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## Time for new urban ethnographies

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**ABSTRACT** ■ Advances in urban sociology now depend on developing the temporal dimensions of ethnographic data. For public place behavior, the need is to follow people before, through, and after the sites where fly-on-the-wall researchers traditionally have observed them. To understand how people economically exploit a city's public life, researchers must follow market responses that discount and redistribute initial advantages. For explaining the formation of neighborhoods, a multiphase social theory is required. Drawing examples from Los Angeles, nine historical processes are shown to have shaped a substantively wide range of cases, including officially preserved, Orthodox Jewish, affluent totemic, low-income ethnic immigrant, and homeless service areas. A historical approach shows that the social character stamped onto a neighborhood early in its history is often effaced or reversed by later processes, identifies new formative processes, and locates the major turning point in a different period, the 1960s, than do theories stressing globalization and deindustrialization.

**KEY WORDS** ■ neighborhood, urban sociology, Los Angeles School, Chicago School, urban fortunes

Several of the traditional areas of urban ethnography are stalled, repeating more or less the same findings and making diminishing contributions to urban sociology and social science more generally. There is a good reason for the current dilemma. Substantive advances now depend on bringing

*time* more centrally into ethnographic research, which requires research strategies that are complex and demanding in novel ways, not so much intellectually as practically.

Many call for ethnographies that address wider spatial dimensions. If 'globalization' requires studies in places that sociologists have not mapped, ethnographers must develop language competency, understand multiple political economic systems, find funding, and confront the personal issues that anthropological ethnographers have always had to face when working far from home. The fundamental research strategy need not change. Ethnographic work on a global scale must be insistently comparative, but comparative analysis has long been a commitment for sociological analysis grounded on native turf.

Putting a longer temporal dimension into the ethnographic research program poses challenges of another order. In the study of behavior in public places, the advances begun by Georg Simmel and continued by Erving Goffman and Lyn Lofland have not seen new leaps for 30 years. It is time to move beyond the atemporal, fly-on-the-wall perspective of the situationally specific participant observer to see the meaning of the current situation within the longer-term framework of a participant's biography as he or she moves from one arena of situated interaction to another, always aware of what *in situ* co-respondents cannot fully know, that what is currently happening has retroactive and prospective meanings based on the overarching trajectories of his or her own social life. Getting access to the biographical meanings of situated public interactions requires negotiating relations with subjects of a sort that a clear-eyed but always cool observer like Goffman would resist. You have to expose yourself, if only as a researcher, when you 'go along' (Kusenbach, 2003). But, unless the ethnographer of public behavior is willing to work out observations over a series of sequential, situated involvements of the same subjects, he or she will be unable to compete in data quality and analytic precision with the increasingly powerful stationary audiovisual recorder.

Consider also the study of economic activity in urban settings. Except perhaps for some ancient sacred sites, perceived opportunities to make money have drawn people to live in the dense proximities that define cities. Exploiting the audiences and the views of communal life that are constituted by dense social activity in long-term settlements is a universal feature of city life. Urban ethnographers can contribute by tracking the interactions through which people make money out of the distinctive phenomena of urban life.

Cities constantly and inadvertently throw up potentially valuable views of their communities that may be grasped as treasures by the shrewd. The mime sees a queue waiting to get into a movie theater and expropriates the assemblage. The economic wit here is that the constitution of his audience

is in effect paid for by others. By walking behind and imitating a pedestrian passing by, the mime, like an alchemist, deflects the free attentions of the people on queue, who were drawn to the place by the vast sums invested by movie makers and theater owners, and converts them into an audience before they pass the ticket booth. Or the bistro owner, simply by orienting chairs toward the avenue or square, can charge extra for the espresso that comes with a landscape view of communal life that generations of others have made magnetic.

Urban alchemy, the trick of selling versions of the public to the public, is as important to the princes as to the paupers of the city. As an influence on real estate values, the value of city views has at times been trumped up to levels towering over central parks. For the ethnographer, urban alchemy raises the political economic question: who gets to appropriate the universally appreciated value of observing the city?

