realty* (1927) and with the recent decision in *Kelo v. New London* (2005). A primary tool that cities have adopted to exercise that authority is zoning. Over the course of the twentieth century an ever-increasing number of municipalities have assumed powers to classify land by intended use (Ford 1931; Weiss 1987).²

Functional segregation and the use of zoning to allocate space in cities according to activities have become so commonplace, so fundamental to urban planning, urban design, and urban life that we have come to see these as the norm, a signature aspect of the modern city under industrial capitalism. In effect, functional

segregation is such a commonplace we have come to see it as the order of things, a phenomenon that occurs naturally. We find this sense of natural occurrence (a fact of nature) represented in trade journals and the Sunday real estate section, in task force reports and candidates' debates, in casual conversation and in children's books. *Principles of Urban Real Estate*, a standard reference first published in 1939, catalogues eleven "forces" generative of value that serve investors, appraisers, financial institutions, and others as indicators for a property's future stability or impending decline. The list has the appearance of common sense: the land in question ought to be located along the "main lines of city growth," near "utilities and conveniences," and the quality of improvements ought to be high. Most significant, for authors Arthur Weimer and Homer Hoyt and for generations of city officials, financiers, and property owners, are questions of compatibility (or incompatibility). The property in question should be of a type with those adjacent, a homogeneity of land use must be ensured over time, and the regulations—covenants, zoning, and the like—necessary to maintain homogeneity and restrict inharmonious land uses ought to be in force. Homogeneity, a uniformity of type, has been a central tenet for the value we associate with location (Weimer and Hoyt 1939).

Absent in such theories and models is attention to and accounting for the social world. For example, Weimer and Hoyt's sole social criteria, number four (of eleven), is "types of people in an area." In cities "various groups of people tend to segregate themselves into definite areas in accordance with their incomes, social positions, and special characteristics." (Though undefined in the text, "special characteristics" is an implied reference to race-ethnicity and to religious beliefs.) As a result, they tell us, neighborhoods show a "surprising gradation in quality from the most squalid of dirty and congested slums to the most tranquil, exclusive, and aristocratic suburbs" (Weimer and Hoyt 1939, 87, 79).

Social segregation, it appears, is also a natural occurrence, and the structures driving this sorting are akin to geology or climate. To the extent that we ascribe to

this interpretation, we view the practice of social segregation as similar to functional segregation. For Weimer and Hoyt, and most neoclassical economists, social segregation is intrinsic, an artifact of market forces and the choices informed consumers make. Further, it is akin to nature's capital and land use regulation in its generative capacity. Social segregation creates value. Those who capture that social benefit live in tranquil, aristocratic suburbs. Other people, with less capital, lower social standing, and "special characteristics" live in districts that are squalid. There is an implied moral order here as well: good people, good places; marginal people, marginal places. The fact that Weimer and Hoyt present social sorting and social inequity as facts of life underscores the taken-for-granted and normative aspects of the claim. It underscores as well the fact that social segregation, divvying up space in cities along lines defined by income, status, and class, by race-ethnicity and by gender is an equally powerful sign of the modern city. Here again homogeneity, in this case an identity of kind, is seen as a value.³

When writing about urbanization as a process, historians tend to consider either functional or social segregation. If their focus is the former, their narratives trace a trajectory from nuisance to zoning. If it is the latter, they examine how social distinction begets social segregation. These causal chains imply direction (from cause to effect). Yet we know through experience and acknowledge in the abstract that causation goes both ways. For example, social segregation produces social distinction; if a person from one group, however defined, rarely sees, much less interacts with someone from another group, this sustains claims of difference. Just as critical are the relations and inter-relations between the types and forms of segregation. Race, a manner of social distinction, is a factor in land use decisions. Ideas about what constitutes a nuisance or congestion such as proximity to people perceived as different are causal factors for social segregation.⁴

A comprehensive accounting of location and of value would consider the role that "special [social] characteristics" have played when assigning space within

cities to certain groups, whether an assignment of space has been a strategy and mechanism for assigning value, and whether both have been steps in a process of classifying or reclassifying land use. We might begin by tracing where the power and authority to classify land lies. Analyses of policy and practice that are attentive to the significance of both physical and social segregation, of land use and social distance, of power and disempowerment, ought to permit us to see partitioning and partitioned cities as contingent products of decisions and actions then and now. Often our actions have unintended consequences. Whether intended or not, the outcomes of our actions today are the basis for subsequent actions tomorrow.

LABELING PEOPLE, DEFINING SPACE

In Los Angeles, as in other cities, the historical record contains repeated cases where equating a district or zone with a particular group is a precursor for a change in land use. Elected officials, social surveyors, public health officials, and other quantifiers and definers of urban space marked Sonoratown, Chinatown, the Macy Street district, and similar districts to fix borders and establish social distance. Often this form of association, a linking of people with space, facilitated a transition from a use of land deemed lower (and associated with lower people) to a higher use, deemed a "higher and best use" for putatively better people (often called "the people"). Such reclassifications have been presented as a collective or common good. In more recent times when local institutions, elected officials, business leaders, and other advocates for municipal expansion—a constellation urbanists refer to as a "growth machine"—identified a city district as "blighted," this designation has been tantamount to a condemnation. More often than not, areas shown as blighted on housing authority maps were "salvaged" through a removal of people, structures, and prior improvements, a process often talked about euphemistically then and now as urban renewal (Figure 1).⁵

A set of vignettes can document the means and

methods Angelenos have employed as they defined place, assigned value, and formed identity. My intent is to sketch out how visitors and residents have articulated boundaries and zones in the city through myth and popular culture, through social reform initiatives, through policy and regulation. The broadest objective of this essay is to contribute, in an incremental manner, to more comprehensive analyses of identity and place, a type of analysis we might undertake through studies of property, land use, and social distance.

