

‘Criminally reckless’: why LA’s urban sprawl made wildfires inevitable – and how it should rebuild - Oliver Wainwright

[1] LA’s ferocious wildfires have seen an area about three times the size of Manhattan incinerated. At least 12,000 homes have burned to the ground and 150,000 people have been evacuated, as entire neighbourhoods become smouldering ruins. Twenty-five people have died, 24 more are missing. Estimates suggest the cost of damage and economic losses could reach \$250bn, making it the costliest wildfire in US history – mainly due to the flames torching some of the highest-value real estate in the country. And it’s not over yet. The city is bracing for further destruction, as weather forecasts suggest winds might pick up again.

[2] Media coverage has had the air of a Hollywood disaster movie, as helicopters swoop through dark red skies while the list of charred celebrity homes grows, and the palm fronds are left blackened. Although celebrity mansions have made most of the headlines, fire doesn’t discriminate. Most of the 200 mobile homes of the Palisades Bowl trailer park went up in flames in the Palisades fire. Across town, the Eaton fire ripped through the mixed-income community of Altadena, ravaging more than 14,000 acres of homes, schools, churches and businesses.

[3] It has been a shocking, saddening spectacle – but also one that was entirely predictable. Blame has been variously hurled at water mismanagement and fire department budget cuts, but little could have been done to stop these blazes. After a century of misguided urban development and blatant disregard for climate change, it was only a question of when the wildfires struck.

[4] This disaster has been on the cards for decades. In his 1995 essay, *The Case for Letting Malibu Burn*, the late activist and urban theorist Mike Davis charted how generations of unbridled residential construction in the fire-prone hills had created the perfect conditions for a firestorm. He railed against the “rampant uncontrolled expansion of firebelt suburbs” which saw timber-framed homes “scattered like so much kindling across isolated hilltops and ridges”. The forests of southern California are supposed to burn as part of their natural cycle, he argued, and it was criminally reckless of the authorities not only to allow but actively incentivise development with low land prices in such fire-prone areas.

[5] The region’s extraordinary fire hazard, he pointed out, is shaped by the uncanny alignment of its coastal canyons with the Santa Ana winds, the strong, dry gusts that blow in towards the coast from the deserts in the north-east. The valleys and gorges in Northern LA act as giant bellows, accelerating the fire winds as they are funnelled through the landscape, made hotter and drier by the climate crisis. Over the last week, these winds have reached more than 80mph, blowing embers from ridge to ridge and street to street, making the fires virtually impossible to contain. As one emergency responder put it: “At wind speeds of 10 miles per hour, I’m a firefighter. At 30 miles per hour, I’m an observer.” Any higher, another added, you’re just a wind sock.

[6] But there’s no fire without fuel and ignition, and the relentless march of homes and cars into the tinder-dry hills has provided both. The city sprawled outwards and upwards as new arrivals sought their own piece of Eden. Where people went, fires followed. After every fire, the official response only exacerbated the situation. “Each wildfire would

be punctually followed by reconstruction on a larger and even more exclusive scale,” Davis writes, “as land use regulations and sometimes even the fire code were relaxed to accommodate fire victims.”

35 [7] Warnings were ignored. In 1930 Frederick Law Olmsted Jr, designer of the California state park system, suggested that 10,000 acres of Malibu mountains and beaches be preserved as a public park. Instead, the land was flogged to wealthy businessmen, to build their fire-prone retreats. Many have burned and been rebuilt several times since. After another 1970s fire, many rebuilding homeowners were exempted from the new standards governing water pressure and width of access roads – factors that have made blazes even harder to contain.

40 [8] Could the 2025 fire finally be the straw that breaks the camel’s back, forcing LA to retreat from its firebelt, rather than continually build into it? Rather than simply rebuild, as these fire-ravaged areas have done time and again, the cataclysmic events of recent days should trigger a rethink as to how the city could grow back. The insurance industry is already reassessing risk for homes in fire zones. Meanwhile, citizens questions over whether they will pay the multibillion-dollar reconstruction process. Building codes are also likely to change, making
45 construction in these areas even more expensive.

[9] This could be an opportunity to fundamentally shift the suburban mindset of LA. Almost 80% of its area is exclusively zoned for single-family homes, pushing new development ever further out into the fire belt. To reduce the sprawl, population density must be increased. So far, there have been few initiatives for it, such as allowing the back yard development of accessory dwelling units, essentially little sheds, but they are a drop in the ocean – and
50 are often just used as guest rooms or Airbnbs. As Char Miller, author of Burn Scars, a history of wildfire suppression in the US, puts it, the adage should be: “Build up, not out” – building in higher density, away from fire zones rather than sprawling into them.

