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Title

Suburban Landscapes in LA

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7r7470h9>

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Publication Date

2011-04-01



BECKY NICOLAIDES IN FRONT OF THE CITY HALL OF PASADENA
PHOTO BY DESMOND WEISENBERG

Suburban Landscapes in L.A.

OVER THE PAST YEAR, I have been working on the first two sections of a book manuscript, entitled *On the Ground in Suburbia: A Chronicle of Social and Civic Transformation in Los Angeles Since 1945*, with generous support from a Haynes Foundation major research grant. The book is essentially a social history of suburban life in Los Angeles, concerned particularly with how patterns of social and civic engagement have ebbed, flowed, and transformed over the past 60 years—and how the suburban built environment factors into the story.

SETTING THE SCENE: THE CONTEXT OF L.A.'S HISTORIC SUBURBAN LANDSCAPES

The book's first section establishes the context of suburbia in Los Angeles by surveying the county's various suburban landscapes then exploring how they've evolved over the last 60 years both demographically and physically. Chapter 1 traces the history of L.A.'s major suburban landscapes as they developed over the twentieth century. Using Dolores Hayden's *Building Suburbia* as a conceptual framework and her typologies of historic suburban landscapes, I use these categories to tell the history of Los Angeles's suburban development. L.A. started out with some borderland suburbs in the late nineteenth century, an amalgam that melded rural and suburban lifeways. In certain parts of L.A. the practice of gentleman farming, by capitalists, businessmen, and professionals, was an exemplar of this lifestyle that reflected local regional culture. By the early 20th century, streetcar suburbs were proliferating across the county, spurred by the development of the Pacific Electric and L.A. Railways which together became the world's largest interurban transit system

of its time. Suburban towns cropped up all along these lines and began a process of wide residential dispersal, an early version of 'sprawl' which would come to define L.A. The historic footprint of these early suburbs, in towns like South Pasadena and Monrovia, is visible in their compact, small-scale business districts which still retain the walkable character that first shaped these places.

Simultaneously, another suburban landscape emerged—the picturesque enclave. These high-end suburbs were sited in some of the most beautiful natural locations in the region. They were often elevated—rolling hills overlooking the vast Pacific, the peaceful foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, the lush hillsides of the Santa Monica Mountains. These areas were beautiful then, and remain so, thanks to astute site selection, strict restrictions, and prohibitive pricing. More numerically significant were the modest subdivisions, oriented to the automobile, which proliferated in L.A. County from 1910 to 1940. They ranged from thoughtfully planned neighborhoods to bare bones tracts. Some were dotted with mail order homes, others were self built, and still others constructed by small-scale builders. Many were nondescript places

without much planning. This landscape comprised acres and acres of modest (even poor) housing, which would be passed onto succeeding generations of working-class families.

The post-WWII years ushered in the most significant period of suburban growth in LA: the era of the mass-produced sitcom suburb, anchored by nascent edge nodes. Sitcom suburbs loom so large in the story of suburbanization for their immense scale, saccharine imagery, and building innovations that they tend to overshadow other suburban landscapes. And indeed, they were dominant in L.A., outnumbering the housing built during all other eras of suburban development. However, it is critical to remember that by the time they appeared in LA (as in all cities) they were adding onto a diversified suburban landscape already in place. Several areas of sitcom suburbia in Los Angeles are particularly well known—Lakewood and the San Fernando Valley the most famous among them. The work of Greg Hise also brings to light the importance of suburban developments within L.A. City's borders—Westchester, Westside Village (Mar Vista), Toluca Wood (North Hollywood), and Panorama City. These suburban

areas targeted both blue- and white-collar home buyers who often settled together as neighbors. Most of these suburbs excluded African Americans, although Latinos and Asian Americans were gaining a gradual foothold in this period. The modest nature of this suburban landscape, combined with fairly permissive building standards and the developers' invitation to renovate, created the potential for future change in these suburbs—both physical and social.

The final phase of suburbanization in L.A. is what I call the era of the edge city and corporate suburb, dominant from 1970 to the present day. Suburbs after 1970 were anchored by more mature economic centers, known as Edge Cities—combinations of corporate offices, industrial parks, and expansive shopping centers. Surrounding them were residential tracts, built in tandem with these centers if they were new, or gentrifying the areas around older centers. In areas of totally new development on greenfield sites, the suburban landscape that emerged is what I term “corporate suburbia.” This was a landscape produced by entities grown far beyond the size of post-WWII community builders—they were corporations, even

global conglomerates, exemplified by K.B. Homes. In corporate suburbia, the landscape was sprawling, car dependent, and monotonous.

