

Urban Revitalization in an Ethnic Enclave: Huntington Park CA 1965-1998

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Huntington Park, California is an excellent example of contemporary urban revitalization in an ethnic enclave where the population has become predominantly Latino (ninety-six percent, of which nearly sixty percent are foreign-born), while all the decision-makers, including City Council, senior city staff, developers, architects, and lenders, have been Non-Latino. As such, it is also a typical case study of the strengths and weaknesses of using a “top-down” planning approach while dealing with issues of

deterioration of the built environment and cultural marginalization.

Located approximately eight miles south of downtown Los Angeles, with its western boundary just to the west of Alameda Street, Huntington Park underwent dramatic demographic and employment changes from the mid-1960s through the 1980s, caused by a combination of local and global forces. The population changed from white, middle-class, blue-collar, and service workers, to a primarily Mexican-born immigrant population with low skills and low wages. Once a thriving community in the center of a huge industrial manufacturing area that provided high-skilled, high-paying jobs, Huntington Park witnessed rampant housing abandonment and retail blight.

As the Latino population moved to Huntington Park and its surrounding area, into what became highly available and very cheap housing, in numbers much larger than the non-Latinos they replaced, a new consumer base for housing, retail, and low-skilled manufacturing and service jobs developed. The city's political leadership capitalized on this growing demand by launching an ambitious redevelopment program to demolish blighted properties, develop new housing, retail, office, and industrial properties, and to rehabilitate a great deal of the existing built environment.

One side of this redevelopment effort is the success of the city council members, their successors, and the then-new redevelopment director, who prevailed in rebuilding a highly deteriorated environment. I will

discuss this effort in some detail. There is another dimension to this story, however, that I would also like to pursue, one that I believe is in the process of being repeated again, in the new ethnic enclaves throughout California, and doubtlessly, throughout the world. It is a story of cultural marginalization, and it is not a case that is easy to make in light of the success of Huntington Park's physical revitalization. It involves questions of who was included in Huntington Park's success, who was left out, and what lessons can be learned from this case study about urban revitalization, "top down" planning, and inclusionary planning in ethnic communities. Given the economic and cultural globalization of the world's city-regions, and the flow of people and jobs across borders, the corresponding growth of ethnic enclaves will be even greater in the decades to come than occurred in the past. Therefore, how planners deal with those contemporary issues in their planning process becomes more urgent.

Redevelopment in an Ethnic Enclave

The redevelopment of the built environment in Huntington Park has been a large success in constructing new ownership housing and senior citizen residences, as well as creating business facilities for retail, office, and industrial uses. What has been lacking is the creation of sufficient numbers of needed rental housing units for large Latino families, especially for the poor.

The assumptions of Huntington Park's revitalization strategy can be viewed on two levels. The first is at the level of real estate redevelopment, in which it

was presumed that the rebuilding process could be stimulated through a combination of economic incentives, aggressive marketing of redevelopment opportunities, and innovative financing techniques. These assumptions were later verified and provide us with important lessons about the physical revitalization process.

Beyond this, however, there were several ever-present, underlying but unspoken, assumptions of Huntington Park's redevelopment efforts. The first was that the needs of the largely Mexican-born, recently-arrived immigrants were basically the same as those of the middle-class, Anglo residents they replaced. The second was that whatever needs this community had could be ascertained either through the knowledge of the decision-makers themselves, or through the usual methods of public hearings, questionnaires sent out in Spanish and English, and meetings with business and citizen groups. These assumptions follow the standard logic in real estate development in the 1970s when Huntington Park officials' actions had to be taken expeditiously. They are fraught with danger, however, when attempting long-term community rebuilding.

How did Huntington Park respond to a deteriorated built environment and an unprecedented population change? How did the mostly Non-Latino decision-makers include the largely Latino community in this response? What lesson does this offer planners in a culturally diverse society?

Formation of an Ethnic Enclave: 1965-1990

Over a period of fifteen years, the City of Hunting-

ton Park was transformed, by a combination of domestic and global forces, from a white, working-class community to a Latino enclave. The concept of an "enclave" denotes a distinct cultural group living within a larger dominant group. In this case, "living within" refers to "within" in the political sense. Geographically, Latinos had already surpassed the Anglo population to become the larger ethnic group in the city, and even within the region as a whole. Politically, however, the Latinos in Huntington Park "lived within" the jurisdiction of white and Non-Latino decision-makers.

