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# Insurgent Knowledges of Oceanwide Plaza Towers:

# Graffiti as Insurgent Planning in Downtown Los Angeles

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Urban and Regional Planning

by

Jordan Wynne

2025

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Insurgent Knowledges of Oceanwide Plaza Towers:

Graffiti as Insurgent Planning in Downtown Los Angeles

by

Jordan Wynne

Master of Urban and Regional Planning

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Marques Augusta Vestal, Chair

Research on insurgent planning in the Global North examines insurgency from the point of formal organization, where insurgent actions are translated to rights-based discourses seeking possession of property to affect planning decisions. This framework often ignores the autonomy, movement building, and critical thought necessary for insurgent actors to take action, limiting urban imaginaries to working within neoliberal planning regimes and hegemonic systems of spatial production. The limitations that propertied citizenship places on the community's ability to affect urban planning decisions as described by Ananya Roy (2003), Faranak Miraftab (2009), and Libby Porter (2014) encourage Global North planning scholars to incorporate informal perspectives from the Global South as a guide to alternative processes of insurgent planning that do not depend on negotiations with dominant planning regimes. This thesis investigates insurgent knowledges—alternative, marginalized, and heterotopic perspectives of urban space—and how these knowledges lead to insurgent planning actions

unmitigated by property rights based regimes of planning. In late January through early February of 2024, a natural case study on this arose in the heart of Downtown Los Angeles' entertainment district, when thousands of graffiti artists and their friends converged on the abandoned Oceanwide Plaza Towers, a trio of 40-story buildings part of a failed billion dollar development. They transformed the building exteriors with over five hundred graffiti pieces in an act of "graffiti bombing" that reclaimed these abandoned speculative developments for the people. Interviewing graffiti artists in community with or directly involved as insurgent actors during the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event in Downtown Los Angeles, this research seeks to understand how insurgent knowledges provide counter-narratives to the dominant norms of the cityscape, revealing the socio-political dynamics that shape urban space. What are the knowledge bases that informed the actions of direct insurgents who participated in the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event of January-February 2024? This research explores how the knowledge bases of social organization, positionality, artistry, history, accessibility, and spatial consciousness can help insurgent knowledge break through the dominant spatial power dynamic to stimulate urban imagination and resist hegemonic development forces.

The thesis of Jordan Wynne is approved.

Christopher C. Jadallah

Veronica Terriquez

Marques Augusta Vestal, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2025

*To radicals, insurgents, dissidents, and disruptors of hegemony—my beloved friends. No matter how much they try to take from us, we will always be there to resist and take it back. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.*

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I would like to thank Joshua Valdez (aka Augnos Media) who captured several photographs of Oceanwide Plaza Towers in collaboration with me for this project. Express permission has been granted by the photographer, Joshua Valdez, for use of photographs captured of Oceanwide Plaza Towers in this thesis.

All other photographs that appear in this thesis were either captured by me directly, or are attributed to a Creative Commons license, which are linked in the captions of each photograph.

The research and interview process conducted as part of this Master's Thesis was approved and certified exempt by the UCLA Institutional Review Board (UCLA IRB), filed under IRB-24-6276.

# CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The use of space in Downtown Los Angeles (DTLA) is currently facing a critical reckoning. With commercial real estate in decline, residential real estate values skyrocketing, and homelessness at all time highs, Downtown Los Angeles has become a place starkly divorced from the needs of everyday Angelenos, held hostage by multinational corporate speculative development. The aggressive commodification, assetization, and financialization of property has fixed capital investment from international conglomerates into the built environment of Downtown Los Angeles, resulting in inefficient and restrictive use of space that exacerbates urban inequality (Flusty 2000; Harvey 2001; Marks 2004; Haas 2011; Ferrer 2021; Huante 2022). This introduction traces the context of the current built environment of Downtown Los Angeles through its main two modes of development: commercial office space and high end luxury housing. The current conditions of these modes of development highlight the spatial fix of capital accumulation that create spatial inefficiencies and injustices. Current development patterns produce too much for high end clientele and not enough for the hundreds of thousands of lower income residents in need of new economic and housing opportunities. In the case of commercial office spaces, their usefulness as such is rapidly diminishing, indicating an opportunity to redevelop or adapt these spaces for reuse that has not yet manifested in Downtown. High end luxury developments have been vastly overproduced beyond what is needed, resulting in cycles of gentrification and displacement. This has stifled housing affordability for all tenants across Los Angeles, and driven the homelessness crisis to the extreme. These inhospitable conditions have roiled the populace into action, encouraging insurgent actions to fight against the spatial fixation of global capital in Downtown Los Angeles by attacking it at a vulnerable site of spatial injustice—the abandoned billion dollar speculative development of Oceanwide Plaza Towers.

*Downtown Los Angeles in Identity Crisis*

After nearly 50 years of financial investments in physical Downtown office space, commercial offices are facing tremendous losses in their value. Despite “back to work” narratives proliferating across corporate and government culture, the use of office spaces in Downtown Los Angeles have steadily been on the decline. According to the Colliers Downtown Los Angeles Office Report, as of Q4 2024, Downtown Los Angeles has an average vacancy rate of 29.6% of all office space—a rate that has increased by 7.5% since the end of 2021 (Colliers 2021; 2025). Reports from the Downtown LA Business Improvement District show even more stark changes, with average office vacancy increasing from 18.0% in Q1 2019 to 31.1% in Q4 2024, an over 13% increase in just 5 years (DTLA BID 2019; DTLA BID 2025). The major shock to the commercial office market was the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health mandates required work from home formats for most all office spaces, and accelerated the prevalence of virtual workspaces like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other business administration softwares that have reduced the need for day to day in person interactions and task management. This caused office building real estate values to rapidly plummet, throwing the usefulness of the commercial office skyscraper into question. Signs of new technology affecting office viability were seen a bit ahead of pandemic impacts, with the sale of the US Bank Building in July 2020 which sold for $430 Million, a marginal increase from its purchasing price of $368 Million, but far below its 2019 estimated valuation of $650 million (Welk 2020). Just down the block on 5th Street, the Gas Company Tower was purchased by Los Angeles County in August 2024 for $215 Million—a stark decrease in price from the $632 Million appraisal of the property in 2020 (Vincent and Ellis 2024). Worker occupancy rates have also seen a sharp decline from pre-pandemic levels. At the US Bank Building, occupancy dipped to a fluctuating 50%-70% occupancy week over week in 2023 (Welk 2020; Pimentel 2023). Average Los Angeles office space occupancy levels as tracked by Kastle show an even sharper decrease: just before the pandemic in February 2020, LA office spaces fluctuated from between 90% to nearly 100%

worker occupancy during an average work week; at the time of writing, this has drastically decreased to an astonishingly low 35.9% to 56.9% worker occupancy during the average work week in April 2025[1] (Kastle 2020; Kastle 2025).

Commercial tenants are reassessing and downsizing their investments in office property. Employers no longer see the use of investing in massive office spaces if only half of their workforce regularly show up there. Likewise, employees are tired of the daily grind of long commutes, stuffy office cubicles, and water cooler chatter when they could be working virtually on most of their white collar tasks. The function of office space as a way to capture a market of corporate consumers and their employees is waning, a major factor that threatens the value of all Downtown office space. As their use becomes obsolete, the value of these properties is depreciating, inviting a new cycle of production to take on the next era of Downtown redevelopment (Smith 1979). The City of Los Angeles, however, is still insisting on traditional office investments, attempting to attract new clients and adapt new ways to maintain the rapidly declining value of commercial office real estate (Vincent and Ellis 2024; DTLA BID 2025). Local government has stepped in as well, buying downtown skyscrapers for their own government administrative tasks which serve as a soft stimulus project to get more workers back in Downtown (Vincent and Ellis 2024). This conveys the desire to maintain the value of capital investments in these skyscrapers, an adherence to the aging modality of dense office space as the primary value add of Downtown areas. New uses could manifest if only the City were willing, but so far the City has not shown signs of wanting to fund adaptation programs to turn office buildings into something of more value to both investors and the people.

Juxtaposed with this depreciation of commercial high rise values and suboptimal use of office space in Downtown is the worst homelessness and housing affordability crisis in the

[1] Data collected from Kastle is based on security keycard swipes of their commercial office clients' employees swiping in to work. While this data is not geographically focused, a large portion of their office clients are based in Downtown Los Angeles, giving us a rough but reliable insight into office occupancy trends in Downtown Los Angeles.

history of Los Angeles. According to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Agency (LAHSA) Homeless Count (2024), 75,312 Angelenos were counted as experiencing homelessness across Los Angeles County in 2024, with over 45,252 situated within LA City boundaries. The highest concentration of people experiencing homelessness in the City is in the Los Angeles Metro and Downtown area, with a majority of them concentrated in Skid Row, representing 18,389 people or about 40% of all homelessness in LA City. Nearly two-thirds of unhoused people in the LA Metro and Downtown Area (12,185 people) are experiencing unsheltered homelessness, braving the elements out on the street. From 2018 to 2024, homelessness in Los Angeles City increased by about 45% from 31,285 to 45,252 (LAHSA 2024).

The responses to homelessness have become increasingly carceral out of an era that once touted progressive housing reform. New local ordinances like 41.18 have criminalized homelessness, creating over 30 special enforcement zones in Downtown Los Angeles where people are no longer allowed to sleep or set up tents or else they can be arrested and lose all of their possessions (City of Los Angeles Assessor's Office, 2025). City programs like Inside Safe have been led without transparency, claiming to house people in interim housing sites while anecdotal reports from advocates report harassment from police officers; 10 minute time limits to gather possessions before they are thrown away which can result in loss of important items and documents; and poor conditions at the “housing” sites that leave residents without good food, hospitable living conditions, or access to services (Beckner-Charmitchel 2024). Furthermore, the recent *Grants Pass v. Johnson* (2024) court case empowered state and local governments to continue with the criminalization of homelessness, giving them the green light to ban encampments without the need to offer shelter.

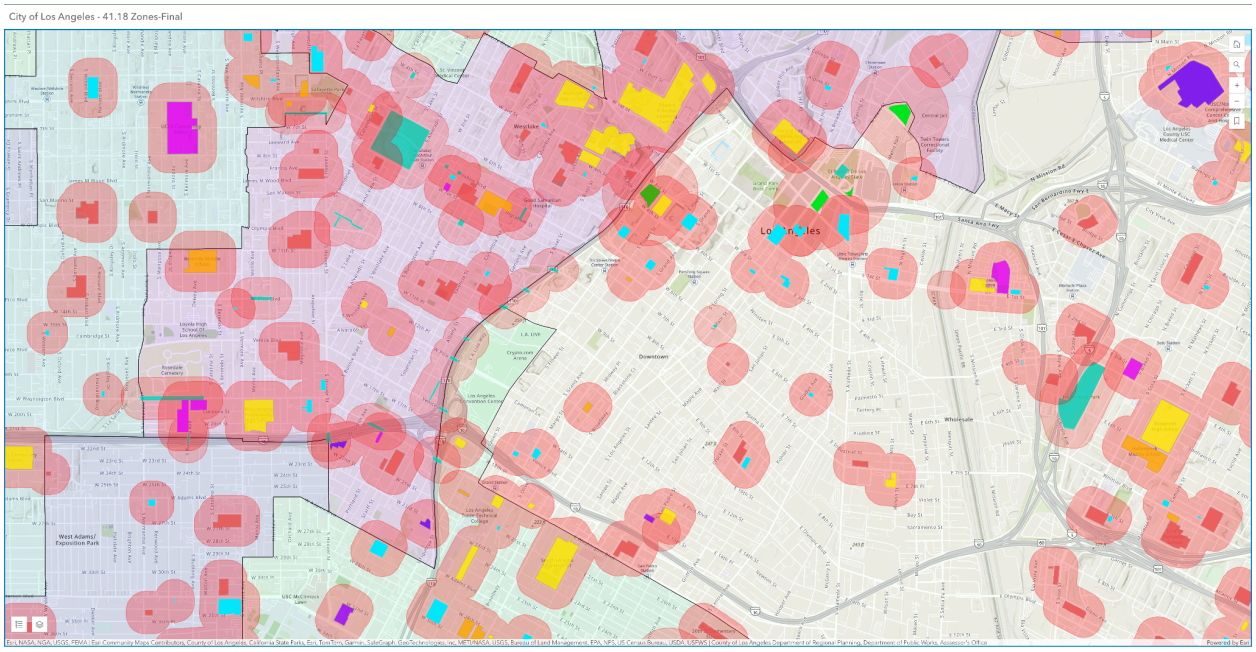



Figure 1. Portion of the ArcGIS map of Los Angeles City Ordinance 41.18 Zones near the Downtown Los Angeles area. These red zones ban encampments within 500 feet of places the city designates as "sensitive areas" such as schools, hospitals, and parks, demarcated by the multicolored blocks on the map. Those that camp in, or even near, these areas risk have their belongings confiscated and destroyed, citations, and arrest. With a majority of zones outlying Downtown Los Angeles, 41.18 zones parallel the enforcement regimes of the 1980s, where people experiencing homelessness were concentrated into a particular section of Downtown Los Angeles known as Skid Row. (Source: City of Los Angeles Department of Regional Planning, Department of Public Works, Assessor's Office, 2025)

Despite a highly service based and criminalized response from the City, County, and State to address homelessness, the understanding amongst service providers, government officials, and community advocates is that a lack of affordable housing is generating the homelessness crisis[2] (California Housing Partnership 2025; Our Future Los Angeles 2025; United Way of Greater Los Angeles 2025). Substantial and long term investments in affordable and supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness have historically been lacking. Measure HHH provided one time funding of $1 Billion to produce 10,000 affordable units across Los Angeles city, and it wasn't until 2025 that the first dedicated source of consistent funding for affordable

[2] There are extensive studies that assert this, but this is also based around my own person knowledge from working as both an advocate and a county service provider for people experiencing homelessness. No matter the agency, government official, or community organization, the understanding is that there is a lack of affordable housing options. People experiencing homelessness get stuck in Interim Housing (the government jargon for shelter housing or short term motel stays) and are unable to find permanent supportive housing—if they are lucky enough to be able to access the limited stock of Interim Housing that exists, see California Housing Partnership 2025. High acuity clients are supposedly prioritized, but are often left without ongoing services to help them acclimate to housing. This also means that the inflow of people experiencing homelessness for the first time has almost no support system that exists, as they are not assessed as having high acuity needs. This has created a massive bottleneck for affordable and supportive housing, leading to increased homelessness across the City and County.

housing development began generating revenue for the County through Measure A funding. Both of these measures were introduced after Los Angeles County had already fallen into a massive homelessness crisis, and had foregone prioritizing new housing developments targeted towards low and moderate income residents (California Housing Partnership 2025). With new housing construction taking several years to complete, the impacts of these funding sources have had a diminished effect. The delayed response of funding assistance for affordable housing development has led to a massive affordable housing shortfall and skewed patterns of development that are catered towards high earning households instead of those who need them the most.

The prolonged lack of focus on housing needs as a development priority for Los Angeles has created a massive, almost insurmountable gap in housing supply across the region. According to the California Housing Partnership (2025), there are 485,667 very low income (earning less than 50% of Area Median Income) and extremely low income (earning less than 30% of Area Median Income) renter households in Los Angeles County that cannot access affordable homes, leading them to become rent burdened, paying more than 30% of their income towards rent. The severity of this phenomenon scales up the lower a household's income: 79% of those who are extremely low income are considered severely cost burdened by housing, meaning they pay more than half of their income towards rent, and 91% pay more than 30% of their income to rent. Despite the nearly half million affordable homes missing for low income earners, development priorities have been fixated on the development of high income housing. From 2014 to 2021, the City of Los Angeles vastly overproduced above moderate income housing by over 85,000 units (meant for households that earn 120% or more of Area Median Income) and fell short on all other housing production needs by over 51,000 units (California Housing Partnership, 2025). The most recent Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA 2021) assessed that to keep up with housing demand from 2021-2029, Los Angeles City needs to build 456,643 housing units, with 259,812 units designated to very low, low, and

moderate income households. By the City Planning Department's own admission, it predicts that it will once again overproduce above moderate income housing and fall short on the projected needs for lower income housing (Los Angeles City Planning Department 2021, pg. 99).

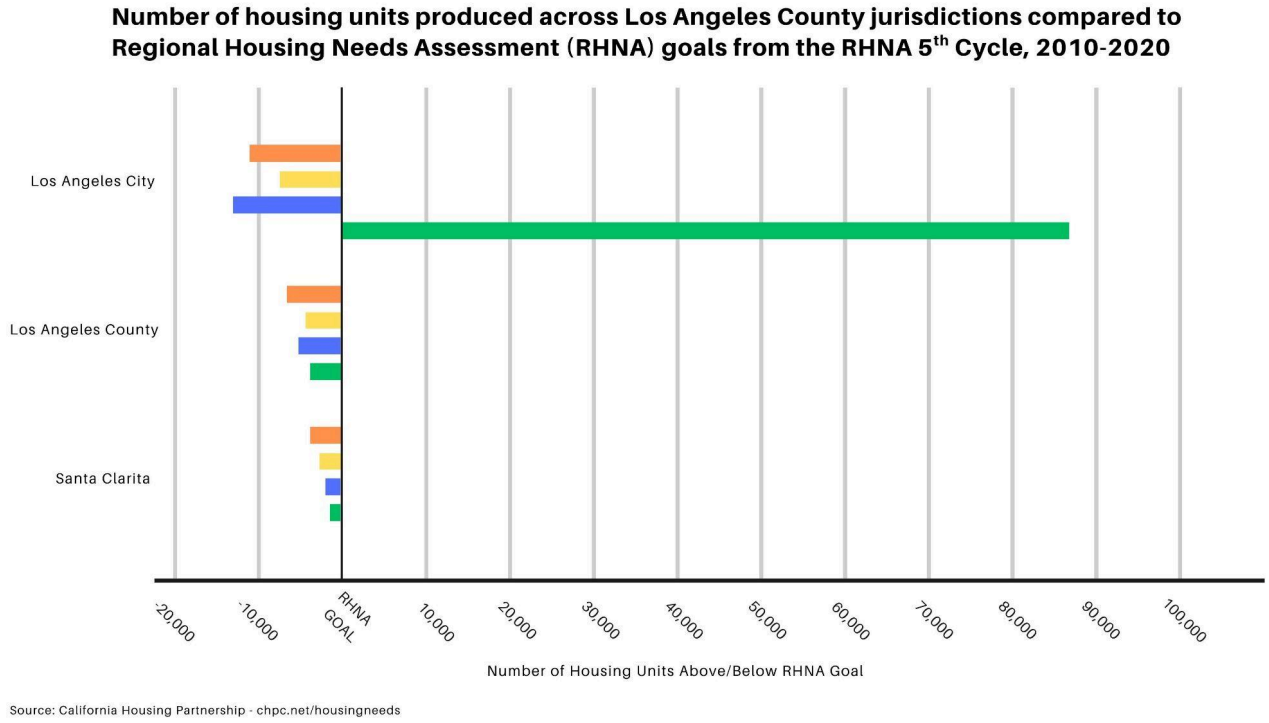



Figure 2. The number of housing units produced across Los Angeles County jurisdictions compared to the 5th Cycle Regional Housing needs assessment (RHNA) goals from 2010-2020. Los Angeles City built over 85,000 more units of above moderate income housing than the region demanded, suggesting a cycle of gentrification where housing being built to attract high income folks to the City and neglecting housing need for moderate or low income residents. This leads to cycles of displacement and the extreme affordability crisis Los Angeles currently faces. (Source: California Housing Partnership 2025).

In response to the diminishing value of office buildings and the critical need for housing, the Downtown Los Angeles Business Improvement District (DTLA BID) aims to increase by-right residential development through their LA 2040 community plan (DTLA BID 2025). This plan is framed as an act of inclusive planning, offering Community Benefit Agreement (CBA) updates that prioritize affordable housing and accessible public space in Downtown, as well as contributions to a community benefit fund. While these may sound good on paper, they are truly nothing that breaks the norm, merely mitigation efforts that shave a little off the top of the massive profits and land rights that are forfeit to multinational developers. The "affordability"

referenced as part of the new Community Benefits Agreement from DTLA settled on the creation of “affordable” units up to 150% Area Median Income as affordable compensation—which is by definition above moderate income housing. With the Area Median Income at $98,200 for a family of four, the “affordable” housing proposed in this CBA could serve households with incomes of up to $147,300, though AMI aid schedules show family incomes possibly being even higher (Los Angeles Housing Department 2024). Following the norms of these neoliberal development schemes will likely lead to a response where Downtown property becomes even more exclusive, with increases in policing, surveillance, and spatially fixed development digging Downtown deeper into a valley of inequality between capital owners and struggling Angelenos (Flusty 2000; Harvey 2001; Harvey 2012).

Los Angeles has overinvested in above moderate “luxury” housing that has not catered to the needs of lower income Angelenos, resulting in a massive backlog of affordable housing stock needed to meet demand. Given the overproduction of above moderate income housing, it is clear that new housing development in Los Angeles is not based on the needs of the people, but by the opportunity for corporate investors to turn a speculative profit. The lack of housing production targeted towards low and moderate income households has destabilized the housing market across Los Angeles, creating a feedback loop where high end developments raise land values and rent prices, incentivizing more high end developments to follow and more corporate concentration of the housing stock, forming a death spiral of housing unaffordability and displacement (Harvey 2012; Soja 2014; Ferrer 2021). New residential developments in Downtown Los Angeles have been driven by multinational holding corporations finding profits based on this housing shortage caused by the commodification of housing and speculative land value investment (Ferrer 2021). Through the financialization of the housing market, housing investors find their assets protected through operation as limited liability corporations, operating as anonymous and complex webs of investment shell companies, taking advantage of favorable corporate tax policies, pursuing the appreciation of land and housing value, and displacing low

and moderate income Los Angeles residents in favor of attracting wealthy elite buyers (Soja 2014; Ferrer 2021). The appreciation of speculative land value based on improvements to the land often outpaces the need for consistent rents and tenancy, resulting in vacancy rates that are higher in Downtown Los Angeles than in other parts of the city (Ferrer 2021; Colliers 2025; DTLA BID 2025).

The fixation on land rent extraction through high income housing investment as the primary feature of housing development has contributed to mass displacement across the city (Harvey 2001; Harvey 2012; Soja 2014; Sims 2016; Roy 2020). The restriction on housing supply for all other income levels has sent rents sky high, resulting in rampant gentrification and sending tens of thousands of low income Angelenos onto the street (Reese, Deverteuil, and Thach 2010; Roy 2020; Bhusal 2021; Ferrer 2021; California Housing Partnership 2025). In Downtown, this has led to a jarring contrast of luxury high rises going up in Downtown while more people experiencing homelessness live on the streets below—a visual representation of worsening wealth inequality. The City's response to this has been to criminalize poverty and protect regimes of speculative policy development in the name of "economic prosperity" and tax revenue seeking behaviors—a policy position that has historic precedence in Los Angeles (Gordon 2004; Marks 2004; Reese, Deverteuil, and Thach 2010; Stuart 2014; Sims 2016; Huante 2022). Unlike the commercial office market, there have been no market-based shocks to these speculative priorities for residential developments, as residential vacancy has actually decreased in Downtown overtime, suggesting an inflow of wealthy renters from outside the local community in a pattern of gentrification (DTLA BID 2025). With housing investments severely misaligned with the existing community's needs, Angelenos have been left to fight for themselves against powerful multinational conglomerates whose only stake in the city is to turn a speculative profit at all costs.

Official city reports portray a Downtown on the rebound, using Business Improvement District reports to depict progress as dictated by these speculative developments (DTLA BID

2025). Indeed, skyscrapers and high rises created through speculative development have long been considered symbols of economic progress, operating on a visual shorthand of their sheer size and architectural marvel to evoke understandings of an urban utopia (Sorkin 2009). From a distance, one could admire the skyscrapers of Downtown as a glistening love letter to postmodern urban development—as many do from the hills of Angeleno Heights. However, with immense economic pressure on the local populace and the growing vacancy and diminishing values of office properties once considered prime real estate, cracks in this façade are beginning to show. And in early 2024, the Los Angeles skyline was forever changed by the tagging of three abandoned high rise buildings that ruptured this pristine urban utopian vision and symbolized the crisis of space in Downtown Los Angeles.

*Introducing Oceanwide Plaza Towers*

This is the story of the infamous Oceanwide Plaza Towers, now known around the world simply as the “Graffiti Towers.” Just across the street from the multibillion dollar LA Live entertainment complex, Oceanwide Plaza was envisioned as a complimentary mixed used luxury development located along Figueroa and Flower Street between 11th and 12th Street. The complex would feature two 40-story luxury residential towers with a total of 340 condominiums; a 49-story five-star Hyatt Hotel with 184 hotel rooms and 164 serviced condominiums; and a massive 166,000 square-foot retail complex down below with a full block of LED advertising space running along Figueroa (Sharp 2017).

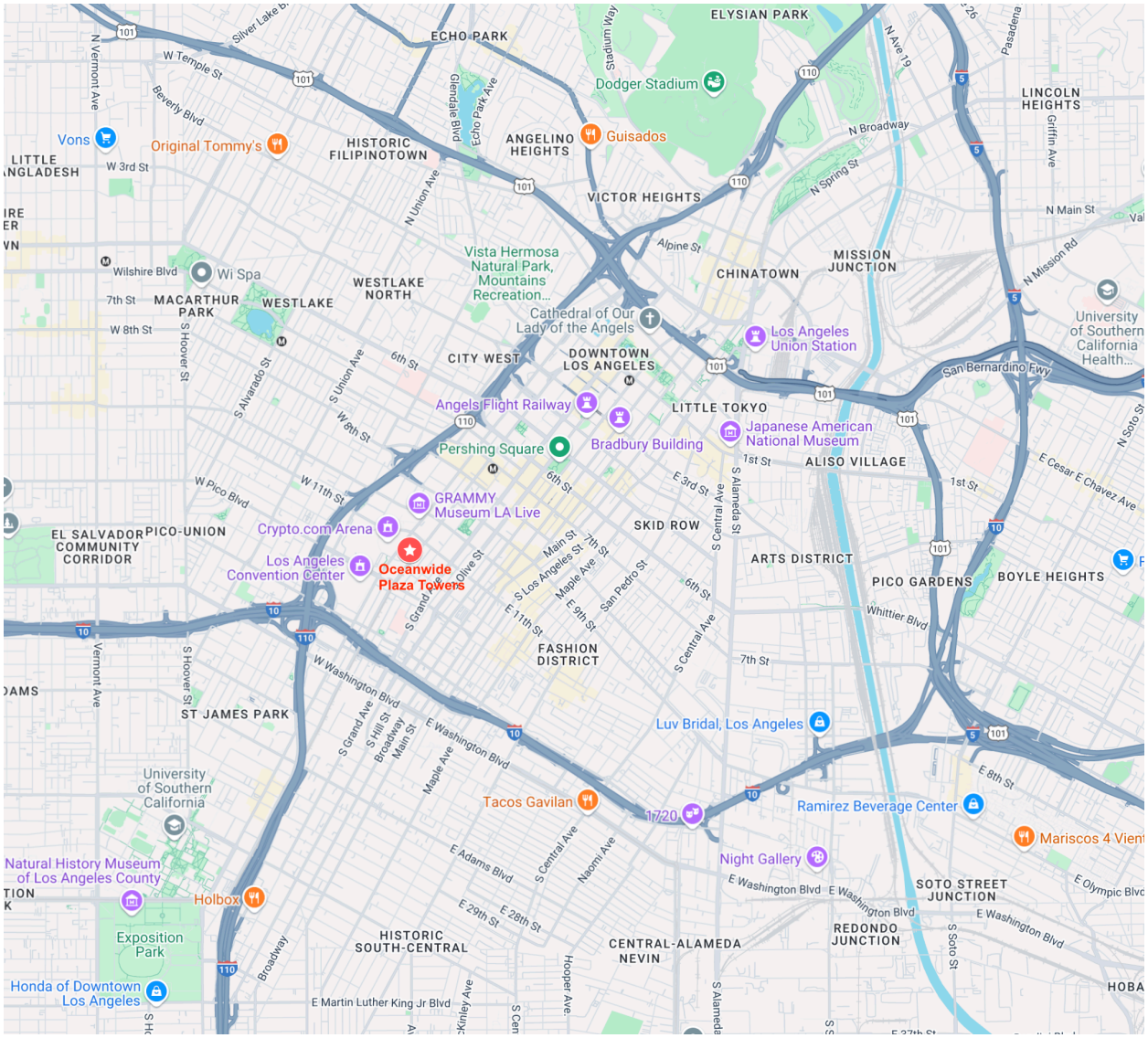



Figure 3. A map of Downtown Los Angeles showing Oceanwide Plaza Towers (the starred location) in relation to other major sites, thoroughfares, Downtown districts, and outlying neighborhoods. Situated near the major interchange of the 10 and 110 freeways, Oceanwide Plaza Towers is visible daily to commuters on their way into Downtown, accessible from the first Downtown exit. The Towers are only six blocks away from the heart of the financial district in Downtown Los Angeles, where the US Bank Building and the Wilshire Grand Center are located. The Oceanwide Plaza Towers are less than two miles away from the Financial District, the Historic Core of downtown, the Fashion District, and Skid Row. Similar high end residential developments have recently arisen amidst a sea of abandoned apartments, warehouse, and tenements scattered across Downtown. Neighborhoods immediately outlying downtown like Pico-Union, Historic South-Central, and Boyle Heights have high concentrations of lower income families and communities of color. Oceanwide Plaza Towers sits on the precipice between the speculative developments of Downtown Los Angeles and the surrounding neighborhoods. (Source: Google Maps 2025).