Using census data on housing, I sorted all of the municipalities of L.A. County into their defining historic landscape category. This provides the basis for further analysis of change within these communities, which is the focus of Chapter 2. I began this analysis during the past year, looking at socio-economic characteristics, race/ethnicity, and gender/family/life cycle patterns. In future work, I will bring in an analysis of the built landscape itself and how that has evolved over time. This section is still a work-in-progress. Yet what I am seeing at this point is a kind of spatial pentimento spread across the county; suburban landscapes first shaped during their historic moment of emergence, reflecting the aesthetic and functional precepts of the day then overlaid by the changing aesthetics and needs of subsequent generations. Alongside the older suburbs grew new suburbs, reflecting emergent tastes, needs, and building technologies and ultimately creating a complex mosaic of built environments across the county.

CASE STUDY PASADENA: THE FALLOUT OF RACIAL POLITICS

After establishing this context for the story, the book then moves into a series of case studies to explore the dynamics of community and civic life in light of several key themes. The first case study is the Pasadena area, and the theme here is the social and civic fallout of local racial politics. Over the past 10 months I have been conducting extensive research for this portion of the book, utilizing an array of local history sources at the Pasadena Public Library and the Pasadena Museum of History. I have also conducted several oral history interviews.

The story that is emerging explores how the divisive politics of race, which exploded in the late 1960s and early 1970s, grew from deep roots in Pasadena and fundamentally transformed the nature of public life. Pasadena represents something of a metropolitan microcosm, it is an Edge City surrounded by an array of suburban neighborhoods that reflect nearly all of the major landscape types of L.A.—picturesque enclaves, modest suburbia first developed in the 1910s and 1920s, and sitcom suburbia. This grouping within a common social/political jurisdiction sets the stage for a forced confrontation with race.

PASADENA AND SAN GABRIEL MOUNTAINS, VISIBLE EARTH, NASA



The chapter begins with a section that explores the “making of the divided Edge City.” It looks at Pasadena’s emergence as a bona-fide Edge City by the 1970s; a center of jobs, light industry, retail, and culture. Embedded in the pro-growth policies of the area was a vision of racial separatism and this, indeed, informed the pre-1960 history of the area. Pasadena’s roots as a wealthy picturesque enclave ironically created the area’s racial and ethnic diversity; its wealthy Anglo residents were hopelessly dependent on a workforce of domestics to keep their estates and mansions functioning. These laborers were initially African American, then Asian by the 1920s. Latinos,

meanwhile, labored in the area’s orchards and railway yards. These historic roots thus gave a foothold to people of color to permanently settle the area, a pattern not always present in high-end white suburbs, many of which had strict race restrictions. Pasadena instead became a place that embodied the extremes of class and race, a town of extraordinary diversity where rich, poor, white, black, and brown coexisted within common political borders.

While Pasadena deployed all of the traditional tools to racially split itself from 1900 onward, by the 1960s significant challenges to segregation emerged, driven especially by the civil rights

movement. A series of three major events radically re-shaped the racial geography of the city: busing (the result of a hard-won battle to de-segregate the schools), urban renewal, and freeway construction. Pasadena emerged from this as a more racially diverse place, integrated in some ways, but newly segregated in others. The chapter continues by exploring the texture of suburban life in the aftermath of these eruptions—particularly in the areas of club life, religious institutions, the schools, and neighborhoods. All of these areas showed nuanced patterns in terms of how people engaged in social and civic life in the aftermath of Pasadena’s racial transformation.

Becky Nicolaidis has been a CSW Research Scholar since 2007. She received her Ph.D. in History from Columbia University in 1993, and went on to serve on the faculties of Arizona State University West and UC San Diego. She left her tenured post at UCSD in 2006 to become an independent scholar and historical consultant. She serves as co-editor for the “Historical Studies of Urban America” series published by University of Chicago Press and on the nominating committee of the Urban History Association. She consulted on the Survey LA project for the City of Los Angeles and on a historic preservation project on L.A.’s Central Avenue, which won two awards.