Participant observers from academia cannot know without doing historical research. The bistro owner most likely does not own the land. The rent he or she pays probably anticipates the value of the view the space provides; it will be higher than rents for cafes that give views onto littered lots or factory walls. Laws and contracts governing view rights have been massaged into form through countless negotiations involving real estate owners, users, politicians, and other interests. Studying urban alchemy requires not only sensitivity to the broad range of ways the public is sold to the public but work that ethnographers have left to others: historical research into the evolution of the current market framework for transactions that exchange view rights.

Taking *time* into account calls for new leaps in a third area of traditional concern in urban sociology, the study of city neighborhoods. Current researchers are at a very different place than preceding generations, though not because 'globalization' and 'deindustrialization' have created a radically different framework for city life. The new dimension of challenge is both simpler and more profound: the cities we study have more history, and history impinges on the present in ways we cannot grasp unless we study the past. To understand the formative processes that shaped what we observe today, we have to take into account lives long dead. But, as we become historians, we must also seek to develop generalizable knowledge from our case studies. When we emerge from a systematic analysis of substantively diverse cases of neighborhood creation and transformation, we will see different social mechanisms, different power dynamics, and a different formative historical era than have been imagined by previous urban sociologies.

## Urban ethnography turns to history

One reason the theory of social geography developed by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess stressed 'ecology' was that they were observing and writing during the first period of urban life in Chicago, which morphed from a small, lakefront and river-based prairie settlement into a major industrial city between 1880 and 1920. Their personal transformations and the city's were interconnected; in the ecologist's phrase, they were symbiotic. Burgess was born at the start of the transformation; Park lived it between young adulthood and middle age. Both came to the University of Chicago before the First World War. In Chicago, no prior urban history complicated their perception of 'concentric circles' describing urban ecology (Burgess, 1925). Notably, sociologists whose own lives did not parallel the growth stages of the cities they studied did not find that model convincing. In Boston (Firey, 1968), Latin America (Caplow, 1949), and Europe, commitments to older states of city life persisted and structured land use patterns (Quinn, 1940).

Many critics soon stepped forward to propose alternatives to the concentric zone model, but the more fundamental problem was the theory's ignorance of history, the set of temporally coincident influences that we cannot capture in a conception of recurrent phenomena (Haggerty, 1971). The Chicago School's substantive theory was soon assailed with an avalanche of criticism. But the intellectual style it represented, that of creating a new theoretical perspective by emphasizing a single ongoing process to explain the character of urban areas, triumphed as an academic strategy.

Two and three generations later, a series of new rubrics emerged to capture what each researcher advanced as necessary to explain the social character of contemporaneous neighborhoods: communities of 'limited liability' (Janowitz, 1952); the 'urban village', an otherwise healthy, natural social type under assault from insensitive, class-biased government reformers (Gans, 1962); 'the defended neighborhood' (Suttles, 1972); and 'symbolic communities', a much-needed corrective pointing out that the 'community areas' as defined by Burgess were imposed on Chicago without necessarily being grounded in local understandings (Hunter, 1974). In the 'urban fortunes' model, city areas are lent artificial identities by a 'growth machine' of self-interested property developers who, in collaboration with politicians corrupted by campaign or more personal contributions, create sports complexes, convention centers, shopping malls, and other mega-projects, supposedly to expand the city's overall economic well-being, using the people's money, acting in the name of false gods (totemic sports teams, superficial bits of city history), and in the end growing nothing so valuable as their own private fortunes (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Molotch, 1976). Recently, a set of Los Angeles-based academics dubbed the 'LA School'

claims that post-modernism's free-floating culture rather than on-the-ground geography matters most in shaping the meaning of urban space in Los Angeles, which they treat as the harbinger of the global urban future (Dear, 2002; Scott and Soja, 1996). Doubly ironic, the LA School juxtaposes itself as a historically necessary revision of the Chicago School, but its staff lacks sociologists and its academic geographers dismiss the need to study personal life on the ground.

