



Lessons from the History of Community Planning and Gentrification in Los Angeles Eastside

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In working class neighborhoods, called barrios, on the east side of the Los Angeles River, recent media stories have highlighted residents' efforts to prevent evictions and block the development of high-end retail spaces. Such struggles are nothing new. For decades, local residents have fought the city over urban renewal efforts concentrated in Los Angeles' ethnic enclaves – and in some neighborhoods they have succeeded. By returning to community plans created in the throes of urban redevelopment of the 1960s and 1970s, today's Los Angeles residents and planners may be able to understand the unlikely preservation of some areas and imagine new ways forward for the neighborhood and Los Angeles overall.

Boyle Heights and Los Angeles Development Planning

The eastside barrios of Los Angeles were shaped, in large part, by redlining – a discriminatory financial practice that prevents residents and business owners from getting loans because of where they live or work. In making credit and other financial supports hard to acquire, redlining also makes it difficult for affected areas to invest in improvements such as renovating homes or building new places for business. The eastside barrios were identified by city planners, politicians, and business leaders as a prime example of the menace of “urban blight” a term used to describe areas with concentrated populations of low-income residents where buildings and infrastructure were often in disrepair. Methods for addressing the inner-city phenomenon of “urban blight” changed over time. For example, unlike Chavez Ravine and Bunker Hill which faced displacement through eminent domain and demolition, the Boyle Heights neighborhood was appraised by city planners as eligible for “conservation and rehabilitation.” In this instance, urban renewal planners actually marked the Boyle Heights barrio as redeemable, saving it from demolition.

During the early 1960s Los Angeles city planners set out to, for the first time, bring together the city's varying land uses under one, coherent, city-wide general plan. This general plan aimed to guide future growth and redevelopment for the city. Early in these efforts, the 1965 Watts Riots, in the words of one planner, “[shook] to pieces the image of a gay, carefree Los Angeles... and jolted...Angelenos into an awareness of their city's urbanhood.” As a result, city planners were compelled to take into account enduring legacies of postwar racial segregation. New plans were fashioned to break away from conventional top-down planning and include otherwise overlooked local residents in the process.

Although citizen participation in neighborhood planning was most often encouraged in predominantly White, “non-blighted” neighborhoods, planning in 1965 saw some of the earliest efforts to solicit and collect input from barrio residents. As records of community participation and concerns, those early plans can help us understand and assess the changing relationships between communities of color and city planners over time.

“Boyle Heights is Worth Saving”

Countering “urban blight” was a priority for local political and business leaders in the 1960s. Shortly after Dodger Stadium broke ground on Chavez Ravine, then councilmember Edward Roybal observed blight remained “one of the most insidious problems confronting the cities of our nation.” At first, unsurprisingly, the idea of soliciting resident input for citizen-centered planning was a hard sell for city planners and neighborhood residents alike. After bad experiences with invasive freeway projects and the razing of neighboring barrios, residents of Boyle Heights were distrustful of city government. Nevertheless, in spite of their skepticism, community residents ended up participating in large numbers to offer detailed accounts of previous city neglect and offer new ideas for support they hoped to receive from civic leaders.

Ultimately, an approved community plan recognized that Boyle Heights was the only affordable area for families of limited income to live. By arriving at this understanding, city planner Raul Escobedo and local residents succeeded in preserving old housing stock initially slated for demolition by earlier city planners. Moreover, Escobedo recommended that areas zoned for high density uses throughout the barrio be downzoned to preserve the existing lower density residential character of the community for the foreseeable future. Agreeing with Escobedo and local residents, the city’s planning director approved the community plan by concluding “Boyle Heights is worth saving.”

Defending Boyle Heights – and Taking Inspiration from It

Supporters of Boyle Heights had to keep pushing to maintain its character as, over the years, economic pressures and new development priorities in planning threatened efforts to preserve and expand affordable housing. For barrio residents, the threats were ever present. In 1973, community member Rosalio Muñoz noted that “Both the City and County of Los Angeles are presently completing new [plans] which call for further development of this new cosmopolitan center [including] plans to redevelop the surrounding neighborhoods to accommodate projected workers and shoppers for the Los Angeles.”

While limited in scope, the Boyle Heights Community Plan offered an alternative to prevailing land use trends by focusing on protecting the most marginalized residents – and this example continues to hold lessons for struggles over urban planning and gentrification today. For residents and local politicians who seek to curb gentrification, this precedent may offer inspiration and point to possibilities not readily imagined. Through many phases of urban renewal, urban redevelopment, and more recently gentrification, Los Angeles government efforts have moved ever further from prioritizing affordable housing for the poorest residents.

Now, as the city’s housing shortages grow ever worse, planners and leaders need to consider broader options than conventional free-market nostrums. A look back at the emergence and impact of the Boyle Heights community plan may spark a useful reimagining of the solutions government can devise when it closely engages the needs and aspirations of low-income residents living in viable, longstanding neighborhoods.

Read more in Alfredo Huante, “Racialized Spatial Imaginaries and Spatial Reordering in Los Angeles: 1973-1993” (Working paper, 2018).