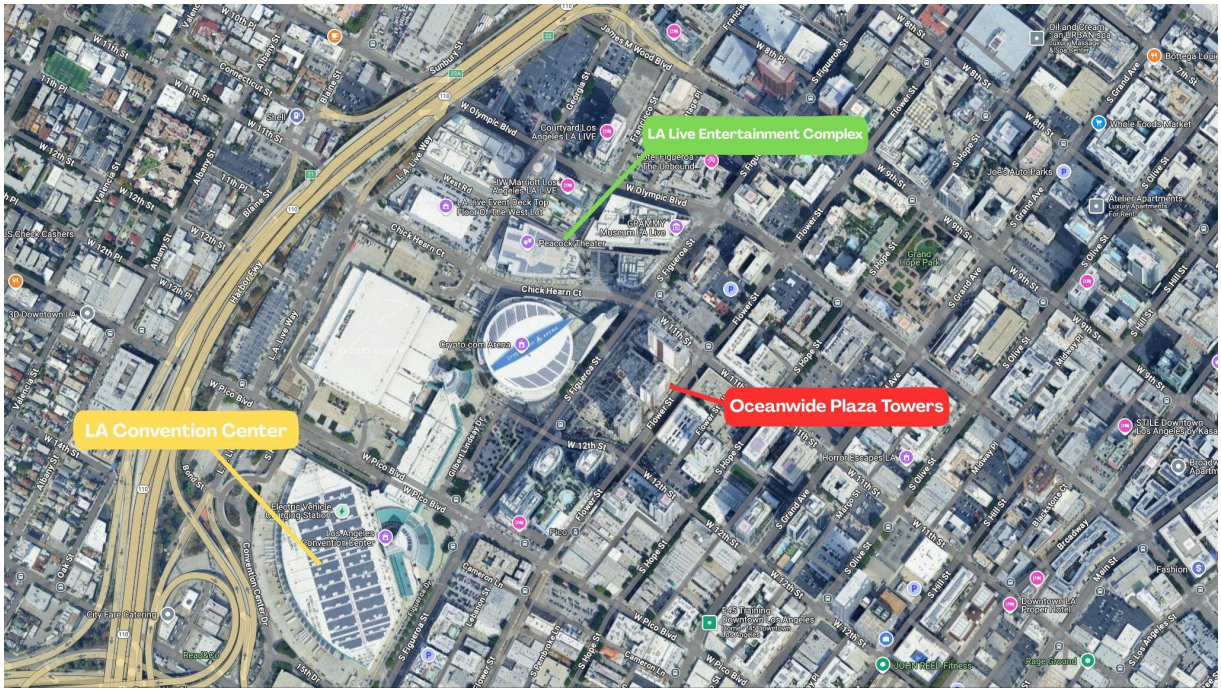



Figure 4. A satellite view of the Downtown area surrounding Oceanwide Plaza Towers. To the immediate east of the buildings across Figueroa Street is the LA Live Entertainment Complex and the Los Angeles Convention Center, both major sites for tourism, sporting events, concerts, and retail commerce. The LA Live Entertainment Complex was also a billion dollar investment that displaced thousands of Angelenos in the late 1990s. (Source: Google Maps 2025).

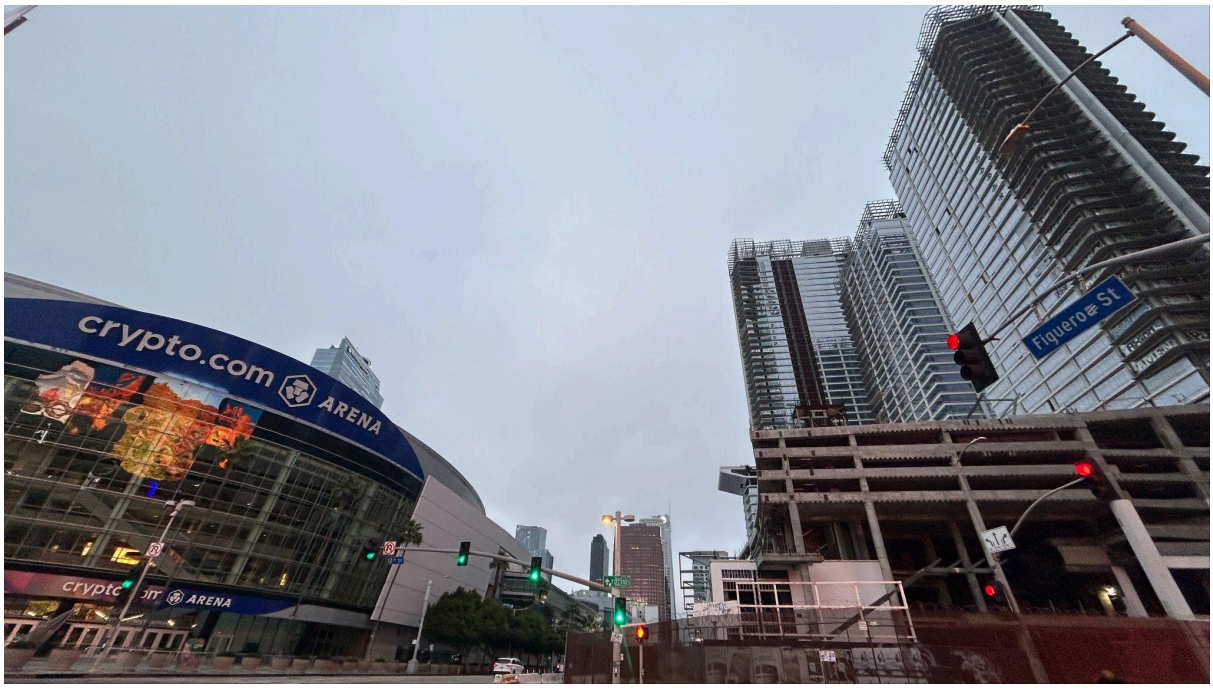



Figure 5. Oceanwide Plaza Towers at the intersection of 12th Street and Figueroa Street, across from the Crypto Arena, part of the LA Live Entertainment Complex, circa May 2025. The construction of Oceanwide Plaza Towers in this location was an attempt to cash in on high end commerce and property values in the area. Photo by Jordan Wynne.

Owned by Oceanwide Holdings, a Beijing based multinational real estate conglomerate, Oceanwide Plaza Towers was the first foray of this conglomerate into the American market (Solomon 2017). Managed under an international subsidiary of Oceanwide Holdings that was actually incorporated as a limited liability corporation in Bermuda for tax and financial liability sheltering (Hong Kong Stock Exchange 2025), China Oceanwide Holdings (one of many similarly named subsidiaries owned by the holding company) saw an opportunity to invest Chinese capital in the speculative housing market of Downtown Los Angeles. Beginning construction in 2015, Oceanwide Holdings invested over $1 billion of its own capital in the project, paying $174 Million for the initial land purchase and over $860 million for construction through the life of the project (Kim 2017; Bloomberg 2019). This is an unusually large sum of capital, as they chose to finance the project without substantial commercial loans. Additional investments of $325 Million came from LA Downtown Investment LP, a group of Chinese investors who were EB-5 Visa recipients. More capital came through a wide array of international equity investments filtered through their Hong Kong financing entity Oceanwide Holdings HK (Kim 2017; Cole 2019).

From the start, the planning and development of Oceanwide Plaza Towers was troubled, with LA Downtown Investment LP sued by the US Securities and Exchange Commission regarding fraudulent investment schemes for EB-5 investors, as well as the property being named in a massive FBI corruption case regarding the bribery of City Councilmembers Jose Huizar and Mitch Englander by developers for preferential treatment (Bloomberg 2019; Denkmann 2020). In 2019, construction was abruptly halted as China Oceanwide Holdings sought to recapitalize development after capital outflow from the Chinese company stopped due to ongoing trade wars between the United States and China that resulted in heavy restrictions on international investment by the Chinese government (Bloomberg 2019; Cole 2019; Vincent et al. 2019). Failing to replace lost capital by securing loans to pay subcontractors and investors, Oceanwide Plaza Towers were left abandoned as China Oceanwide Holdings became

embroiled in lawsuits. After four years in 2023, China Oceanwide Holdings was court ordered to be liquidated in order to pay the debts owed to their lenders and subcontractors, and shares in the company were cancelled by the Hong Kong Stock Exchange in April 2025 (Rogers 2023; Hong Kong Stock Exchange 2025). From early 2019 to late 2023, Oceanwide Plaza Towers stood empty as a byproduct of corrupted city planning processes and reckless foreign investment seeking speculative profits.

After nearly half a decade of abandonment, a community response to these derelict skyscrapers came in the form of graffiti. In December 2023, three tags from local taggers AKUA, SOUR, and CASTLE adorned the tallest of the three Towers (Abramovich 2024). Word quickly spread of these tags and the minimal onsite security, sparking interest from the wider graffiti community that would eventually manifest in a mass tagging event on a scale unlike any seen before (Zeiger 2024). In late January through early February 2024, graffiti artists swarmed the vacant floors of Oceanwide Plaza Towers by the hundreds to cover the three abandoned properties with graffiti. Within just a few days, all three Towers saw 13-foot graffiti pieces from hundreds of artists covering their exteriors, staking an illicit community claim on these private developments. For several weeks, sporadic takeovers continued as the city struggled to secure the site, with people continuing to graffiti on, party in, and even jump off[3] of these abandoned monoliths. This mass tagging event rapidly went viral over social media with tens of millions of views and video streams on Instagram and Tiktok, garnering international attention at an unprecedented scale. Impressions from the general public were widely positive, celebrating the work of the artists as an act of community resistance against rampant corporate luxury housing development in Downtown Los Angeles.

[3] With the assistance of a parachute. See KTLA 5 News coverage: "BASE jumper leaps from graffitied towers in downtown L.A." February 13, 2024.




Figure 6. Oceanwide Plaza Towers as seen from 12th and Flower Street at night after having been covered in graffiti, circa March 2025. Graffiti can be seen along the balcony portions of each tower, and are paralleled on the other side. Photo by Joshua Valdez.

The impacts of these events reverberated amongst community and online conversations for weeks after these events took place, with thousands of new photographs and videos of the tags across the build being shared across the world. In response to the tagging event, the city government furnished nearly $4 million for private security and graffiti removal—the latter of which has still (fortunately) not materialized. In their staunch belief in private property rights, they demanded that the property owners, China Oceanwide Holdings, mitigate the graffiti on their property. This was a futile demand, as Oceanwide Holdings not only did not respond to these demands but were by this point in the middle of liquidation, not having further assets to invest into the property let alone for graffiti mitigation (Rogers 2023; Farr 2024; Tidmarsh 2024). Over a year later, the graffiti remains on the Oceanwide Plaza Towers, with some of the largest multistory pieces ever painted by graffiti crews visible from several miles away.

This serves as a major disruption to the spatial norms of Downtown. Commuters entering Downtown Los Angeles as they drive up the 110 North freeway are now greeted by the graffiti covered Towers at the forefront of Downtown. Skyscrapers held for decades as fortresses to globalized capitalist investment and symbols of urban repression have now for the first time revealed vulnerabilities that the people were quick to take advantage of (Davis 1990; Harvey 2001; Flusty 2001). Graffiti artists broke legal and physical boundaries of private property at a scale never before seen in Los Angeles, escalating graffiti from actions achieved on the margins of urban space to an act of insurgent placemaking in the center of one of the highest value real estate markets in the world.

This thesis aims to understand how graffiti artists used multiple knowledge systems to engage in insurgent action that had an unprecedented impact on the production of space in downtown Los Angeles. I focus on the tagging event at Oceanwide Plaza Towers as my case study to unearth the varied bases of knowledge that influenced the actions and perceptions of graffiti artists as a site of urban insurgency. This thesis starts with a literature review where I define insurgency and insurgent knowledges, and situate graffiti as a form of insurgent action. I

examine the practice of graffiti as it relates to the production of urban space and its relationship to insurgency. I then pose my research question and provide a conceptual framework of the multiple knowledge bases that are utilized by graffiti artists with regard to Oceanwide Plaza Towers. I then provide an overview of my data, measurements, and methodology, before presenting findings on the knowledge bases that this study engaged. I conclude with a discussion on the implications of insurgent knowledges of Oceanwide Towers on urban planning regimes in Downtown Los Angeles, tracing how these practices challenge the dominant modalities of the production of urban space and reclaim a right to the city for marginalized communities.



Figure 7. The three tagged up Oceanwide Plaza Towers as seen from the 110 Freeway near the 9th street Downtown exit, circa October 2024. Photo by Jordan Wynne.

# CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

*Defining Insurgency*

Insurgency is generally understood as revolt or rebellion against state power structures that fall outside of legal means of resistance. Insurgent actors go beyond what the state has designated as legally permissible, distinct from appeals for rights within the bounds of legal recourse such as voting, community organizing, or lobbying government bodies. While this definition helps understand the nature of insurgency as illicit unsanctioned actions, this definition is too broad. It may inadvertently include actions that reassert forms of oppression, and does not focus on the importance of refiguring power dynamics (Miraftab 2009; Miraftab 2016).

Urban planners distinguish acts of insurgent planning from general insurgency in two distinct ways. First, insurgent actors must practice a “humane urbanism” (Miraftab 2009; Miraftab 2016; Canedo and Andrade 2024), challenging the norms of dominant spatial production in cities in ways that are “transgressive, counter-hegemonic, and imaginative” (Miraftab 2009, pg. 33). Humane urbanism is generally concerned with improving quality of life and asserting rights to space for marginalized social groups, centering the urban potentialities that they envision. This theory builds off of ideas of radical planning, which centers the importance of social learning and knowledge building to affect change and take action (Friedmann 1987; Canedo and Andrade 2024). It is these three qualities—being transgressive, counter-hegemonic, and imaginative—that underscore the knowledge systems of urban insurgent actors. The knowledges of the marginalized are understood as fundamental to creating new forms of radical planning through insurgent action. These transgressors engage in iterative practices of social learning through venues outside of “expert-based” or “professionalized” knowledge building, such as through lived experiences, folk knowledge, and shared realities (Friedmann 1987; Roy 2003; Miraftab 2009; Canedo and Andrade 2024). These shared realities amongst socially marginalized groups generate “everyday” forms of resistance

that over time help to build a transcript of shared knowledge hidden from hegemonic forces and not considered in conceptualizations of formal spatial politics (Kelley 1996; Flusty 2000; Miraftab 2009; Canedo and Andrade 2024). The creation of these subaltern knowledges through community camaraderie allows communities to survive and thrive in the face of inhospitable urban conditions (Friedmann 1987; Kelley 1996; Roy 2003; Canedo and Andrade 2024). These iterations of knowledge are shared through networks of social organization to form “dissident cultures” opposed to urban oppression, finding ways of building and asserting dignity, pleasure, style, artistry, and other forms of expression within urban space (Friedmann 1987; Kelley 1996; Harvey 2000; Holston 2008; Canedo and Andrade 2024). Members of these groups create fissures in the sociospatial fabric of urban space through small acts of insurgency, with the potential to catalyze into organized social movements. (Kelley 1996; Flusty 2000; Harvey 2001; Holston 2008; Harvey 2012; Canedo and Andrade 2024). Social knowledge building is thus a crucial component of insurgent urbanism that makes new urban realities possible. These alternative knowledges spring forth actions that attempt to disrupt the power of hegemonic forces and redistribute this power to the people by way of affecting physical space (Friedmann 1987; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2016; Canedo and Andrade 2024). Through critical consciousness of their sociopolitical position, groups can disrupt urban space through insurgent political action, asserting bold and deliberate claims to space rooted in their collective social identity (Kelley 1996; Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Hou 2010; Harvey 2012; Miraftab 2016; Roy 2016; Barry & Agyeman 2020).

Second, insurgent planning is a struggle staged in urban space to establish citizenship rights outside of state definitions and restrictions to citizenship (Holston 1999, 2008; Roy 2003; Miraftab 2009; Harvey 2012; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019). Citizenship rights as defined by the state can be considered projects of exclusion, where the state embeds formal and substantive citizenship rights within the built environment of a city (Holston 2008). Formal citizenship rights are imbued by official recognition by the state as a political member of society,

whereas substantive citizenship is the set of “civil, political, and social rights” that certain urban subjects can actually assert (Holston 2008, pg. 50). Insurgency arises through new forms of social organization that challenge the bounds of formal and substantive citizenship, demanding rights, resources, and recognition of citizenship outside of how the state defines them (Holston 2008, pg. 51). Assertions of these socially demanded citizenship rights happen most frequently at sites of contention: spaces where challenges for rights and identities confront hegemonic forces that attempt to sequester, segregate, and police these identities out of urban space (Holston 2008, pg. 48; Kelley 1996; Flusty 2000; Roy 2003; Roy 2005; Reese, Deverteuil, and Thach 2010; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019; Roy 2020; Cnaedo and Andrade 2024). These are spaces where insurgent actors assert their right to the city—the ability to be able to shape and influence patterns of planning, development, and quality of life in urban space—in ways that are extralegal and beyond the bounds of strict citizenship rights (Lefebvre 1996; Holston 2008; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019; Roy 2020)

Within the United States, access to full urban citizenship rights are contingent on property ownership (Roy 2003). Constitutional protections of property rights create paradigms of propertied citizenship that afford more substantive citizenship rights to property owners over non-property owners (Nedelsky 1990; Roy 2003; Roy 2020). Property rights are a significant component of the state and citizenship building projects of the Constitution, as it sequesters formal political power away from majority democratic rule and towards a protected class of political and economic elites (Nedelsky 1990; Roy 2003; Holston 2008). This inherently excludes tenants and the unhoused, and historically excludes communities of color from substantive urban citizenship rights. Those that have property are able to assert a stronger right to the city, which scales exponentially the more property is owned (Roy 2003; Harvey 2012).

The American system of propertied citizenship is heavily based in racial capitalism, where exclusion of people of color—and particularly Black residents—from owning and controlling property is fundamental to value accrued and assessed on property (Robinson 1983;

Roy 2003; Gibbons 2016; Gilmore 2017; Taylor 2018; Táíwò 2022). While in the contemporary era of planning substantive rights are most often at issue, it is denial of formal citizenship rights that form the backbone of most unequal appeals for property rights today. At the inception of the Constitution of the United States, enslaved Black Americans were considered property, fundamentally encoding the subjugation and exploitation of Black people into the understandings of property rights in America. Both the state and capitalist business owners relied on the exploitation of Black labor to maintain, cultivate, and expand their land and assert their rights to property. The lack of formal citizenship for Black and Indigenous members of society both through explicit exclusion during slavery and colonial removal projects and unequal formal inclusion through Jim Crow and segregation laws sowed the seeds for ongoing substantive rights problems that persist through to this day (Robinson 1983; Kelley 1996; Gibbons 2016; Táíwò 2022).

20th century spatial segregation policies like redlining and racial covenants kept people of color in specific parts of town away from white properties and communities (Taylor 2018; Ndubuizu 2021; Táíwò 2022). Land and property owned by Black communities and communities of color were valued lower, under more scrutiny by the state, and more easily dispossessed through government regimes that prioritized white propertied citizenship (Roy 2003; Gibbons 2016; Taylor 2018). White families also received benefits of government assistance when it came to housing in the form of more housing financing options, social programs, and public housing, that were explicitly barred for people of color. As Roy (2003) explains:

> "Not only were first-track programs restricted to white citizens, but also the second-track programs were marked by a set of racist exclusions…public housing remained overwhelmingly white until the late 1950s (Vale 2000, 8). The integration of public housing was bitterly contested, often through violent defenses of the color line as in the case of the white riots of Trumbull Park, Chicago (Brown 1959/ 1972), and later through white flight. In a racist system, as these sites became predominantly black, so they were stigmatized. Such discursive devaluation was deepened by the insistent neglect of the state." (Roy 2003 pg 477).

As soon as formal laws of racial exclusion were no longer legalized, the exclusions experienced by communities of color became absorbed by the market. Public housing and other

public benefits were defunded, in an act of refusal from the state to provide benefits to families of color and unfurl the racial systems of valuation entangled in propertied citizenship (Roy 2003; Gibbons 2016; Gilmore 2017; Taylor 2018; Táíwò 2022). The desegregation of redlined districts opened up urban land valued at lower prices, which was further exacerbated by the phenomenon of white flight (Roy 2003; Gilmore 2016; Taylor 2018). This primed them for redevelopment, granting free reign for capitalists looking to perpetuate growth by expanding into new economic territory. Funding that was once reserved for public housing was now sent to the private sector as ways of building value and investment in the city (Taylor 2018). This is the genesis of the spatial fix in areas like Downtown Los Angeles as driven by capitalist development (Harvey 2001). Now that the state could no longer enforce racist regimes of exclusion to private property, they allowed market forces to act as these exclusion forces instead, pushing people out of urban centers as capital owners buy more and more property (Harvey 2001; Roy 2003; Gordon 2004; Harvey 2012; Taylor 2018). These exclusions from property ownership and rights to space in the city have generated insurgent actions and inner city rebellions that the City of Los Angeles has tried to suppress, but with each instance of suppression comes starker pressures for marginalized tenants across the city (Kelley 1996; Gibbons 2016; De La Cruz-Viesca et. al, 2018; Comandon and Ong 2020; Táíwò 2022). Land speculation and property development by capitalists encouraged by states seeking property tax revenue acts as fuel for urban gentrification and redevelopment (Smith 1979; Harvey 2001; Harvey 2012). This inexact tool of spatial stratification would serve not just to disempower communities of color (though they were indeed the ones who bore the most severe consequences), but the general public of the city as well (Kelley 1996; Harvey 2001; Roy 2003; Miraftab 2009).

In the contemporary area, property has become a commodified financial asset, acting more as a means for capital accumulation than as a means of social value like housing (Harvey 2001; Roy 2003; Miraftab 2009; Harvey 2012; Ferrer 2021). Incentivized by government

funding, investment firms poured excess capital into urban centers, buying up rights to expand and grow upwards (Harvey 2001; Harvey 2012; Taylor 2018). Regimes of propertied citizenship allowed this phenomenon to grow out of control, extending rights beyond just individual property owners/landlords to large corporate conglomerates representing major capitalist interests (Harvey 2001; Roy 2003; Gordon 2004; Miraftab 2009; Miraftab 2016; Ferrer 2021). This places the average urban citizen on a starkly uneven playing field when claiming a right to the city, increasing the scale of urban marginality and exclusion (Harvey 2001; Roy 2003; Miraftab 2009; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014; Roy 2016; Roy 2020; Ferrer 2021). Regular citizens now had to compete in the urban arena with billion dollar investment companies from home and abroad. This detachment of land use from community control and a lack of a substantive venue to protest encourages dissident cultures to find creative and insurgent ways of asserting their right to the city (Kelley 1996; Flusty 2000; Harvey 2001; Harvey 2012).

Insurgent planning emerges as a response to strict norms of propertied citizenship. With diminishing opportunities for ownership, rising housing costs, and deteriorating urban conditions, marginalized groups claim space through the cooptation and disruption of private spaces. Incursions on property rights regimes become defined as insurgent action, reclaiming their right to the city not through formal tenure mechanisms but through defiance of oppressive legal forms of land rights (Flusty 2000; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Hou 2010; Harvey 2012; Miraftab 2016; Roy 2016; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019; Roy 2020). The generation of formal urban space is left to state-certified “experts” in the professional class of “urban planners” and by capitalist developers seeking to extract land value (Smith 1979; Ross & Leigh 2000; Song 2014). Urban planning theorists problematize the stranglehold of capitalists and professionals on urban development by tapping into the importance of the participation of the urban subject in citymaking. As a response to neoliberalism, progressive urban theories generally rely on a reformist standpoint of aligning the professional urban planning profession with principles of inclusivity and equity (Ross & Leigh 2000; Song 2014). Both of these

modalities still support a hegemonic power structure in which the planner is the conduit of urban space, limiting the scope of transformative or radical city planning (Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014; Canedo and Andrade 2024). Abolitionist theories emphasize the need for active participation of the urban subject in placemaking, beckoning them towards the concept of insurgency (Abu-Lughod 1990; Flusty 2000; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Miraftab 2016; Roy 2020). As Miraftab (2009) explains:

> "Neoliberalism should be understood as not simply a bundle of economic policies that extract surplus capital, but as a network of policies, ideologies, values and rationalities that work together to achieve capital's hegemonic power…insurgent planning has traveled an important further path by revealing how inclusive planning, with its emphasis on citizen participation and civil society partnership, has often become the accomplice of neoliberal governance." (Miraftab 2009 pgs. 33, 43).

The concept of the right to the city creates an arena by which we can evaluate who has the ability to create within urban spaces (Haas 2011; Harvey 2012; Barry & Agyeman 2020; Ferrer 2021; Huante 2022). Lenses that examine racial capitalism and settler-colonialism in urban spaces "extend ideas of belonging and becoming in urban planning and placemaking" (Barry & Agyeman 2020, pg. 3). Agency of the urban subject in crafting urban space is critical to urban theorists in the democratization of urban placemaking, acting as an antithesis for modernist cities as spaces of accrual for capital investment (Dear and Flusty 1998; Harvey 2012; Song 2014; Barry & Agyeman 2020; Ferrer 2021; Canedo and Andrade 2024).

Urban planning literature regarding cities of the Global North situates insurgent action as legitimized by a gradual process of formalization—the extralegal or rightsclaiming acts of insurgency lead to an organized political front that protects these actions (Harvey 2000; Hou 2010; Reese, Deverteuil, and Thach 2010; Harvey 2012; Roy 2016; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019; Roy 2020). This literature describes organized housing justice movements and nonprofit organizations stepping in after insurgent action to engage in planning activities—as proxies or collaborators for the actual insurgent actors. This reflects the fundamental inequalities of propertied citizenship: those with more access to stable existence in urban space must be the

ones to help assert the rights of those that have less than them (Roy 2003; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019). This is also reflected in frameworks of “inclusive planning” or “equity planning” processes that aim for considerations of the less powerful as a part of the planning process without actually creating systemic changes (Miraftab 2009). Most importantly, it shows the limitations of a strictly rights based framework of claims to dispossessed property and citizenship rights in a framework that Libby Porter (2014) terms “possessory politics.” Porter (2014) describes the “regressive tendencies” (pg. 389) of rights based frameworks to undo the dispossession of land and property from the marginalized urban subject. Attempts at repossession through property rights based regimes limit what can be achieved under hegemonic norms of planning and spatial production within the city without proffering new norms of planning. This is not to say that these exercises in possessory politics are without results: in the case brought forth by Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert (2019), the organizing of insurgent actors who co-opted untended state-owned buildings in New York and Chicago led to the establishment of new decommodified CLT housing, an incredible resource for the urban poor.

What it does discount is the self-determination of the initial set of insurgent actors: they themselves are not the agents of change, but simply the call to action. This shows a blind spot in the literature on urban insurgency in the Global North: we do not reflect on the knowledge, experiences, and desires of insurgent actors directly and instead synthesize their needs into planning discourse that is digestible to hegemonic regimes of planning. This ignores the “hidden transcripts” and “daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often inform organized political movements” (Kelley 1996, pg. 7-8). This may diminish possibilities of new urban development patterns that could otherwise arise, and that insurgent actors may be calling for us to see, resulting in the “immediate limitation and co-optation” of insurgent planning impacts (Porter 2014, pg. 387). Insurgent action is a tool to disrupt established property regimes and imagine new ones instead (Miraftab 2016; Canedo and Andrade 2024). While Global North planning literature tends to miss this, literature on and from the Global South encourages

planners to learn from social groups that are less stringently bound by regimes of propertied citizenship (Roy 2003; Roy 2005; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Canedo and Andrade 2024). In the case of Roy (2003) and her influential essay “Paradigms of Propertied Citizenship,” planners of the Global North are asked to consider a broader citizenship regime that operates off of the autonomy of the marginalized urban citizen to determine their own planning needs and affect their own environments. Rather than focusing on how insurgent actors can find formal means of legitimacy, these accounts focus on informal insurgent acts as legitimate resistance strategies that create new modes of planning. Informal actors, acting without nonprofit or advocacy support, take it upon themselves to reclaim space for their own use.

Literature on insurgent planning also misses the creeping subversion of insurgency, often jumping off from the point of an insurgent action instead of understanding the fomentation of insurgent action, which comes from collectivised but also often decentralized understandings of space and power. The individual actors that make up a network of insurgency are important components that construct potentials for insurgent planning. They themselves are planners, and the Informal networks of insurgency are the backbone they build that that breeds action (Friedmann 1987; Miraftab 2009). This is foundational to radical planning theory, where processes of community based alternatives to hegemonic planning move from the development of knowledge of marginalized community members (Friedmann 1987). Looking at the process that leads insurgent actors towards action more properly frames them as insurgent planners, not just instigators. This gives credence to urban imaginaries held outside of professionalized hands that offer hollow ideas of “inclusion” as a thinly veiled mechanism of appeasement for neoliberalism (Miraftab 2009).

*Los Angeles & Crises of Propertied Citizenship*

As a premiere city of the Global North plagued with social inequities throughout its history, there is extensive research and historical analysis on the development of Downtown Los Angeles. Major redevelopment in DTLA began in after 1965 in response to the first Watts Riots,

which were insurgent actions rooted in the spatial injustices and inequalities that Black communities experienced throughout cities such as rent increases, evictions, private property redevelopment, and severely limited access to homeownership immediately proceeding an era of explicit racial redlining (De La Cruz-Viesca et. al, 2018). These acts of urban rebellion resulted in direct federal and state government response that attempted to “fix” these issues of spatial inequality that would result in even deeper spatial exclusion (Harvey 2001; Gordon 2004; Harvey 2012). The federal Kerner Report and California McCone Commission reports did not focus on addressing inequity through direct assistance or reparations for these communities, but instead crafted a response strategy to provide assistance through private sector subsidies (De La Cruz-Viesca et. al 2018). This would involve the clearing of inner city neighborhoods deemed “blighted” by the government—a term historically used to describe neighborhoods with high populations of Black and Brown residents, perpetuating patterns of exclusion formulated through racial capitalism (Robinson 1983; Gordon 2004; Avila 2014; Comandon and Ong 2020; Huante 2022). Reneging on providing substantive citizenship rights to Black and Brown residents, the government opted to finance the private market as the primary means of urban improvement (Taylor 2018; Ndubuizu 2021; Taiwo 2021; Huante 2022). Developers receiving government subsidies were the very same ones who were clinging to urban segregation due to the historic importance of race in housing valuation (De La Cruz-Viesca et. al 2018; Taylor 2018; Taiwo 2021). Communities who were experiencing major rent increases and evictions from discriminatory housing providers were now going to be at the whim of these entities backed by government support. Massive subsidies for privatized urban redevelopment resulted in subsequent rounds of Downtown redevelopment driven by speculation and financialization of property (Marks 2004; Gordon 2004; Avila 2014; Soja 2014; Comandon and Ong 2020; Huante 2022).

The tool identified for neighborhood redevelopment for Downtown Los Angeles was the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles (CRA/LA), a tool that had been used in first

rounds of urban renewal which saw federal investments in freeway systems and new housing that displaced communities of color without their input or consideration (Gordon 2004; Avila 2014; Huante 2022). Post-1965 Watts Riots, the CRA/LA were initially responsive to the findings of the McCone Commission, seeking to involve communities of color in redevelopment through community participation in the planning process, an early form of advocacy planning (Ross and Leigh 2000; Huante 2022). This involved bringing together boards of community members representing outlying downtown areas—South Los Angeles, Boyle Heights, and the Figueroa Corridor—to share with the CRA/LA, Department of Planning, and City Council what the local communities needed. Common desires included investment in neighborhood homeownership programs, the creation of new affordable housing, and rental assistance for low income and senior residents (Marks 2004; De La Cruz-Viesca et. al 2018; Huante 2022). However, the end of federal urban renewal programs in the early 1970s and their replacement with Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs) left cities with much less federal funding available for public-oriented redevelopment (Taylor 2018). Worse, the passage of California Proposition 13 in 1978 limited property tax revenues for the state and cities. This created pressure to build high-value developments that could generate more property taxes.

