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Bridging Los Angeles: Leaning Into the Reconnecting Neighborhoods Movement



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Issue

Highway construction in the United States has historically neglected city residents, caused urban sprawl, led to unfair treatment based on race, forced people out of their homes, and broken up communities. Today, planners can address this historical malpractice through freeway reform and building connectors that bridge divides between neighborhoods and communities. This research is intended to encourage amending past failures in city planning by highlighting and promoting methods for reconnecting communities disadvantaged by freeways.

From local leaders to national policymakers, more people are starting to realize the damage caused by the National Highway System and continued highway expansions on poor neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color all over the country. Los Angeles County and its many wide highways demonstrate how decisions made by highway experts and planners, with the influence of the oil and car industries, have shaped these areas in the long term.

This study contributes to the ongoing conversation of sustainable urban transformation and the reclamation of public spaces for community benefit by analyzing historical impacts and contemporary solutions. The findings should help inform and guide urban planning, policy advocates, and professionals inspired by the reconnecting communities movement, underscoring the need for innovative approaches to mending bifurcated and ecologically disadvantaged communities.

Study Approach

This research highlights the history of freeway development, analyzes de-freeway potential, presents an argument for de-freeway efforts in Los Angeles, and applies them to real-world sites by analyzing regional environmental and socioeconomic data.

The researcher used aggregated quantitative indicators from CalEnviroScreen, California Tree Equity Score, and Park Needs Assessment to demonstrate impact and priority needs across Los Angeles County. Qualitative data came from news articles and an interview with a staff member at People for Mobility Justice, a nonprofit organization centered on mobility justice in low-income communities of color in Los Angeles. Case studies were chosen based on their significance in the greater context of the de-freeway movement and their applicability to themes raised in this research (Figure 1).

Key Findings

- The legacy of freeway construction continues to impact communities and the environment, demanding planners' and policymakers' attention and courageous decision-making if our urban centers are to reverse course and become accommodating, nurturing, and sustainable.
- The shift in attitude toward freeways and pedestrianization reflects that city leaders and planners see their role in long-term urban reformation for future generations.

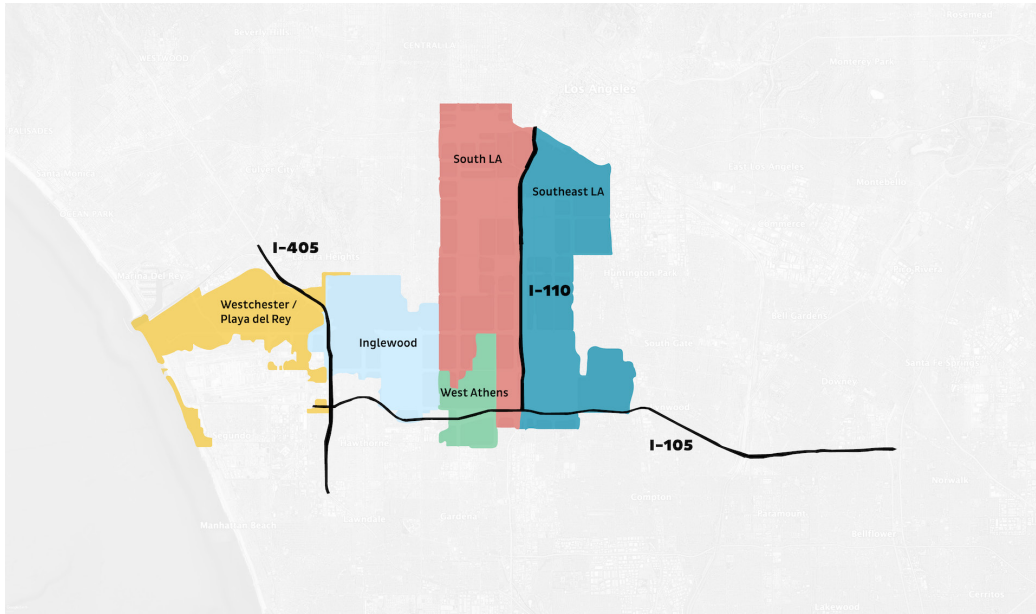


Figure 1. Map of the freeways and communities in Los Angeles that were used as case studies

- The measures and interventions outlined in the design proposals are expected to face significant hurdles and will not resolve all the disparities identified. However, they would contribute to existing efforts, particularly those related to mobility and connectivity, that aim to transform the built and social landscape of Los Angeles.
- The increasing number of projects prioritizing pedestrians in cities across the U.S. and globally is a testament to the transformative power of people-centered planning in the face of fast-paced, car-centric urban lifestyles.
- There is evidence that these reforms work when there are great minds collaborating and adequate funding. It is a question of political courage and will to make these projects the norm rather than the exception.
- How justified and realistic is it to expect people to spend time above and around freeways — notably in the same communities that are denied access to adequate health care?
- If contemporary planning movements such as de-freeway, reconnecting communities, and new urbanism aim to eliminate the need for individual automobile use, with the goal of facilitating the 15-minute walkable city, why commit time and resources to the cause of the problem instead of fighting to remove freeways altogether?
- The homelessness crisis in Los Angeles speaks to many issues, but what role do advocates of open community spaces play in addressing homelessness? Are unhoused populations considered under the same umbrella as other vulnerable groups, or are they othered and obfuscated from the collaborative planning process?

Conclusion

Our cities should be vibrant centers of curiosity and social interaction, not isolated and desolate concrete grids that discourage or prevent us from accessing opportunities for personal and collective growth. Dismantling and rebuilding these barriers would enhance the urban experience and foster greater unity. The movements to de-freeway and reconnect communities are significant strides in this direction. Still, questions remain for planners and proponents advocating for these shifts in practice:



Handel, H. (2024). Reforming the Freeway Divide to Close Gaps and Reconnect Communities (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8ww9345v>

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