Myth, Identity, Place

For Angelenos, race and space have been articulated through physical and social distance (the near and far) and the designation of districts associated with people and activities. These districts and zones (Sonoratown, Chinatown, the immigrant wards) were actual and conceptual. At any moment in time a resident of Los Angeles would have composed his or her individual city as well as their sense of a shared or common city by aggregating structures and spaces (parcels, blocks, streets, districts) and people and places (from the scale of a room to a group's putative territory) into a mental map. An individual's mental map would have contained segments of the urban landscape they knew through daily practice or occasional experience. Their mental maps may have contained other segments known primarily or solely through words or texts such as stories, newspaper accounts, social surveys, or reports from the commission on housing or other municipal agencies. Angelenos have left traces of their mental maps in documents such as petitions to the city council, memoirs, interviews, reports, and actual maps. The latter include boosters' birds-eye perspectives or place promoters' diagrams of territory, guidebooks for touring, as well as property surveys and similar documents. The archival record reveals an urban landscape composed of districts defined by functions and activities: housing here, commerce there; here sites of production, there sites of recreation and leisure; civic life here, religious life there. These sources also reveal people's sense of topography, a literal and figural annotation of the landscape in three

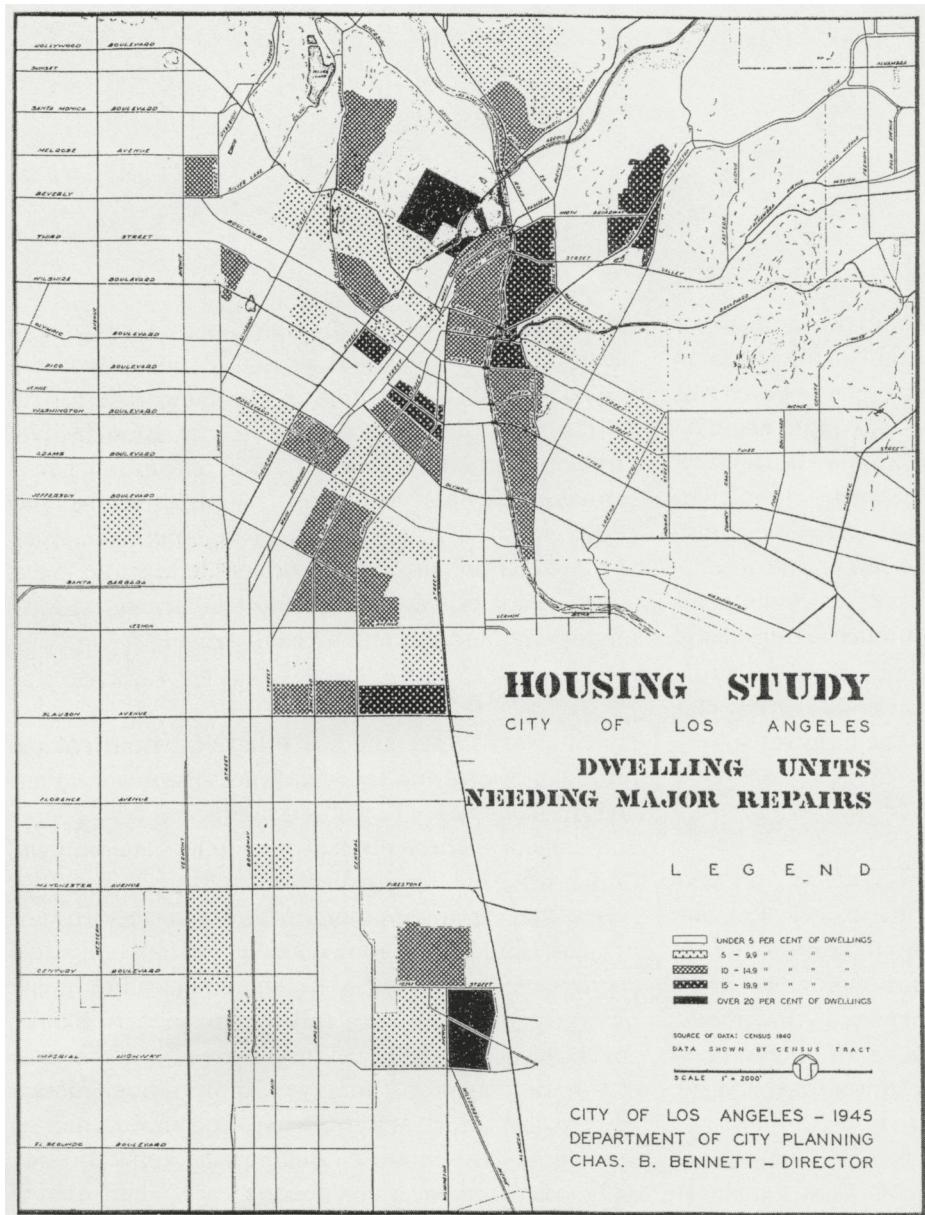


Figure 1. Map of central Los Angeles. The area from Elysian Park in the north and south to Washington Street is within the boundaries of the Pueblo. Note the Los Angeles River, a perceptual and experiential divide between east and west sides of the city. (City of Los Angeles, 1946, 17)

dimensions. On inspection these topographies of place appear also to have been diagrams of race and social distance.⁶

Angelenos' primary coordinates of topography were the customary vertical axis of up and down, a scale of relative position in space of the type people then and now associate with a social hierarchy of high and low. In contemporary Los Angeles as elsewhere this equates to an almost universal social gradient of hill dwellers and flatlanders. In a similar manner we find the use of "east," a compass coordinate, as a complementary referent for the low. Over time, a distinction between west side and east side became a foundational dichotomy for thinking about space in Los Angeles. It served then

and now as a conceptual and actual divide separating landscapes of wealth and leisure on the west from landscapes of labor and production on the east (Hise 2001b).