This led Mayor Tom Bradley and the City Council to subsidize the construction of massive skyscrapers using Tax Incremental Financing (TIFs) in a bid to attract investment firms and major corporations to Downtown Los Angeles (Marks 2000; Gordon 2004; Huante 2022). The City of Los Angeles sacrificed the agency of the urban subject, once again enforcing exclusion of communities of color and the impoverished from rights to the city through physical displacement, dispossession, and intentional disinvestment in order to extract value from the land, offering that surplus value to major corporations (Soja 1996; Harvey 2001; Marks 2004; Gordon 2004; Harvey 2012; Avila 2014; Porter 2014; Huante 2022). Centralizing redevelopment in Downtown on major high rises for private corporate use would provide a way for the city to generate tax revenue and also get rid of their problems of “blight” and civil unrest through

dispossession and displacement of the urban poor and communities of color (Soja 1996; Gordon 2004; Marks 2004; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014; Huante 2022). The process of overriding community plans became commonplace, extinguishing the voices of communities of color who had only a decade ago won their rights to freely exist in spaces across Los Angeles (Gordon 2004; Marks 2004; Sims 2016; Comandon and Ong 2020; Huante 2022). Community members on planning boards would be replaced by entrepreneurs and city planning officials, creating a mechanism of false consensus whereby these boards misrepresented the needs of the community and supported subsidies for private development (Huante 2022; Sovacool et. al. 2023). At the same time that the practice of neoliberal corporate financial development in Downtown Los Angeles was nurtured, homelessness in Downtown was sequestered onto Skid Row (Reese, Deverteuil, and Thach 2010; Stuart 2014).

In the 1980s, Downtown Los Angeles saw a massive influx of private development in downtown, attracting major corporate investments from domestic and international investors, opening up downtown to the world as a site of capitalist value extraction (Soja 1996; Flusty 2000; Harvey 2001; Marks 2004; Harvey 2012; Huante 2022). Los Angeles lured these corporate developers in by the promise of speculative returns on investment from low rent land dispossessed from the urban poor, and tax subsidies from local governments meant to incentivize long term business agglomeration, thus driving up future tax revenues by way of artificially inflated land values (Harvey 2001; Marks 2004; Porter 2014; Huante 2022). Rent seeking city governments saw these speculative investments as possible sources of new property tax revenue, a hot commodity post-Proposition 13 in 1978. This incentivized them to provide subsidies for redevelopment to generate economic activity. The TIF structure had the power to finance the entire process of redevelopment, from pre-acquisition to construction and completion of each project (Gordon 2004; Marks 2004). While TIF projects through the CRA/LA were meant to make back the property taxes spent on them, most newly redeveloped properties generated only half of the property taxes that they were financed with (Dardia 1998). This meant

that high rise redevelopment properties were receiving 50% tax subsidies that siphoned property taxes from other neighborhoods (Dardia 1998). From 1980 to 1992, more than half of the skyscrapers that exist within Downtown today were constructed (Sims 2016). Assessed values in those areas from 1983 to 1996 grew at a staggering 270%, driving up property and land values and making new construction more expensive (Dardia 1998). This exemplifies the core concept of the spatial fix (Harvey 2001): capital accumulation by globalized investment corporations fixate on city centers as ways to both extract capital and bury their excesses into physical space. This was justified through the political philosophy of neoliberalism, relying on economic policies that support large capitalist conglomerates that supposedly "trickle-down" to generate economic prosperity and "fix" socioeconomic issues like poverty and blight that were historically associated with Downtown (Harvey 2001; Gordon 2004; Marks 2004; Miraftab 2009; Avila 2014; Soja 2014; Huante 2022). These "fixes" of neoliberalism internalized the violence of exclusion through its ideological project, mapping it to the urban space of Downtown Los Angeles (Harvey 2001; Gordon 2004; Avila 2014; Soja 2014; Huante 2022). As private entities basked in tax subsidy benefits, outlying communities only felt the negative effects of these investments. Declines in home ownership, rent increases, gentrification, and displacement in South Los Angeles, Boyle Heights, and the Figueroa Corridor came as a direct result of Downtown redevelopment and land speculation (Comandon & Ong 2020; Haas 2011; Gibbons 2016; Huante 2022).

While initially disempowered and met with carceral forces of displacement, disempowerment, and criminalization, marginalized communities ousted from Downtown have fought numerous times to claw back their right to the city (Soja 1996; Cummings 2006; Haas 2011; Pulido 2012; Harvey 2012; Song 2014; Roy 2020; Ferrer 2021). In the mid-1990s, a coalition of several nonprofits led by Strategic Action for a Just Economy (SAJE) and Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) partnered with local downtown adjacent residents to fight for the creation of Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs) (LAANE 1999;

Cummings 2006; Haas 2011; Bhusal 2021). This was in response to the proposed development of the LA Live Entertainment complex—directly across from the current site of the Oceanwide Plaza Towers—which was a $2 billion investment that nearby residents of Downtown worried would exacerbate gentrification and rent increases that they were already experiencing (Cummings 2006; Haas 2011). The purpose of the CBA was to provide direct benefits to local communities affected by redevelopment activities, written directly into the development agreement (Cummings 2006; Haas 2011; Card 2022). This was a first of its kind innovation that created legally enforceable demands for marginalized urban citizens to exercise some substantive rights to the city. If the city wanted to establish new high end properties, then the community had to receive some kind of benefit. The CBA included stipulations for green spaces, fair labor practices including living wages and local hiring, and affordable housing (Cummings 2006; Haas 2011).

Critical resistance from organized and unorganized contingents of urban subjects has resulted in concrete wins within the urban arena, but these wins are often dwarfed by the scale of extraction that has been undertaken at the expense of these communities (Gordon 2004; Cummings 2006; Haas 2011; Harvey 2012; Bhusal 2021). Rarest amongst these wins, if at all present in the literature or in reality, is the winning back of physical space within Downtown. In the case of LA Live, community demands for a 20% affordable housing requirement in the area were whittled down to 5%, and developers further skirted these requirements in later negotiations (Cummings 2008; Bhusal 2021). The system of racial capitalism has dictated the development outcomes before communities can even participate (Heynen & Ybarra 2021). While residents may get a Community Benefits Agreement that provides certain caveats and carve outs to “help small communities,” ultimately the space is still taken, low-income residents are displaced, and most people remain without a true right to the city (Harvey 2012; Bhusal 2021; Ferrer 2021). There still does not exist a true right to the city in Downtown Los Angeles for the marginalized urban subject. Private property is protected at all costs, even when doing so is

nothing but costly for state and private actors, as is the case with Oceanwide Plaza, which now receives millions in public funding for private security to prevent further insurgent action.[4]

*Graffiti - Understanding Insurgent Artistic Practice*

Graffiti has a vibrant and storied history in the city of Los Angeles, emerging as an artistic movement that declares a right to the city through illicit personal expression on public and private property through drawing, engraving, and—primarily—painting. (McCormick et. al. 2010; Guanuna 2015; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b; Montoya 2023; Bloch 2024; Gonzalez 2024; Pacheco-Bell 2024). Graffiti as a mode of staking claims to space has existed in Los Angeles since the 19th Century, with "hobo graffiti" of the 1870s appearing as simple paintings and engravings of names onto surfaces, etched by vagrants passing through urban space, leaving a souvenir of their identity on urban space (Valladares and Rodriguez 2024; Bloch 2019b). The emplacement of self through graffiti carried through to "Pachuco gangs" of Los Angeles in the early 1930s. Young Mexican-American residents, a part of this subculture, would scrawl their names as an affront to racialized violence and discrimination against them (Guanuna 2015; Bloch 2019b). Both of these early instances of graffiti practice in Los Angeles highlight graffiti's intrinsic qualities of resistance and emplacement, a tool for the marginalized to reclaim space and power within a segregated and dispossessive city. These early scrawls, which could be considered some of the earliest tags in urban space, predicated bolder, larger, and more artistic graffiti that claimed more space for the urban subaltern.

Graffiti as a broader movement in the United States was born out of a cultural movement of Black liberation and resistance through the emergence of hip-hop in 1973 in the Bronx of New York (BLocal & Pope 2021). Young Black artists established four pillars of artistry to their practice of hip-hop: DJing, MCing (rapping), Breakdancing, and Graffiti, each designed to

[4] Since the designation of the nearly $4 Million by LA City Council for private security and removal of the graffiti, security measures have minimally increased with a second layer of barbed wire fencing, and no removal of graffiti has taken place as of December 2024. See the LAist article by Kevin Tidmarsh, "LA City Council Approves $3.8 Million Of City Funds For Graffitied Oceanwide Plaza Towers," 17 February 2024.

reclaim space to and promote a culture of resilience in the Black struggle for rights, space, and joy in the city (Ruppel 2003; BLocal & Pope 2021). This artistic movement created challenges to dominant social and cultural expressions in the urban cityscape, transforming public and less-policed private spaces into venues of artistic expression (Ruppel 2003; Bloch 2019aa; BLocal & Pope 2021; Gonzalez 2024). Hip-hop artistic movement was in dialogue with the urban condition of the oppressed, speaking on and highlighting social conditions that created urban strife while also uplifting the resiliency, creativity, and inventiveness of urban subaltern populations (Ruppel 2003; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b; BLocal & Pope 2021; Elam 2023). Hip-hop artists like Fab 5 Freddy, Basquiat, and Grandmaster Flash created urban commentary through their artistic practices that operated as alternative theories of urban life and development from the academic—highlighting hip-hop as a prime venue of social learning and insurgent knowledge building (Brathwaite and Mosset 1982; Friedmann 1987; Miraftab 2016; Elam 2023). As shared by the foundational graffiti artist Fab 5 Freddy: “What made graffiti what it is, was the marriage which was the placing of the individual’s mark on that blank surface. But that blank surface that the individual graffiti person tags on, belongs to someone” (Brathwaite and Mosset 1982). Graffiti as it exists now is thus intrinsically tied to the defacing of property that is unowned by the artist. Spaces where such art or space is owned by the artist but reflect the practice of graffiti are merely transcriptions or translations into a larger artistic movement by which the language and praxis of graffiti can be observed from afar (Brathwaite and Mosset 1982; Bloch 2016; Bloch 2019b; Elam 2023). At its most potent and authentic, graffiti must occupy contested spaces—akin to spaces of insurgent citizenship (Holston 1999; 2008).

In the early 1980s, hip-hop and graffiti exploded in popularity and practice, and their influences spread to Los Angeles’ artistic underground (Bloch 2019b; Montoya 2023; Bloch 2024; Gonzalez 2024; Pacheco-Bell 2024). Finding its way into predominantly Black and Latinx communities of East and South Central Los Angeles, graffiti artists took to developing new forms of graffiti that would allow for unique and identifiable claims to urban space (Guanuna

2015; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b; Montoya 2023; Bloch 2024; Pacheco-Bell 2024). Artists like CHAKA, CISCO[5], and SKATE developed new letter writing techniques, creating pieces that were culturally unique to Los Angeles (Guanuna 2015; Bloch 2019b; Bloch 2024; Pacheco-Bell 2024). The language of graffiti in Los Angeles developed in unique ways, influenced by the diverse groups of marginalized urban youth seeking ways to engage with art, and the massive sprawling spaces of the city that operated as blank canvases for expression. Where New York had the subways and stark alleyways, Los Angeles had vast quasi-public spaces like the Los Angeles River and major industrial areas like the railyards full of private spaces that had enough space for artists to find spaces to paint on. Daring incursions on these highly visible spaces, such as the Belmont Tunnel near Downtown Los Angeles, were ways to extend visibility to the artists involved, acted as ways to build community, and allowed artists to build prominence in the graffiti world (Guanuna 2015; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b; Montoya 2023; Bloch 2024; Pacheco-Bell 2024). Graffiti crews, groups of artists that tagged these urban spaces together under a shared group alias, generated their own internal social learning mechanisms that rapidly generated new styles of tags[6], identified new places to “bomb” (covering a space with graffiti art), and designed new and more complex “pieces” (full size artworks with stylization unique to each artist) as ways of gaining prominence and notoriety—known in the graffiti community as “getting up”( Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b; Montoya 2023; Bloch 2024; Gonzalez 2024; Pacheco-Bell 2024). Many taggers aim to show off their tag name and artistic skill, build community, and gain prominence in the local and global informal art scenes (Bloch 2019a; Montoya 2023; Bloch 2024; Gonzalez 2024; Pacheco-Bell 2024).

[5] CISCO is the alias of prolific graffiti artist and UCLA Luskin graduate Professor Stefano Bloch. He is seen as one of the foremost authorities on the practice of graffiti in Los Angeles, and is cited throughout this thesis.
[6] Note: “Tags” or “Tagging” is used as shorthand in this thesis as well as in general conversation to refer to any act of graffiti art, but it should be noted that tagging is most often associated with simple graffiti writing of a certain artist’s graffiti name. Tags usually appear like a signature, either sprayed from a single can or written with paint pens. Tagging is also colloquially used to describe the act of graffiti, but the larger, more complex works of graffiti are more accurately referred to as “pieces.” See Bloch (2019b) and Pacheco-Bell (2024) for more context.

Graffiti is potent with the capacity to disrupt urban space, even if the intentions aren't to make direct political change. A sense of claiming space guides many taggers, who explicitly seek to make their names known in a city that would otherwise forget them. The emancipatory nature of this artistic expression became a way for artists to find their own spaces of insurgency within the city (Ruppel 2003; Dovey et. al. 2012; Bloch 2019a; BLocal & Pope 2021). As eloquently summarized by Dovey et. al. (2012): "From a framework of Deleuzian assemblage theory graffiti negotiates ambiguous territories between public/private, visible/invisible, street/laneway and art/advertising. Graffiti is produced from intersecting and often conflicting desires to create or protect urban character and place identity" (Dovey et. al. 2012, pg. 21). This alludes to the smoothing of urban space understood by Deleuze and Guattari (1980), and the challenges that graffiti makes to the uniformity demanded by dominant forces of urban production. Urban space is smoothed by the hegemonic forces of the production, eliminating ways that urban subjects can effectively influence the spaces around them (Deleuze and Guattari 1980; Gottdiener 1994; Miraftab 2009; Harvey 2012; Huante 2022). Hegemonic forces of spatial production in urban space use smoothing as a way to sanitize space through what Stefano Bloch terms the "aesthetic moral geography" of urban space (Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2024). These "aesthetics" align with projects of racial capitalism that seek to displace and dispossess marginalized urban subjects, creating a sanitized environment that embodies consumerism, capitalism, and whiteness (Gordon 2004; Harvey 2012; Roy 2016; Taylor 2018; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2024). The sanitizations of urban space occur through the state projects of redevelopment and gentrification, as capital investments fixate their grasp on the cityscape through gleaming skyscrapers—symbols of social progress that stand as reminders of spatial dispossession to the marginalized urban subject (Flusty 2000; Harvey 2001; Miraftab 2009; Sorkin 2009; Porter 2014).

Graffiti is an act of creativity and dissidence that turns tools of creative expression against the stratification of urban space. Attempts to remove graffiti are greeted with cyclical

reemergence, emphasizing a conflict between formal rights to urban space and informal assertions of rights to space (Flusty 2000; Holston 2008; Guanuna 2015; Miraftab 2016; Bloch 2016; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b). Steven Flusty (2000) describes this conflict between the "urban monolith" and of playful acts of personal expression like graffiti, describing how artists see this homogenization of space as a canvas for disruption:

> "Downtown L.A. has become an agglomeration of pretty, homogenized spaces. It is a rarefied monolith of a place, where the individual who appears unable to afford the escalating price of prefabricated recreation has no option other than to be at home, at work, or in transit between the two. This monolith, however, is rife with cracks, enabling a wide and eccentric range of unforeseen, unauthorized actions. Further, it is precisely the centrality and exclusivity of this monolith, both geographically and administratively, that invites these unauthorized acts by highlighting their insubordinate implications." (Flusty 2000, pg. 151)

Graffiti interrupts this smooth and sanitized urban monolith that has passed through multiple rounds of development, abandonment, and redevelopment (Flusty 2000; McCormick et. al. 2010; Bloch 2019a). It can be used to make direct and continuous changes to city space that are perpetual and unrelenting; an act of a person contesting for their claim to space and identity in Downtown. Graffiti serves to disrupt the homogenization of urban space, finding the cracks in the monolith of urban space by which individual expression can flourish and a right to the city can be reclaimed (Flusty 2000; Holston 2008; Harvey 2012).

While literature on graffiti is keen on the artistry, social conditions, and politics of police targeting that enacts violence on marginalized urban youth, potentials for changes to planning regimes via insurgency are only sparsely discussed (Bloch 2019a). Insurgent potentialities are understood as a part of graffiti culture (McCormick et. al. 2010; Bloch 2018; Bloch 2019a; BLocal & Pope 2021; Pacheco-Bell 2024), but have not yet been fully understood as a mechanism of insurgent planning. Yet insurgent artists make planning decisions that assert new claims to rights to the city in their everyday lives as taggers (Friedmann 1987; Bloch 2016; Bloch 2019a; Canedo and Andrade 2024). The simple act of tagging property is a spontaneous planning decision born out of wants for personal expression, recognition, and most importantly,

claims to space otherwise denied by the private property regimes of urban areas (Roy 2003; Holston 2008; McCormick et. al. 2010; Bloch 2019a). For authorities on graffiti's practice, it is the fact that these acts are unsanctioned government granted rights to space that keeps the practice of graffiti out of the hands of the powerful that may seek to commodify and limit these spontaneous artistic expressions (Dovey et al. 2012; Bloch 2016; Bloch 2019a).

Through the definition of insurgent planning established through this review, it is plain to see how graffiti holds the potential for insurgent planning. Graffiti art fits the definition of humane urbanism. It is born out of transgressive cultures of so-called "vandals" that represent wide contingents of marginalized youth and communities of color in impacted urban areas. It faces up against the hegemony of property regimes by directly defacing them with art and personal expression, asserting rights to space beyond what is legally allowed. Graffiti artists challenge the commodification and assetization of space by asserting their presence and identity without ownership. When urban residents are denied their right to the city, and are not given the resources, voice, or methods to alter space or circumstance through legitimized means, residents can choose to use the physical urban built environment as a resource and take insurgent action (Flusty 2000; Holston 2008; Hou 2010; Douglas 2014; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2024; Pacheco-Bell 2024).

The theoretical literature on urban placemaking and the case studies and community actions in Downtown Los Angeles depict well why Los Angeles is primed for a new modality of citymaking. Community participation in the creation of urban centers has been fundamentally diminished through processes of exclusion driven by racial capitalism (Robinson 1983; Flusty 2000; Harvey 2001; Roy 2003; Marks 2004; Gordon 2004; Harvey 2012; Gibbons 2016; Roy 2016; Ferrer 2021; Bhusal 2021; Huante 2022). Theories on insurgency and insurgent planning document methods of resistance emerging from insurgent urban subjects (Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Hou 2010; Harvey 2012; Roy 2016; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019; Roy 2020; Canedo and Andrade 2024). My work aims to add to this body of research by

dissecting the structures that currently uphold this extractive and unimaginative use of space in Downtown. I hope to unearth the modes of occupation the urban subject has in downtown, and how these modes of occupation can be used to reimagine and ultimately reclaim downtown.

# CHAPTER 3: Research Question & Methodology

*Research Question*

Urban spaces like Downtown Los Angeles are shaped by hegemonic capitalist forces that prioritize development, economic growth, and gentrification over the needs of the community (Soja 1996; Marks 2000; Gordon 2004; Avila 2014; Huante 2022). With little access to formal planning power, urban insurgency enacted upon physical space can act as a valuable tool to disrupt these extractive forms of spatial production. Those with the power to shape the cityscape—namely, developers—take full advantage of city politicians' desires for unbridled economic development by enjoying incentives for spatial agglomeration and capital fixation on high value land (Harvey 2001; Marks 2004; Huante 2022). Insurgent actors push back on these hegemonic norms, introducing new ways of conceptualizing urban space to a wider audience. While in the United States these contingents of insurgent actors are usually formally organized after their actions by outside organizations to translate actions into planning demands, this case presents an alternative. In this case, graffiti artists came together informally to affect a planning decision, carrying with them the socially constructed knowledges of their insurgent practice. What happens when planning decisions are spontaneous, without an interlocutor, at the moment when insurgent knowledges translate to action? This research aims to examine the different knowledge bases that motivated the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event to practice a mode of insurgent planning dictated entirely by insurgent actors through collective informal action. This would more clearly reveal the power of insurgents to create new urban imaginaries beyond negotiation with rights-based planning regimes (Roy 2003; Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014).

Using Oceanwide Plaza in Downtown Los Angeles as a case study, this research asks: What knowledge bases informed the actions and perceptions of graffiti artists regarding the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event of January-February 2024? Insurgent knowledges allowed insurgent actors to break through hegemonic spatial power dynamics to stimulate the

urban imagination, and to provide a counterpoint to state sanctioned development forces. This thesis proposes a substantive theory that builds off of urban theoretical concepts of social learning (Friedmann 1987), insurgent planning (Miraftab 2009), and the insurgent right to the city (Roy 2003; Holston 1999; Holston 2008; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014) to establish an understanding of how insurgent knowledges can be used to challenge hegemonic forces of the production of urban space and affect planning decisions even without formal organization or translations to rights-based frameworks of urban development (Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014; Miraftab 2016). Based on insurgent planning theory, I examine social organization, positionality, artistry, history, and accessibility as five pertinent knowledge bases that insurgent actors may have used in consideration of getting involved at Oceanwide Plaza Towers, and how their perceptions of that action were shaped.

*Definitions*

"Insurgent knowledges" are all the socially acquired information, experiences, skills, and values held by an individual that inspire them to take insurgent action to claim a right to the city. This is based on Friedmann (1987) who considers "planning as a link between knowledge and action" (Canedo and Andrade 2024, pg. 129). To Friedmann (1987), the social production of knowledge is generative, allowing the enactment of new and imaginative forms of urbanism. These knowledge bases inform an insurgent actor's ability to imagine urban alternatives to hegemonic forces of development through insurgent action and critical interpretation.

I use the phrase "hegemonic forces of development" to represent entities that have historically held dominant power over the production of space in Downtown Los Angeles. This power is wielded in a neoliberal fashion to influence the political economy of urban development either through direct access to governmental decision making or through access to large amounts of capital to invest in the transformation of urban space in pursuit of generating profits (Smith 1979; Soja 1996; Ross and Leigh 2000; Harvey 2001; Harvey 2007; Soja 2014; Sims 2016). These forces include neoliberal politicians and government agencies (i.e. Los Angeles

City Council, the Los Angeles Planning Bureau, the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles); real estate firms and property developers; holding companies and corporate conglomerates that engage in speculative real estate investment; and the wealthier gentry class demanding high end commercial and residential development (Marks 2004; Harvey 2007; Soja 2014; Roy 2020; Huante 2022). Hegemonic development forces erect barriers that sequester spatial power for themselves while denying access to marginalized community members to influence these development decisions (Marks 2004; Foucault 1967; Soja 1996; Flusty 2000; Taylor 2018; Barry and Agyeman 2020; Huante 2022). These “barriers” consist of strategies that these hegemonic forces use to discourage the heterotopic urban subject from participating in the creation of urban space. These strategies can include direct state interference; criminalization of urban subjects and informal development; absence of or lack of access to information on development (whether public or private, purposeful or “accidental” in nature); built design of skyscrapers and urban features; and suppression of venues of public expression. (Soja 1996; LAANE 1999; Marks 2004; Gordon 2004; Avila 2014; Roy, Schrader, and Crane 2015; Sims 2016; Taylor 2018; Comandon and Ong 2020; Ferrer 2021; Huante 2022). Insurgent knowledges allow the insurgents of the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event to break through these barriers and confront the hegemonic forces of development in Downtown Los Angeles. In the following paragraphs, I provide definitions and context for each conceptualized knowledge base, providing an understanding of why these knowledge bases could be important to an insurgent actor. It is important to note that knowledge is complex and constantly evolving particularly in the case with social learning as generated through marginalized, dissident, and subaltern urban culture (Friedmann 1987; Kelley 1996; Porter 2014; Canedo and Andrade 2024). Drawing on the reviewed literature on insurgent planning, urban social movements, and personal experience as a part of the underground culture of Los Angeles, I build a conceptual framework for articulating some distinct dimensions of insurgent knowledge, leaving open the possibility of my participants to reveal knowledge bases outside of the five I conceptualize.

Social organizing of the graffiti community is defined as the way that an actor's social spheres influence their actions and perceptions of urban space (Friedmann 1987). In the context of this thesis, I focus on the way that graffiti artists organize themselves in relation to other artists, typically within the context of "crews." Crews are the primary form of social organization within the graffiti scene, formed by tight knit groups of friends and artists who also maintain the informal rules, practices, and power dynamics of the scene (McCormick; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b; Bloch 2024; Pacheco Bell 2024). What you tag, where you tag, and why you tag is often informed by an insurgent's relationship to these social groups. Smaller crews and individuals are often beholden to the whims of larger crews, who have more authority to command graffiti space and paint over other artists (McCormick 2010; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b; Montoya 2023; Bloch 2024; Pacheco Bell 2024). Artists' relationship to more formalized and notable crews versus less formalized and smaller crews may have an effect on the ways that graffiti artists understood and acted on the Oceanwide Plaza Towers.

The positionality of insurgent subjects represent the social identities of subjects as they relate to hegemonic sociopolitical powers, and how these identities affect lived experiences. Race, socioeconomic status, documentation status, housing status, gender, and sexuality are all identities that affect someone's positionality within the context of hegemonic structures of power in society. This also includes emplaced identity, such as their identity as someone living in Los Angeles and their unique experiences of that place as they relate to it (Jadallah 2025). These identities are intersectional, compounding experiences of oppression or power depending on the social positioning of your identity (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2017). From a hegemonic position, social privileges are derived from proximity to whiteness, maleness, straightness, access to wealth, access to property, and access to formal citizenship status. In a planning context, the positionality of subjects and their accounts based on experiences of discrimination and lived experiences of trauma are often undervalued and overlooked (Friedmann 1987; Roy 2003; Porter 2014; Roy 2016; Roy 2020; Beebeejaun 2022). This thesis aims to shine a light on the

importance of positionality to defining how urban subjects understand urban space and the actions they can take within them.

I proffer that the artistry and artistic practice of graffiti is an influential knowledge base on insurgent actors with regards to their actions on and perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Defining graffiti as art is controversial, as there has been debate amongst practitioners and experts of graffiti as to the function that classifying graffiti as art serves, and whether it should be considered “art” from a functional perspective. Stefano Bloch argues that classifying graffiti as “art” introduces a system of subjective valuation where some graffiti is perceived “as less worthy of occupying space” (Bloch 2016, pg. 446). While this may open the door to discrimination and hatred of some type of graffiti writers, this argument also ignores the way that graffiti writers (or artists as I have been referring to them) perceive themselves, their own work, and the work of others in their community (Cook 2011). Graffiti takes practice to build skill, uses mixed mediums (spray paint, roller paint, wheat paste, etc), and is performed to impart a message on those who see the tag. These are the qualities of graffiti that incline me to identify it as an artistic practice, and I am curious if graffiti artists themselves also qualify their practice as art. Whether or not they do could have implications on how they interpret the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers.

The history of Downtown Los Angeles and its historical relationship to graffiti may be a knowledge base that influences the understandings of Oceanwide Plaza Towers for insurgent subjects. Histories of displacement, redevelopment, and discriminatory planning (i.e. redlining) are all encoded into the contemporary development of Downtown Los Angeles (Marks 2004; Avila 2014; Gibbons 2016; Bhusal 2021; Huante 2022). As discussed in the literature review, the redevelopment of Downtown Los Angeles acts as a racial project of spatial injustice that reinforces spatial exclusion that has historically prevented communities of color from influencing planning and development decisions (De La Cruz-Viesca et. al 2018; Taylor 2018; Taiwo 2021; Huante 2022). These complex and technical histories or Downtown redevelopment may or may not be understood by insurgent actors, but if they are, they could have marked effects on the

decisions actors made around tagging the Towers and their perceptions of them. While actors may not be aware of the history, they may be aware of the contemporary manifestations of these decisions such as gentrification and speculative redevelopment—of which Oceanwide Plaza Towers is a product. These histories could also be understood through the insurgent memory of the graffiti scene. Where specific histories of Downtown development may not be understood or accessible, the history of insurgent response to these developments may act as another influence. Graffiti has been used as an act of spatial resistance in Los Angeles since the 1980s, in parallel with the boom of Downtown Los Angeles redevelopment and skyscraper construction (Flusty 2000; McCormick, Schiller, and Schiller 2010; Iveson 2013; Douglas 2014; Kamel 2014; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b; Bloch 2024; Pacheco Bell 2024). A graffiti artist's understanding of the history of graffiti in Downtown Los Angeles could impact how they interacted with Oceanwide Plaza Towers.

The accessibility of Oceanwide Plaza Towers as it pertains to proximity to the Towers and expected activity within that space is the last knowledge base in my conceptual model that may had an effect on the actions and perceptions of insurgent actors. Accessibility via proximity refers to how close an insurgent actor is to the Oceanwide Plaza Towers on a regular basis. The awareness of the Tower actions, the understanding of its existence in urban space, and the ability to actually get to the Towers are affected by this proximity. As it pertains to onsite actions, accessibility deals with the actual logistical concerns of an artist. How easy is it for the artist to actually enter the site? Can they find a spot to paint that is visible on the Towers? Are they able to bring the materials they need to make their piece the way they want? Can they climb the stairs to get to the spot they need to get to, or is that a barrier to access? These considerations and more make up the possible choices of action that an artist must make to access the space and successfully tag the Towers.