Local Forces

The Los Angeles region in the 1960s experienced suburbanization as white, middle-class residents left the central area. At the same time, however, the attractiveness of Southern California to businesses and residents exercised a countervailing trend. Therefore, when people moved to the San Fernando Valley, the San Gabriel Valley, and Orange County from Central Los Angeles, Huntington Park still maintained a slow but steady population growth. Its population in 1930 was nearly 25,000 and thirty years later, in 1960, it was only 29,000 (City of Huntington Park 1986), with only about six percent having "Spanish surnames" (U.S. Census 1960). Huntington Park's promotional videotapes point to suburbanization as a factor in its population change. However, it was not until several other events took place that rapid change occurred. One significant event was the Watts riots of 1965. At least one researcher and two people interviewed claimed the riots had a chilling effect on the whites then living in Huntington Park (Fulton

1997; Funk 1998; Watson 1998). Watts is a fairly short distance to the west, across Alameda Avenue, and about a mile to the south. Fulton described how the line-up of Southern Pacific railroad cars along Alameda Avenue was used to keep the rioters out of Huntington Park (Fulton 1997: 76).

The second domestic event that impacted population change is the Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965. The national immigration act abolished the old country-of-origins quotas, established family ties to citizens or residents as a criterion for entrance, and increased the total number of immigrants to be admitted to the United States. Newcomers admitted under the newly liberalized system came from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996: 9). Mexicans, with their long-existing relationship to California, settled in record numbers—about 700,000 in the Los Angeles region from 1965 to 1980, and another one million in the 1980s (See Figure 3.5 in Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996: 91). Huntington Park's Latino population reached eighty-one percent of the total population by 1980 (U.S. Census 1980).

Global Forces

The communities to the south and southeast of downtown Los Angeles had been part of the region's industrial might. With the rapid industrialization that occurred nationally after World War II, the area around Huntington Park became home to giant auto and tire plants. These included a huge General Motors plant in Southgate, the Bethlehem Steel plant, and the Samson Tire and Rubber plant

(eventually the Uniroyal Tire plant) in the City of Commerce, and numerous smaller manufacturers related to these industries (Fulton 1997; Soja 1996). Employment, wages, and benefits for blue-collar workers were high, and unionized jobs were secure.

During the 1970s the world economy underwent a structural change. Industries like the auto and steel industries shifted from a fordist to a flexible production mode. Some cities such as Los Angeles, which had served as a single site of mass production, were transformed into a nodal point of the commodity-chain of production. Much of the work of mass production factories was transferred to the peripheral areas of the region and the world, with only small portions of the original manufacturing process left behind. The economic "stagflation" of the 1970s and subsequent advances in telecommunications and transportation contributed to this economic restructuring (Scott, 1998; Sassen 1994; Soja 1996). Huntington Park and its neighboring communities in the inner city suffered from a loss of thousands of high-paid manufacturing jobs. And with this job loss, the flight of the white working-class residents accelerated.

Restructuring brought with it a change in the employment opportunities in Los Angeles' inner city communities. Craft industries such as garment, furniture, and jewelry manufacturing, as well as food processing, toy manufacturing, and warehousing and distribution industries, grew at a rapid rate. The City of Vernon, located on the northern border of Huntington Park, lost a great number of high-wage manufacturing jobs during the 1970s and 1980s,

while its low-wage sector (primarily garment) expanded by 8,000 to 10,000 jobs (Rocco 1996). These low-skilled and low-wage jobs created a double dynamic. Industries were attracted to the area due to the availability of low-wage labor, and immigrants were attracted by the low-skilled jobs industries provided (Soja 1996). Combined with ongoing economic and political turmoil in Mexico, the industrial restructuring in Los Angeles continued to attract new immigrants across the US-Mexican border. Cheap and available housing, vacated by the fleeing white population, and its spatial proximity to the industrial area made Huntington Park a popular destination for newly-arrived immigrants.

The remaining white residents disproportionately controlled the political destiny of the city. Since the recently-arrived residents were not yet citizens, they had no voice at the ballot box. In this case, the new immigrants, who had poor language skills and a history of mistrusting government, did not seek avenues of political expression. Thus, was borne an ethnic enclave. Albeit numerically dominant, Latino residents are politically powerless.