A few examples from the Mexican era to the first decades of the twentieth century ought to convey the pervasiveness of topography for Angelenos' mental maps. In the 1840s, Pueblo residents prodded the *ayuntamiento* (the Mexican-era common council) to remove the indigenous from their *ranchería* or village located just south and east of the Plaza. Much of the talk recorded in the minutes concerns the Indians incivility. A close reading reveals a series of encroachments initiated by *Californios* (Mexican era residents and their

descendents) desirous of securing land adjacent to the Plaza. (Among those seeking usufruct rights was Juan Domingo, an Anglo who had become a Mexican citizen.) A subsequent displacement of the indigenous to the east side of the river—people Juan Domingo, Juan Verdugo, Luis Jordan, Juan Bandidi, and other Pueblo residents viewed as social inferiors—was followed in short order by the dog pound and other land uses *Californios* perceived as noxious or as a nuisance. Their practice became a pattern that continues to the present (Robinson 1938; Phillips 1980).

Then and now the bottomland along the river east of the Plaza was associated with base needs and uses. (Initially the *pobladores* had sited the Pueblo below the bluff for access to river water but following a flood in 1792 the settlers relocated the Plaza to higher ground.) The river provided residents with a basic necessity as did the irrigation ditches or *zanjas* that it fed and which distributed its water to fields and families throughout the settlement (Figure 2). Multiple informants spot the Los Angeles River running against a bank adjacent to the Plaza, a course that formed the line of Los Angeles Street at that time and up to the present. When engineer J.W. Reagan interviewed “old timers” to compile their stories about the river, its course, its capacity, and its capriciousness, one respondent, Joseph Messmer, estimated the grade change from the Plaza to the bottomland at sixteen to eighteen feet in elevation, an embankment that ran, as he recalled, south to Seventh Street “where it began to diminish.” In 1825, floodwaters changed the course of the river shifting it east of the bluff and south across the plain toward Long Beach. (Before this the river traveled west where it emptied into Ballona Creek.) The resultant bottomland on the west side of the watercourse was “allotted to the Indians by the Padres,” as newspaperman Randall Hewitt recalled. They could “take as much land as they could protect by planting willows and canes” as a barrier to flood waters. According to Hewitt, the “figures made by the cross threads in a spider’s web were more nearly rectangular than were those flats formed by the fences of the Mexican and Indian squatters on the river lands.” As was its

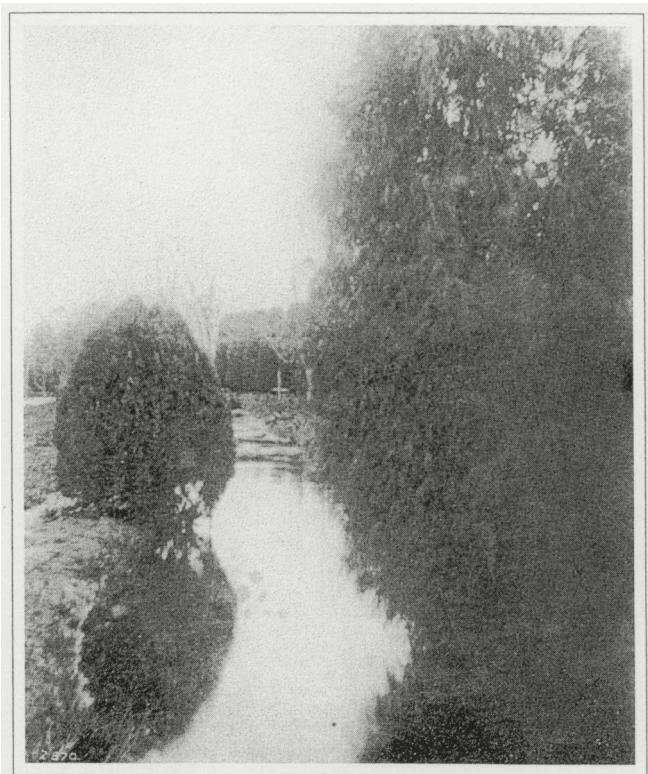


Figure 2. *Zanja*, Sixth Street Park c. 1876. From the Pueblo founding in 1781 up to the first decade of the twentieth century *zanjas* provided city residents water for their households, commerce, and later industry. O. C. Ord viewed a scene similar to this when he entered Los Angeles in 1856. (Courtesy of University of Southern California, USC Specialized Libraries and Archival Collections)

custom, the *ayuntamiento* granted petitioners land for use (as opposed to granting title). Much of this land reverted back to the city in 1850. This zone then became the site for a heterogeneous mix of people and land uses and was known from the 1860s forward as Sonoratown, the East Side Industrial District, and the congested or foreign district with subunits of Chinatown, Ann Street, Macy Street, and the like (Reagan 1915, 34–37, 107–109; City of Los Angeles 1902; Wilson 1880). (I will return to these districts in a later section.)

Repeated references from diaries, travel accounts, and promotional texts attest to the fact that visitors as well as residents equated the river and *zanjas* with *Californios* and particularly women. Lieutenant Edward O.C. Ord's account of an 1856 visit during the dry season begins in San Pedro. A ride through brown mustard grass toward a thin line of green brought Ord and his companions to a route lined by “willow hedges and *zanjas*, or ditches, of flowing water[.] Through these vines and behind the hedges low huts peeped out . . . where under squatted sundry brown dames with maybe two or three bare brown babies sprawling