More recently a sociologically informed wave of neighborhood studies has taken a historical turn. Mario Small (2004) finds that the second Puerto Rico-origin generation occupying Boston's Villa Victoria lacks the dedication to the local community that sustained their parents, who founded this tenant-controlled subsidized housing complex. Omar McRoberts (2003) portrays the dilemmas of African American churches that have remained in place after their congregations moved away. Sudhir Venkatesh (2000) contrasts a public housing community to its character a generation earlier. Elijah Anderson's current (2004) studies of the 'cosmopolitan canopy' in multiethnic Philadelphia are positioned in contrast to the black/white dynamics of his earlier ethnographies. Historical explanations are emerging in studies of the differing social characters of adjacent areas (Molotch et al., 2000). Researchers have begun to address the question of how African Americans manage to hold onto the public identity of neighborhoods in which Latino immigrants and white home buyers have made blacks a quickly diminishing minority. Andrew Deener (this issue) examines this phenomenon in Oakwood, known as 'the black neighborhood' in Venice, a coastal section of L.A. Given the enormous demographic changes of cities in the US and Europe over the last 30 years, ethnographers have become vulnerable to stinging criticism when they immerse themselves in urban social places without establishing where their fieldwork has put them in processes of historical transformation (May, 2005; Small, 2007).

Yet full awareness of the implications of incorporating historical time in the explanation of urban social geography has not yet blossomed.<sup>1</sup> Ideas and terms from popular culture have been picked up by urban researchers, bringing in theoretical biases that have masked recognition of the complexities of the massive changes that have been occurring. 'Gentrification' invites binary thinking, glossing the multiple, independently originating class and ethnic streams of change that have reshaped city neighborhoods, and the concept smuggles in teleology. Some urban areas have been gentrifying for 30 years and are still heterogeneous. While gentrification is presumably hostile to low-income residents, in many US cities by far the greatest changes in urban neighborhoods, quantitatively speaking, have been through the settlement patterns of an immigrant working class. As with gentrification, globalization and deindustrialization remain underspecified

in their timing, especially in their historical relation to the emergence of the problems they are put to explain (Guillén, 2001).

A casual attitude toward historical specificity does not work even in relatively young cities like Los Angeles. Current machinations about altering or developing neighborhood identity play out within frameworks that were set in place decades earlier. Early 20th-century social geography, despite recent transformations, still shapes the field in which urban villages develop, makes the growth strategies of long dead place entrepreneurs bear unexpected fruit, and persistently induces neighbors to organize along defensive lines that cast new types of nearby people as outsiders. In order to ground the call to bring historical time into urban ethnographies, I draw examples from a study of neighborhoods in Hollywood by Peter Ibarra, Margarethe Kusenbach, and myself, which began with participant observation and biographical interviews conducted in the late 1990s and has become a project in urban history.

Hollywood is not a political unit but an area within the city of Los Angeles that is defined in different ways by different publics and administrative organizations. For all, Hollywood is centered around the production studios that were created in the silent movie era. According to the police definition of the area, which we used in order to pursue 'community policing' themes, Hollywood houses about 200,000 people. Each of the six areas we studied is a different type of neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> Five represent newly emerging types for Los Angeles. All began to change in the mid-to-late 1960s, although the changes did not become visible to outsiders, or even to many insiders, until the 1980s. They are:

- A neighborhood of low-income immigrants from Mexico and Central America, centered around the intersection of two high-traffic streets, Santa Monica Boulevard and Western Avenue.
- A neighborhood containing various communities, including a concentration of religiously observant Jews, in an area between the north-south streets, La Brea and Fairfax, and the east-west streets, Beverly and Melrose, where dozens of Orthodox schools, synagogues, and retail stores are now clustered.
- Spaulding Square, which in 1993 became the sixth residential area officially recognized as historic by the city's conservancy agency.
- Hollywoodland, a planned development from the 1920s that is 'totemic' in the sense that residents take neighborhood identity from the famous sign, from the original European-style hill homes, and from their common hillside ecology and views.
- An area in which homeless populations congregate. By 1980, streets around the entertainment destinations on Sunset and Hollywood boulevards had become a geographic center for various subpopulations of street kids or 'runaways', drug-addicted prostitutes, and destitute men.