[10] A house that gets destroyed is not an affordable home, nor is it a sustainable one. The city needs greater urban density, not more even more fire belts. Ironically, it might be the inability of the insurance industry to pay up that
55 finally forces LA to change.

Questions

1. Fill in the following information sheet about the 2025 Los Angeles fires.

Area burnt by wildfires	Three times the size of (i)_____
Number of houses burnt	At least (ii)_____
People evacuated	(iii)_____
Economic losses	(iv)_____
Casualties	(v)_____ people dead; _____ people missing.

2. Why did the 2025 Los Angeles fires cause the highest amount of economic damages in US history?
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3. Why was the coverage of the wildfires described as a “Hollywood disaster movie”?
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4. Determine if the following statements are True(T), False(F) or Not given(NG) using the information in paragraph 2.

- i. Both the Palisades fire and the Eaton fire burnt down houses of poor people.
- ii. Many celebrities lost their houses in the wildfires.
- iii. The wildfires burnt down facilities like hospitals and police stations.

5. Which of the following IS NOT a cause for the wildfires as described in paragraph 3?

- A. Neglecting climate change
- B. Misuse of water resources
- C. Lack of public information
- D. Poor urban planning

6. Why did the writer describe the fires to be.....

- i. “Shocking, saddening spectacle”?

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- ii. “Predictable”?
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7. Which of the following best describes Mike Davis' reaction to a new residential development project in the hills of Los Angeles
- A. Excited
 - B. Sceptical
 - C. Confused
 - D. Angry

8. Fill in the summary with the information in paragraph 4.

Mike Davis argued that many years of (i)_____ residential projects in the city have created the (ii)_____ conditions for wildfires. He was particularly against building new (iii)_____ with wooden-framed homes in the hills, which interfered with the (iv)_____ burning of the forests. He slams the government for (v)_____ development in these areas by decreasing the cost of land.

9. Fill in the following table about the causes of wildfires in Los Angeles, one example has been done for you.

Cause	How it leads to/worsens wildfires
e.g. Building in the fire-prone hills	e.g. Wooden homes are placed right in wildfire-prone areas.
Alignment of costal canyons	(i)
Valley and gorges in Northern LA	(ii)
Climate crises	(iii)

10. Why does the responder say that he is “an observer” when the wind speeds are high?

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11. What was Los Angeles described as in paragraph 6?

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12. Why is it that “where people went, fires followed?”

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13. Find a word in paragraph 6 that can mean “worsen”
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14. Is the government able to learn from their mistakes after a wildfire? Find a piece of evidence in paragraph 6 to support your answer.

15. Fill in the blanks regarding how the developments in Malibu ultimately worsened wildfires. You do not need to use a word from the article. USE NO MORE THAN 3 WORDS IN EACH BLANK.

The Malibu mountains and beaches were originally reserved for a public park. However, the land was instead given to wealthy developers to construct (i)_____. They have since been destroyed by (ii)_____ multiple times. After 1970, reconstruction of the houses no longer needed to (iii)_____ the new standards, which in turn made wildfires (iv)_____.

16. Why was the 2025 fire described as the “Straw that breaks the camel’s back”? (line 40)

17. Why should the fires trigger a rethink for the city’s growth? (line 42)

18. Complete the following table regarding how different parties will react to the 2025 fires.

Party	Reaction
Citizen	Question whether the (i)_____ companies will pay for reconstruction
(ii)_____	Reviewing policies with homeowners who live in fire zones.
Legislators	Changing (iii)_____ to make new houses more fire-resistant

19. Find a piece of evidence in paragraph 9 that shows that Los Angeles has a sprawling form.

20. What does “A drop in the ocean” (line 49) suggest about the effectiveness of the measures in reducing urban sprawl of Los Angeles?

21. Fill in the following sentence about backyard development.

Backyard development of dwelling units intended to (i)_____.

However, this did not work out as planned as most of the units were used for (ii)_____.

22. Explain the irony at the end of the article. (lines 54-55)

23. Do you think that the 2025 fires will change the urban planning mindset of Los Angeles, cite one piece of evidence from the article to support your answer.