*Conceptual Framework*

The conceptual framework below provides a visual aid of the relationship between the insurgent knowledge bases and the actions and perceptions of graffiti artists regarding the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event. The conceptualized knowledge bases are threaded throughout the literature on insurgent planning and graffiti, but have not been explicitly articulated as interrelated factors that generate insurgent action in urban space (Friedmann 1987; Kelley 1996; Soja 1996; Flusty 2000; Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014; Soja 2014; Roy 2016; Bloch 2018; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019; Canedo and Andrade 2024). This adds depth to macro theoretical understandings of insurgent planning by examining the social learning and iterative dissident practices of marginalized groups that lead to insurgent planning decisions (Friedmann 1987; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009). This framework was constructed prior to data collection, amassed based on preliminary research on the case study and derived from the literature on theories of insurgent urbanism and graffiti. It serves as a loose guide to classify the various subfactors of each knowledge base, leaving room for significant variation between them. One actor's understanding of history or accessibility could vary substantially from another respondent—and both could place different importance on one variable versus another. Different knowledge bases may be interrelated to one another, such as history and social organization relating to the positionality of a subject, which pool into an actor's collective insurgent knowledge. This preliminary conceptual framework of insurgent knowledge is incomplete, and leaves room for artists to reveal other knowledge bases that I may not have considered that are critical to the actions and perceptions of insurgent artists with regard to the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. This allows for nuance and nullification of my conceptualized knowledge bases. This conceptual framework helped to develop my research instruments, namely, semi-structured interviews, in order to analyse the phenomenon of the

Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event  to better understand how insurgent knowledges of graffiti artists influenced their actions and perceptions.

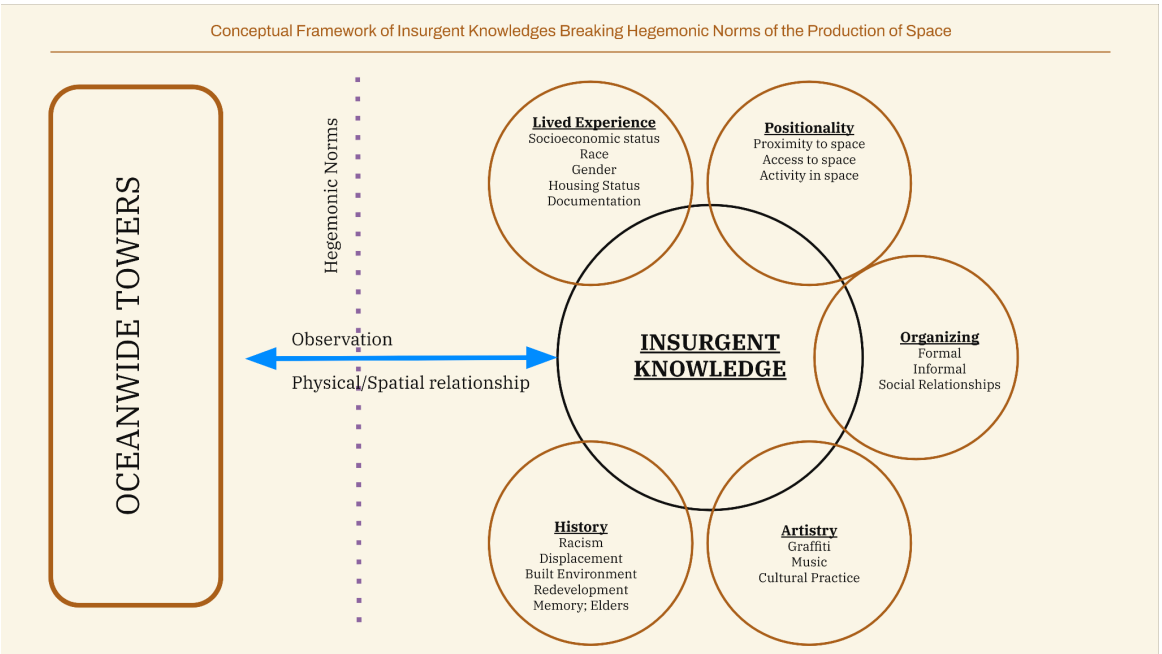



Figure 8. Initial conceptual framework of insurgent knowledges breaking hegemonic norms of production of space as they pertain to Oceanwide Plaza Towers. This framework was constructed ahead of the research as an anchor for my research instruments tracking the phenomenology of the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event.

## *Methodology*

My research question is concerned with investigating which knowledge bases influenced the actions and perceptions of insurgent graffiti artists regarding the tagging and public takeover of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. To answer this research question, I use a phenomenological approach, conducting six semi-structured interviews with active graffiti artists in Los Angeles to garner first-person accounts of their involvement and perspectives on the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Phenomenology is focused on collecting and interpreting the subjective experiences of individuals as they pertain to a particular event or phenomenon—in this case, the individual accounts of graffiti artists regarding the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event.

Phenomenological accounts of planning are useful because they center the urban subject as an agent of potential change in urban environments. Literature on modern planning of Downtown Los Angeles often focuses on macro political economic concepts (e.g. neoliberalism, racial capitalism, postmodern urbanism) to define the course of development, placing the individual urban subject as subordinate to changes in these political economies (Smith 1979; Robinson 1983; Flusty 2000; Harvey 2001; Gordon 2004; Sims 2016; and Huante 2022). Other urban planning scholars employ phenomenology to ascertain perspectives of urban subjects that are historically marginalized within the field of planning or not accounted for within large scale development focused models of planning analysis (Flusty 2000; Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Roy 2016; Bloch 2019a; Bloch 2019b; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019; Canedo and Andrade 2024). This thesis collects the phenomenological accounts of graffiti artists to understand insurgent means of urban engagement that can resist and change hegemonic forces of the political economy in Los Angeles. These accounts lend legitimacy to acts of informal occupation, property destruction, and spatial “thrashing” as forms of urban resistance and ascertaining rights to the city (Flusty 2000; Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Harvey 2012; Roy 2016; Roy 2020; Dozier 2022). Phenomenological analysis comprehends the importance of knowledge bases that insurgent actors operationalize, and translates each individual account to the discipline of urban planning in hopes of understanding the role of insurgent action in disrupting spatial hierarchy.

*Participant Selection*

To obtain data, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with graffiti artists related to my case study. These interviews were conducted from February to April 2025. Interviewees were recruited through a process of self-selection via social media digital recruiting and interpersonal networking. Digital recruiting was chosen as the primary means of recruitment for several important reasons. First, digital platforms are a major social space for modern graffiti artists. Despite the sensitivity of their work, many graffiti artists maintain an online social media

presence where they are able to post their pieces while also remaining (quasi-) anonymous in the public eye. Recruitment via social media thus allowed artists to remain anonymous and covert in their disclosure of insurgent and illicit practices of graffiti. Second, social media played a major role in amplifying the actions at Oceanwide Plaza Towers to an international platform. As is recounted by the interviewees, most people found out that the building was being tagged up through social media posts, whether early or late in the process of the action. Social media thus served as a central forum by which the Oceanwide Towers were communicated about within the graffiti community. Third, digital recruiting via social media allowed for a process of building social trust within the time constraints of the thesis research process. Given the risks associated with being an insurgent artist, it is critical to develop trust between the interviewee and the researcher so as to ascertain authentic and fully rich accounts of illicit insurgent actions (Bloch 2018; Bloch 2024). Having artists within the scene “vouch” for you is a simple and effective way to gain this trust. Digital engagement through social media allowed for this vouching process to happen more rapidly and organically, where friends could connect with other friends about this interview and then reach out to me as a researcher with interest. Building closer social bonds with these artists would be preferable for continued research, as it would develop closer social trust and thus more nuanced and detailed responses. All of this informed my approach to recruitment over digital platforms. Being connected to the underground art scene of Los Angeles, I placed public calls for interviews on my personal Instagram story and reached out to friends in the underground art scene for them to share across their networks. This process of interpersonal network building over social media increased visibility of my research request and provided rapid access to social trust that let those connected to the graffiti scene vouch for me.

*Interview Methodology*

Interviews were conducted in the location preferred by the respondent—either in person or over Zoom. In discussing the interviewing techniques with graffiti artists, Stefano Bloch

discusses the importance of “place-based elicitation” in acquiring authentic accounts of insurgent activity (Bloch 2018, pg.172). It is to the benefit of the researcher to operate not as an outside observer but as a person in touch with the underground movements of Los Angeles and as a trusted mutual acquaintance connected through other friends within the network. Bloch argues that this is most readily practiced by conducting interviews “at the scene of the crime” (Bloch 2018, pg.171) rather than in surveilled or displaced locations that may reduce the accounts of writers from more authentic and uninhibited to more contrived and restricted. Measures of the impacts of these informal actions must be indigenous to the praxis and space by which they are produced, which means the methods to collect these data points were indigenous to the way graffiti artists operate. Unfortunately, the Oceanwide Plaza Towers are not publicly accessible at this point in time. Most respondents did not want to be out in the field tagging during the time of the interview. To mitigate these effects, I gave agency to the interviewees to choose the format of interviewing that they felt more comfortable with. Three respondents chose to meet in person to be interviewed, and three chose to meet over Zoom. All three of the respondents who chose to meet in person expressed that their desire to meet in person was tied to how important graffiti was to them, with one respondent saying “I think zoom makes interaction less personal and graffiti is very personal and important to me, so I’d prefer to do it in person.” This speaks to Bloch’s theory on place-based elicitation, as the face-to-face exchange of information and the non-verbal elements of meeting via community were important to the authenticity of the experiences articulated by the artists (Bloch 2018, pg.175). To further mitigate unintended self-censorship, all spaces chosen for interviews were private spaces: there were no onlookers or listeners that would be able to hear this compromising information. Before each interview, I had casual conversations to get the interviewees comfortable with speaking openly, and adopted casual, non-academic speaking patterns that made the environment feel more friendly and less academic. Future study with a longer time horizon should aim to

incorporate place-based elicitation, but I find that the mitigation strategies I employed in this study were effective at garnering authentic responses from interview participants.

The interviews started with the introductory questions designed to get the respondent speaking openly and candidly about the events at Oceanwide Plaza Towers. After identifying whether they did or did not participate in tagging the towers, I opened the floor to respondents to share their perspectives and understandings of the events at the towers. I took the sound approach of listening more than speaking when conducting quantitative interviews, allowing respondents to naturally guide the interview conversation (Bloch 2018). This also allowed each respondent to provide an unadulterated account of their perception of the events at the Oceanwide Plaza Towers. The stories that the respondents told were laced with crucial evidence unmitigated by my own perceptions or conceptual model. These were supplemented by site-specific questions that aimed to understand the subject's relationship to and perception of the towers and tagging events. As subject matter arose that pertained to my research question, I shifted towards the second section, asking respondent-specific questions that pertained to the knowledge bases of my conceptual framework, introducing them organically to the conversation. Participants often interweaved responses from both sections as a natural part of the conversation, responding to certain questions incidentally "out of order" but in an uninhibited and unprovoked way, allowing for more authentic responses. At the end of this section of the interview, I asked participants once again about the Towers, inquiring if any additional observations about the towers came to mind. To conclude the interview, I conducted a short survey pertaining to the impact that my five conceptualized knowledge bases had on their choice to participate or not participate in tagging the towers. This survey gauges the perceived importance of the five knowledge bases in my conceptual model to the interview respondent on a scale of one to five. While the small sample size of this survey prevented inferential statistical analysis, it allowed for descriptive analysis to further characterize the importance of different

knowledge bases in their role of spurring insurgent action, supplementing the responses to prior interview questions.

*Classifying Participant Relationships to the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event*

The graffiti writers who were interviewed were either directly involved in the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers or were tangentially connected to the action as friends, crew members, and peers of those who went up on the towers. I refer to these two sets as "direct insurgents" and "tangential insurgents." Direct insurgents are graffiti artists that were directly involved with tagging up Oceanwide Towers; tangential insurgents are graffiti artists that were not directly involved but were in community with those that were. This dichotomy was originally created in my research proposal for this thesis as a delineation between actors and nonactors in the context of the towers. However, I came to find through the process of this research study that this dichotomy was less important and more amorphous than anticipated. I found that by dichotomizing those directly and indirectly involved that I had artificially striated and privileged certain knowledge bases over others in an individually minded way, when in reality, the knowledge bases of graffiti artists as insurgent actors are co-constituted and socially constructed. This is not to say that both direct and tangential insurgent experiences are the same; rather, each account gives us a unique perspective that adds to the collective knowledge of the graffiti community as a whole.

I analyze the experiences of both direct and tangential insurgents on an even playing field because they both add to the collective knowledge bases of the graffiti community which affect patterns of insurgent action.The graffiti community at large was impacted substantially by the events at Oceanwide Plaza Towers. As was detailed in a direct account, there were thousands of people on site over the course of the event, and only a fraction of those were actually able to find a spot and get up on the windows of the Towers. Social relationships are a core component of graffiti culture, and have significant impacts on the choices that each insurgent actor makes. Capturing the insights of both direct and tangential insurgent graffiti

artists is thus important to understand production of knowledge bases amongst the graffiti community at large, giving insights into their understanding of the urban environment and impact of tagging the Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Direct insurgency through tagging the Towers can provide key site-based and place-based information based on direct participation, and give us an understanding of the personal stakes involved in taking such insurgent action. It also gives us a window into the motivations of those who climbed the Towers from a primary account. As participants in other insurgent actions, the tagging of the Towers may affect the way that tangential insurgents conduct future actions and interpret their ability to plan within cities. Tangential insurgents provide information based on their own relationship to the site and to other insurgents, which gives us an understanding of the Towers role in generating insurgent thought and action against extractive capitalist forces of development in the city. Despite the distinct identities of each interviewee, there was interconnectedness between one another and also with the broader community of graffiti artists. This allows for a more complete view of how graffiti artists consider their role and actions as part of insurgent citizenship that resists the hegemonic forces of development on the production of space in downtown (Friedmann 1987; Flusty 2000; Roy 2003; Roy 2005; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Hou 2010; Iveson 2013; Douglas 2014; Bloch 2019a).

*Challenges and Limitations of Data Collection*

While both direct and tangential insurgent accounts are important to creating a more robust knowledge base of insurgent action in urban spaces, it must be acknowledged that only one direct account was able to be collected in the timeline of this thesis. The five other accounts collected were all tangential accounts—all of whom were connected to people who did actually tag the Towers. This limitation was due to several factors. First, during the initial recruitment phase in January 2025, massive and unprecedented wildfires wrought havoc across Los Angeles County. This disrupted the ability of researchers and potential subjects to conduct interviews and build social connections, as well as delayed the planned form of social media

recruitment. This contributed to the second challenge, which was conducting interviews within an already short research phase of three months. In a less protracted research timeline, more direct insurgent accounts would be collected to balance the tangential accounts. Third, risks to safety were an important factor determining who responded and who didn't. When asking my tangential contacts who were connected to direct insurgents if those people would be willing to sit for an interview, most said that it would be unlikely for them to say yes because of the risk of criminalization due to disclosing their involvement in the action.

Due to the illicit practice of graffiti, artists were identified in a way that would maintain anonymity, remaining sensitive to the risks that could come from identification as a tagger. In California, the act of graffiti carries a felony charge. This codes the act of graffiti insurgent by nature, but also puts respondents at risk if they are identified by name. My recruitment process was designed in a semi-informal way in order to respect the privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy of the interviewees. I recruited respondents on a volunteer basis, meaning interviewees self-selected to participate in the interview. Even with these precautions, direct insurgents were still wary to disclose that they were involved and to sit for an interview where they would go into detail about these practices. According to a couple of respondents, direct insurgents are cautious about discussing their involvement even within the graffiti community, let alone with a researcher not within the community (Interview Five and Interview Six, 2025). Disclosing these practices in any way is a substantial risk that artists have to weigh with the benefits. A few notable graffiti artists took interviews with major media outlets, where the benefit of notoriety outweighed the risk of criminalization (Abkenari 2024). As a single researcher performing an anonymous study, I had less public benefit to provide, and relied on my social networks and building social trust in recruiting. My primary source data depends on this social trust, which takes time and energy to foster. With more time to build social trust in the graffiti community, abatement of these security risks may have been a lesser issue. Increasing the number of direct insurgent accounts would provide a more robust understanding of motivations

and knowledge of those that actually tagged the building. After all, it is the movement to action that effectuates a shift in the urban environment of Downtown. A longer research timeline would allow for more direct insurgents to be contacted and interviewed. This would provide an even richer understanding of the initial findings here, as well as more salient evidence of how knowledge bases affected direct action. Further study is needed to make the initial findings of this thesis more robust.

*Coding Methods*

This thesis takes advantage of both deductive and inductive qualitative coding methods to interpret the gathered results from interviews. My deductive coding process identified quotes and phrases that were affiliated with my five conceptualized knowledge bases, whereas my inductive coding sought other knowledge bases not captured in my conceptual framework. Deductive coding methods were then used to ascertain where and if the knowledge bases from my conceptual framework were present in each interview account. This involved multiple readings of the transcripts and coding particular accounts, experiences, and phrases with the five knowledge bases. Inductive coding methods were used by taking phrases, experiences, and themes found in common across accounts to build the semblance of a knowledge base. When certain topics and themes were mentioned by a multitude of respondents, these were grouped together to code for similarities and differences in ways of thinking about such topics. Where consensus was built amongst respondents, a new knowledge base emerged. Whereas deductive coding did not necessitate consensus building amongst respondents, inductive coding involved coding responses together that dealt with similar content in order to conceive of a new collective knowledge base of importance. Both processes were iterative, in which coded groups were regrouped several times through several readings until findings specific to each knowledge base were generated. These regroupings aggregated findings into the themes that guide the following results section.

This thesis provides a preliminary consensus due to the small sample size of six interviews and also because only one account collected involved a direct insurgent. Despite these provisional findings, they are reflective of a diverse swath of members of the graffiti community. Interview subjects represent diverse ages, genders, experience levels, and areas within the city. This resulted in varied accounts of decision making and relationality to the Oceanwide Plaza Towers, which provides richer insights into the knowledge bases of insurgent actors. I use this to extrapolate larger phenomenological meanings about what this event meant to the graffiti community at large—what knowledges were used and also what knowledges were developed through the actions at Oceanwide Plaza Towers.

# CHAPTER 4: Results and Analysis

*Participant Profiles*

Before we discuss the results of the interviews in aggregate, I provide short profiles of each of the six interviewed insurgent artists that give a light sense of who each artist is. These profiles are starting points that will be filled with richer descriptions through the course of the results and analysis section.

Interviewee One ("One") is a queer femme Latinx graffiti artist who has been tagging for the past six years. She has a background as a visual artist and a close knit crew of friends that she tags with. She also enjoys exploring urban spaces on her own, taking her time to scope out spaces where she can throw up her tag or her crew's tag.

Interviewee Two ("Two") is the youngest graffiti artist among interviewees who had only just begun tagging around the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event. Coming from a strict upbringing in a Mexican Catholic household, Two expanded his critical consciousness in college, learning from liberationist texts and building a friend group focused on leftist political organizing and creative expression. He is exceptionally political in his speech and motivated by anticapitalism and decolonization.

Interviewee Three ("Three") is an experienced tagger, holding graffiti as his personal space to be seen while also trying to get his name seen in a wide myriad of spaces across the world. While not overtly political, Three has a lot of opinions about what it means to be devoted to graffiti, and the social issues that are facing Los Angeles. The most distinct from the rest of the respondents, Three showed little interest in being involved in the Towers, distanced from the larger graffiti scene and preferring to tag on his own.

Interviewee Four ("Four") is a white nonbinary tagger and the only person interviewed that was not born in Los Angeles. Having lived in Los Angeles for about a decade, Four took up tagging as primarily an artistic practice, focusing on mural art and tagging in spaces that were

open to all. Four has a deep passion for housing and homelessness issues, and works as part of a homeless services agency.

Interviewee Five (“Five”) is the most veteran artist of those interviewed, having about 20 years of graffiti experience in Los Angeles. He tracks multiple eras of graffiti practice and engages critically with his identity as a Black artist across spaces in Los Angeles. He is also involved in local music scenes, but feels more recognizable as a tagger than as a musician.

Interviewee Six (“Six”) is the sole direct insurgent interviewed in this study. Inspired by his older brother, Six has been tagging across Los Angeles since he was in middle school. Six related his lived experiences of abuse under exploitative systems of care to the homelessness crisis in Los Angeles, and sees graffiti as a practice that brings him back to his childhood memories, away from the complexities of adult life. He keeps close to his crew based in his community, but stays away from the larger dynamics of crew politics.

*Setting the Scene — The Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event*

To understand the knowledge bases that affected the actions and perspectives of insurgent actors with regards to Oceanwide Plaza Towers, it is important to establish an understanding of how exactly the event transpired. Collecting accounts from insurgent graffiti artists about the Oceanwide Plaza Towers event resulted in a refined sequence of events and awareness that goes beyond initial media reports and general understandings. It is likely that with more accounts, a more complete history of this event could be archived. Initial media reports cite specific three artists who claimed to have been the first visibly up on the towers, and it was from this point where word started to spread to build critical mass towards the main tagging event that happened in the last week of January into early February 2024 (Abramovich 2024). However, my collected accounts allude to activity on site and general awareness of this abandoned tower by the greater Los Angeles graffiti community from when it was officially abandoned back in 2019. Four details how word of the tower’s abandonment spread shortly after work stopped completely on site in 2019. This very quickly entered the consciousness of

the graffiti community akin to other abandoned properties—a phenomenon I will discuss in greater detail in the results section. Four shares how “a little bit after, like, they had halted construction, and it seemed like nobody was there that people sort of jumped on it,” likening illicit use to this abandoned space to other spaces that insurgent artists identify can be used due to low risk. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic made risks for entering this abandoned property even lower. Four describes how renegade parties began to pop up at Oceanwide Plaza Towers during the pandemic, and with it, how some stray tagging began:

> “So maybe it hadn't completely started out with graffiti, but it became a result of it where there would maybe be like one or two tags. It just kind of like…exploded into popularity, but they were using the buildings before that. I mean, there's a lot of squatters, even in other abandoned buildings in downtown LA. It's just considered a popular place to do that, because it's usually foreign companies that don't— they just don't come around. They don't even have, like, somebody on site to watch the property. So a lot of people were partying and using the buildings for, you know, other illicit activity, obviously.”

Four’s account alludes to a longer term use of these Towers as a site of illicit art and insurgent activity, describing artists and people experiencing homelessness using this space for both art and for shelter. This juxtaposition of insurgent artists and people experiencing homelessness—a population relegated to insurgency because of their subjugated position in relation to the postmodern urban cityscape (Roy 2003; Reese, Deverteuil, and Thach 2010; Roy 2020)—carries deeper meanings that other graffiti artists identified in their knowledge bases which we will further explore. Initial visible tags on the exterior of the building were witnessed by Four and by One several months before initial reports cite them, with tags on lower levels of the exterior of the building popping up throughout early 2023. Four recounts seeing some of these initial tags going up as they would drive past every day on their way to work, and was surprised that people “didn't really catch on to it sooner, because it's pretty much front and center when you're driving down the 110 from certain angles.” This sequence of events suggests a longer lead up time of awareness amongst the graffiti community, with certain insurgent actors testing the waters well before the mass influx of taggers during the known event. This lends evidence to

the creeping subversion of urban insurgency. Social learning generated an understanding of this space through individual interactions that eventually would become large-scale insurgent action.

The main tagging event at Oceanwide Towers took place in the last week of January into early February 2024. There are several claims as to who were the “first” artists who got up there, with Five sharing that they knew the person who claimed to be up on the towers first, and other news reports sharing certain tags going up in December 2023 acting as the first domino that led to this larger action. One mentioned how there were several “cycles” of graffiti going up on the towers over “two to three weeks,” first starting with individuals, and then with crews and larger groups of people coming to tag more of the building. Most of the interview accounts detail how the graffiti community at large found out about people tagging the towers through social media channels. Interviewee One talked about major graffiti pages on Instagram posting memes and images showing tags going up on the towers. Six, the insurgent graffiti artist directly involved with the towers, also found out about these towers through social media, describing how over the course of three days he “just kept seeing four names on the towers, and then five names on the towers per day…Next thing you know, like 10 names, next thing you know, 20 names…randomly, just getting filled…I was like, fuck, let me go scope it out.”

Six provides the primary account as a witness to the event, detailing how most graffiti artists acted within that last week of January in a rush to claim a spot, and participating in what he thinks was the biggest day of activity at Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Six arrived at the towers in the afternoon after four days of major activity on the towers, and noticed 20 to 30 people around the perimeter of the building looking for the way in. The fact that this was occurring in broad daylight in public view in Downtown is peculiar and already shows the uniqueness of this event. Typically, graffiti writers will be covert with their intentions, scoping out a spot long term to assess its viability, and acting when there aren’t likely to be eyes on you (One describes her process of this in extensive detail). This was happening during traffic hour in Downtown Los Angeles, and yet there were already a lot of people there looking for a way in. Six found out just

how easy it was to get onto the site, gaining easy access through a gap in a fence that others were climbing through. At the time, he said there were already people inside starting to tag things up. Because it was such an easy place to access, he called his brother, who had been a tagger but often didn't show up to spots due to risk and age, and FaceTimed him to show him just how easy it was to access. Around 4 PM, Six left to go grab his "fire camp" gear, which is a set up with more materials to tag, including cans of paint but also some food and beer for what he imagined would be needed to climb the towers. He didn't think he would have to climb far, and had picked out a spot lower on the tower's floors.

However, by the time he returned with his brother around sunset, he saw that "all the bottom spots were totally gone. They were fucking completely gone." Swarms of people had arrived at the Oceanwide Plaza Towers, encircling the area in the surrounding parking lots. Activity had picked up immensely, with Six seeing "people there just waiting, just flying drones, smoking weed, catching spots right there in the parking lot, because, you know, some people didn't want to go in…" and also seeing groups of people entering through where he had been before. Six estimates that there were over a thousand people there all at once, a mix of people who were trying to get their names up on the towers, taggers who wanted to watch, and friends who came along as part of that group to be a part of this big event. For each name that was on the towers, several people had come along to support and hang out—and given that there are over 500 visible tags on the three towers, the figure Six shared easily adds up.

From there, it was a race to the top. Six and his brother entered through the previously identified entryway at the same time as about twelve other people, with more people coming in behind them. The interior plaza was filled with people at the bottom, and rushes of other people were headed to the stairs to go up the towers, "trying to beat each other for the window side spot." Six and his brother started to ascend the towers through the stairway, which was no small feat. Six emphasized how big of a barrier climbing the stairs was to getting up there, describing the stairs as "the ultimate graffiti villain," having to climb thousands of steps to find an available

spot to tag up. Because the towers were unfinished, there was no electricity or signage in the buildings, leaving the stairs completely pitch black without a clear understanding of what floor each stairwell was. As they swarmed the stairwells, graffiti artists were hitting tags on the walls, some making marks to remember where they had been, and using their phone flashlights to illuminate the way. For all the names that are visible on the exterior windows, there are even more that are not visible to the public eye lining the insides of the building. Six shared how the stairwell was full of people encouraging one another and helping one another, telling each other "Don't fucking give up! Come on, we're almost there!" Many people, including Six, were carrying a lot of spray cans and other material with them—Six estimates he was carrying about forty pounds of gear. At one point, Six had to go back downstairs to encourage his brother to come up to a spot he found since the stairs had winded him. By the time he got back up, those spots had already been taken, and so they had to ascend even higher.

After over an hour of climbing, Six and his brother finally found a spot on an exterior window they could tag up, and put in the initial fill for his piece and let it dry. Around them, other people were also finding and tagging up their spots. They had gone so high up that they were close to the roof, and decided to ascend all the way up to take some time and relax while their first fill of paint dried. Six described his enjoyment of the view amidst the chaos of the event and the activity happening as hundreds of people ascended and hit up the towers with their tags:



Figure 9. The east faces of two of the Oceanwide Plaza Towers at night, circa March 2025. Over 40 flights of stairs awaited insurgent actors who dared climb to get up on the most ambitious graffiti spot in Los Angeles history. Photo by Joshua Valdez.

> “Once we were up there, we can see people in their apartment complexes, around the perimeter—like, other apartments. Yeah, you can see, like, a crazy clear view of people just living their life. So we were just smoking up there and drinking, just watching people… it was just this weird thing where you can see people live and like, it was just weird….And then that's who would call the cops on people that are doing the graffiti. They'll just peep out the window and they can see people doing graffiti, and then they'll just call the cops. And same with the people that are doing graffiti, they can see the people calling the cops on them…You got people flying their drones. You got the helicopters. You got the police down there. But they can't really do anything, cuz ain't nobody trying to walk fucking 1600 stairs just to tell me to stop, you know?”

Despite the massive event with over a thousand people trespassing and tagging up the towers, police hardly got involved and did not stop the tagging from happening. Six expressed concern about some of the drones trying to record peoples' faces and scan them with some kind of facial recognition software, but felt safe in knowing the police wouldn't climb all the way up there, and that the helicopter was just an intimidation tactic: "You just let that motherfucker just circle around. Then he'll leave. He's gonna fucking run out of gas anyways." They "chilled" on top of the building for a while longer, watching other people catch tags, before finishing their tag up and descending the towers. When activity ceased and police presence closed off access to the building in the next few days, hundreds of tags had been put up on the windows of the building, with thousands more inside the interiors of the buildings.

The tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers thus marked itself as one of the most openly notorious mass tagging events in history, and sets the stage for my analysis of knowledge bases that influenced actions and perceptions of the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event. With awareness of these towers amongst the graffiti community being much longer than the actual event, it lends credence to a calculus of action and social learning that was formulated over time that resulted in this mass, informally organized action.

## *Findings*

The resulting accounts from insurgent interviews revealed that the knowledge bases of insurgent actors are even more complex than initially conceived. Interviewees engaged within and beyond the five knowledge bases of my conceptual framework. These expansive knowledge bases intersected with one another to form a critical consciousness of Oceanwide Plaza Towers and its malformed existence within Downtown urban space. While an abstract sense of sociospatial power dynamics was anticipated, the respondents demonstrated a much more comprehensive and explicit understanding of their actions as they related to physical space in Downtown Los Angeles than initially expected. In this section, I approach interpreting the knowledge bases in two ways. I start with deductive coding by detailing the accounts of the six graffiti artists as they pertain to the conceptualized bases of knowledge. I then use inductive coding to display the expansive bases of knowledge that artists used beyond my conceptual model, demonstrating how spatial consciousness significantly influenced the actions and perspectives of insurgents as it related to the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event.

## *Social Organization*

Across all six accounts collected, the social organization of the graffiti artists were consistently influential in informing the knowledge of each actor. The interpersonal relationships that artists had with one another and their perceptions of these social groups were fundamental to each actor's perceptions of the buildings overall and their choices for how to respond to the tagging of the Towers. The social spheres of these artists were part of a greater politics of graffiti norms that influences decision making in general practice. These norms often establish access to space and power in the graffiti scene; in example, being a part of a large "crew" that is well known often allows you the privilege of painting over other artists. The same can be said for a notable and skilled artist who paints over a less skilled writer. However, an unskilled artist painting over a skilled piece would be a social faux pas (Bloch 2019b; Bloch 2024; Pacheco Bell

2024). This kind of social positionality had a large bearing on whether or not an artist chose to get involved. While sociopolitical norms of the greater graffiti community were certainly present here, the events at the Graffiti Towers challenged some of these norms. Certain social rivalries were set aside for the purposes of participating in this historic moment; others verbally challenged the power dynamics within the scene, proffering a spirit of collective action beyond any individual artist or crew. The interviewed graffiti artists were conscious of what it meant for artists to claim space on the towers, and how it determined who should have access to them—as well as what norms were disruptive to the historic nature of the event. Overall, the community and social spheres of artists were a driving force for making this mass informal action as momentous as it became.