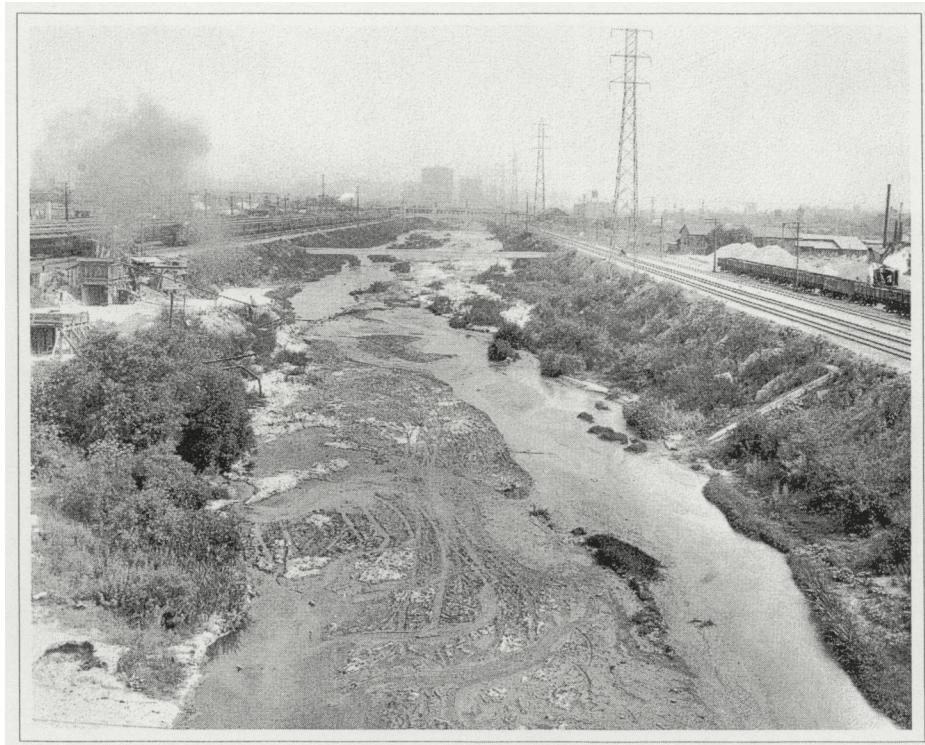


Figure 3. Los Angeles River near Ninth Street. This view of the river bed looking north toward Seventh Street shows a watercourse enwrapped in systems for transportation, power, and production. (Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library)

about . . . [with] a half clad Indian or two somewhere in the corn or among the vines, making believe to work" (Ord 1978). Most likely Ord had spied women washing laundry or cleaning housewares or, perhaps, bathing. Their activity reminds us that the river and *zanjas* served a second basic need for *Californios* and Anglos: the carrying off of refuse and waste. Both the records of the *ayuntamiento* and after 1850 those of the city council are littered with proclamations, petitions, and ordinances intended to regulate residents' use of the watercourses for everything from bathing and washing to discarding carcasses and, increasingly, to control the discharge of chemicals, offal, and other by-products of manufacturing. Municipal agencies were, ironically, one of the leading offenders. From the 1890s forward, the city leased land adjacent to the river to industrialists who used river water for manufacturing and the river to carry off waste (Figure 3). The city spread its sewerage across the bottomlands south of Seventh Street as fertilizer through the first decade of the twentieth century and it maintained its dump along the banks of the river into the 1930s (Ord 1978: 9; Common Council Proceedings, 1872).

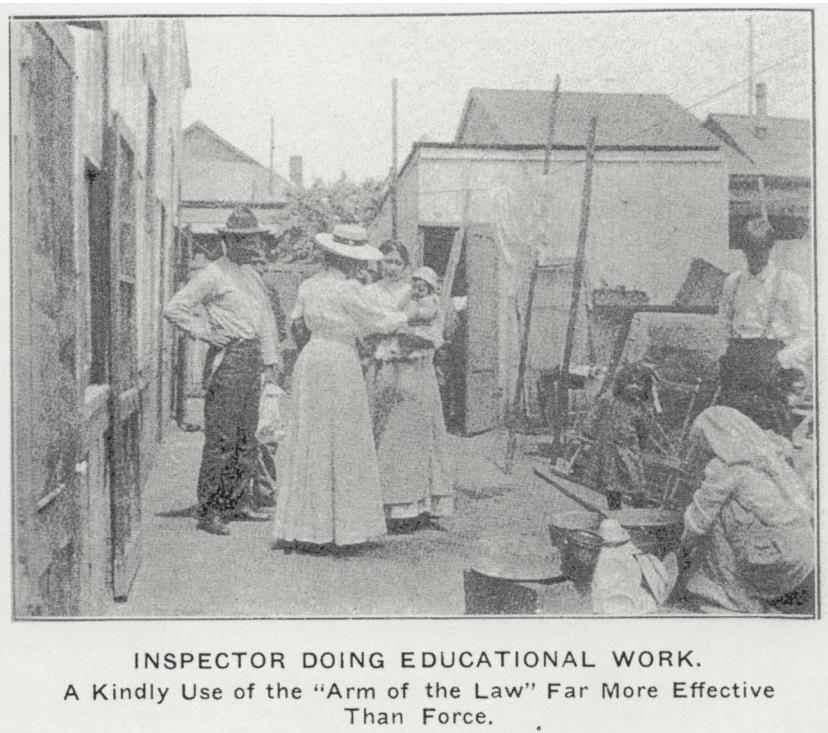
In sum, Angelenos held an ambiguous—perhaps conflicted—perception of the river and the low-lying land east of Alameda Street. Not surprisingly, in subsequent decades, when elected officials, business leaders, and a majority of voters made decisions to locate

slaughterhouses and gas works, to site a Union Station, or to construct freeways, they looked east to the low-lying land along both sides of the river and toward East Los Angeles, Boyle Heights, and Belvedere. Similarly, when social reformers sought to locate Mexicans and to fix the so-called "Mexican problem" in space, or when public health officials strove to isolate an outbreak of plague and to quarantine its victims they too turned their gaze east.

Difference And Distance

Beginning in the first years of the twentieth century and extending into the 1930s, a cadre of settlement house workers, sanitarians, municipal officials, and students and faculty from the School of Social Work at the University of Southern California (most notably Emory Bogardus, a sociologist who trained with Robert Park at the University of Chicago) repeatedly surveyed and studied the remnant adobes, box-car housing, and rows of one- and two-room, party-wall units filed on both sides of deep, narrow lots (known locally as house courts) in the "congested districts" between the Plaza and the river. Although the number of Mexican nationals and Mexicans with citizenship constituted a simple majority in only a handful of blocks, social reformers of all stripes considered this area a "Mexican village" in the "heart of an American city" and viewed its putative problems as the "Mexi-