The Response to the Built Environment

During the late 1960s and through the 1970s, residential housing abandonment and deterioration along with retail vacancies became commonplace in Huntington Park. By 1978, retail vacancies along once thriving Pacific Boulevard reached thirty percent (Funk 1998). Much of the housing stock was already forty to fifty years old by the mid-1970s, and industrial plants were either abandoned or experiencing

serious deterioration. Real estate developers, lenders, and major retailers avoided Huntington Park. Physically and economically, Huntington Park was in a downward spiral.

Redevelopment

In 1976 the City Council created the Huntington Park Redevelopment Agency, and in 1978 hired a thirty-two year old planner from Downey, James G. Funk, as its executive director. With little to lose and everything to gain, Funk and the City Council created an ambitious strategy to redevelop the built environment of the city, create jobs, and restore the city's tax base. The strategy was developed along classic real estate development logic; it combined city revenues and federal grants with financial incentives to developers, aggressive marketing of development opportunities, and innovative financing techniques. In the process, the city created between 4,000 and 7,000 jobs (Huntington Park Redevelopment Agency 1987; Funk 1998).

The first priority of the Agency was to rejuvenate the central business district along Pacific Boulevard, a mile-long, seven block strip of stores and small office buildings from Slauson Avenue on the north to Florence Avenue on the south. A Victor Gruen report prepared in 1968 recommended that the seven blocks be given anchors at the north and south ends, and broken up with passageways to rear parking lots, since they were too long for shoppers to traverse comfortably. Both design recommendations have since been implemented.

In 1976 the Council began a multi-million dollar reconstruction and modernization program for the boulevard, which began with the allocation of “hundreds of thousands of the City’s dwindling reserve dollars” (Huntington Park Redevelopment Agency 1987: 1) in conjunction with a similar amount from merchants along the Boulevard who committed to refurbishing their stores. The streetscape was improved: bus stops were enhanced through sidewalk widening to create a plaza-like waiting and socializing area, and decorative bus shelters were installed, for example. The city obtained a federal Economic Development Administration (EDA) grant of \$2.4 million to repair roadways and sidewalks throughout the city, some of which was used in the central business district. Several million dollars in grants were obtained from various federal agencies to repair miles of city roads and sidewalks, acquire land for the Westside City Park, and initiate home rehabilitation programs. By 1980, according to the Redevelopment Agency’s description of a story in the local newspaper, the *Huntington Park Signal*, business along Pacific Boulevard was “booming” and there were no retail vacancies.

The city embarked on a tough and expanded housing code enforcement program, increasing from two to four the number of code enforcement officers. Undertaken partly to address code violations and partly to provide the city with the legal grounds to demolish hundreds of sub-standard housing units, the way was cleared for new developments. Code citations increased from 300 per year to 5,000, forcing the demolition of more than 150 sub-standard

dwelling (Huntington Park Redevelopment Agency 1987). In all, the city demolished about 2,000 dwelling units to make room for new housing and commercial developments (Funk 1998). Each resident displaced through demolition was provided with a relocation payment of \$4,500 for tenants or up to \$16,500 for owners (in addition to the appraised replacement value of the property)—if the owner would buy into the replacement housing. Renters were encouraged to use the relocation payment as a down-payment on the ownership housing that was to be built. About twelve to fourteen percent of the displaced renters became homeowners through this procedure.

The first group of redevelopment projects completed were industrial parks west of Alameda. The Agency initiated the development of five industrial park projects ranging in size from 9,000 square feet to 118,000 square feet, with a total estimated market value of around \$20 million. The Agency’s function was essentially to demolish deteriorated industrial buildings, assemble parcels through acquisitions and then sell to developers or users, and provide public infrastructure. As a result of redevelopment, 660,000 square feet of industrial space was developed by 1987, a number that reportedly rose to 1.5 million through the 1990s (Funk 1998).

Following closely behind industrial development was the construction of new ownership housing units, particularly townhomes, adjacent to the downtown area. While all the redevelopment projects required considerable salesmanship and arm-twisting to convince developers, lenders, and buyers to coop-

erate, ownership housing around a reconstructed central business district, with selling prices ranging from \$94,000 to \$115,000, was probably “the path of least resistance.” The first project, Park Villa, twenty-eight townhomes located one block east of Pacific Boulevard, was completed in 1985. Following this was a series of townhouse and apartment-style condominiums, single-family homes, multi-family apartments, rehabilitations, and senior citizen apartments. In total, 2,371 residences were built throughout the city, and 397 homes were rehabilitated. Of these, only 160 were apartments, with an additional 440 in the downtown area under negotiation in 1998 (Wong 1998).