*Crew Membership & Determination of Action*

The predominance of crew culture in the graffiti community was a significant factor in the decisions each actor made on whether or not to participate in the tagging of the towers, and of their perceptions of the towers overall. From a denotative perspective, a “crew” is defined as any group of graffiti writers who regularly come together to paint and tag. Within this definition, however, are several connotations understood collectively by the graffiti community. Crews generally share a collective name that is tagged in lieu of or alongside the names of the taggers in the crew. As with any individual artist in the graffiti scene, prominence and notoriety also affects the way that other writers define and understand crews. Crews of major repute attract large numbers of members, garner certain privileges like the right to paint over other individual/smaller artists, and often carry the history of the movement with their reputation. As mentioned earlier, the majority of the artists interviewed—five out of six—were not directly involved in tagging the Oceanwide Plaza Towers, but their reasons were determined in part by their relationship to crews. Whether or not they were actually a part of graffiti crews, each artist’s individual relationship to crews had a varied affect on the desires to get involved at the towers. Guiding this variation was a consideration of the size of the “crews” each artist considered in

their decision making process. Smaller crews provided a backbone of safety and solidarity for the interviewed artists that informed critical perspectives on the Oceanwide Towers and the impacts of graffiti as insurgent practice. Larger, notable crews were looked at with caution due to the sociospatial power they wield, but significantly, the events at Oceanwide Plaza Towers ruptured some of the archetypical dynamics within the graffiti scene. Overall, the social spheres of graffiti artists made the impacts of these insurgent actions possible. The collective work of artists on the buildings signaled a challenge to the dominant modes of development in Downtown Los Angeles that was decipherable by a broader public.

*Small Crews, Big Impact*

Interviewee One is part of a small crew of painters who were longtime friends who formed what she describes as a "familial bond," interconnected by artistry, femme gender identity, and queerness. It was her close relationship to her crew that ultimately informed her decision to not be involved with the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event. The reason One cited for not getting involved was because she was afraid that she would get caught and prosecuted—information that she says was primarily informed by accounts from her friends:

> "Knowing that specific building, you know…I think that also plays into the reason why I specifically didn't go in those buildings. Because, like I said, I don't know if everybody knew that. I know some people got in trouble. I don't know if they got prosecuted to the full extent or if they just got fined, whatever, but I just try to avoid things like that. Because when it comes to graffiti, like the thing that usually gets you jail time, beyond like a fine or a night in jail is like hitting high value things where people will, where people have the time to sue you for damages…I've just learned that from, like, my friends and shit like that…I learned that through friends who they fell victim to those things early on, you know? Like they got cases or so on and so forth, you know, because of hitting certain buildings and getting prosecuted because the owner of the building felt like they needed to or vice versa."

This speaks both to a critical understanding of political-economic power imbued in downtown private spaces (which I will discuss in more length in my section on spatial consciousness) and also of the importance of community-based knowledge in forming decisions to take insurgent action. The experiences of members of One's crew directly informed her decision to not take the risk of tagging up the towers. Her crew members had experienced the

violence of criminalization that limits access to physical space and upholds regimes of private property in the Western world (Flusty 2000; Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Porter 2014; Roy 2020). While these risks may have discouraged her involvement in tagging the towers, the shared risks and personal experiences that she shares with her crew motivates her actions. This results in motives to tag that are collectively held, as she details:

> "You know, I'm not just doing it for myself anymore. Like, to me the crew that I rep, I rep it because I relate to the other writers in my career because of the struggles they've gone through. And like, how much, despite that, they're strong people. You know, I like writing with them for that reason."

Being a part of a crew has fostered solidarity amongst her crew members, with community informing actions and responses that honor the individuals that write together. This exposes the permeable bounds between knowledge bases, where lived experiences of individual artists influences the social spheres that they associate with, which holds true for each artist account. It also alludes to the larger sociopolitical consciousness that begins to arise through acting as part of a collective, where risks, benefits, and messaging are shared as part of a collective. Through the act of collective insurgent action, solidarity can be built.

The function of crews as solidarity building was expressed at great length by Interviewee Two. Early in his journey as a graffiti artist at the time that the Oceanwide Plaza Towers were tagged up, Two didn't get involved. However, he did harbor a strong admiration for the artists and larger crews that did go up on the towers, inspired by the work that they put up, noting the "very established sense of style in their art." As the youngest artist interviewed and someone still new to the craft, Two expresses humility when talking about himself in relation to crews, defining them as mostly reserved for those who have been established artists in the scene. This being said, he definitely saw the events at the Towers as a point of inspiration to get more involved with the graffiti community and to pull together social groups that can tag together. Rather than defining this as forming a "crew," however, Two likens it to organizing:

> "I'd argue that I have personally started, like some smaller crews, without really trying either, you know? **My goal is to radicalize the people around me so that they can**

> **also push towards social reformation, you know**…But I'm, I think I'm like, working my way towards trying to build a crew. You know, I think a crew is more like everyone is kind of more well established. They know what they're doing, and shit hits the fan or anything happens like, they can go about handling it very well on their own because they've been there before. **Organizing, I feel is more like I'm helping bring people into this so that they could also kind of learn the ropes as I did**…because getting into graffiti, at least for me, was a very, like, stressful thing to do. You know, I was really scared the whole time about getting caught up or having some type of issue. And most of the times when I've invited other people to join along in this, I can see that anxiety in them, and I don't want it to feel like an anxiety inducing thing all the time, because we're making art, you know?"

Informed by his background in political science and his own political praxis, Two approaches his graffiti practice from the lens of organizing. He uses this practice as a way to introduce people in his social spheres to radical action, opening alternative ways for them to fight for social change. Similar to One's account, Two prioritizes safety amongst his smaller crews of taggers, as many of them are just starting out tagging for the first time. However, the safety created here is shared through collective risk, a key function of many graffiti crews. By tagging together, members build trust amongst one another, mitigating the risks of being caught unaware of law enforcement or surveillance systems that may jeopardize their safety. Leading these activities from the perspective of an organizer also provides relief for new taggers who feel like they can fall back on the experience and reassurance of the organizer. There exists a small irony here, as Two himself is relatively new to the graffiti practice. This is indicative of the importance of Oceanwide Plaza Towers as a source of inspiration for his deeper engagement in the practice of graffiti and a solidification of his leftist ways of thought. Through his interactions with the towers, Two solidified his perspectives on the political potentiality of graffiti writing, framing it as an explicitly insurgent act that redefines sociospatial relationships in the urban landscape (Bloch 2019a). As someone embedded within political movements for social change, Two was upfront about the impacts of the towers and how the collective action inspired him, describing how he interpreted the artists who tagged up the towers as creating a collective change on Downtown and laying claim to the cityscape.

*Big Crews, Small Dynamic Shifts*

While small crews provide a sense of solidarity amongst graffiti artists that determine motivations and perspectives on graffiti, large crews with more social clout tend to dictate a sense of social enforcement that may negatively impact the ways artists function in relation to the towers. Of the six artists interviewed, only one claimed to not be a part of any crews, painting entirely on their own. In explaining his reasoning, Interviewee Three exposes the normative power dynamics of large crews that present challenges and social threats to other writers:

> "For the most part, I have always painted by myself. I wouldn't be lying if I sat here and said, sometimes it's nice having someone watch your back… you know, more people can contribute. You know, there's strength in numbers. But just because, like, there's strength in numbers doesn't mean all those people are your friends, and it's hard, because then there's like, you have crews that, like, want to beef with other crews. And I don't see the point in that. Like, if you're gonna want to shoot somebody over someone like, going over a spot, just be a gang at that point. And it's like, I don't agree with that. Because it's like, if you really gave a fuck about anybody in your crew, you would want to push peace. You wouldn't want to see anybody get hurt. You would want to see people move past this. Have kids go to school and provide for their families, not "Hey, go shoot that dude because he went over a spot." At that point, it's just like, it's not graffiti. That's just your ego, that's your feelings being hurt. And it's like, I don't give a fuck about it."

Three's account complicates the understanding of the function of crews, providing both positive and negative impacts that being a part of a notable crew can have. While Three understands the benefit of more personal safety that crews can provide through "strength in numbers" similar to the accounts of Interviewees One and Two, he also sees the ways that the influence of crews can negatively affect interpersonal dynamics between writers. Notably, Three mentions the potential for personal harm and violence inflicted on other artists by prominent crews that are based in the intercrew power dynamics. These concerns of interpersonal violence were shared by the more experienced writers interviewed. Interviewee Six, who painted a piece on the Towers, talked about long lasting "beefs" that crews had between one another, supporting Three's claims of ego-driven conflicts between crews:

> "There's a lot of crews that just fucking hate each other, just like high—it's pretty much high school beef…I had a couple folks that died from just being in crews and just—high

> school beef, ya know? Like they think they fucking….Some people hold grudges from high school bro!"

Interviewee Five, who was the most senior of the artists interviewed, talks extensively about experiencing race-based violence and threats as a Black graffiti writer from what he sees as "gang-adjacent" crews. From being singled out as the only Black writer in his former crew, hearing prominent artists from other crews use racial slurs against Black artists, and having threats from non-graffiti related gangs put a target on his back as a Black writer, Five ultimately decided to "reject the idea of, or like, participating in [crews/graffiti community] because of, maybe just like, the trauma that I've gone through, you know?" These accounts provide evidence of humane urbanism being a part of the praxis of graffiti writing (Friedmann 1987; Miraftab 2009; Miraftab 2016). Crew based violence is seen by several interviewees to disqualify graffiti writing from being a part of the community understanding of graffiti based in artistry, creativity, and an uplifting of identity within restricted urban space (Interviewees Three, Five, Six 2025). These artists depict graffiti as an act primarily concerned with asserting rights to space for marginalized social groups that make statements on quality of life. This intersection between community, lived experience, and humane urbanism is crucial, and will be further explored in the following section on lived experience as a knowledge base for insurgent action.

From these accounts, the reader may be inclined to think that graffiti crews are inherently "dangerous" and more associated with gang activity—an assertion historically made by law enforcement in Los Angeles to violently oppress and arrest graffiti artists (Bloch 2016; Pacheco Bell 2024). Weaponizing these artists' accounts in that fashion misappropriates their meaning and misses key observations of power dynamics within the Los Angeles graffiti scene at large. It is not membership in crews that should be thought of as inherently tied to violence, nor should the practice of graffiti. Our prior accounts of smaller crews justify this: in fact, working together can provide more safety for individual artists and taggers. Rather, it is the abuse of acquired sociospatial power that seems to generate these forms of violence. Stefano Bloch

uses the concept of “authoritative spatialization” defined as “the normative spatial codes and dominant ideological structures that are manifested in and on public space” to describe the actions of different types of “anti-graffiti zealots” (Bloch 2016, pgs. 442-443). In many ways, the acts of prominent crews to enforce their spatial regimes of the city mirror the abuses of power weaponized by police against graffiti artists. Bloch picks up on this, framing “anti-graffiti ‘heroes,’ vigilantes, gang members, and cops” as different types of anti-graffiti zealotry (Bloch 2016, pg. 442). These influential crews can thus be seen as another force that acts against the interests of graffiti artists, and ignores the importance of humane urbanism in their insurgent actions (Miraftab 2009; Miraftab 2016). The power and prominence that major graffiti crews wield creates an internalized authoritative spatialization within the graffiti community itself. The influence of these prominent crews over space can create regimes of authoritative spatialization that inflict violence against those that would otherwise be comrades in the movement. The normative power dynamics of prominent crews are at odds with those labeled outsider, whether by skill, by notoriety, or by race.

The violence described by our interviewees should not be seen as a quality intrinsic to the practice of graffiti, but rather as antithetical to it. Acts of violence perpetrated by prominent crews are seen as abuses of power within the larger graffiti community, and disqualifies their actions from contributing to a key function of graffiti—challenging dominant spatial dynamics. Graffiti veteran interviewees disqualify these behaviors as a part of graffiti culture, associating them with gang culture or immaturity rather than the ethos of graffiti. Indeed, despite all of these dynamics, our interviewees continue to be active graffiti artists. Three clearly delineates how these abuses of action are antithetical to the practice of graffiti in his above account: “That’s not graffiti. That’s just your ego, that’s your feelings being hurt.” By acting as a force for authoritative spatialization, large crews can suppress the political potentials and radical actions of other artists by dictating what can be seen.

Several artists I interviewed expressed discontent at the way the large crews asserted their authority over space on the Oceanwide Plaza Towers (Interviews One, Three, Five, and Six, 2025). Major crews painted over pieces from smaller crews and individual artists who had painted spots on the Oceanwide Plaza Towers before those crews had. These major pieces can be seen from far and wide: the large “OTR” and “MTA” tags on the side of the building can be seen from far away on approach to Downtown Los Angeles from the 10 freeway. Artists were cautious about their expressions of discontent, placing caveats that acknowledged and respected the established rules that allow prominent crews to paint over others (Interviews One, Three, Five, and Six, 2025). These caveats served to demonstrate an understanding of social order and organization of intercrew and interartist dynamics, while also expressing frustration with prominent crews acting on authoritative spatialization on such an impactful collective piece (Interviews Three, Five, and Six, 2025). These actions maintained visibility, prominence, and impacts of the large crews at the expense of any notoriety from the individual artists who not only spent time and took major risks to scale the towers, but also were there to tag the spot up first. While graffiti artists deal with the ephemerality of their art as a reality, as shared in several accounts (Interviews Two, Three, Four, and Five, 2025), the interviewed artists understood the actions at Oceanwide Plaza Towers as a significant historical event, and were saddened that certain artists who had made their mark on those towers now would go unseen and unrecorded for as long as the art on the Towers would stand (Interviews Three, Five, and Six, 2025). This tension between respect for pre-established rules and the political potentialities and recognition of other artists positions Oceanwide Plaza Towers as a mediator for changing dynamics with and beyond the graffiti scene. Oceanwide Plaza Towers acted as an intermediary level set between prominent crews, lesser known crews, and individual artists. While some social norms as enforced by the authoritative spatialization of larger crews were followed, others were set aside from the purposes of contributing to this historic piece of art.

Over the course of several days, Oceanwide Plaza Towers saw thousands of insurgent artists descend upon it, all of various notoriety, to leave their impact and “get up” on a coveted spot on the Towers (Interview Five, Interview Six, 2025). Everyone who was a part of the graffiti scene could access these towers—even those not from Los Angeles, as far away as Riverside or San Diego (Interview Six, 2025). As a part of the graffiti community, Interviewee Six saw it as an imperative to get up on the towers: “It was a thing you had to do if you’re part of, like, community in the graffiti world. You had to go up there….I can tell people I went up there and had proof, you know?” Interviewee Five likened it to a “yearbook” of “people who are writers” in the city, expressly acknowledging that it wasn’t even “the people who are most up [e.g. more notable]” that found space on the towers. Artists small and large converged to stake a claim as a part of this vertical yearbook commemorating the Graffiti Class of 2024—all with approximately equal claim to the space and opportunity for notoriety. Artists' relationship to that opportunity for notoriety within graffiti social spheres were quite informative about the actions they took in response to the Towers. It motivated artists like Six to get up on the Towers, and disappointed Five when he wasn’t able to secure a spot due to not acting fast enough. It also prompted artists less concerned with social notoriety not to act. Three expressed an anti-social attitude, saying that he “didn't want anything to do with it” because it was “everything anyone was painting at the time.” Four reflected on the fact that because notoriety was not as important to her, she wanted other taggers to have the opportunity to tag the “front and center areas” of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Artists wielded their knowledge of social organization and their own personal relationships to it to inform their actions regarding the Oceanwide Plaza Towers.

The tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers seems to have had a transformative effect on the social organizational norms of graffiti artists that may shape the ways that artists utilize this knowledge base in the future. An enhanced sense of collaborative spirit was experienced during the spontaneous and informal collective action at the Towers. As Six accounts in his experience on one of the busiest days at the towers, despite the competition to find a spot, people were

helping each other, regardless of what social spheres they ran with. While there may have been "beefs" or conflicts that crews may have had between one another outside of the space of the towers, these crews were occupying and using the same space at the same time in tacit collaboration. This doesn't necessitate a fully conflict-free space, but it did emplace thousands of artists and their communities in the same space at the same time with the same motivations—a kind of informal unity in action begotten from the central space of the Towers themselves. They offered graffiti artists a new way to create space with one another, challenging the social norms of graffiti. Artists encouraged each other to make the harrowing stairwell climb to find a spot, and enjoyed together the spatial disruptions they were making to downtown Los Angeles as the surrounding police and affluent residents could do nothing to stop their action (Interview Six, 2025). Artists socialized across artificial interscene dynamics, painting together, listening to music, imbibing with weed and alcohol, and even feeding each other—Five mentioned a Carne Asada set up in the Towers that I will forever wish to have attended (Interviews Two, Five, Six, 2025). This collective community support transcended interpersonal differences and power dynamics for the greater purpose of disrupting urban space

The spatial primacy of prominent crews was challenged on the Towers. Publicly speaking out against the actions of large crews may put these artists in hot water, but in this context, it places importance on the graffiti scene as a whole as a conduit for messaging and collective notoriety. This is reflected in the philosophy of several interviewed artists, who encourage younger artists to make their own smaller crews and not be beholden to the power dynamics of the larger crews (Interviews Three, Four, Five, Six, 2025). This disrupts the dynamics of internalized authoritative spatialization, opening up new political, spatial, and reputational potentialities for artists. Artists recognized the impact of social spheres and community decisions on the messaging that their graffiti can convey (Interviews Two, Four, 2025). Whether part of a small crew, a large crew, or an individual, graffiti artists can have a major impact on the perception of and production of space—a fact that all artists articulated in

some way. The social organization of graffiti spaces is paramount to this. The unique ways that the graffiti community acted in relation to Towers allowed artists to open new frontiers of expression and interpretation, communicating a message collectively constructed. These actions are imbued with meaning in good part because of this collective participation. This is eloquently described by Two, who acknowledges that despite the pieces individually mostly being “personal throw ups” without an explicit message, that collectively, these works reveal larger motivations of the artists involved:

> “**I think it's amazing how this large group of people were able to come together and decide, like, let's go here and make this message**…There are hundreds of thousands of people here, like, just a couple miles away on Skid Row, in Downtown LA, all people that are struggling. They're living outside in tents and stuff and now we have this giant building that's just abandoned, and we're not allowed to get near it….it just doesn't make any sense. I like to imagine that the artists did it because of something along the lines of that. So, yeah, I mean, **I think it's a great thing that they did. I think it really kind of pushed the message**.”

The knowledge base of social organization was incredibly influential in informing the actions of the interviewed graffiti artists. Small crews provided safety and camaraderie for participants that allowed them to develop their own critical consciousness. Larger, more prominent crews saw their implicit spatial power equalized with smaller artists in this central space on the Towers. The space of the towers itself was influential on creating new political and spatial frontiers. The tagging of the towers done collectively and informally built new community connections and transformed space in a way more powerful than had previously been seen in Los Angeles. Multiple layers of transgression, imagination, and anti-hegemonic thinking were threaded through the tagging event, marking the insurgent actions at Oceanwide Plaza Towers as transformative acts of humane urbanism (Miraftab 2009; Miraftab 2016).

## *Positionality*

The positionality of the interviewed graffiti artists influenced involvement at and perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Positionality is intertwined with social organization in

graffiti spaces. Aspects of personal identity helped artists determine who they associate with and where they tag (Interviews One through Six, 2025). This helped them decide whether or not to tag Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Positionality had a bigger impact on perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers for some artists more than others. While some artists pulled more prominently from other knowledge bases to create their conceptualizations of the actions on the Towers, others had explicit lived experiences that contributed to their outlooks. The critical consciousness of these artists helped them perceive the message of Oceanwide Plaza Towers as insurgent resistance to dominant regimes of property development and resource allocation in the cityscape (Interviews Two and Six, 2025). Since each individual had a unique positionality, I visit each of them briefly in the sections below to discuss how their positionality interfaces with their actions and perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. I discuss them in reverse numerical order so as to relate concepts introduced in some excerpts to others.

*Interviewee Six: Connecting Personal Trauma to Systemic Injustice*

The lived experiences of Interviewee Six affect both his motivations for his graffiti practice and his spatial perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Six spoke of a core memory of his brother tagging up a bus in front of him that later appeared in a commercial on TV. This made the practice of graffiti an escape for him, something that takes him back to happy memories of being a kid with his brother. This positive feeling garnered from graffiti is juxtaposed with traumatic experiences of systemic violence that Six recounts enduring as a teen through the foster care system. After being reported a runaway, Six was stuck in foster placement, unable to get out to go back home to his mom or dad: “I was just in the system, lost, bro. Just like in the system, stuck, because the system wanted the money, you know? They didn't want to give me to my mom or my dad because they wanted the money.” For over two years, Six faced physical abuse and mental torment, stuck at a facility where staff seemed not to care about him. When asked how this impacted him, Six emphatically relates his circumstance of systemic abuse directly to his perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers: “I don't trust the

system, bro! I don't trust the system. Bro, the system's broken, bro. Like, come on, ***they're building a fucking crazy ass building in the middle of downtown, but they're not helping the people that are like, that live down in the community***." Six understands his lived experience of abuse from the foster care system as interrelated to people experiencing homelessness around Oceanwide Plaza Towers. The violence that he experienced while in foster care is analogous to the violence of experiencing unsheltered homelessness while a billion dollar investment property sits vacant right next to them. He displays critical consciousness of spatial injustice, relating the lack of care he received while in foster placement to the lack of care people experiencing homelessness are receiving. He sees these inequities as systemic features of the production of space and allocation of resources in Los Angeles. He frames both himself and people experiencing homelessness Downtown as "victims" who have fallen into the "holes" of a political economic system that has severely underinvested in social services programs that could aid them. This frames his action of tagging Oceanwide Plaza Towers as an act of reclamation. As part of a citizenry forgotten and abused by the city, Six ascended the Towers to make his mark. His tag is a symbol of inspiration, a symbol of his joy and good memories with his brother, adding a bit of hope and resistance to this monument of dereliction.

*Interviewee Five: Consciousness Arenas*

Interviewee Five introduced the concept of "consciousness arenas" when discussing his early lived experiences that drove him towards the practice of graffiti. Consciousness arenas can be thought of as the spaces and places that develop an individual's critical consciousness—that is, awareness and ability to respond to their positionality in relation to systemic political, economic, and social injustices and inequalities (Freire 1970). Critical consciousness allows an individual to reassess their relationship to hegemonic forces of power, moving from a subject that is "naive" of the subjugative power of hegemonic systems, to a subject that is critical of this power. The arenas, or spaces, are primarily composed of social

environments where individuals are exposed to critical thought by information and ideas offered by other people (Freire 1970; Friedmann 1987; Miraftab 2009). These arenas are environments that inspire challenges to the hegemonic modalities of sociopolitical power dynamics. The development of critical consciousness is based around a person's positionality within certain arenas. As a Black graffiti artist, Five references pro-Black thought spaces he engaged with in middle school that laid the foundation of his connection to graffiti culture:

> "It was like this super pro-Black school, you know, like Tupac came to visit us one day, and, like, that whole kind of thing. And so, like, I was always finding myself in these, like **consciousness arenas**, you know? At that time period, I don't know about now, hip-hop was, like, an element of that, you know? So I ended up finding out about, like, all these underground hip-hop acts, you know. I was listening to, like, Divine Forces Radio on KPFK, you know, and that kind of stuff. So that's like, really what just threw me into that, you know?"

Five describes two consciousness arenas that were intertwined in this story: school and hip-hop. At school, Five is exposed to pro-Black thought likely through his peers, teachers, and shared cultural experiences. Through the arena of hip-hop, Five engages with a myriad of artists from the iconic Tupac to the underground Divine Forces on KPFK community radio who each contribute thoughts and ideas to Five's consciousness. By introducing these consciousness arenas as "foundation" for his graffiti practice, Five implicitly connects his practice of graffiti as an act of personal liberation. Critical awareness of race also affected how Five navigated the graffiti scene, as discussed in the prior section on social organization as he deals with threats of race-based violence within the social spaces of graffiti practice. The trauma inflicted on him influenced him to operate more as an individual rather than within crew dynamics, claiming his own practice of graffiti for the political messages he wanted to share. Despite the anti-Blackness he has encountered in facets of the graffiti community, he does not let it deter him from accessing the spaces he wants to be in. He credits these consciousness arenas to helping him advocate against the perpetuation of systems of oppression like racial capitalism and colonialism. Recently, Five has been tagging about Palestine as a way to let out his grief and frustration against the ongoing genocide in Gaza pushed forward by US imperialism. Graffiti is

one mode of action that Five found he could take that offers alternatives through personal liberation and insurgent action. Were there space available on the Towers, Five would have gladly participated in tagging them up as a point for both “getting up” and making a statement against hegemonic powers of urban development.

*Interviewee Four: Whiteness, Graffiti, and “Legitimacy”*

Interviewee Four both has lived experience with homelessness and works directly with people experiencing homelessness as well, which positioners her perspectives on the Tower as informed by spatial justice principles. They have a deep understanding of the underlying socioeconomic issues that drive people into homelessness, and the political economy of the city that results in the development of abandoned highrises instead of social services for people experiencing homelessness. This informed their perspective on the actions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers as an act of artistic resistance that beautified an otherwise decrepit building. Four’s engagement with housing justice and organizing spaces pushed them into conversations about the “formalization” of the Towers in some way. This was viewed either by turning it into affordable housing (a view shared by several other interviewed artists) or by making Oceanwide Plaza Towers a “legitimate” place for graffiti—in other words, getting explicit public permission to paint on the Towers. This runs counter to the desires of other interviewed artists as well as scholars of graffiti, who understand the political currency of graffiti being an illegal act (Interviewees Three, Five, and Six, 2025; see also Bloch 2016). This perspective acquiesces in some ways to the dominant modes of spatial production where for something to be well received it must be legitimized by a hegemonic force like a government or property owner (Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014; Bloch 2016). This insistence on legitimacy may have to do with their positionality. Four readily identifies themself as a white person who is a transplant from the East Coast. They often tag in spaces where it is explicitly “allowed,” or where they can “tag indiscriminately” without worrying about the spatial dynamics of their tag. Coming from a position of privilege (which they acknowledge) may inform why they are framing graffiti as

becoming more “legitimate” as an art form over the years. Their perspective as a white artist understands the ways that graffiti has been marginalized by the art world over the years, but has somehow now “become” a respectable medium because it is being commodified and found in more galleries—thus, consumed by more white eyes. While this casts a shadow on the liberatory nature of the insurgent act of graffiti on the Towers, Four also explicitly acknowledged their privilege and positionality as a core reason why they did not participate in tagging the Towers:

> “I am a white person, so I feel like this isn't quite my place to, like, put my name all over everything…a lot of people I know that are like, doing the graffiti art are like, LA born and raised, and they're also people of color. So those spaces feel like it's not my place to sort of tag things in a certain way.”

While Four may have perspectives informed from their privilege, their understanding of their positionality gave them the wherewithal to step back and not participate in tagging Oceanwide Plaza Towers.

*Interviewee Three: Space and Racialization*

Interviewee Three had substantial consciousness of his racial identity, which influences the way that he chooses to use space in the city. This sense was embedded in him at the start of his graffiti practice. As someone of two separate ethnicities and who lacked a role model, Three took up graffiti as a way to “be seen” and “have a voice” within a community where he was marginalized. He recounts being singled out for looking different at his school, enduring traumas in childhood, and trying to avoid gangs and bad influences that he sees tarnishing the graffiti scene. He conceptualizes the way that racism works in his community and in the graffiti scene: “When the world sees me, right, they see other people that look like me, and it’s like, I’m an example of that…I don’t need to add any more struggle to people who look like me.” He is especially conscious of the kinds of places that he tags up, talking extensively about wanting to avoid “fucking up” and disrespecting local community members. He carries the pressure of trying to be a good influence on the community while also trying to prioritize enjoying his own

practice. This has put him in a position where he keeps to himself, avoiding associating with crews and generally not tagging along with other community members or popular community sites. This was a factor in him not wanting to participate in the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. He wanted nothing to do with the people there or what other people were tagging. While the above section framed this from the perspective of social organization, in the context of positionality, racialized trauma may have had an influence on Three's participation. To honor his own account, this is interpreted implicitly, as the given reasons for not participating were primarily based on social organization and accessibility. However, the impact of how his identity is perceived in space was expressed as affecting both of those knowledge bases, suggesting an underlying connection to positionality.

*Interviewee Two: Transforming Spatial Consciousness*

Interviewee Two had a transformative experience when it came to his understanding of graffiti, with the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers as a critical juncture helping him enter into a new consciousness arena of graffiti artists. Two comes from a predominantly Mexican community, which placed issues of citizenship, immigration, and state violence at the forefront of his mind from a young age. He also describes growing up in a "really, really religious" Catholic background, putting him in "strict" and "judgemental environments" that frowned upon acts of transgression like graffiti or speaking out on social issues like environmentalism, immigration, and homelessness. Coming into college, Two began to break into new consciousness arenas filled with people that also cared about addressing systemic injustices, getting him involved with activist spaces pushing for social change. At the time Oceanwide Plaza Towers was tagged up, Two was only just beginning to experiment with graffiti. The stigmas he held from his youth about graffiti kept him doing small tags out of sight from the public eye, worried about negative impacts he might have and disconnected from the greater graffiti community. Connecting with graffiti artists who tagged Oceanwide Plaza Towers changed this for him, helping him understand the political consciousness underlying many facets of graffiti culture. Two

encountered these direct insurgent taggers at a campus protest for Palestine, where they related over their shared positionality and political stances. They shared Two's same understanding of the Oceanwide Plaza Towers as a message of rebellion against the hegemonic modes of corporate land speculation amidst a housing and homelessness crisis (Interview Two 2025, 1:12:32). Two began to realize that "a lot of other graffiti artists are very political, and this is a very, like, large political movement within the graffiti scene." From that point forward, Two approached graffiti as an act of "propaganda," understanding the political potentialities of graffiti to push messages of social change and to build movements of resistance amongst those with shared political consciousness. This speaks to the power of consciousness arenas threading together lived experience and social organization. Insurgent actors arrived in the same place at the same time because of their social networks that were connected by a shared critical consciousness (Friedmann 1987; Miraftab 2009; Canedo and Andrade 2024). The positive reinforcement of solidarity amongst crew members and social spheres served to inform Two's perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers, inspired by this symbol of collective action with a poignant message made by artists who shared his political outlooks.