Figure 4. An inspector for the Housing Commission of the City of Los Angeles visiting a "House Court" c. 1909. The commission described these group dwellings as "so primitive in type that the original cave dwellers possessed a more water-tight roof and greater protection from heat and cold, winter floods and flies" (City of Los Angeles, *Report of the Housing Commission* 1910, 5)



can problem." A photograph in the Housing Commission's 1909–1910 annual report records a house visitor, dressed in starched white fabric from head to ankles, standing with dark-skinned children in soiled clothing. The caption: "a kindly use of the 'arm of the law,'" calls to mind what scholars refer to as the "soft" state; municipal or institutional authority that is evaluative, educative, and prescriptive (Figure 4). House visitors and settlement house workers, school board members and teachers, officials with the department of parks and recreation, and their colleagues engaged in projects to acculturate immigrants; each brought to bear methods more suggestive than coercive. They strove to personify practices the unassimilated might emulate; through emulation, foreigners might become citizens. Regardless of their intention, reformers' surveys and maps called out Sonoratown, the "foreign districts," the "immigrant wards" and, by extension, immigrant bodies as a counter-space within the city (City of Los Angeles 1910; Stoddard 1905).⁷

Elizabeth Fuller, a resident at the Neighborhood Settlement House, an Episcopalian outpost on East Ninth Street, surveyed "Mexican homes" along Ninth Street between Wilson Street and the Los Angeles River and on Channing Street between Ninth and Fourteenth streets. Following fieldwork and visits to fifty dwellings Fuller concluded that a Mexican's use of space was "instinctive . . . [they] huddle together in certain districts"

(1920, 2).⁸ Nora Sterry, a school principal and a student in social work training with Bogardus, examined the Macy Street district. Her essentialist view of culture groups, her conception of Los Angeles as an ecosystem made up of diverse, independent yet interrelated ecologies scaled from the individual (child, student, worker, Syrian, and so on) to the family (sibling, parent), a race-ethnic group, a school district, a neighborhood, increasing in geographic reach and number to the city, and the way she casts her findings are each conventions of urban theory drawn from Chicago School sociology. Similar to their counterparts in New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Boston, Fuller and Sterry defined the problem as environmental and they sought progress, uplift, and improvement through better housing (Sterry 1924).⁹

Sterry's empirical description of Macy Street and its conditions was Dickensian. It was a world unto itself (Figure 5). The streets, she tells readers, were a "veritable maze" with only four streets providing egress. These public thoroughfares were "narrow," "littered with rubbish and filth," in some cases never touched by the street department. The district lay "along the old river bed," three feet below the Alameda Street grade, hence to the "east" and low. Ever more deplorable conditions made Chinatown, a subdistrict within Macy Street, the epicenter of poor housing. Its cribs and dens, its lodging houses, its sleeping quarters over stables were a perpet-



Figure 5. Children, "slum housing," and City Hall. A photograph the Los Angeles City Housing Authority employed to show proximity of people and land uses that ought to be segregated and separate. (Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library)

ual menace to others who might suffer from seemingly eminent outbreaks of disease incubating there (Sterry 1924).¹⁰

Sterry's qualitative assessment obscures her quantitative findings. Macy Street was not a district of house courts; on the contrary, the great majority of dwellings, 113 of the total, were four- and five-room detached houses most constructed between 1890 and 1903. These dwellings were produced during a prior regime of investment in land and improvements. The majority of residents (55 percent) were tenants who paid "abnormally high rents" for their accommodations. Owners of property in the district collected income without expending capital for maintenance or improvements. These owners were holding property in anticipation of capitalizing on increased land values following a conversion to industrial use.

An economist would view these owners as rational operatives whose decisions to withhold investment signaled their projection of future change. In fact, they were reaping a double social benefit. In addition to the standard unearned increment of public investment in infrastructure and services (investments that created location), in this case and like cases property owners reaped the benefit of public stigma. By associating the Macy Street district with Mexicans, Chinese, Syrians, and other cipher groups, Sterry contributed to a discourse that assured this district would be seen as unfit for uses other than industry. As a result of this process, and in conjunction with demands from manufacturers calling for the reclassification of property to create an industry-only zone along the river (a district with a homogenous land use), the exchange value of this land increased through its identification with groups that were stigmatized racially (Sterry 1924).¹¹

Like the surveyors who preceded her and those who followed, Sterry translated empirical findings into an analytic description of place, a description based on distinctions that were experienced and measured as social distance. The author shared with her cohort a predilection for associating districts with a majority population; in this case, the Mexican population comprised

60 percent of the 2,878 residents. Another 20 percent were identified as Chinese, 11 percent Italian, 8 percent Syrian, with the remainder comprising thirteen other "races." Common to these reports is a thinly veiled subtext concerning the nature of the putative boundary separating those studied from those doing the research, hence Sterry's description of Chinatown as "within the walls" of the Macy Street district. There is a fear, vaguely articulated, that the line dividing this district from other districts might be porous (or perhaps not an actual boundary) and a related concern that even if contained, mere proximity to Mexicans, Chinese, or Russians and the proximity of the immigrant districts to the city center might threaten social order and economic boundaries (Sterry 1924).¹²

Ideally the Mexican, Chinese, or Syrian would be near enough to allow for oversight yet removed enough to isolate other Anglos from the immediate presence of these subjects as a person you might encounter, rather than a member of an objective group. The unexpressed, perhaps unexamined, rationale for these projects and practices was to find a point from which Anglos might lose sight of a person as an individual. Once social distance had been established, an individual or individuals might then recede in space and become a figure in a landscape, an unknown among the unknowable many who inhabited the foreign districts in the city. Whether intended or not, the reformers' surveys made visible the distance Angelenos maintained as individuals and as members of social groups. If one were to breach that distance, to cross borders both social and physical, it was tantamount to inviting all manners of social contagion, a fear given substance, seemingly, through disease, pathology, and epidemiology.