- An area we call DeMille Studios, which lies between higher-profile neighborhoods. Residents are diverse in social class and ethnicity, and they live a distinct local social life through their divergent orientations toward neighborhoods centered elsewhere and in the patterns of segregation and symbiosis that characterize proximate relations. A few would accept the label 'Bohemian'.

Our understanding that this set represents a new era in city neighborhoods is supported by indications of similar types of neighborhoods emerging in other cities across the US: new immigrant areas, places where facilities serving the homeless are clustered, enclaves of Orthodox Jews, officially historic neighborhoods, which represent a shift in focus from protecting long-recognized institutional landmarks to creating new identities for residential areas, and new in-between areas that develop as an offshoot of concerted community efforts in their surrounds.

Within Los Angeles each of the six neighborhoods is part of an archipelago of geographically separate but similar neighborhoods, a social fact understood by residents who know the status and character of each island relative to others in the same chain. Hollywood is sociologically unique, not only because of the glamour of the film industry image projected onto it from outside but because, seen from the inside and on the ground, it is the area in Los Angeles in which multiple neighborhood archipelagoes cross over one another in their greatest number and variety. Rather than the singular Skid Row that was located near the downtown railroad center for about a century, over the last 40 years a series of areas in Hollywood, Santa Monica, and elsewhere have become homes for the homeless. Here, in contrast to a 'barrio' concentration of Mexicans that developed in the early 20th century when the Mexican revolution brought a large wave of immigrants to relatively cheap land east of downtown LA, Latin American immigrants from various nations and regions have over the past 30–40 years developed new concentrations within a new socio-geographic constellation. For example, Central Americans have congregated southwest of downtown around Pico Union and around Van Nuys in the San Fernando Valley, as well as in Hollywood. Spaulding Square is one of a growing set of noncontiguous legally preserved neighborhoods; as of this writing there are 23 with 15 more in process. Hollywoodland is one of a set of neighborhoods that take their identities from canyons in the hills that create the LA basin and that are parallel in symbolic and organizational power to neighborhoods formed around other totemic features in their vicinity, such as the artificial canals in Venice.

Developing a historical perspective does not come at the cost of a general sociological theory. For understanding the formation and transformation of all neighborhoods in Hollywood, nine different social processes have been

significant: major changes in land values; mass population movements; the role of pioneers or prime movers; ecological relations to adjacent areas; diffusion or marketing processes; 'retail' institutionalization, or long-term commitments made within the neighborhood; ecological imitation and differentiation from similar, non-adjacent areas; 'wholesale' institutionalization, or externally located social machinery that underwrites a series of neighborhoods of a given type; and the turning point of the 1960s, when central planning authorities that residents previously deferred to were successfully resisted, initially by grassroots protests and culminating in a shift in deference toward local communal organizations.

I draw examples from neighborhoods in the Hollywood study to show how bringing historical time into the study of urban neighborhoods matters. Over the 20th century, formative processes that have always been in operation have changed in their substantive effects on the character of the neighborhoods they produced. Bringing time into urban sociology is necessary to isolate the processes shaping neighborhood formation that have emerged within the last 30–40 years. A historical perspective reveals that urban neighborhoods are becoming 'sanctified', as local geographic areas are publicly defined with themes that receive respect in the form of investment, voluntary aid, and deferential applications of government power. After describing how various social processes have been critical in the formation of current Hollywood neighborhoods, I reverse the reading of history, looking for the timing of the macro-social changes that set in motion the construction of the neighborhood communities an ethnographer can witness today.