*Interviewee One: Misogyny as a Spatial Barrier*

Interviewee One identifies as a queer femme Latine graffiti writer, which influences who she chooses to do graffiti with. She talks about brushing up against misogyny in the graffiti scene, where men will discredit her graffiti or style as inferior or derivative of male painters. In response, One talks about how this identity politics in the scene has fueled her growth: "Being a femme writer…I don't want to give anybody a reason to talk shit. So I'm going to get more spots than you, and I'm going to be sicker than you." She also decided to build a graffiti "family" of those that share or protect her identity in the scene, building a crew that she is proud to represent and be a part of that also provides safety and security. These dynamics were pertinent to her decision to not get involved at Oceanwide Plaza Towers. In addition to the influence of her crew as discussed in her last section, her identity was also a deciding factor.

When prompted about other factors influencing her decision to get involved, One said that if she had decided to go by herself without her crew that her identity would have made tagging the Towers a “stressful event” for her. This suggests that misogyny and perhaps homophobia within the graffiti scene was a barrier to entry to the Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Placing this in contrast with Five’s desire and lack of concern for going up on his own as a Black man provides further evidence that misogyny may have been a substantial barrier to entry on the Towers. Without safety in numbers from a crew, One wasn’t comfortable going up on the Towers.

## *Artistry*

*Graffiti is Art — According to the Artists*

The interviews conducted for this study suggest that artistry is a fundamental motivator for graffiti artists. Despite the diversity of backgrounds and experience levels, all six insurgents interviewed classified graffiti as art and an artistic practice. Six put it rather plainly: “You know, coloring is art. You know, using colored pencils and pens and pencils is a form of art, right?” Graffiti artists also understand and practice varying forms of their art: Three uses rollers; Four is a muralist; Two and Five are scribes; One and Six spray pieces representing their small crews. Bloch (2019a) perceives art in one dimension, where there is a single appraisal from a dominant hegemonic force that determines the value of such graffiti in comparison to others based solely on a subjective aesthetic value and artistic appeal (Cook 2011). These artists, however, demonstrated an understanding of art from multiple dimensions, ascribing value and meaning to pieces beyond the written/painted form it is in. In describing the influence that veteran graffiti artists had on him on a young age, Six assesses artistic value and inspiration from the placement of graffiti in a high up “jet pack spot” that was hard to access: “Back in the days, I used to see FELLO, like, in 2007…That was dope, bro, because he used to have some crazy ass jet pack spots. Like, how'd you get the fuck up there? You know, I like those type of, like,

random hit ups where it's like, when the fuck did you get up to that?" The space that graffiti is placed is one of the many multidimensional aspects that adds meaning and value to the work of graffiti artists. The artistic inspiration and merit that graffiti artists ascribe to art within their scene inspires them to innovate through creating stunning pieces that demand attention within the montonoy of the urban monolith (Flusty 2000).

*Graffiti as Beautification*

In the context of the Towers, artistry was perceived as a means by which to effectively impart a political message of change to the urban form of Downtown, and as propaganda that counters the dominant modes of spatial production in Downtown Los Angeles (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). Oceanwide Plaza Towers represents a clear example of how the physical space where graffiti is painted adds artistic merit that is decipherable both by artists and the broader public. Several artists cited how impressions of the tags on the Towers from their non-graffiti affiliated connections were distinctly positive, even for those who may otherwise frame graffiti as a negative use of space (Interviews One, Two, Four, and Five, 2025). Interviewee Two shared that even his mom, who was generally very opposed to graffiti, saw the Towers as something actually "cool." Interviewee Four said even the "crotchety" people at their work supported it, sharing that people in their life were "excited about it" and that "a lot of people said it was better." Merit for the tags was ascribed directly to the place in which the tags appeared. The tagging of the abandoned Towers transformed it from a "eyesore" with a negative impact on the city to something seen as beautiful or positive (Interviews One, Two, Four, and Five, 2025). Four, whose account of the Towers focused on their artistry, provides their perspective on the transformative effect of taggers utilizing this building as a canvas:

> "Just seeing that, like, front and center, on like, what is supposed to be a commercial building is not normal. And, I mean, the piece itself is just extremely inspirational and colorful. I think it's transformative for a lot of people…I feel like this is the ethos of like LA…we're kind of meant to be a little bit more colorful than we currently are…"

Four's statement speaks to the diversity and "colorful" nature of Los Angeles communities as placed in opposition with rigid development regimes that do not reflect or respond to these diverse aspects. This frames the graffiti on the Towers as art that places communities of Los Angeles back in Downtown where they are otherwise not given space to be represented. The idea that Downtown development is not representative of community needs is a sentiment shared across several interviews (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). The tagging of the Towers serves as a collective art piece that emplaces parts of the community that had been erased and displaced from the area back into Downtown.

This action is described as "beautification" by several interviewees, which goes beyond typical convention (Interviews Four and Five, 2025). This understanding of artistic "beautification" was not based in hegemonic understandings of the term that weaponize aesthetic value through "artwashing" that gentrifies and displaces communities, but as a community reclamation of the abandoned Oceanwide Plaza Towers (Interviews Four and Five, 2025). Describing the tagging of the Towers as beautiful frames its beauty in relation to acts of insurgent resistance that challenge the dominant production of space in downtown. In this dynamic, speculative "luxury" property developments are framed as ugly and blighted, and the acts of insurgent artists are seen as beautiful and rejuvenating. Artist accounts attest to Oceanwide Towers serving as a central point of inspiration where artists were able to show off their own skills and names (Interviews One, Two, Four, Fix, and Six, 2025). The tags were ascribed to represent communities who were denied a voice in the development of Downtown (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). Four describes how the tags on the Towers were directly representative of these neighborhoods:

> "For a lot of the names that were on the tower, those are people that have been tagging, like, either a long time or they're very representative of their neighborhood. And if you look at the graffiti on the tower, and specifically, it's like, a lot of artists from like downtown LA, like East LA, ***it's like, it's representing a lot of, like, marginalized and communities with a lot of people of color. It's very representative of like, LA as a whole, and how those people are expressing their art***."

These communities were now claiming space within Downtown that was being developed in ways that neighborhoods did not desire nor had input in (Interviews Two, Four, and Five, 2025). By tagging the Towers, graffiti artists created a powerful collective art piece interpreted as a reclamation of space in Downtown. This is the direct interpretation of the impacts of the tagging that Interviewee Five sees: “They say that the people have the power…and I think the towers are indicative of that…people taking over an abandoned building a beautifying it, you know, or making art out of it…that whole kind of thing.” Through this action, ot only do artists take up space and occupy Downtown with their pieces, but they also transform the space their art occupies into something whose vibrant aesthetic inspires action to the wider community of marginalized urban subjects in Los Angeles. The tags on Oceanwide Plaza Towers represent neighborhoods and the diverse crews of Los Angeles (and Southern California at large, per Interviewee Six), subjects that have otherwise been excluded from the right to the development of their city. This action was perceived as bringing power to these people, reclaiming this abandoned Downtown space as a giant artistic canvas (Interviews Two, Four, Fix, and Six, 2025). The collective artistry on these towers was seen as something historic, something impactful, and something imbued with a clear message to the public (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025).

*Graffiti as Propaganda*

Most of the interviewed artists understood the power of the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers to impart a political message, which was also inherently related to the artistic practice of graffiti itself (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). While not all graffiti artists operate under the political modality of graffiti (Interviews Three, 2025), others choose to engage graffiti as an art form to affect political change (Interviews Two, Four, and Five, 2025). This concept is most extensively articulated by Interviewee Two, whose perception of graffiti was formatively shaped by the actions on the Towers and meeting taggers who engaged with this event. When prompted to answer if he perceived graffiti as art, Two responded: “I do consider it an art form. I

also think that it's very political. But I also think that all things are political…Everything's political, and we choose how we go about expressing that. And we just so happen to use graffiti." The art of graffiti for Two is a matter of crafting propaganda that combats the narratives of hegemonic powers like capitalism, authoritarianism, and colonial imperialism. Using graffiti as propaganda can also be a driving force for building community solidarity. Two described how he connected directly with artists who were involved with tagging up the Towers through an event not unlike the Tower takeover: a 2024 Palestinian campus encampment protest:

> "Recently I met a couple people that were in a crew when the whole Palestinian encampment thing was kind of going down…And I got to meet some people then that were more open towards it, because now we're all like, kind of in the same boat of vulnerability, you know? And they also thought it was really cool. Some of them actually partook in it. But they also weren't entirely sure about how all of these people came together at once to do it, you know? Because a lot of it happened in one night…They all thought the same general message I'm kind of spreading here. Like it was a very inspiring thing."

Two's experience meeting the taggers at Palestine protest is a helpful analogue for the political power of the artistry of graffiti. Both the taking of the Towers and the taking of multiple college campus plazas and buildings speak to the political impact of taking over spaces owned by oppressive forces and reclaiming them for the people. In both cases, graffiti was overlaid on physical space in a way that crafted political propaganda relevant to the issues of concern for the artists who made them. At the Palestinian encampment protests on college campuses, tags calling for divestment from war profiteers and an end to the genocide in Gaza were abundant, sprayed up on central locations and key buildings often used in promotional material as representative images of the university as a whole. For Oceanwide Plaza Towers, tags were associated with artists and crews made up of community members from rent burdened and historically marginalized communities, sprayed upon an abandoned speculative development seen as a generator of the housing crisis (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). Given the spatial and symbolic similarities, it is no wonder that Two met taggers from the Towers at the Palestinian encampment protests. This account provides a tacit answer for Two's question on

artists' convergence on the Towers. Artists with shared political views and similar socioeconomic circumstances (as Two terms it, "the same boat of vulnerability"), came together in the same physical space to make a statement against colonial and capitalist powers that denied the right of space to oppressed populations.

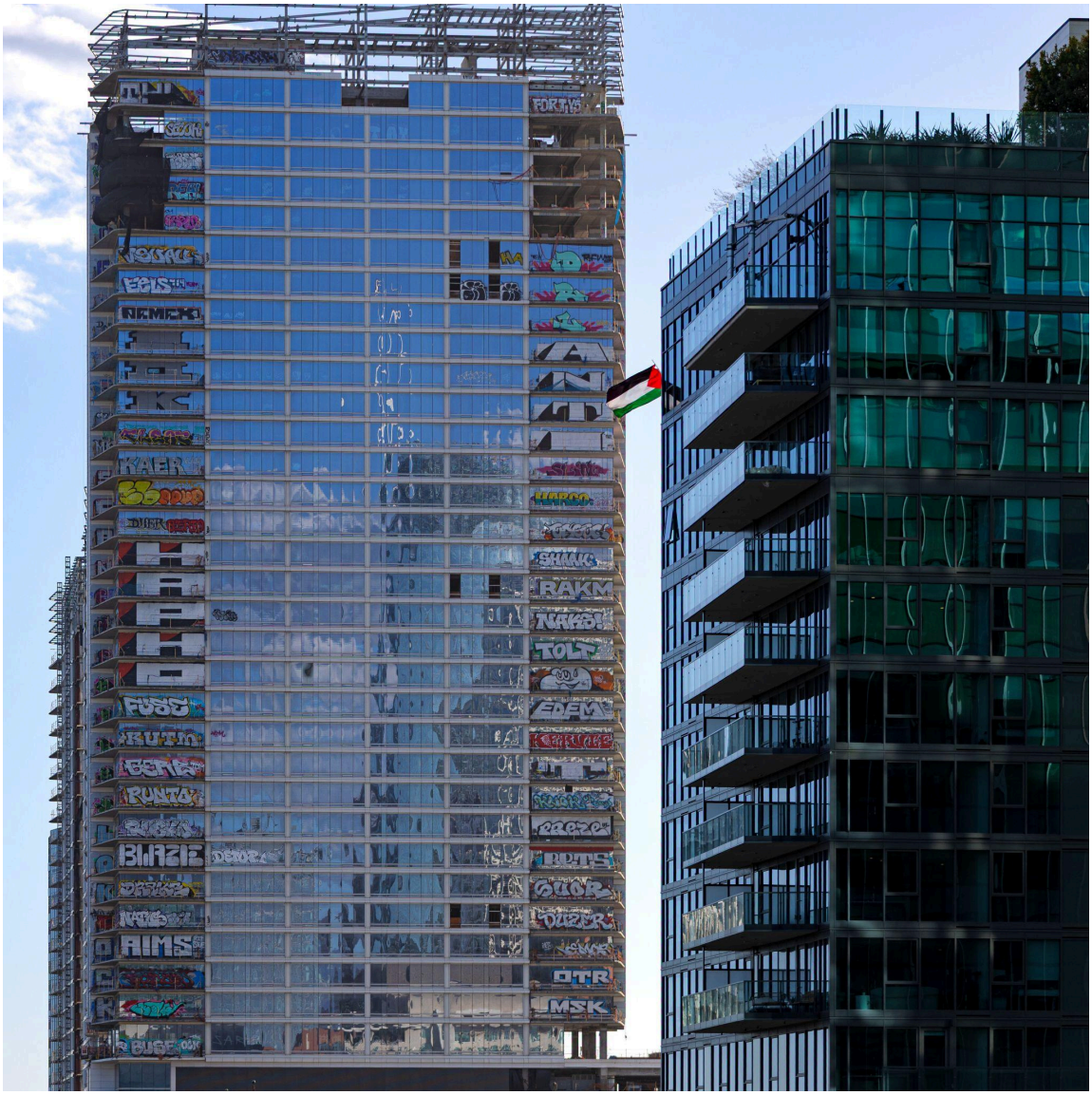



Figure 10. The planned 47-story hotel tower of Oceanwide Plaza, covered in graffiti from individual artists and crews, circa April 2025. On the building across the way, a Palestinian flag flutters in the wind. Photo by Joshua Valdez.

These themes of spatial reclamation through graffiti's propaganda power resonate across the graffiti scene. Interviewee Five described tagging "Thinking of Palestine" across Los Angeles as a way to express solidarity and also his grief and frustration with the ongoing

genocide. Interviewee One describes the importance of claiming space as a femme artist through tagging artistically impressive pieces. Interviewee Six describes the juxtaposition of his graffiti art on the Towers to the “out of place” residents in the luxury condos across the way, and reveling in his enjoyment of occupying this space. In their own unique ways, each interviewed artist conceptualizes graffiti as an art that transforms physical space into something with more meaning: from empty to occupied, from monotonous to rebellious, from erased identity to declared identity. Graffiti is the art of reclaimed space and reclaimed personhood. As Interviewee Three describes “at the end of the day, I want you to know my name…I put my name on a wall: whether you like it or not, you have to see it.” Graffiti creates a way for people to be seen—a sentiment even those who claim to be less political share (Interviews One through Six, 2025). The artistry of graffiti is inherent in the demand to be seen; a refusal to be displaced. Graffiti is propaganda against powers that attempt to erase the marginalized citizen from urban space. Two sees this as a fundamental part of the nature of graffiti, and a reason why the impact of Oceanwide Plaza Towers will be felt even if the graffiti is eventually washed away:

> “[Graffiti] is a way that you could go about spreading a message with no form of censorship, aside from like them trying to take you down. But that's kind of the name of the game. When it comes to graffiti, like, you put stuff up, they're probably gonna take it down, and then you go back and you do it again, and you try somewhere else, ***and you keep going until you're inevitable***.“

## *History*

When considering Oceanwide Plaza Towers, most of the interviewed artists did not use history as a primary knowledge base. Most artists related the concept of “history” to the social history of the graffiti movement, which informed their general practices more than their actions on and perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. From a spatial perspective, perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers were primarily based in contemporary awareness rather than historical knowledge. Some artists related the development of the Towers to histories of

displacement and property violence in other parts of Los Angeles. Overall, though, it seems artists are thinking more about present spatial impacts than past histories when forming their knowledge bases. This will be revisited in my inductive analysis of the spatial consciousness of graffiti artists.

*Social History: Dictating Internal Rules, Challenging External Rulers*

Most of the history that interviewed artists referenced as relating to their practice and decision making as graffiti artists was related to the social history of the graffiti movement. This basic understanding of graffiti history in Los Angeles was important to artists primarily to be able to respect the implicit rules and spatial hierarchies that are enforced within the graffiti scene. There is a collective understanding of the roots of graffiti history: i.e. the impact of New York as a “Mecca” and progenitor of graffiti practice; the development of graffiti as part of the hip hop movement of the 80s and 90s; and the impact of veterans on the scene (Interviews One, Three, and Five 2025). Most of this history is stored collectively, rather than held by one person, but there is a sense amongst artists that there is a duty to hold this history so as to respect the practice as a whole (Interviews One, Two, and Four 2025). Interview One mentions how the graffiti writers she gravitates towards tend “to be very researched based” and that they “need to know the lore” when it comes to the history of graffiti. For her, this manifested in understanding the impacts of veteran graffiti artists in the scene, which can influence style, praxis, and personal goals as they relate to graffiti (Interviews One, Two, Five, Six, 2025). Knowing the “lore” or social history of the graffiti scene as it relates to space allows artists to maintain respect for the socially established rules and practices of the graffiti scene in Los Angeles (Interviews One through Six, 2025). Knowing who is allowed to paint where and over what, the crew politics both between crews and with external forces like gangs, and regional styles of graffiti help artists avoid disrespecting certain people, artists and spaces, which can tarnish an artist’s reputation within the community or even result in physical harm if someone is angered enough (Interviews One, Three, Five, and Six 2025). This relates back to the authoritative spatialization

found within the graffiti scene: the history of the graffiti scene is foundational to the formation of these spatial regimes that dictate the practices of graffiti artists on the whole. Across the board, history was most commonly referenced as a way to learn the rules and norms of graffiti practice. This had less to do with the specific actions and perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers and more about general practice as a graffiti artist (aside from challenges to authoritative spatialization as discussed in the “Social Organizing” section of this thesis).

Knowledge of social history affected the actions of a couple of artists as it relates to social organization. Responses to social history did keep a couple of artists away from the Towers out of either respect or disdain for these social hierarchies. Interviewees Two and Four perceived those tagging the towers as part of a longer history of tagging tradition in Los Angeles. Their relationship to this history (with Two being a new graffiti artist and Four not having been born and raised in Los Angeles) informed their choice not to participate in tagging up Oceanwide Plaza Towers. On the other hand, Interviewees Three and Six have respect for artists that came before them, but do not care much for the history of graffiti due to their perceptions of the people and crews involved. Both of them took polar opposite actions: Three wanted nothing to do with tagging Oceanwide Plaza Towers while Six saw it as an imperative to stake his claim in graffiti history. Most of these decisions were based more in the social relationships established through the history of the graffiti scene rather than actual consideration of graffiti history. Actors were not making choices based on their historical understandings but on the social ramifications of their actions. This suggests a middling effect of social history as a knowledge base that determined the actions of graffiti artists with regard to tagging Oceanwide Plaza Towers.

Some artists did submit other understandings of social history as influential to their perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Several artists contextualized the practice of tagging in decolonial, antifascist, and antiracist movements as a historical form of insurgent resistance against imperialist regimes (Interviews Two, Four, and Five 2025). They spoke to the relativity of

legality and morality, harkening to US histories of legalized slavery and segregation, enforcement of heteronormativity, and the abuse of the “rule of law” to justify the subjugation of marginalized communities. Interviewee Two sees it as an imperative to use graffiti to confront these injustices:

> “As graffiti artists, I think we have, like, almost a responsibility to provide an uncensored, different view and use that to, like, really push it onto the masses. And again, that's where I kind of correlate it back to, like, a lot of wars and past situations…. If we look at different authoritarian regimes that have taken over, like with that, there is graffiti everywhere. Why? Because sometimes we need that reminder. We need that person to be out there spreading that message. Because it's really easy to fall into the propaganda of colonial imperialism, and you need someone to like challenge that. And that's kind of where we come in as graffiti artists.”

These artists understand the historic power of graffiti in confronting empire, and how it acts as a counterbalance to state based violence and propaganda. To these artists, graffiti garners its understanding as an insurgent action from its history as an act of resistance. These insurgent acts that have been codified as “illegal” serve to challenge the moral geographies of the cityscape, confronting hegemonic regimes with countervailing understandings of the right to space and existence in the city (Flusty 2000; Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Bloch 2016). In the context of our conversations, this invokes the tagging of the Towers as a critical response to colonial imperialism and the rise of authoritarianism in the United States.

Harkening to its historic function, the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers can be contextualized as an act of resistance against the dominant spatial and capitalist regimes of Downtown Los Angeles that generated these vacant towers. Artists conveyed their understanding of the historic oppression of graffiti artists through police violence, criminalization through anti-graffiti laws, and misplaced aggregated associations with gang violence (Interviews Four and Five, 2025). Graffiti scholar Stefano Bloch refers to criminalization as tools to enforce “aesthetic moral geographies” of hegemonic social norms informed by racial capitalism and colonial tradition (Bloch 2016, pg 442; found also in Cresswell 1996). Not only did artists indicate an understanding of how graffiti challenges these moral geographies, but they also

acknowledged actual shifts in these moral geographies that have taken place over time that have made graffiti more socially acceptable (Interviews Two, Four, and Five 2025). Interviewee Four details how she has seen Los Angeles become “really relaxed compared to how it used to be when it comes to graffiti art…it’s not being discriminated against as much…it’s not being shaded in, like this…criminal light.”

Historical practice of graffiti has shifted the social perceptions of graffiti by Angelenos at large, making more people receptive to the anticapitalist and spatial justice messaging that is embedded within the practice. This tracks with artists’ accounts of how the broader public reportedly perceived Oceanwide Plaza Towers, seeing the tagging as a positive and impressive action that brought attention to the regional housing crisis and misuse of space (Interviews One, Two, Four, and Five 2025). The nearly half-century of graffiti history in Los Angeles has softened segments of the public on graffiti, and enforcement regimes are observed by artists to be changing (Interviews Four and Five, 2025). Whereas a notable action like this may have resulted in an overall crackdown on graffiti in the city, or perhaps the introduction of a program akin to CRASH in the 1990s, carceral response to these actions has been relatively light, with only a handful of artists facing charges and arrest (Bloch 2019b; Conybeare and Ramos 2024). More than a year later, the graffiti on Oceanwide Plaza Towers still remains, with no sign of being removed anytime soon. In previous eras, such a removal project may have been prioritized much more rapidly. While this is in part due to the sheer size and scale of these Towers, this also reflects a more relaxed enforcement regime on graffiti as Four suggests. This backs up Six’s account of tagging up the Towers, describing how easy it was to get onto the premises and how little the police actually did to stop these actions from happening. Artists used their understanding of historical suppression of graffiti practice to understand how the social perception of the tagging of the Towers differs from what the social response would have been in the past (Interviews Two, Four, and Five 2025). Less violent criminalization and discrimination against graffiti made it easier for artists to take this insurgent collective action, opening up

possibilities for stronger political resistance that is more readily received by the general public without acquiescing to hegemonic aesthetic moral geographies (Bloch 2016).

*Spatial History: Relating Displacement Across Time*

The history of spatial injustice in downtown Los Angeles was not a knowledge base that graffiti artists were actively pulling from to inform their actions and perceptions of the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event. However, a broader base of historical spatial injustice across Los Angeles did appear to inform some of their perceptions. While most artists expressed an awareness of contemporary spatial and political dynamics as it pertained to Downtown Los Angeles (e.g. the housing and homelessness crisis), historical knowledge of Downtown and its redevelopment was not commonly expressed amongst artists. Only Interviewee One articulated the major urban redevelopment projects in Downtown Los Angeles that were designed "to bring money into the area." She referenced the redevelopment of the Figueroa Corridor in Downtown which introduced the LA Live entertainment complex and Staples Center—a historical moment that was formative to contemporary redevelopment patterns in Downtown Los Angeles and the establishment of community based organizing to establish Community Benefit Agreements. Interviewee One did not articulate the formative nature of this redevelopment, but implicitly connected it to the current existence of Oceanwide Plaza Towers, which sits across the street from the LA Live complex. While other artists did not reference this redevelopment history, several others related other locations in Los Angeles that had historically experienced displacement and gentrification to the Oceanwide Plaza Towers. In discussing historical influences, Interviewee Two references the displacement of residents from Chavez Ravine during the construction of Dodgers Stadium in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as freeway driven displacement of communities of color in and around Downtown Los Angeles. This highlights the historic underpinnings of racism and segregation that have driven redevelopment in Downtown Los Angeles, and influenced Two's perceptions of the Tower. At the same time though, Two remarks that understanding the history of Downtown LA is "as simple as what you see in your

day to day." That is to say, the impacts of historical patterns of spatial injustice are perpetuated by today's hegemonic development regimes. Indeed, most of the accounts artists provide regarding the gentrification and development of Downtown Los Angeles come from spatial impacts on the graffiti artists themselves (Interviews One through Six, 2025). Overall, it seems artists are thinking more about present impacts than past histories when forming their knowledge bases of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Artists are pulling from a contemporary knowledge base of spatial consciousness, interpreting the relationality of the Towers to contemporary issues of spatial injustice that they witness in their day to day.

## *Accessibility*

Accessibility as a knowledge base was primarily understood by the graffiti artists through risk assessment and virtual accessibility. The proximity of an actor to Oceanwide Plaza Towers did not seem to have any particular effect on whether or not they decided to participate in the tagging of the Towers, nor their perceptions of the Towers. Actors who had little physical proximity or knowledge of the Towers beforehand did not act differently than those who were far away. Six, the sole direct insurgent actor I was able to interview, knew nothing about the Towers beforehand, and was not regularly around or interacting with the buildings in any way, living and working in neighborhoods away from Downtown. He first discovered this was happening through graffiti circles on social media, and described how some taggers from Riverside and San Diego made the journey to take advantage of this historic opportunity that they too had heard of, no doubt, through social media. Social organization of the graffiti community provided virtual proximity to the buildings which factored into if graffiti artists decided to access the site. Interviewee One talks directly about this virtual network of graffiti artists that informed her—and the graffiti community at large—about the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers:

> "At that time, a lot of people that I follow via the community were like, live posting, you know…the graffiti community has, like, their own Instagram community. The graffiti

> community definitely has their own. So it's kind of like meme accounts, things like that. They'd be posting updates about them, So I'd be like, "Oh, those are my friends!" Or those are people that, uh, I maybe don't get along with, or vice versa, people I don't know…."

Social media allowed the graffiti community to share real time updates of the progress being made on the Towers. These particular channels of social media content allowed graffiti artists to see these actions before the general public. This created a virtual proximity where graffiti artists could assess their perceptions of it and what actions they would take without having to physically be there. In other words, an actor didn't have to be close to the building in physical space to understand the dynamics at play around it. Artists reference social media as a point of early information about the tagging of the Oceanwide Plaza Towers, making them aware of this mass action and its impact (Interviews One through Six, 2025). This virtual access allowed them to make a decision around their actions, and allowed them to form broader perceptions about the Towers as well.

Artists weighed the challenges and benefits of accessing the space of the Towers during the tagging event. Potential risks and challenges to accessing Oceanwide Plaza Towers included concerns of criminalization, logistical concerns with "getting up" on the Towers, and community-based concerns. Assessing these risks was important to artists in forming an understanding of site accessibility. Concerns of criminalization manifested around confrontation from police, arrest, and possible criminal charges, which artists weighted with different levels of apprehension (Interviews One, Five and Six 2025). Interviewee One thought that the buildings being valued at over a billion dollars would contribute to the likelihood that she or her crew members could face steep criminal charges if they were caught. Interviewee Six, on the other hand, saw how easy it was to access the entrance to the site and interpreted police presence as an intimidation tactic rather than a serious risk. Access to the ground floor of the site was easy, but Six was very clear about how big of a barrier the stairs were. Because of the barrier the stairs presented, he didn't think police would try to ascend the Towers to arrest the taggers. This

risk of police encounters did reportedly increase over time. By the time Interviewee Five was trying to find his spot on the Towers, he was concerned there was “too much heat” with regards to surveillance and police presence that had picked up over the course of the most active week of tagging. Indeed, by February 4th, the site had been fenced off and a much heavier police presence had been added, contributing to some late stage arrests and closing off easy access to the site. This ultimately contributed to Five’s decision to not get involved: he had missed the moment of action and now perceived the risks of arrest to be too high.

Logistical concerns for how an artist would actually be able to tag the Towers were also a consideration of several artists. This also seemed to have a time based component. Artists that acted earlier and more rapidly were more likely to find a spot when they accessed the Towers (Interviewee Six, 2025). Artists that acted too late found themselves without a spot on the building they thought that they would be able to paint (Interviews Three and Five, 2025). Interviewee Three reflected on missing the moment, while also being clear that he doesn’t regret it: “By the time I really thought about it, it was super burnt out…when I had first heard about it was still something that could have been hit. But then, like, when I drove by it one time, I was like, damn it…I was like, it's done. I was like, I'm good.” The physical limitations and barriers of the building factored into the assessments artists made about ascending the towers (Interviews Three and Six, 2025). The biggest physical barrier to accessing visible tagging space on the Towers were the infamous stairs—a barrier so grueling it gave Six the confidence that the police would not come up to intervene in their activities. The logistics of bringing graffiti gear up thousands of flights of stairs was a daunting challenge. Six describes carrying two backpacks with about forty pounds of supplies and gear up multiple stories, which made the activity an endurance exercise. This was something that Three assessed as too daunting of a barrier for him because of his practice of graffiti as a roller artist. The prospect of having to carry his heavy buckets of paint and rolling materials up dozens of floors was a level of effort he did

not want to endure. Three prioritized ease of access to a site as a motivator for his graffiti practice: “If I can’t just walk up to a spot, I don’t want it.”

Social barriers to access were a third consideration of artists when it came to tagging the Towers. These social barriers were self-regulated rather than enforced by the community. There was no strict social code or membership status that was stopping artists from tagging the towers: truly, the opportunity was open to any tagger. Instead, artists assessed their ability to act as it related to the larger schemas of social organization as to whether or not they should access the Towers (Interviews Two, Three, and Four 2025). Interviewee Three saw all of these other crews and artists accessing the Towers and decided he did not want to be doing what everyone else was. His want to remain separate from the majority of the graffiti community was another part of his decision not to access the Towers. Interviewees Two and Four, by contrast, saw the Towers as a realm for graffiti artists of more repute and experience. Two saw the tagging of the Towers as representative of more experienced taggers than him, placing a social barrier of access between him and the Towers. Four saw the Towers as reserved for native Angeleno taggers who were representing their deeper seeded communities, thus creating a social barrier to accessing the Towers.