A Plague

In the fall of 1924, a few months after Sterry filed her thesis, city officials and public health authorities mapped foreign bodies and assigned space to Mexicans, Italians, Chinese, and other race-ethnic groups after a critically ill woman, Luciana Samarano, referred to simply as a "Mexican patient" in a report from the California State

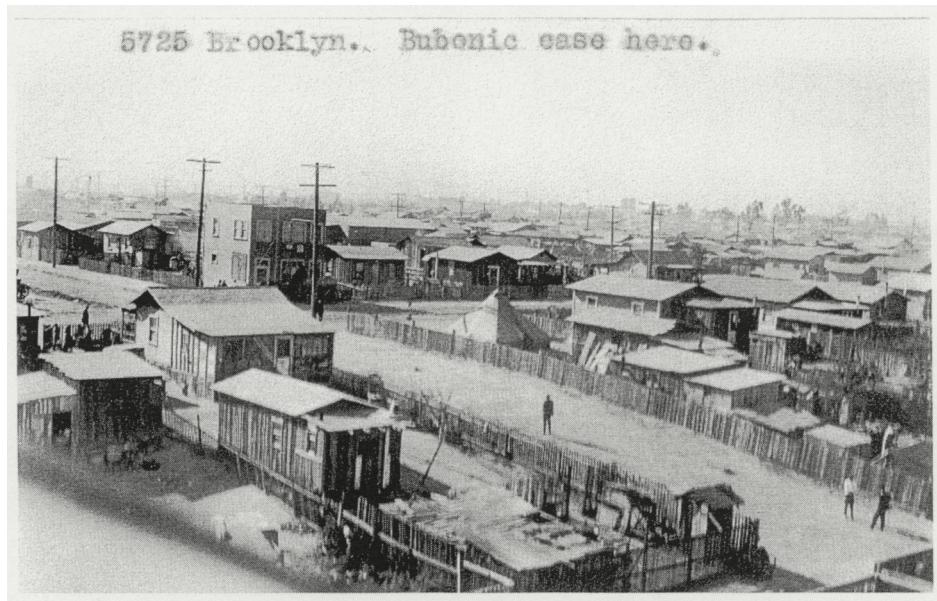


Figure 6. Plague spot, East Los Angeles. One of the “infected districts” health inspectors identified and quarantined east of the Los Angeles River. (Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)

Board of Health, was diagnosed with pneumonia. When physicians from Los Angeles General Hospital arrived at the Samarano house on October 29, 1924, they found family members, relatives, and neighbors suffering from symptoms variously associated with meningitis, influenza, typhus, and pneumonia. Over the following weeks, from late October to December, their residence at 742 Clara Street (in the Macy Street district) came to be seen as a death house; ten or more people who had come into contact with family members would die from pneumonic plague (California State Board of Health 1924).¹³

Fear spread quickly, like a disease. In response to residents' concern of contagion physicians and officials from the State Board of Health and the Health Department of the City of Los Angeles strove to define the disease and its vector spatially, to articulate boundaries, and to police borders. Officials identified, mapped, and then quarantined five infested zones in the city: Macy Street, Belvedere Gardens (a “Mexican district” just east of the city limits), and the Pomeroy Street, Marengo Street, and South Hill Street districts (Figure 6). On maps these districts had irregular boundaries. Health officers drew the line designating the Pomeroy and Marengo districts to include “isolated Mexican homes.” The line around South Hill Street extended out to encircle a single apartment house described as “large [and] occupied by Mexicans.” A State Board of Health analysis fixed the “Foci of Infection” within the “old section of the city,” in the bottomland “extending along the east and west banks of the Los Angeles River” (California State Board of Health 1925).

In his January 1925 narrative report on field operations, Chief Sanitary Inspector Edward T. Ross described the “infected district” with a mix of empirical observation and sweeping generalization. He characterized Macy Street much as Sterry had, with rear housing in “shacks of one or two rooms without foundations; population—Mexicans and Italians.” In other cases the dysgenic zones south of Macy Street were defined as a single structure and a few adjacent buildings. Ross described Frank’s Restaurant, at 115 East Second Street, as located in a section of “old brick buildings” with rooming-houses above shops; “population consists of Mexicans, Japanese, Chinese and Russians” (Dickie 1925, 4). Note the recurrent references to time (“old”), to space and topography (east and low), and to those other than Anglo in reports by Ross, the State Board of Health, and the city’s health department.

Elected officials, spurred on by the Chamber of Commerce and other commercial interests, rushed to craft and enact policies that might restore public confidence, insure public health, and ensure safety in the city. Within three weeks the council had sanctioned repeated municipal expenditures and approved two ordinances. Number 50,283 (approved 21 Nov. 1924) authorized a city department for rodent extermination with personnel “drilled in the combating of plague.” Rat extermination claimed 40 percent of the 230 thousand dollar budget. Twenty-five percent was earmarked for structures, either to rat-proof those deemed salvageable or to remove those deemed beyond repair. Since there were no lines in the budget for the reconstruction of buildings demolished, for replacement housing for

people displaced, or for compensation to those whose property would be left in ruin, we can infer that the mayor and council remained unconcerned that the removal of rats and structures would result in the removal of people. Nor did they express concern that a policy they enacted equated the removal of all three with the “preservation of the public peace, health, and safety” (Ordinance No. 50,283).

Local reporting on the plague shuttlecocked between accepted and familiar poles of a discourse on property and its value, land use, and social distance. On the one hand, the *Los Angeles Times* (most notably) and publications from organizations both public (the Municipal League’s *Bulletins*) and private (*Los Angeles Realtor*) strove to impress the gravity of the plague on readers and to seize upon the outbreak of infectious disease as a means to draft and approve municipal policy. New ordinances extended and enhanced regulatory authority, oversight and, most critical, gave municipal authorities the right to enter, inspect, and assess structures (both residential and commercial) and, if deemed warranted, to remodel or remove buildings they appraised as public health nuisances. Categorizing property as a nuisance (rather than acquiring land and improvements through municipal purchase via eminent domain) freed the city from compensating owners and from replacing buildings and other improvements the rodent exterminators destroyed. A report from June 1925 tallied the results: more than 1400 dwelling units, most of these housing “Mexican wage earners,” had been burned or demolished. Another 1500 structures had been destroyed.¹⁴

Some viewed this crisis in public health as a context conducive for redrawing land use maps and for initiating practices we might view as proto-urban renewal. They saw as well a context for addressing perceived crises in social space. Retrofitting structures to deny a rat access to food and shelter as a means toward management of the rodent population was non-controversial; most cities implemented and maintain regulations similar to the ordinances Los Angeles adopted in 1925.