A consistent issue with Huntington Park’s housing program during this period is the question: To whom was this program targeted? The Agency’s report does not provide rental rates on the apartments, but there is no indication that these were for low- and moderate-income residents. In 1980, median household income for Huntington Park was \$11,466, rising to \$23,582 by 1990. This translates into housing affordability ranging from about \$38,000 to \$79,000 during this period, well below the cost of even the townhome condominiums built in Huntington Park early in the redevelopment period. Clearly the target was not the existing, largely Latino, non-voting, non-participating resident. Furthermore, the huge number of senior citizen apartments built (1,295), while showing empathy for seniors, is inconsistent with the young age of the city’s population; only 8.8 percent were sixty-five or older in 1980, falling to 5.6 percent in 1990.

As townhomes were built and sold, retail developers and retailers were pursued by the city with vigor. Almost every retail developer in the greater Los Angeles region was contacted, each promptly turning down the invitation to build. After undaunted efforts, the city secured a developer for the first shopping center built under the redevelopment program, the Pacific Center, a 166,000 square foot anchor for the north end of Pacific Boulevard at Slauson Avenue. The Center brought in the area’s first major new supermarket in Boys Market, which later became Ralphs, and then went dark in 1996. The vacant Ralphs is now being replaced by an electronics and furniture retailer, La Curacao (owned by two Israeli brothers).

After about two years of diligent pursuit, Funk convinced developer James Watson of Watson & Associates to purchase, under a city cost write-down, the property at the southwest corner of Slauson Avenue and Pacific Boulevard. The result was Lugo Plaza, a mixed-use retail and office property. Watson became one of the city’s most important developers, building about fourteen projects, mostly retail, but with some office developments on Pacific. A notable Watson center is Plaza de La Fiesta, at the now “100 percent occupied” location in Huntington Park, at the northeast corner of Pacific and Florence Avenues. The center is anchored by El Gallo Giro, a Mexican-American owned chain of Mexican restaurants that incorporates a bakery, a butcher shop, and a tortilleria. The center is notable because it is one of the few in Huntington Park that is overwhelmingly Mexican-American, incorporating a Mexican cultural reference in its architectural design. El Gallo Giro also pro-

vides outdoor seating for its restaurant patrons and the center is a general place to “hang out” in the central business district.

The most recent retail development in the works is a movie/retail complex to include a sixteen- to eighteen-screen theater and 122,000 square feet of retail space. To be located at the northeast corner of Zoe Avenue and Pacific Boulevard, the development will further contribute to the retail and recreational amenities in the central business district (Wong 1998). In all, redevelopment resulted in the construction of between 1.0 and 1.5 million square feet of retail space throughout the city. Most of the centers built were in typical suburban style, with a large parking lot in front and a parking ratio of four spaces per thousand square feet of retail space. This ratio is consistent with auto-oriented suburbs, but inconsistent with a city like Huntington Park, where low incomes preclude many people from owning a car. It does not appear that there was an effort made to vary from the standard parking ratio to which most developers build or to consider replacing it with a transportation plan more conducive to the needs of residents.

Inclusionary Planning Amid Cultural Diversity

Empirical material (personal interviews, city promotional videotapes, the current General Plan, and the city’s *Consolidated Plan for 1995* submitted to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development) shows no specific attempt to view Huntington Park’s constituents as “Mexican-American” or “Latino,” that is, as a community that may have had different needs and demands than the Anglo population it

replaced. The presumption has been that the city’s constituents are not much different than the Anglo middle- and working-class population that departed in the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps this was just a reflection of political realities. Given the low voting record of the largely immigrant population of Huntington Park, the now-rarefied, non-Latino population was the city’s effective political constituency during its redevelopment heyday. At any rate, the city’s decision-makers (City Council, senior staff, developers, architects, and lenders), overwhelmingly non-Latino, were content to be ethnic-blind.