Participants weighed the risks and benefits of access to space based on their own personal assessments of safety, logistics, and social standing. While this accessibility affected whether or not each artist decided to get involved with the Towers, their perceptions of the Towers were not informed by the ability to access them. Accessibility via proximity to the Oceanwide Plaza Towers was too narrow of a scope to assess artists’ perceptions, as their understandings of the Towers went far beyond the physical space of the Towers themselves. Artists connected their access to Oceanwide Plaza Towers to a broader framework of the right to the city (Harvey 2012). These buildings were not assessed in a vacuum, but were related to larger patterns of political economic development in Downtown as a whole. This reveals much more robust understandings of space and power amongst insurgent actors.

## *Spatial Consciousness - An Expanded Knowledge Base*

The actions and perceptions of artists with regard to Oceanwide Plaza Towers pull from an expanded knowledge base of spatial consciousness based around the political economy of development in Los Angeles. This spatial consciousness allows them to operate effectively as graffiti artists and also provides motivations for action against the hegemonic production of space in Downtown Los Angeles. Artists keep an informal inventory of properties across the city, held collectively amongst graffiti artists, as a way to know what spaces can be accessed as a tagger. This inventory also provides graffiti artists with implicit understandings of property dynamics that inform sociospatial and socioeconomic power struggles between Downtown and the rest of Los Angeles. Oceanwide Plaza Towers was one of many vacant downtown properties within this inventory with the potential for insurgent action. This inventory network made it possible for actors to assess their ability to act on Oceanwide Plaza Towers through informal collective action.

Interviewed artists were also cognizant of contemporary patterns of development as tied to the political economy of Downtown, informed by dominant decision makers like politicians and speculative developers. Most artists viewed this dynamic through the lens of the housing and homelessness crises affecting Los Angeles. This placed spatial justice at the forefront of many artists' perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. They blamed the hegemonic development regimes of Downtown Los Angeles as responsible for ignoring and generating the homelessness crisis, and saw the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers as a symbol of resistance to these regimes. This provides evidence of the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers being an act of insurgent planning that purposefully disrupted hegemonic norms of spatial power to affect change to the patterns of development in Downtown Los Angeles.

*Informal Inventories: The Urban Compass of Graffiti*

Informal inventory is the space based component of spatial consciousness that informs where graffiti artists can act. This larger network of spatial consciousness is constructed by insurgents keeping tabs on viability for actions like graffiti tagging or renegade parties. Graffiti artists are constantly keeping tabs on the locations where they can potentially tag things up, and this information is shared amongst the broader social network of artists (Interviews One and Four, 2025). This act of social learning stores spatial information collectively through rhizomatic connections between insurgent actors, allowing for the development of insurgent response over time based on the factors of humane urbanism (Deleuze and Guattari 1970; Friedmann 1987; Miraftab 2009).

This practice of informal inventory keeping is intrinsic to the practice of graffiti. Interviewee One discusses how the role of observation as a graffiti artist plays into building a site inventory: “Graffiti has made me more observant. Like I said, you observe things that I guess other people wouldn't. I guess we probably share a lot in like architectural minds, because you're staring at rooftops.” One identifies a shared sense of spatial consciousness amongst graffiti artists that goes beyond the typical awareness of space. Artists are looking for the next place that they might be able to catch a tag—something that was expressed across all artist accounts (Interviews One through Six 2025). Artists may identify places individually, scoping out places to tag that are accessible to them. By observing, talking about, interacting with, and tagging these spaces, these locations are brought into the collective informal inventory (Interviews One, Two, Four, and Five, 2025). Understanding where tags and pieces can be placed through collective inventory of space is all part of what Interviewee Five terms “the urban compass,“ helping artists navigate places in the city where they can engage in insurgent action.

Oceanwide Plaza Towers was brought to light to graffiti artists as part of the informal inventory when it was abandoned in 2019. The ease of access to the building influenced renegade parties located inside the building as early as the pandemic, along with some initial

tagging on the lower floors (Interview Four, 2025). This kind of activity was not unique to Oceanwide Plaza Towers: it exists in the larger inventory of insurgent spaces in Downtown Los Angeles. Interviewed artists put Oceanwide Plaza Towers into the context of the political economy of development in Downtown (Interviews One, Two, Four, and Five, 2025). They compared its status as an abandoned building with other similar buildings in Downtown, and exhibited an understanding of this abandonment being generated by the same force of speculative property development. Interviewee Four lays this out with remarkable clarity:

> "There's actually a lot of empty buildings in Downtown LA that not that many people are living in...they never really intended for these to be apartments for people to live in them...It was basically just to flip a property through, like, an advantageous time. So I find that really interesting that [Oceanwide] was co-opted for this, because it almost feels like a better use for the building than what originally it was intended for…"

In terms of the informal inventory of graffiti artists, Oceanwide Plaza Towers was yet another abandoned building that came to be through the same process of property speculation as other vacant buildings in the Downtown areas. Insurgents respond to dereliction and abandonment of these buildings with similar actions across the inventory of Downtown (Interviews One, Three, and Four 2025). Downtown has been a place of consistent graffiti practice, as many of these abandoned spaces were not closely monitored and thus more easily accessible to graffiti artists to tag (Interviews One, Three, Four, and Six 2025).

Not only were these spaces more accessible, but they also allowed graffiti artists to catch the eyes of hegemonic forces of production in Downtown. Interviewee Three talks about Downtown as a space he engaged as a graffiti artist from when he was young and just starting out, specifically because he likes the fact that tourists to Los Angeles will have eyes on these spaces and see his name. Interviewees One and Four talk about other abandoned or vacant buildings in Downtown that catch tags, and how these typically happen in areas of new development like Little Tokyo or the Figueroa Corridor. Tagging in Downtown also tends to have spillover effects on adjacent spaces as artists seek further claim to space beyond the initial point of fissuring in the homogeneity of Downtown urban space. One actually explicitly mentions the

tagging of buildings adjacent to Oceanwide Plaza Towers that “have the same effect” and are getting tagged up by other artists. There is implicit spatial commentary regarding where graffiti is placed, and the interviewed artists were generally cognizant of this (Interviews One through Six, 2025). Notoriety is not just generated by recognition within the graffiti community, but where your piece is located and how it communicates with its surrounding environment.

The informal inventory keeps track of these spatial dynamics by way of what is and isn’t considered as part of the inventory. While spaces that concentrate political and economic power like Downtown Los Angeles are generally a part of the inventory, spaces outside of dominant spatial hierarchies tend to be excluded. Spaces like vacant and abandoned buildings, public transportation, freight trains, and public property are all regular parts of the informal inventory of taggable spaces that interview respondents shared (Interviews One through Six, 2025). By contrast, local community spaces like small businesses, churches, and homes were sites that interviewed artists explicitly mentioned as places not to tag—in other words, they fall outside of the general informal inventory of potential insurgent action (Interviews One, Two, and Three, 2025). This helps bring the informal inventory as a function of insurgent action into focus. The viability of a location as taggable in the informal inventory is not just based around accessibility, but also around the impacts that artists have on challenging the dominant uses of space, once again invoking ideas of humane urbanism within their praxis of insurgency (Miraftab 2009). Community based spaces that exert less spatial power are seen as undesirable and against the rules of tagging on a general basis. This is not to say that tags never happen in those places, but they are generally not places that will generate collective interest in the informal inventory, and may at worst get you in trouble with other community members, civilians, and graffiti artists alike (Interviews One and Three, 2025). The impact of a tag increases as it relates to the challenge to hegemonic power dynamics of where the tag is placed. Buildings like Oceanwide Plaza Towers are selected as sites of insurgent action in part because of the spatial power dynamics that they exert upon the rest of Los Angeles. Tourists, building owners, police,

politicians, and wealthy downtown residents are the audiences of viewers that taggers confront when they tag spaces in Downtown (Interviews One through Six, 2025). The informal inventory guides them towards places where their tags can have a larger impact to challenge the hegemonic production of space.

In some ways, this makes the tagging event at Oceanwide Plaza Towers “business as usual” for graffiti artists (Interview Four, 2025). Graffiti artists accessed this informal inventory through their networks of insurgent action, finding out through their collective networks about the tags that were being placed on the upper floors of the building (Interviews One through Six, 2025). This is akin to other Downtown spots that artists could access: taggers seize upon an accessible spot that also has potential visibility, which causes a “ripple effect” amongst the graffiti community (Interview Four, 2025). People share this location through their social networks via social media or word of mouth, which attracts more artists towards the space to assess the possibility for them to take insurgent action (Interviews One through Six, 2025). Each artists’ connection to the informal inventory allowed them to assess their own desire to tag Oceanwide Plaza Towers, akin to how they may assess other spaces in the inventory. Those that wanted to participate in the actions had an understanding of the ease of access and high impact activity taking place at the towers (Interviews Five and Six, 2025). Not only was the site relatively easy to access during the events, but the potential impacts on Downtown space and thus greater potential for notoriety also drove actions at Oceanwide Plaza Towers (Interviews Four, Five, and Six, 2025). The informal inventory kept artists informed about the Oceanwide Plaza Towers, and drove actors who participated to contribute to an action that had the potential to elevate the spatial consciousness of the Los Angeles community as a whole.

*Spatial Justice: Political Economy of Oceanwide Plaza Towers*

Interviewed artists also had a strong sense of spatial justice that related to contemporary issues of housing affordability and homelessness in Los Angeles, which affected their perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. One artist saw the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza

Towers as “a symbol of our housing crisis” in Los Angeles (Interview Four, 2025). Artists readily linked the vacancy of Oceanwide Plaza Towers to the extractive political economy of Downtown development, whereby city planning policy concentrated wealth in Downtown through land speculation which resulted in resource deficits for investments in public health and wellbeing (Interviews One, Two, Four, Five, and Six 2025). This cycle of extraction and land speculation is framed as a misuse of spatial resources by hegemonic forces of development in Los Angeles that closes the door on participatory planning or receptivity to community needs. The Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event was framed as a strong insurgent message to highlight these extractive politics.

Graffiti on the Oceanwide Plaza Towers was seen by interviewees as a symbolic response to vacant luxury developments amid a housing and homelessness crisis. Interviewees Two and Six criticize the construction of new luxury developments at Oceanwide Plaza Towers that are left to dereliction while people on Skid Row and Downtown LA live on the streets. Two, who did not tag the Towers, wanted to imagine that the artists that tagged the Towers did it to “push the message” of confronting the city’s misuse of land instead of addressing the housing and homelessness crisis. Six, who did tag the Towers, explicitly validates this as a core reason why the tagging took place:

> “***You had people coming from different places to write in that building for a reason, because it's just not supposed to be there. It's just like out of place***…Like, why are you gonna put a fucking quadrillion [dollar] building there when you haven't even fixed the street?”

This frames the mass tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers as an event motivated by spatial justice against hegemonic forces of production in Downtown. Artists tie the Towers to state based wealth and land transfers that are misallocated towards speculative development instead of public services (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six 2025).

The dissonance of these investments is mapped in the actual geography of Downtown. Interviewed artists explicitly discuss the proximity of people experiencing homelessness to

Oceanwide Plaza Towers, with a couple even referencing people seeking refuge inside the Towers themselves ahead of the tagging event (Interviews One, Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). Rampant homelessness juxtaposed with and even overlapping this abandoned development emphasizes the rampant spatial injustice the interviewed artists refer to. From the perspective of the hegemonic forces of development in the city, letting an abandoned skyscraper stay vacant after its owners go bankrupt is acceptable, but people experiencing homelessness are unacceptable and should be criminalized (Interviewee Two, 2025). Hegemonic property norms of ownership are prioritized over providing public assistance, showing where the city is willing to place their investments. Six reflects on the $4 Million used to fence off Oceanwide Plaza Towers from taggers as juxtaposed with what they are willing to spend on public investments, snidely remarking: “They'd rather spend that shit on little bus stop shades…they look like prison cells…?” These “bus stop shades,” are a form of hostile urban architecture, denying shade or shelter for anyone out of the desire of elite property owners and government powers to discourage people experiencing homelessness from occupying public urban space (Tu 2024). In doing so, they make urban space hostile for all users, not only the most vulnerable and oppressed, causing a decline in quality of life for all bus users through acts of spatial restriction that push people out of Downtown spaces. Artists understand public investments as surface level compared to the deep investments that the city is making in maintaining the status quo of dominant development forces, prioritizing the value of Downtown properties over human life (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six). They also understand the carceral responses to poverty that are mapped on the cityscape of Downtown, and how resources are siphoned towards wealth accumulation for speculative developers rather than for the people. The awareness of this crisis acted as a crucial motivator for insurgent actors.

The tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers was seen by interviewed artists as spatial reclamation and collective resistance against hegemonic forces of development in Downtown. This came from their own understanding of graffiti as a tool of spatial resistance (Interviews

One, Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). For Two, graffiti is explicitly encoded as an act of insurgent spatial justice and resistance against hegemonic norms of gentrification. He understands how graffiti classically relates to systems of property valuation and sees it as a way of fighting against displacement and gentrification of communities. Those that tagged the Towers were fighting against gentrification and rising housing costs in their own lives. As Interviewee Five describes, “the majority of people who hit that building could not afford to live there.” Graffiti allows insurgent artists to take back spatial power and dictate it on their own terms (Interviews Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). When Six suggests that these Towers were “not supposed to be there,” he also suggests that there are a myriad of other ways that this land could have been used, prompting wider urban imagination that goes beyond the dominant forces of production. Interviewees Four and Five play with this urban imagination. Five imagines if it were up to him, he would take eminent domain to make the Towers into affordable housing, bemoaning the unwillingness of city or state powers to address the housing affordability crisis. Four details how at their work in homelessness services they had people reaching out to them asking about turning Oceanwide Plaza Towers into housing for people experiencing homelessness—even before the tagging took place.

Four goes on to explain the importance of the graffiti of transforming the “eyesore” of this vacant incomplete building to something colorful and impactful, encouraging people to “love everybody in our city, equally, and make our spaces beautiful in that way.” These imaginaries stand in stark contrast to a city that would rather facilitate speculative development to aid “the 1%” (Interview Two, 2025) than devote resources to help end the homelessness crisis. All interviewed artists were aware of Oceanwide Plaza Towers being owned by a foreign investment holding company, and several tied this understanding to methods of extractive capitalism (Interviews One, Two, Four, and Six, 2025). Land and property is bought up by corporations with no connection to the city, operating off of a logic of racial capitalism that leaves marginalized communities displaced without a right to the city (Interview Two, 2025; see also

Flusty 2000; Harvey 2001; Roy 2003; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014; Roy 2016). Graffiti artists used the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event as a way to confront these extractive urban modalities and reclaim space in a cityscape taken time and time again from marginalized communities (Interviews Two, Four, and Six 2025).

Spatial consciousness allowed graffiti artists to view Oceanwide Plaza Towers as a canvas to paint a message that confronted hegemonic forces of development in Downtown Los Angeles and the crises they have created. For these insurgent artists, Oceanwide Plaza Towers is just the beginning. Interviewee Six remarked that after the events at Oceanwide Plaza Towers, *"*people want buildings. Now, you know, people are like, horny for buildings." The actions at Oceanwide Plaza Towers were a call to action for insurgent artists to tag up even more high value buildings brought about by speculative property development. The informal inventory of abandoned skyscrapers is on watch. Insurgent artists can engage in strategic collective actions in highly visible locations to push messages and influence development patterns in Downtown Los Angeles. This may be the harbinger of a new era of planning regimes that confront the city's poor investments and reclaim a right to the city through insurgent means.

# CHAPTER 5: Synthesis & Discussion

The tagging of the Oceanwide Plaza Towers as understood by insurgent graffiti artists provided expansive insights into their sociopolitical consciousnesses that have far reaching implications for urban planning. The original conceptual model of five primary knowledge bases is indeed too narrow to describe the way that insurgent knowledges interact. Insurgent knowledges were found to be more expansive than initially understood, with each knowledge base being interrelated and co-produced with one another to determine the actions and perceptions of insurgent actors. Threaded through this interrelationship is spatial consciousness, which goes beyond the practice of graffiti to an attentive and critical view of the sociospatial power dynamics of Los Angeles. The graffiti artists interviewed showed immense understanding of how their graffiti work affects different kinds of physical space as defined by different knowledge bases: the intrascene social hierarchy of graffiti displaying humane urbanism in conflict with authoritative spatialization (Miraftab 2009; Bloch 2016); the positionality of an artist informing their claims to and use of space in the graffiti scene and in the city at large; the artistic intentions of graffiti and the merits of its use on physical space, from reclamation beautification to a mode of propaganda to a simple taking of space to be known in the cityscape; the spatial history of Los Angeles as it pertains to dispossession and racial banishment (Roy 2003; Porter 2014; Roy 2016); and the historic nature of this opportunity that was through virtual space on social media accessible to everyone. This gives way to a conceptual model of insurgent knowledges of graffiti artists as depicted below. This model must still be refined by interviews with other graffiti artists, but the key finding in this thesis is the importance of spatial consciousness to tying knowledge bases together.

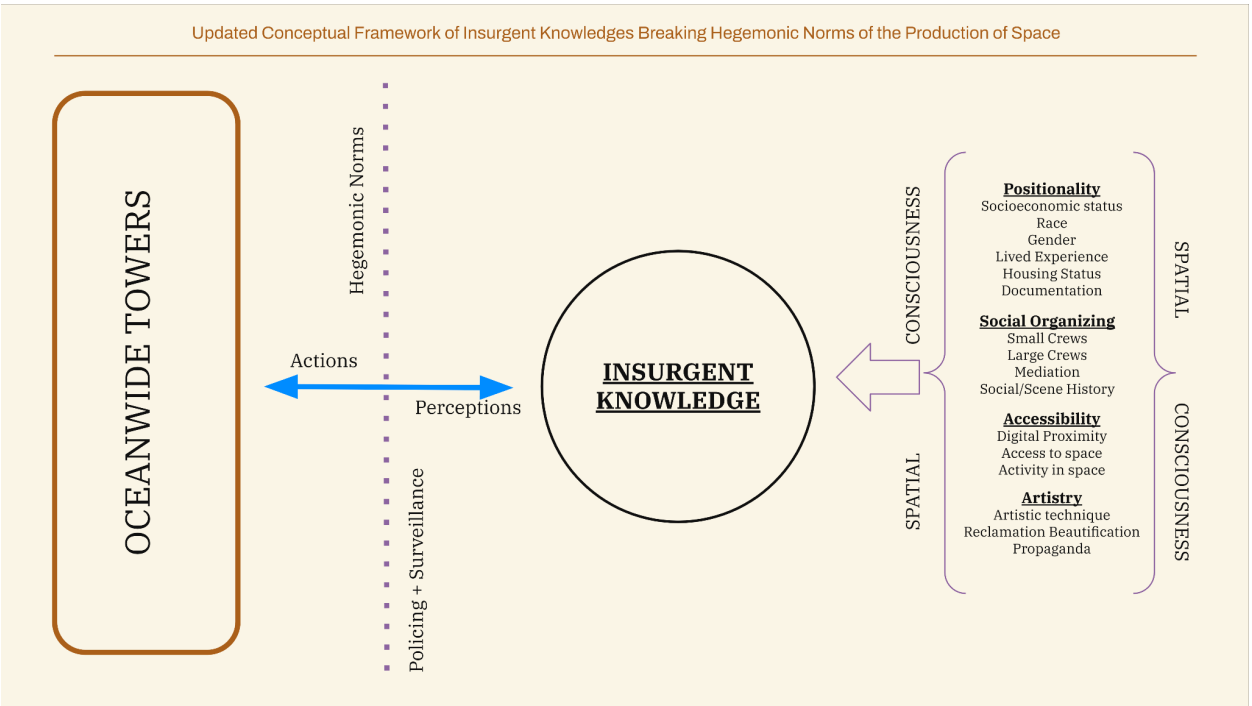



Figure 11. The updated conceptual framework of insurgent knowledges breaking hegemonic norms of the production of space as it pertains to the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event. This conceptual framework was constructed after research was analyzed. Spatial consciousness is a thread that binds the observed knowledge bases and is a filter by which the viability and visibility of a graffiti action is understood. One of the previously conceptualized knowledge bases, History, has been absorbed as parts of other knowledge bases that were more prominent in the decision making processes of the interviewed graffiti artists.

The ways by which graffiti artists engage with space from a conceptual and action-oriented perspective makes them potent agents of change in the urban arena. These findings position graffiti artists as active challengers of hegemonic modes of development and planning. Insurgent action from graffiti artists not only raises awareness of misused and underutilized space but actually have produced a counteroffensive response to the dispossession of peripheral communities of Los Angeles in the form of insurgent planning. Artists take an active role in asserting a right to the city through the cooptation of a destitute billion dollar property investment. The tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers cut off the spatial fix of development in Downtown Los Angeles, in large part due to the repossession of space inherent to the practice of graffiti. Artists call out the spatial contradictions inherent in this billion dollar luxury development amidst a homelessness and housing affordability crisis. An urban planner working from the perspective of the City of Los Angeles must seriously consider the

implications of continued patterns of speculative property development in the face of diminishing profits, rising vacancy, and astounding spatial and economic inequality in Downtown Los Angeles. The tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers, forevermore the “Graffiti Towers,” prompts new urban imaginaries to shift the regimes of planning away from neoliberal globalization of Downtown districts into one of community repossession and substantive spatial reparations to the dispossessed.

*Street Addiction: Graffiti and the Spatial Fix*

Artist interpretations of the connection between Oceanwide Plaza Towers and the homelessness crisis parallel the planning concept of the “spatial fix” in neoliberal and globalized Downtown areas that drives the spatial dispossession of marginalized urban subjects (Harvey 2001; Miraftab 2009; Reese, Deverteuil, and Thach 2010; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014; Roy 2020). Across the board, insurgent artists had an overt recognition of the spatial inequalities of Downtown Los Angeles that were seen as intrinsic to the existence of Oceanwide Plaza Towers. Respondents centered on the juxtaposition of people experiencing homelessness and housing instability with the billion-dollar Oceanwide Plaza Towers investment. Describing people experiencing homelessness in and around Oceanwide Plaza Towers illustrates the spatial contradictions produced from the fixing of capital investments through speculative development in Downtown (Harvey 2001; Reese, Deverteuil, and Thach 2010; Roy 2020). Artists understood the Oceanwide Plaza development in the context of an ongoing regime of land speculation that ignores the housing and homelessness crisis facing the city. They recounted the spatial contradictions of the brutal living conditions for unsheltered people experiencing homelessness in Downtown overlaid with luxury apartments like Oceanwide Plaza Towers that were built to attract wealthy residents to the same geographic space (Interviews Two, Four, and Six, 2025). In declaring these buildings as “out of place” and “not where they’re supposed to be” (Interview Six, 2025), they recognize the dispossession of space inherent to the spatial fix of capital accumulation in Downtown. Where assistance to vulnerable Angelenos in the form of affordable

housing and permanent supportive housing should be, instead comes speculative development that absorbs valuable space and land for the sake of holding capitalist investments (Roy 2020; Ferrer 2021). Insurgent artists recognize the conflict between what is needed by residents of Los Angeles in the vicinity of these Towers versus what is actually provided—luxury housing to serve transplants and gentrifiers from outside these urban centers (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). Artists understand this neoliberal mode of planning as one that is both absurdly misguided and as systemic—a spatial disjunction that continues to be replicated over and over across Downtown space despite problems of spatial and economic inequality in the cityscape of Los Angeles becoming worse (Harvey 2001; Miraftab 2009).

This directly harkens to the addictive nature of the spatial fix that David Harvey imbues in his definition of the spatial fix (Harvey 2001; Harvey 2012). In trying to resolve urban emergencies like our homelessness crisis or rapidly growing urban inequality, the city response has remained the same: concentrate capital and develop speculative high end properties, continuing “that insatiable drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical expansion and geographical restructuring” (Harvey 2001, pg. 24; Roy 2020; Ferrer 2021). As people are ostracized for substance use disorders, poverty, mental health issues, and houselessness alone on the street (Interviews Three and Six, 2025), capitalists are given the go ahead to feed their addiction to space, with urban emergencies further sequestered and ignored (Harvey 2001; Roy 2020; Ferrer 2021). Oceanwide Plaza Towers is just the latest spatial fix of capitalist accumulation in Downtown Los Angeles in a long history of documented trends of Downtown urban development (Smith 1979; Logan and Molotch 1987; Soja 1996; Dear and Flusty 1998; Marks 2004; Reese, Deverteuil,and Thach 2010; Bhusal 2021; Huante 2022). Graffiti artists are cognizant of this fact, connecting the abandoned speculative development to other speculative developments in the surrounding areas—and the graffiti and insurgent actions that track and follow them through the informal inventory (Interviews One and Four, 2025). Artists recognize the spatial inequalities built into the systems of spatial production in Downtown Los Angeles,

and the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event is a large scale symbol of the way that these speculative developments have dispossessed communities and enacted racial banishment to oust marginalized communities across space (Kelley 1996; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014; Gibbons 2016; Roy 2016; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019). The responses from interviewees revealed graffiti artists as some of the most in touch with witnessing the planning regimes of Downtown.

The fight for space in Downtown is not new to graffiti artists: on the contrary, graffiti artists have their own kind of spatial fix that fights for space within heavily surveilled and restrictive urban environments. Graffiti's spatial fix is not driven by capital but driven by the people. Artists talk about graffiti as an addiction or impulse to tag up a space, an alluring pull to put your name out there and make your presence known in the city (Interviews Two, Three, Five and Six, 2025). Interviewee Three describes this point blank: ""Really what it is, it's an addiction... It's like, it's a full blown, like, in my car right now, I got paint...I can't go anywhere without not wanting to put my name on a wall." This impulse is the opposite of the hegemonic spatial fix; a fight against dispossession, claiming space in a Downtown that has tried to remove and make invisible the presence of the local community (Flusty 2000; Holston 2008). Graffiti artists want to be seen in a cityscape that would otherwise erase them. As artists shared, there is a lot of merit ascribed to the location in which graffiti is placed, and getting eyes on your tag in a space like Downtown frequented by community outsiders—gentrifiers, tourists, and developers—is a reclamation of space that confronts hegemonic forces of development. As shown by the informal inventory, graffiti reclaims space as rapidly as hegemonic forces of development try to claim it. There is a perpetual struggle for space within an ever shrinking and ephemeral urban presence. Steven Flusty (2000) describes this as insurgent actors finding the "cracks" that "fracture the monolith" of Downtown spaces that have been homogenized and agglomerated by hegemonic forces of development (pg. 151). The "centrality and exclusivity of this monolith" (Flusty 2000, pg. 151) invites insurgent challenge, prompting insurgent actors to

find the spaces that remain for them to claim. The tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers takes these cracks to the urban agglomerated monolith of Downtown Los Angeles and splits them open, creating spatial fissures in Downtown Los Angeles that have threatened the continued regimes of neoliberal speculative property accumulation. This is an eventuality predicated in the understanding of the spatial fix (Harvey 2001; Harvey 2012). Just as the prolonged use of a harmful drug eventually harms the user, the overuse of the spatial fix and the contradictions they cause generates what Harvey terms “political-economic earthquakes that have shaken the prospects for further capital accumulation to their very core” (Harvey 2001, pg. 27). The Graffiti Towers were that earthquake for Downtown Los Angeles, and the shockwaves of this event have shaken conceptions of property rights and revealed revolutionary insurgent strategies that attempt to shape the production of space in Downtown Los Angeles by force.

*Combatting Dispossession: Insurgent Planning and the Right to the City*

Artists actions and perceptions of Oceanwide Plaza Towers disrupt the dominant property regimes that inform the production of space in Downtown, generating an alternative form of planning not based in property rights considerations but in an insurgent repossession of space. Artists’ frustrations with the spatial fix of property development in Downtown is reflective of their general lack of inclusion in urban planning decisions. As addressed in the literature review, this is a well documented norm in the development patterns of Downtown Los Angeles, where capitalists exert power over planning decisions to maximize value extraction from Downtown developments, while participation and inclusion of the surrounding communities are minimized, with damages, displacements, and dispossessions mitigated as afterthoughts (Smith 1979; Soja 1996; Harvey 2001; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014; Roy 2016; Sims 2016; Barry & Agyeman 2020; Roy 2020; Bhusal 2021; Ferrer 2021; Huante 2022). These contests for space boil down to rights-based decisions within the cityscape, with capital power as a key determinant of the power to assert those rights to space (Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014). As actors without capital power, artists recognized their opportunity to

subvert this neoliberal model of spatial production by tagging up the unguarded and abandoned Towers. The Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event was a chip in the neoliberal armor that guards capitalist exploitation of land.

With the development of Downtown has come a myriad of surveillance networks (i.e. security cameras, policing, graffiti removal programs) that regulate the use of space in Downtown and protect these properties from illicit use or co-optation (Flusty 2000; Hou 2010; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014; Roy 2016). A lack of this security network was the crucial vulnerability that made this abandoned property susceptible to insurgent cooptation, making the property accessible to graffiti artists across Los Angeles and Southern California. This action was a trespass on the property rights of Oceanwide Plaza Towers—the graffiti artists obviously had no legal right to occupy or alter the property, which in other more surveilled circumstances may have presented substantial risks to insurgent artists (Porter 2014; Interview One, 2025). Instead, the social organization of the graffiti scene led to thousands of actors acting upon the Tower collectively which mitigated risks for all actors involved. By the time the cops showed up, nothing could or would be done to stop the actions of thousands of insurgents—a true moment of people power against the regimes of spatial dispossession and enforcement (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025).

The lack of policing at Oceanwide Plaza Towers allowed insurgent actors to operate at a scale of private property reclamation not usually allowed in the strict property regimes of the Global North. Policing is a crucial mechanism by which the paradigms of private property are maintained in the United States (Harvey 2001; Roy 2003; Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014; Gilmore 2017; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019). In the United States, policing powers often limit large scale insurgent actions to public and quasi-public spaces where actors can assert more rights to space (Flusty 2000; Roy 2003; Hou 2010). The mode of physical space in an urban setting (public vs private) often determines the amount of policing that takes place within it, leading to mode and scale of insurgent action acting mutually exclusive. This often limits large

scale insurgent actions to public and quasi-public spaces where actors can assert more rights to space (Flusty 2000; Hou 2010; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019). Insurgent actions on private property are more subject to policing powers, and are thus usually more ephemeral, small-scale, and short-lived (Roy 2016; Roy 2020; Dugdale 2024).