More notable was the demolition of structures that appraisers designated unhealthful and too compromised for renovation (Figure 7). This policy, predicated on eviction (and forced removal of those who did not want to leave), displaced renters (described at the time as a population for whom the housing problem was an employment problem) and small businesses (that primarily met the needs of local residents), while opening up space for new development. Among the findings reported in a Municipal League-sponsored post-plague evaluation was the housing committee’s discovery that Industrial Land and Development Company, a reputed subsidiary of the Southern Pacific Railroad, was the largest landowner in the quarantined district within the city. “Territory in the vicinity of Macy Street is gradually being changed into industrial sites,” they noted. “Industrial Land and Development is endeavoring to bring factories into the territory, and will not improve the residential property. . . . Tenants are charged all the traffic will bear. When unable to pay they move on” (Municipal League of Los Angeles 1925, 2–6).

The committee presented this sequence of events and its consequences as unfortunate for those left with no choice other than to “move on.” Unstated yet implied in their presentation was an expectation that a change from mixed use (heterogeneous) to a single use (homogeneous), from old to new, from low to high was the inevitable order of things. Rather than seeing this as naturally occurring, we might read the historical record in the Macy Street district as a representative case. Here property owners, whom we might refer to today as an interest group, sought to reap profit through a rezoning of land. Working with officials of the local state and other advocates for growth (a coalition of interests who, like the property owners, viewed industry as a highest and best use) Industrial Land and Development sought to capitalize on an association of a space with certain people. Associating Macy Street with its topography (low and adjacent to the river), with lower people (primarily Mexicans), and with base uses (shacks and house courts) was a step toward a reclassification and recla-



Figure 7. Technical experts touring "slums." Architects (including Lloyd Wright, second from right) promote the demolition of existing dwellings at the site of Aliso Village, a municipal (later state) housing project. (Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library)

mation to a higher use that would benefit the collective or common good, that is "the city." In this sense too, the processes revealed through a study of Macy Street can be seen as a type of proto-urban renewal—attempts to "salvage" land, to enhance exchange value, and to protect persons and property in surrounding districts.¹⁵

WHY SPACE MATTERS

In the decade following the plague, surveyors employed by two federal agencies, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), assessed property, land use, and social conditions across Los Angeles. HOLC property surveys and appraisals provided the data that underlay a program of mortgage guarantees administered by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). That system of federal

insurance for mortgages, and the agency's guidelines for design, construction, and marketing provided a pattern for land use and urban development that promoted social segregation in the post-WWII era. In Los Angeles, HOLC surveyors characterized a site close to the Plaza (designated Area D-35) between Elysian Park and the Los Angeles River "within walking distance of the Civic Center" as a district of Mexican, Japanese, and Chinese laborers. They classified 80 percent of the residents "foreign" and described their housing as substandard frame shacks constructed on land that was "unrestricted," that is without benefit of a deed restriction.

This is an extremely old area which was never highly regarded and is now thoroughly blighted . . . [a] typical Mexican peon district . . . part of it is known as "Dog town[.] [T]he area as a whole is dilapidated

and inhabited by a highly heterogeneous and subversive population—[it] is accorded a “low red” grade. (HOLC, 1936–1939)

The HOLC appraisers’ field observations and color-coded maps directed the flow of investment capital *away from* districts such as D-35, a section of the city they characterized as heterogeneous (in terms of land use and demographics), as associated with marginal people, and which they colored red on their map. Those maps directed capital *into* districts appraisers viewed as homogeneous, with strict zoning controls, high relative rates of owner occupants, and high percentages of white residents, segments of the city they colored green. The effect these appraisals have had on subsequent investment and on patterns of wealth accumulation in American cities are well known. Less so are the ways these diagrams of physical and social value informed mental maps and shaped perceptions of place.¹⁶

Similar vignettes for the second half of the twentieth century might include the razing and eventual rebuilding of entire urban districts such as Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine, which HOLC appraisers and the city’s Housing Commission had designated as blighted. In 1951, the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) designated Bunker Hill, a once genteel residence district, the State of California’s first redevelopment project (CAL-1). The eviction of a mixed-race, mixed-income community of residents and the subsequent reengineering of the site was simply the initial step in a 50-year effort to bring affluent Angelenos “downtown.” A similar course of events led to the removal of residents, many of long duration, from Palo Verde, a predominantly Latino and working-class enclave on the hills and in ravines north of Bunker Hill and the Central Business District. When architect-planners Robert Alexander and Richard Neutra surveyed Chavez Ravine in 1950, they found unpaved streets and pathways, extended households and shared services, precisely what these well-intentioned designers expected to find (in fact were trained to find). In addition, they found what they only could describe as “community,”

a place rich in social capital but poor in economic capital. They were at a loss for words to describe what they discovered and rather than talk about a “future yet unthought” they rehearsed familiar narratives about blight and slums, with disastrous consequences for that district’s residents. Their eviction, and a decade-long struggle over what constituted the “highest and best use” of this land, led to the city’s transfer of 315 acres in Chavez Ravine to Walter O’Malley, then owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, in exchange for a nine-acre parcel. (The land swap, and a \$2 million city investment in site improvements, was justified as necessary for securing a professional baseball team in Los Angeles; Dodger Stadium was constructed in Chavez Ravine.) That battle over land use and public subsidies for housing—a contest that led to the recall of the city’s mayor, Fletcher Bowron, in 1953—and the Council-led evisceration of support for municipal, state, and federal programs that were intended to make better housing available to all, reveal lived experience in processes that often remain abstractions, such as displacement and gentrification. Examples like Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine, and similar cases in Los Angeles and in other cities, reveal context and contingency. They remind us of what is at stake when we fail to imagine, when we fail to transcend the limitations of disciplinary language. These stories encourage us to do better whether as practitioners or scholars or both (Parson 2005; Cuff 2000; Hines 1982; Sitton 2005).¹⁷

