

The Evolving Faces Of Pico Neighborhood:

The Stories Of The Communities Who Built The Most Culturally Diverse Neighborhood In
Santa Monica

Santa Monica City is a relatively small city located along the western border of Los Angeles County. It is famous for its yellow sandy beaches and beautiful weather. When people envision Santa Monica, it is usually through the lens of Old Hollywood. The city was made famous by some of its former rich, white residents so the area was believed to be built in luxury. And that is not entirely untrue. However, Santa Monica today is extremely ethnically, and economically diverse. Santa Monica is interesting because it has streets with multimillion dollar homes as well as section 8, low income housing, on the same street. Tourist will spend over \$500 a night to sleep along the beach at one of Santa Monica's luxury hotels, only to be greeted by a person sleeping on a cardboard mat in the morning. This city is filled with irony, but none of it makes me laugh.

The story I will tell today focuses on the Pico Neighborhood, where I call home. “Municipal boundaries also provoke a wide range of academic and practical interest, yet they are more particularly inscribed in and limited to the politics of jurisdiction,” (Hernandez, 2018). Neighborhood boundaries are only more complex, especially when it comes to Santa Monica’s Pico Neighborhood. The population is currently around 16,000 people (Census.gov) with a white majority (38%), closely followed by hispanic or latino (33%) population, followed by those identifying as Asians (14%), and with a smaller Black population (8%). However, those percentages have drastically changed throughout the century. Unfortunately, a lot of the neighborhood's history has been told through word of mouth, so many stories have been forgotten in the process. I grew up around a large Hispanic community and learned to speak

Spanish through some of my childhood friends (although I regret to say I've forgotten most of it). My neighborhood is filled with Japanese inspired "California Craftsmen" homes which landscaping that matches that aesthetic. Our neighborhood is considered both the most culturally diverse, and most affordable (I wonder if those two facts are correlated). In my project I will try to explain the complicated history of demographic shift which birthed the illustrious Pico Neighborhood.

The Pico Neighborhood is bordered by Lincoln Blvd to the west, Centinela Ave. to the east, Olympic Blvd. to the north and Pico Blvd. to the south. It stretches across about one and half miles, and its most eastern section touches the border of West Los Angeles. Pico Blvd, and the Pico Neighborhood was named after the last Governor of Alta California, Pío de Jesús Pico, under Mexican rule. He, and many other Mexican entrepreneurs are commemorated through the naming of many other streets, parks and schools throughout the city. But therein lies the very issue I see with the story of Santa Monica, and the Pico Neighborhood in general. Despite the claims of "rich cultural diversity," there is a lack of real recognition of the ethnic groups that built this city and neighborhood. So much of the history has been erased and forgotten. However, "the photographic image plays a central role in American culture[...]we grow increasingly reliant on photographs for information about histories and realities that we do not experience directly," (Fusco, 2003), and it is through these photographs that we can see the reality of the birth of Pico Neighborhood. This is why I felt compelled to tell the story through photographs which show the changes over time. But even photos cannot convey the true nature of discrimination that residents of Pico Neighborhood faced. We are the forgotten, working class, neighborhood of the wealthy, white Santa Monica.

Despite the more liberal nature of the West Coast, (non-white) residents of Santa Monica faced racial discrimination daily. Landowners made it difficult for black and brown migrants to buy homes in the city, so many sought refuge in the more affordable Pico Neighborhood. Prominent African American communities were built, such as the first Episcopal Church in California. Japanese convenience stores, and garden nurseries dotted the area and were frequented by the largely white community. Mexican immigrants started cultural centers and schools which welcomed all ethnic minorities of the area. These centers for community provided refuge for the culturally diverse Pico neighborhood, and signifies “the shift from circular migration to one of permanent settlement in the United States,” (Cruz-Manjarrez, 2013).

World War II, and the subsequent internment of the Japanese marked the first change in the neighborhood’s demographics. However, the disruption of the culture of the Pico Neighborhood became most pronounced when the construction of the 10 freeway was planned to bisect the neighborhood in the 1960s. It also became clear to the residents that their livelihoods were disposable to the city planners. Many decades later, when the Metro Expo Line Maintenance yard was planned to be placed in our neighborhood, those feelings of disposability came flooding back. The buffer park that was granted to us, became a symbol for our community. It felt like we were “trying as best we can to take the power of the [city] and put that back in the hands of the people who for so long have been denied everything,” (Guzmán, 2010). It was named after a Japanese war-veteran, which commodorated the Japanese heritage of the community. There were no cultural or boundaries, everyone was welcome and everyone built the park together. “We feel we are one family. We have no borders.” (Leza, 2019). This park is the culmination of the history of the Pico neighborhood, and proves that through perseverance something good can come out of a sad story.

Link to StoryMap: <https://arcg.is/Kq4SP0>

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