Large scale insurgent actions are usually performed on the margins of space in spaces that are less strictly policed. The famous giant MTA graffiti on the Los Angeles River or the historic Belmont Station are both examples of large scale graffiti projects that took advantage of public and quasi-public space to achieve their insurgent work. Belmont Station is also a great example of what happens when the spatial mode changes: when the abandoned public station was sold to a private housing developer, all the graffiti was buffed out and access to the site was completely restricted (Montoya 2023). Large scale attempts to co-opt or reclaim private property by insurgent actors are often met with brutal response by police forces, making it harder to scale up these kinds of actions without risk of violent and criminal repercussions (Kelley 1996; Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Harvey 2012; Roy 2016; Roy 2020).



Figure 12. Metro Transit Assassins painted their crew initials along the Los Angeles River flood control. Removed a year later, this piece still holds the world record for the largest single graffiti piece, at over 57 feet tall and 1,700 feet long. Photo circa January 2009. (Source: "jondoeforty1" on Flickr, Creative Commons License, CC-BY-SA 2.0)



Figure 13. Toluca Substation of the Belmont Station/Hollywood Subway, circa 2004. This was a world famous location for graffiti artists to paint. (Source: "Amyzun" on Flickr, Creative Commons License, CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0).



Figure 14. Toluca Substation of the Belmont Station/Hollywood Subway, circa 2017. After the property was purchased in 2004, it was redeveloped into an apartment complex. The Toluca Substation was literally whitewashed. (Source: Wikipedia, Creative Commons License, CC BY-SA 3.0).

Insurgency on private property is ephemeral and much more limited, done on the small cracks of the urban monolith of surveillance and buffed out rapidly by removal teams who enforce the private use of space (Flusty 2000; Roy 2016; Roy 2020; Dugdale 2024). The insurgent takings of abandoned CalTrans housing by unhoused mothers and their families in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic was met with aggressive attempts from police to remove them (Dugdale 2024). Saving them from immediate expulsion was strategic action from a larger collective network of supporters espousing appeals to rights-based property frameworks, making their contentious situation more easily manageable and managing to win short term victories (Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019; Dugdale 2024). Safety and power in numbers through collective strategic action is a recognized strategy among insurgents in this study (Interviews One, Two, Four, and Five, 2025). However, as this thesis has shown, this is but one of a myriad of knowledge bases that insurgent actors pulled from to inform their actions and perceptions of the Towers.

It is the combination of these knowledge bases that was key to the insurgent actions on the Towers. This frames the collective knowledge of insurgents as a mitigation strategy against policing powers that would have otherwise prevented the insurgent actions at Oceanwide Plaza Towers from taking place (Friedmann 1987; Miraftab 2009). Recognizing a weak policing regime around the Towers made them accessible to artists. Social networks of graffiti artists spread this opportunity rapidly across the community, leading insurgent actors to swarm the Towers by the thousands. Combining their numbers with their understandings of space and their own personal motivations and positionalities, artists were able to rapidly co-opt the Towers in a way that was neither marginal nor ephemeral. Their artistic practice allowed for their insurgent actions to continue beyond their physical presence in the building, leaving occupational phantoms that did the work of sustained co-optation without the risk of ongoing policing that could prevent the effects of their insurgency. This allowed Oceanwide Plaza Towers to operate at a scale never

before seen on private property in the Global North, the crucial combination that fueled its social media virality and impact across the globe.

The tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers was a co-optation of private property of dispossessed land and reclaiming planning power outside of a rights-based perspective (Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014). The actions on the Towers were not based on individual claims to land, not seeking middling mitigation efforts that provide piecemeal remedies to dispossession, and certainly not worried about the formal procedures of planning nor their appeal to state agents of city planning (Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014). These actions were a collective claim to a property that the people had determined as incongruent with the needs of struggling Angelenos (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). To insurgent artists, the right to the city was not a right to decision making power in a neoliberal property development regime, but a right to disrupt the norms of planning found harmful to the public and dismissive of emergency crises (Miraftab 2009; Harvey 2012). This meets the qualifications of insurgent planning, an alternative mode of urban planning that not only plays outside the framework of rights-based property regimes and their enforcement but actively disrupts the exploitation of Downtown land use by extractive capitalists through a praxis of humane urbanism (Miraftab 2009; Miraftab 2016; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019; Canedo and Andrade 2024).

The actions and perceptions of artists on the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event contribute to insurgent planning because of the physical, procedural, and political economic influence that these actions had on the production of space in Downtown Los Angeles. Undeterred by respect for property rights or rent seeking behavior, artists took insurgent action to alter the Towers as they saw fit, disrupting the hegemonic norms of production with intention. Oceanwide Plaza Towers quickly became a canvas of political expression that shattered understandings around who has the power of planning a city. Artists took this derelict skyscraper and turned it into a poignant symbol of the housing crisis (Interview Four, 2025). They painted the Towers inside and out, beautifying them through artistic reclamation representing the voices

of marginalized and spatially dispossessed communities of Los Angeles (Interviews Two, Four Five, and Six, 2025). This collective artwork took the form of insurgent propaganda, promoting spatial requisition by the people to counteract the propaganda of hegemonic forces of development that normalize extractive land use and dispossession (Interviews Two, Four, Five, and Six, 2025). This action came together collectively and diffusely, informally organized by word of mouth through the informal inventory, social organization, and social media of graffiti artists (Interviews One through Six, 2025). By nature of their social organization, they have defied the structured design of a city designed to privatize and sequester social relationships into interior and truncated spaces, and operationalized an insurgent takeover of a derelict investment property (Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Canedo and Andrade 2024). Without seeking procedural approval or negotiating through formal planning arenas nor through rights-based frameworks of mitigation, insurgent actors altered the physical space of Downtown as a way to both gain notoriety and highlight the inequities of Downtown (Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014).

But the results of this action had a much more impactful effect than just circumventing neoliberal planning procedures and spreading a message highlighting dispossession and spatial inequality. The tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers permanently diminished the capital value of these properties, disrupting the hegemonic political economy of Downtown Los Angeles and making a lasting planning decision without the consult or interpretation of organized community based organizations or nonprofits (Miraftab 2009). As Interviewee Six put it: “That's gonna be a whole fucking crazy ass mess if they take it down. And it's gonna be a whole lot of money to buff all that shit out, because people were throwing paint everywhere.” The interior and exterior graffiti on the Towers has proven to be completely infeasible and expensive to remove. The insurgent actions completely diminished the speculative value of the Towers, dissuading other buyers who would want to purchase the property from the bankrupt Oceanwide Holdings company. What was once a billion dollar building was valued at under $200 million less than two months after the tagging—substantially less than the $370 million debt sunk into construction of

the building (Nichols 2024). The reputation of the Towers were tarnished by this action, making financial investments into these Towers untenable and almost certainly guaranteeing that these Towers will not be completed. Through the co-optation of these Towers, this insurgent action was able to affect the production of space in Downtown, determining use of space and market based decisions without negotiating through rights-based transactions of property (Miraftab 2009). Insurgents enacted a planning strategy of spatial reclamation, repossessing Downtown space sequestered into the hands of holding companies. It actively challenged the hegemonic forces of production and denied their spatial fix, making a clear demand to stop producing speculative properties and fix the socioeconomic issues facing vulnerable Angelenos. By disrupting property rights regimes, insurgent actors showed hegemonic forces of production that they could actually lose money if they continue to create these kinds of spatially fixed properties. Through their autonomous and self-determined mode of insurgent planning, graffiti artists have shown the power of insurgent action to physically alter space in Downtown outside of a regime of strict property rights (Roy 2003; Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014). Collective informal action allowed insurgents to affect changes to the city they could not previously assert through formal planning discourse, and denied another speculative product of extractive capitalism to ravage the skyline of Los Angeles.

*The Indignant City*

With a billion dollar tower abandoned for over six years now tagged up and coopted by insurgent actors, why won't the City of Los Angeles' government step in and do something to the building? Three reasons seem to manifest. First, the City appears to be falling back on neoliberal property regimes to justify their approaches to urban space. Los Angeles City Council members and planners have dismissed this as an act of vandalism that Oceanwide Holdings must pay to mitigate—a request to which the holding company has not responded to. City Council paid almost $4 million in order to secure the site from further incursions, but this is as much as the City will do (Tidmarsh 2024). The City is deflecting responsibility for removing the

graffiti or doing anything about the derelict buildings due to it being “privately-owned property” (Ozebek 2025). The city places the obligations to remove the graffiti on the shoulders of Oceanwide Holdings company. The owners, however, are bankrupt, in the process of being liquidated, and non-responsive to the City’s demands for mitigation. They are of course uninterested in sinking more money into a property that they abandoned five years prior, and unpressured by reprimands as a foreign investment company based thousands of miles away from the actual Towers.

The norms of private property ownership under American capitalism require the property owner to be extracting surplus value from the land to maintain their rights (Nedelsky 1990; Harvey 2001; Porter 2014; Jerolmack 2021). Following the norms of private property rights that protect the speculative development seen in Downtown has ironically left the City with a giant derelict building producing no surplus capital value that they pretend to be powerless to change. By depending on the logic of private property rights, the City leans into the contradictions of space manufactured by the globalization of local development (Harvey 2001; Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Porter 2014; Sims 2016). When the property owner stops answering your calls, and those owners are thousands of miles away, how do you compel them to action? And who is the true owner of a faltering speculative investment property held by a now liquidating international holdings company who owe debts to numerous investors in the project that span the globe? The capitalist production of space that is fundamentally detached from the space itself and divided thousands of times over amongst globalized investors is a problem too big for a simple bundle of property rights to handle (Merrill and Smith 2014). The bundle becomes a thicket of rights, too dense to cut through, making it challenging to provide a simple transfer or acquisition without instigating more legal actions from investors. Mitigating property disputes amongst multinational investors creates dense legal issues and protracted disputes. This is not a fight the City is keen to involve themselves in, as mitigating the rights issues becomes incredibly complicated and

slow moving—exactly as it was designed to be (Smith 1979; Logan and Molotch 1987; Harvey 2001).

Additionally, the City's inaction exposes the ongoing influence of racial capitalism on the modes of production, adding more evidence to the true meaning of "blight" in the urban core as tied to the presence of communities of color. Historically, the City of Los Angeles has had no problem evoking the process of eminent domain to condemn large swathes of Downtown communities of color to redevelop Downtown Los Angeles under the guise of urban renewal (Smith 1979; Gordon 2004; Marks 2004; Avila 2014; Roy, Schrader, and Crane 2015; Sims 2016; La Cruz-Viesca et. al 2018; Huante 2022). Claiming they were clearing "blighted" communities full of abandoned and dilapidated buildings that would make way for (tacit) public improvements to Downtown, Los Angeles conducted mass demolitions of communities of color, building freeway systems and transferring the land acquired to the corporate conglomerates that continue to command the production of space in Downtown Los Angeles (Gordon 2004; Marks 2004; Avila 2014; Huante 2022). As an abandoned property on high value land, left in disrepair by an owner that disregards its responsibility to its property, Oceanwide Plaza Towers bears all the hallmarks of a property that should fit the definition of "urban blight" that could be condemned through eminent domain. From their inaction, it is clear that the racialized connotation of "blight" is the operative qualifier for a property to be condemned (Gordon 2004). Eminent domain is exclusively a tool of racial capitalism, operating only in one direction, dispossessing communities of color and lower income communities with less capital power and transferring that property to those with high capital power (Robinson 1983; Roy 2003; Gordon 2004; Gibbons 2016). By the letter of the law, the City could use eminent domain (or establish a receivership like they did with the bankrupt Skid Row Housing Trust supportive housing buildings)[7] to encumber the property and use it for public good. After all, by their own admission,

[7] In 2023 after Skid Row Housing Trust announced it would file for bankruptcy and disband, the City of Los Angeles stepped in to maintain the buildings through a court-ordered receivership. A year later in August 2024, these buildings were sold at a rate of $8,300 per unit (hundreds of thousands of dollars less than the value of an average unit in

they find the building in its current state to be an eyesore. But to do so, the City would go against the very systems they set in motion to dictate land use and planning. Doing so would disrupt the racial capitalist processes of extracting surplus value based on the exclusion and dispossession of marginalized populations from space. From the perspective of the average citizen without capital development power, this fundamentally devalues the formal process of urban planning (Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014). The urban subject is a caveat and afterthought in relation to the true function of property development in urban centers, and has no real power to affect change to neoliberal development patterns because they are purposefully excluded and boxed out from planning decisions (Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014). Participatory planning was a project that was sabotaged before it began, and no matter what lip service is given to “inclusive planning,” these communities' voices would only be included in the process of extractive capitalism and rights based property regimes (Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014; Barry and Agyeman 2020; Bhusal 2021).

This rights-based exclusionary logic leads to the third reason for the city’s inaction: the City does not want to validate the alternative strategies of insurgent planning. Insurgent planning sees the injustices embedded into stringent private property rights through its enforcement of the racialization of space, and sidesteps this process entirely in an act of reclamation for the people. This denies speculative developers access to the extractive values of their properties, and cuts through the bureaucracy of planning designed to keep the average urban subject out of planning decisions. Were they to acquire this building through eminent domain, not only would it break the norms of property transfer from lower to higher agents of capital power, but it would also provide tacit legitimacy from the City that insurgent action is an effective action that one could take to change planning decisions and affect urban space. It gives people an alternative to rights based property regimes, meaning that one’s access to

Downtown Los Angeles) to Beverly Hills YIMBY density developer Leo Pustilnikov. After promising to maintain these units and keep the formerly unhoused tenants living there housed in these units, he soon reversed course and offered cash for keys from clients to get them off the properties. See Dillon 2024: “Sale of massive Skid Row homeless housing portfolio approved by Judge” and LACAN 2025 (instagram post)

capital would not determine the power they could exert over space. The City of Los Angeles acquiring Oceanwide Plaza Towers would put all the other abandoned buildings in Los Angeles on the insurgent market.

The Towers are certainly not the only abandoned buildings in Downtown Los Angeles without a substantial security force, nor are they the only buildings that would find themselves overwhelmed if thousands of artists just decided to take them all at once. For almost 20 years, Downtown's abandoned buildings have enjoyed free rider benefits to security, surrounded by other high capital value buildings that have advanced surveillance, demand police, and employ private security patrols. Oceanwide Plaza Towers was a warning that this facade of security is dissolving—and with it, perhaps the current regime of property development in Downtown. Validating the insurgent planning methods of actors on the Graffiti Towers by state acquisition or putting public dollars into its redevelopment could set off a domino effect on other buildings in Downtown. To maintain norms of spatial production and extractive planning, it behooves the city to rely on the private market to work the problem out on its own. This is why their only response has been to set up barbed wire fences and hire private security, as it maintains the status quo for rights based development and planning. In refusing to do more to these buildings, they hold on fast and hard to the normative hegemonic regimes of development that continue to generate spatial inequity and harm on the public. This is a powerful non-response that blatantly ignores the problems of spatial and socioeconomic inequities in the city while laying bare the City's priority to maintain extractive land development practices. If the City continues with its indignant response to these actions, the outcomes for planning in the City of Los Angeles are unlikely to fundamentally change.

*Expanding Urban Imaginaries: Lessons for Planning Professionals*

What lessons can planning professionals glean from the insurgent knowledges of Oceanwide Plaza Towers? The clearest lesson imparted by the insurgent actors was to reconsider the spatial investments that the city is supporting in Downtown Los Angeles, and to

divert the capital and spatial resources reserved for speculative investment to resources that will help struggling Angelenos. Unfortunately, most formal planning professionals and government officials do not seem to be taking this lesson seriously, and continue to hold to development regimes based in racial capitalism as the last section details. This indignant response restricts who is considered in shaping the cityscape, functions off of persistent logics of racial capitalism, and ignores the massive monument to the housing crisis wasting away in Downtown (Harvey 2001; Roy 2003; Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014; Gibbons 2016; Roy 2016; Ferrer 2021; Huante 2022). There have been meager appeasements to the public based around hardfought challenges to spatial production in Downtown, but these serve as mitigation for the rampant surplus value extraction exercised by these speculative development investments (Haas 2001; Bhusal 2021).

As with ending all addictions, the first step is admitting you have a problem. The humility of a City that can admit that its development priorities have been eschewed from the public good would be a welcome dose of humility that would set the intentions of the City towards making a change. If the City wants to prevent further insurgent responses, it must address the issues of spatial injustice that it has created. The City should create serious and lasting responses to our housing and homelessness crisis that prioritize the needs of struggling Angelenos. Instead of ignoring the massive landmark to the housing and homelessness crisis, planners should seek inspiration for new urban imaginaries from the actions and perceptions of graffiti insurgents. These imaginations invoke immediate changes that could be brought about within formalized planning regimes, and also invite planners to think about new urban forms that consider spatial reparations to make up for the just compensation historically denied to Angelenos. Below, I outline several responses that planners could have to improve the problems highlighted by insurgent actors: a moderate “progressive” planning response that funds affordable and supportive housing to address housing instability; a social housing planning response that further invests local government in housing provision; and a restorative

justice planning response that reimages the urban landscape through a framework of spatial reparations.

The most immediate and accessible way to provide substantial investments in long term housing and homelessness solutions is to use the mechanisms within the existing toolbox of the local government that allow it to fund affordable and supportive housing. There is consensus between advocates and service providers alike that the critical missing piece to solving the homelessness crisis is access to housing. This is the position of most progressive housing advocates in the City today, which involves creating new funding sources for new development and homelessness response (Our Future Los Angeles 2025). Several billion dollars have been sunk into emergency responses to the homelessness crisis, but much of this funding has been poorly tracked and oriented towards emergency outreach response instead of long term solutions (Alvarez & Marsal Public Sector Services, LLC. 2025). The treatment of this crisis as an “emergency” entrenches Los Angeles into patterns of emergency urbanism that dovetails with the spatial fix of Los Angeles to reproduce harms and dispossession on the most vulnerable Angelenos (Harvey 2001; Porter 2014; Roy 2016; Roy 2020). Most homelessness response funding has been one-time cash infusions from state aid or temporary bonds, preventing the City from committing to long term solutions to homelessness. It wasn't until this year that Los Angeles County finally established its first ongoing dedicated source of funding for the purpose of generating more affordable housing stock in the City, thanks to several years of campaigning from progressive housing advocacy groups and community based organizations (Our Future Los Angeles 2025; LACAHSA 2025). This means that current investments in affordable and supportive housing production from local government are still fairly miniscule.

To address this gap, the city could redirect and increase funding for affordable and supportive housing development. Under the current property regime, this means subsidizing non-governmental organizations like nonprofit housing developers that allows them to compete with for-profit speculative developers. As it currently stands, the bulk of nonprofit

pre-development and acquisition funding comes from Low-Income Housing Tax Credit exchanges with major corporations (showing the intrinsic dependence of this current system of exploitative globalized development and extractive capitalism). These tax credit exchanges still leave non-profit developers far less investment ready than for-profit developers, who can often front the acquisition costs for properties and development much more rapidly than nonprofits can. Local ongoing funding could the stopgap funding needed to help nonprofit developers outcompete private developers in acquiring urban space for affordability. This could also help them acquire vacant properties in Downtown Los Angeles and repurpose them for affordable housing.

Such patterns have slowly begun to manifest, with the recent acquisition of older Downtown properties like the Cecil Hotel oriented towards supportive housing for Skid Row residents. If the City were willing, it could rapidly enhance these funds by redirecting funding from over bloated agencies that receive the lion's share of general funds. The most notable bloated agency is the Los Angeles Police Department, which receives over $1.7 Billion per year in funding, and continues to rise (Mejia 2025). The tragic police murder of Minneapolis resident George Floyd in 2020 was a flashpoint for progressive advocates who connected this tragedy to the history and ongoing perpetuation of anti-Black violence by police forces across the United States, lobbying City governments to shift their police budgets to community based resources. With initial performative fervor, the City of Los Angeles voiced its support for change, before falling back into its old patterns of extractive capitalism supported by growing police budgets (Chou 2025). The Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event shows the result of this continued ignorance and indignancy, and encourages the City to take these calls to action seriously. Planners must seriously advocate for budgetary shifts to increase investments in affordable and supportive housing. While these investments in nonprofit housing are still tied to global forces of development, state involvement would still make a substantial impact in changing housing patterns and improving conditions for the City. These are not radical nor new ideas, but they are

ideas that the City should actually put into action. This is a moderate and attainable response that the City could take today if only it had the political will.

This also means including folks deliberately and markedly in planning decisions. This goes far beyond the calls for “inclusive planning” or “equity-based planning” that only have the obligation to listen to, collect, and consider the needs of underserved communities without actually taking substantial action on them (Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014; Barry and Agyeman 2020). These forums already exist in the form of obfuscated public comment forums and bureaucratized citizen oversight committees that can be (and are) easily tuned out by the hegemonic forces of development. A recognition and visibility of these issues is simply not enough. A naming of the issues without action to address them has become a neoliberal hallmark that perpetuates spatial injustice and disenfranchisement of marginalized citizens in policy and planning processes (Miraftab 2009). This is part of the motivation and perspectives behind the tagging of the Towers: having been ignored through formal processes, artists made a clear statement that the norms of spatial production must change. This means actively making communities a partner in the development process that goes deeper than community meetings, public comments, and oversight committees. Consideration is not the same as action, and communities know the difference (Bhusal 2021).

The state could go beyond the progressive and moderate approach to housing and homelessness solutions by stepping back into the production of social housing. This means dedicating space long term to low and extremely low income households, reversing legacies of exclusion that have destroyed publicly assisted social housing due to a desire for racial banishment of communities of color from urban centers (Taylor 2018; Gibbons 2016; Roy 2016; Roy 2020; Táíwò 2022). Social housing may actually be a more efficient way of rapidly scaling up space for affordable and supportive housing, as it would be infusing investments directly into housing development instead of passing it through bureaucracies and middlemen to be managed (or mismanaged) by nonprofit housing developers. This also means that this kind of

housing might not be limited by limited affordability covenants, as the state could set its own terms around affordability and price of land. Subsidizing these programs through taxpayer funding would help offset the costs of development and operation. The City could purchase vacant Downtown properties and create new stocks of affordable developments that would improve the lives of local Angelenos and help to immediately get people off the street.

Social housing is a mode of development management that is generally frowned upon in the current neoliberal regime of property development because it would not be producing surplus value for a capitalist to reinvest (Harvey 2012; Taylor 2018; Táíwò 2022). Instead, this would serve as a public investment in the betterment of socioeconomic conditions for the urban poor, taking substantive steps to reversing a legacy that has left communities without the means to a better quality of life. Doing so may deprive extractive capitalists of their investment opportunities, but in this case, that would be the point. This is a staunchly socialist perspective that uses state intervention to redistribute access to space and thus the value of the land to the people, dedicating these properties as public goods. However, social housing is dependent on public investment, and limitations to local social housing programs would be based around the amount of public funding dedicated to this activity. Under the current regime of private property, public investment in Downtown would be severely restricted. And the state would still face the same problem of competing against private actors, meaning acquisition costs of property would be steep—let alone the ongoing costs of operation. Astronomical land values in Downtown as an effect of decades of speculative development make it challenging for public land to be acquired by purchase. Planners would face a serious uphill battle of generating adequate amounts of public funding to acquire Downtown properties.

But what if planners could circumvent these acquisition costs? This brings forward a framework of spatial reparations where prior takings from communities of color are finally met with just compensation in the form of land and wealth transfers. What would it mean for investments in the city to be guided by restorative justice? (Táíwò 2022) The Oceanwide Plaza

Towers Graffiti Event was an experiment in true participation of Angelenos in deciding the urban form, taking back a property that represents the historical takings from the community. It beckons the City to consider taking back properties and land that was stolen from communities of color and to give it back over to these communities to decide collectively what they want to use them for. There is a dollar value that can be assessed for the takings of land from communities of color, akin to the trillions of dollars assessed in reparations owed to descendents of victims of slavery (Táíwò 2022; Wise 2023). In recent years, Los Angeles has been experimenting with land based reparations, but most of these are based on individual claims to property rights, like the transfer and resale of Bruce's Beach (Chappell 2023). There are hundreds of thousands more Angelenos who have experienced loss of property and racialized land violence who will never see their claims to individual property loss recognized (Gordon 2004; Avila 2014; Gibbons 2016; Huante 2022; Sovacool et. al. 2023).

Insurgent knowledges of Oceanwide Plaza Towers prompt planners to think beyond their understanding of what a Downtown is used for to create new urban imaginaries of space. They encourage the state to directly intervene on abandoned and underutilized properties held by capitalist investors seeking rents from speculation. Reparations-based acquisition and eminent domain would allow for a transfer back of stolen space, land, and property that would allow for community self-determination. Spatial reparations would allow communities to directly plan how Downtown space is used, accelerating innovation change in Downtown towards a new era of planning. Not being beholden to extracting surplus value in urban centers would allow for investments in communities to truly manifest, shifting power away from private ownership models and towards collective ownership that democratizes the use of space. This places the right to the city in the hands of community members (Roy 2003; Miraftab 2009; Harvey 2012; Porter 2014), tapping into the colorful and creative "ethos of Los Angeles" (Interview Four, 2025).

# CONCLUSION

This thesis presents insurgent knowledges of graffiti actors as generating challenges to extractive modes of urban development based in racial capitalism, power-based property rights, and exclusion in urban planning decisions. This action was the biggest thrashing of Downtown that Los Angeles has seen (Flusty 2000), exacted by insurgent actors at such scale on private property and showing how insurgent subcultures can and will come together to affect urban change when the opportunities arise. Each knowledge base was more intertwined and coproduced than anticipated, enriching our understanding of graffiti artists as insurgent actors with spatial consciousness embedded within their modes of operation. The dissident cultures of graffiti artists acted as inherent means of urban solidarity building, produced informally through a collective network of shared craft and passion. These radical actions have revealed a new mode of insurgent planning in the Global North that goes beyond rights-power based exchanges that determine patterns of urban development in favor of a mode that circumvents and strikes back against systems of dispossession (Miraftab 2009; Porter 2014; Cahen, Schneider, and Saegert 2019). Graffiti artists affected a planning decision through their informal networks of insurgency, exercising power over spatial production not yet exercised at this scale in the city. These planning decisions occurred autonomously, without the assistance of an organized mediator or community advocacy group, and were unconcerned with appealing to hegemonic regimes of development. They created an insurgent space that disrupts a skyline of conspicuous consumption with vibrant visions of a people's city reclaimed. This opens up the possibilities of planning analysis that are more deeply inclusive and intersectional, reconceptualizing resistance by verging on new forms of insurgent citizenship (Holston 2008; Miraftab 2009). These perceptions help define the insurgent act of tagging these Towers as a fundamentally liberationist act that provides a direct challenge to the hegemonic production of space in Downtown Los Angeles.

Graffiti is rife with political potential, even when it doesn't try to be. The simple act of writing one's name on a wall in Downtown is a reclamation of space that brings the personhood back to the city. The Graffiti Towers scaled this political potential up to a massive monument to the people the City government tries to forget but will never be able to shed. This large scale was built off the muscle memory of graffiti's daily insurgent actions, ingrained in knowledge systems that lead artists towards new venues of creative and political expression. The insurgent citizens of Los Angeles have robust and creative ideas about how space could be used better in Downtown, and took their chance at asserting their views on the biggest canvas Los Angeles has ever seen, upon a private space they would otherwise lack the power and authority to do so. Through the tagging of Oceanwide Plaza Towers, artists translated their critical consciousnesses onto a physical medium, and continue to promote these understandings amongst their communities beyond the graffiti scene. By translating their own critical consciousness to these Towers, they have opened up opportunities for others to deeper their understandings of spatial injustice, speculative development, and dispossession in Downtown Los Angeles.

Graffiti artists reclaim urban space at the point at which extractive land regimes fail. Where graffiti has been used as a preventative strategy to keep the tendrils of gentrification and dispossession out of their communities, the insurgent actors of the Oceanwide Plaza Towers Graffiti Event went on the offensive as a protest to further exploitation of land. Los Angeles wants to keep building these extractive developments that serve the capitalist class. Graffiti artists, in vivid color, have said strongly and overwhelmingly: STOP. It may be that the tagging of the Towers had and will continue to have an effect on the construction of new buildings in Los Angeles and Downtown as a whole. Since the Towers were tagged, there have been no new construction entitlements in Downtown Los Angeles, and vacancy rates of office buildings continue to climb (Colliers Report Q4 2024; DTLA BID 2025). It has ruptured these spatial investments, at least temporarily, and will remain a towering reminder of the risks of continued

investment in speculative properties that Angelenos have resoundingly rejected. The City can act dismissive of these actions at their own peril, lest the spatial fix of mismatched speculative developments lead the City towards an overdose of high value properties that crash their own markets while (a point we may have already reached).

The insurgent actions of graffiti artists have introduced confounding questions for the traditional modes of urban production. Can Downtown Los Angeles shed its development based on exclusion and build out new forms of development that serve the diverse communities of Los Angeles and welcome them into a city center? Can it be revitalized from a corporate office sink into a true community center? What would it mean for investments to focus on retooling these buildings for residential use focused on affordability and community resilience? All these questions spur the public and decision makers alike to produce new urban imaginaries that finally address the centuries of spatial injustice that have extracted, displaced, and murdered people in the name of increasing profit margins for a narrow few landowners.

For many, the Graffiti Towers are an inspiring beacon of hope for a new age of urban development in Los Angeles. I hope that this act of urban insurgency inspires new patterns of investment in Downtown that understand the extractive model of urban development cannot last. There is a false permanence of Downtown skyscrapers that has been programmed into the urban imagination of most citydwellers. When thinking of utopias, the pristine, gleaming skyscraper has been the modernist symbol of perfection that represents the city of the future (Sorkin 2009). The critical, post modernist, or abolitionist planner may understand this to be a falsehood, but the staying power of this imagery is keeping these buildings around much longer than is economically appropriate. The insurgent planner pulls back this curtain for the general public, revealing the true nature of these buildings. The gutted, half complete Oceanwide Plaza Towers are what the glittering completed office buildings and residential skyscrapers hide behind their facade—emptiness; a city without people. Insurgent graffiti artists took this husk and made it a monument to the people—The Graffiti Towers—pushing us towards a future

where one day we may reclaim these spaces as our own. A better city depends on the actions and perceptions of insurgents to guide the way, as they are the ones to test the bounds of possibility before anyone else, even and especially against the threat of repression. The hallmark of insurgent action is resilience against all odds, and no insurgent discipline represents this better than graffiti. As Interviewee Two masterfully articulated, even when your graffiti is erased, you keep coming back and doing it again and again “until you’re inevitable.” The paradigms of insurgent planning will continue to grow, iterate, and reassert themselves until they inevitably find their place amongst future modalities of urban development.




Figure 15. A clear view of the North Tower of the Graffiti Towers at sunset, circa April 2025. A vision of new urban imaginaries driven by the people reflects the skyline of Downtown Los Angeles. Photo by Joshua Valdez.

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