Often the histories we write unintentionally occlude or obscure the intertwining of race and identity with place and space. Often we stress the functional aspects of land use and isolate or ignore the social. Bringing race and social distance to the fore is significant as a corrective but perhaps more so as an impetus toward change. The implications of past policies and practices are manifest, they are real, and they demand our attention. Ideas and actions that reformers, planners, elected officials, and other agents of the state (both the formal state and the “soft” state) imagined as a helpful, or perhaps as an innocuous partitioning and assignment of space, have led to concentrations of like people and to

more invidious concentrations of inequities in wealth, in housing, in access to capital, education, health care and other services, in prospects and aspirations. All manner of metrics underscore the simple fact that space matters. It is difficult to understand conflicts over education, land use, or public health absent knowledge of history that accounts for property, economies, politics, race, and social relations.¹⁸

The repeated surveys and the habitual surveillance of Mexicans and foreigners, marking the Plaza and its surrounding areas as Sonoratown (with subunits of Chinatown, Macy Street and the like), even the very use of the term "Sonora" remind us that the construction of race and identity in and through space is a process that takes place at multiple scales, from an individual body (with our psychological and sensory perception of boundaries), to an urban district, to the nation state, and its boundaries with other nations. Our mental maps and the stories we tell will continue to shape urban space: what it has been, what it is now, what it could or ought to be in the future. Creating futures yet unthought requires us to understand better what we know and how that knowledge has changed (or not) over time. We need to understand how we have come to know cities in order to imagine how else they might be.

NOTES

1. For an introduction to urban economics and location theory see O'Flaherty 2005 and Ely and Wehrwein 1964. For an early and influential assessment of land use see Bartholomew 1932.
2. For processes of land use decision making prior to the advent of zoning see Novak 1996. For the Kelo decision see the transcript of the Supreme Court argument, Suzette Kelo, et al. petitioners v. City of New London, Connecticut, et al. No. 04-108, 22 Feb. 2005, available online at <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=000&invol=04-108>.
3. There is a deep literature on social segregation. Scholarship examining identity and race-ethnicity as a structural driver for segregation is more recent. Representative works include Hirsch 1983, Massey and Denton 1993, Sugrue 1996, Self 2003, and Wiese 2004.
4. See for example, Anderson 1987.
5. For growth coalitions see Logan and Molotch 1987; for reform and urban space in Los Angeles see Hise 2001a; for slum clearance as a "land salvaging operation" see Gries and Ford 1932, 9.
6. Though many scholars have used the mental map concept, most people associate this with Kevin Lynch; see, for example, Lynch 1960. For Los Angeles records, see the birds-eye renderings in the Ephemera Collection, the Huntington Library; petitions to the city council in the collections of the Los Angeles City Archive; and guidebooks such as those produced by the Automobile Club of Southern California and the Works Progress Administration, the latter published as *Los Angeles: A Guide to the City and Its Environs* (New York: Hastings House, 1941/1951).
7. The most complete quantitative assessment can be found in California Commission of Immigration and Housing 1919, which records a Mexican plurality in four of eleven districts and an American plurality in five.
8. Note that Fuller's assessment of social sorting as instinctual practice is similar to that of economists such as Weimer and Hoyt (1939).
9. See also Patric c. 1917. On settlement houses in Los Angeles, see Engh 2001.
10. District conditions are in Chapter 2: Social and Educational Needs Revealed by a Community Survey (Sterry, 1924, 12, 29, 37). The author classifies Chinatown, a sub-district with "exact" boundaries amounting to an area three blocks (east to west) by a block and a half (north to south), as "so self-contained, so isolated socially, as to necessitate separate consideration" (Sterry 1924, 14).
11. Chart A: Relative proportion of single houses, houses with rear apartments, and house courts (page 18) and descriptions in Chapter 3, Part 2: The People of the Community. I am indebted to Martin Krieger for articulating the relationship between classifying land for people and for activities following a seminar presentation of an initial version of this essay.
12. Table no. 1: 27. There are similarities here with the practices and policies Kay Anderson describes in Vancouver (Anderson 1987).
13. See the series of monthly reports catalogued as California State Board of Health, "Report of Plague Eradicative Measures," Nov. 1924, Jan. 1925–June 1925 at the Huntington Library, San Marino. For an extended analysis of the plague see Chapter 5 in Deverell 2004.
14. The *Los Angeles Times* ran articles most every day; for a rep-

- resentative assessment see "State to Fight Disease, War on Pneumonia Organized Here With Indications That Outbreak is Under Control," 4 November 1924. In the California State Board of Health's monthly "Report of Plague Eradication Measures," Chief Sanitary Inspector Edward T. Ross kept a running tally of field operations including the number of structures renovated and made "rat-proof" and those torn down by week and to date. In May 1925, the final copy in the run, the total in the Los Angeles district (the six-square mile, later ten-square mile zone adjacent to the river and exclusive of the harbor) had reached 1,470. At this point the "wreckers" had shifted their focus from those areas initially associated with the plague—the foreign districts—toward the harbor, Vernon, and storage sites for grain and other feedstock, such as hog ranches and warehouses along rail lines.
15. For urban renewal in Los Angeles see Parson 2005, Cuff 2000, and Hines 1982.
 16. See also the annual reports of the Los Angeles Housing Authority and the agency's survey of housing conditions conducted with the Works Progress Administration, Project no. 65-1-07-70 (Williamson 1940).
 17. For "futures yet unthought," see Grosz 1999.
 18. Quoting analysis from the *American Journal of Public Health*, a 27 December 2004 *Los Angeles Times* feature made this point in stark terms: "For blacks, poor healthcare access can cost lives. Disparities in care caused nearly 900,000 preventable deaths from 1991 to 2000." For recent accounts in Los Angeles, see "Inland Hospitals Rank Low," 28 July 2005 and "Top-Tier Hospital May Be Worth the Trip," 7 October 2005, both in the *Los Angeles Times*.
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