The problems created by ethnic-blindness exist on many levels. Firstly, there is the exclusion of ethnic consciousness from the planning process. Induced to move to Huntington Park by industry’s need for low-wage, unskilled labor, and the availability of cheap housing, the low-income Latino population, like many other immigrant groups in the United States, found itself on the outside looking in on the revitalization process (Ortiz 1996). The city pursued community participation through the usual channels of public hearings, questionnaires sent to thousands of households, and meetings with the Chamber of Commerce and other groups. The problem with this process in Huntington Park is that it fails to reach the neediest families, who are either culturally too intimidated to participate and/or have little or no political power at the ballot box. Not surprisingly, the revitalization process will give short shrift to their needs for low-income family housing, childcare facilities, job training programs, healthcare, and the like. Social justice requires that city leadership conduct outreach

through non-traditional means—through Latino churches, in small group meetings in people’s homes, at hometown clubs, on the streets. This process of participation among the neediest in a social learning context provides for learning by both the “leader” and the participant in ways, and on issues, that cannot be anticipated ahead of time. A process of community-building is created through dialogue that lasts far beyond the actual construction process. “In other words, participation seems to bring with it transformative powers at different levels, from individual to collective behavior, and even to improve the performance of public agencies” (Sandercock 1998: 151).

Secondly, there is the question: what is the fundamental purpose of a revitalization effort? Is it solely to reconstruct the city’s infrastructure? As difficult as this task is, real estate redevelopment is the easiest part of community revitalization. Community-building, which seeks to satisfy human needs and create a viable community in the long-term, goes much further than reconstructing dilapidated properties. Accordingly, Huntington Park’s *Consolidated Plan for 1995* reports that: “[c]ommunity identifies its needs as a declining industrial/business base; low skill levels in the work force; crime; overcrowded public schools; limited information available on medical services; scarcity of affordable housing; and an inadequate transportation system” (1995: 14). Granted, all of these problems contain dimensions that are outside one jurisdiction’s control. However, an effort as ambitious and innovative as the Huntington Park redevelopment effort, focused centrally

on the needs of its neediest, *as voiced by the neediest*, might have resulted in a different statement of conditions than the one just quoted.

An inclusionary planning process that recognizes and makes visible the cultural qualities of ethnicity and its derivative needs, preferences, and memories, may turn up some startling discoveries. It may identify a need for low-income rental housing or childcare centers, which might be a complete change in strategy from building another shopping center. Or, if a shopping center was identified as a need, it might be designed with store fronts at the sidewalks to accommodate a culture that is accustomed to socializing in public areas. The center might be built more cheaply and consume less land if parking requirements were reduced to reflect a public transit-dependent consumer. Possibly, it will be found that the home rehabilitation loan program ought to be combined with technical assistance and code changes that make it easier to build out a garage as an additional bedroom in a manner that respects safety and sanitary issues. Maybe the “image” of the city, called for in the urban design section of the city’s General Plan, should incorporate some meaningful references to the Mexican culture to celebrate the population’s heritage and instill pride in “their” community.

The point here is that “top-down” planning or, we may say, “decision-maker centered” planning in an ethnic community does not work when the decision-makers come from one ethnic group and the majority of residents from another ethnic group—inclusiveness in a true and profound sense is required. Indifference to ethnicity is not constructive. It makes

people invisible, marginalizes them, harms their self-identity, and makes it harder to create a harmonious society that seeks a common ground *while* still celebrating diversity. Taking an ethnographic approach to developing an understanding of a community's culture would facilitate this process, particularly when all the decision-makers are ethnically outsiders or socio-economically privileged. How culture gets translated into a revitalization effort is not an easy issue to address, particularly in a market-driven, profit-oriented system. But this issue is critically important, and the only way to grasp its complexities is to make ethnicity visible, and incorporate it into planning process. Physical space should not be looked upon solely for its exchange value—how much profit it will return to a developer, a retailer, or to the city treasury, as important as these considerations are. Particularly in low-income communities, physical space has extremely important use values—social values that people impart to an environment by their behavior and perception of the physical space. The approach of revitalization efforts should be to try to understand this process, instead of getting in its way through inappropriate programmatic assumptions. In fact, revitalization efforts should seek to encourage the social use of space in politically constructive and culturally appropriate ways.

The response of decision-makers, in implementing a highly successful program to revitalize its built environment and create jobs, is not atypical, and my purpose is not to point a finger of blame, so to speak. In fact, it is clear that Huntington Park is a better place today for all residents than it was in its deteriorated state of the 1970s. Along with the continuing

globalization of California's (and the world's) economy, the problem in Huntington Park's case is that planning in ethnic enclaves needs to operationalize the notion that ethnicity not only matters, but that it is essential to the planning process. A failure to be inclusive of ethnic difference will not only undermine efforts to revitalize the built environment in the long run, but will also make it harder to achieve the goal of democracy in a multicultural society.

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