### **Population movements and the rise and relative fall of near-in land values in the 20th century**

The foundations for current Hollywood neighborhoods were laid in the period from 1905 to 1930, through what urban sociologists might take as classic cases of collaborations between private economic interests and public powers. After 1930, and for most of the rest of the 20th century, land values in Hollywood and other areas close to downtown LA fell, not absolutely but relative to steeper rises in land values further out. As a result, the social characters that were originally stamped onto local areas in Hollywood by politically influential capitalists faded and then reversed. The story is a cautionary tale for those who would understand collaborations between capitalists and politicians as predictably defining the long-term social character of city areas.

Spaulding Square had its genesis before the First World War. This rectangular area of 160 single-family homes was created by a developer in a

manner that was typical in Los Angeles. Albert Spaulding bought land in what were then the far western reaches of the city. At the time, the area to the south and east was used for agricultural and oil fields. Across the street from his lots lay an unincorporated area known as the 'town of Sherman'. Moses Sherman, a major developer whose name later defined prominent sites in the San Fernando Valley, had created a major junction and housing base for his streetcar workforce. Spaulding, a bit player by comparison, marketed his lots by sponsoring picnic outings at a nearby tram stop. He and Sherman both profited from the rising land values around the stations. In 1984, the town of Sherman became the independent city of West Hollywood.

Spaulding designed his development so that it would be perceived as continuous with the social character of 19th-century Hollywood, which was conservative, Christian, and dry. Just across the western boundary of Spaulding's tract, beyond the legal jurisdiction of the Los Angeles city police department (LAPD) and beyond the moral supervision of Hollywood (then and now a part of the City of Los Angeles), was the working-class junction that Sherman had built. The place was famous for gambling and prostitution organized around taverns and rooming houses. Spaulding developed his lots before LA had zoning rules that would bar commercial uses of residential properties. A prohibition against alcohol sales in his deeds signalled that his lots would not become an extension of the disreputable adjacent area.

Hollywoodland was created in the early 1920s by a consortium including Sherman, real estate professionals, and Harry Chandler, owner of the *Los Angeles Times*. At that time Chandler, who had married into a real estate and publishing fortune, was reputed to be the wealthiest property owner in the US. His fortunes were established before the First World War, when land that he controlled in the San Fernando Valley became irrigated by an aqueduct that his newspaper helped persuade the public to fund. Chandler and his partners adorned their development, which covered over 500 lots destined for single-family housing, with myriad elitist symbols. Houses had to be in one of several European styles. The developers marketed the neighborhood restrictively to white Christians, including business owners, oil executives, financial managers, and professionals. An illuminated white dot placed under the sign proclaiming 'Hollywoodland' represented 'the white spot' promoted as an image for Los Angeles by Chandler's newspaper and the city's Chamber of Commerce. Derived from economic maps showing Southern California prospering when the Midwest and East Coast were depicted in the gloom of economic downturns, the 'white spot' connoted an anti-union policy as well as racial exclusivity.

Land values soared as the movie industry developed. Hollywood's population rose from 5000 to 30,000 in the 20 years after 1905. The

intersection of two main through streets, Santa Monica Boulevard and Western Avenue, was developed by the city as a major transportation hub for streetcars and auto traffic. For decades, a Sears department store and a major bank made it a destination for Hollywood's white working and middle classes.

By the 1930s, the social character of Hollywood neighborhoods departed radically from the vision of the original place entrepreneurs. Spaulding's lots became favored by modestly paid movie industry workers, craftsmen, and contract actors. Homes were convenient for workers and patrons of the Sunset Strip, just west of the LA border, which supported a scandalously permissive night life for gamblers, mobsters, prostitutes, mixed-race couples, and homosexuals.

In 1929 the *Los Angeles Times*' incessant promotion of Hollywoodland suddenly stopped. With only a fraction of the potential lots sold, the consortium went bankrupt. Religious homogeneity broke down with the Depression. An elegant house used as a model in marketing the development was resold to a Jewish garment manufacturer; a generation later, the same property was bought by a succession of gay couples. In the 1930s, Hollywoodland residents included leftist activists who were later targeted as 'Reds'.

From about 1905 through the 1920s, Hollywood was well served by street railways and improved road networks. As auto use grew rapidly, cheap land further from LA's center became targeted by the next generation of developers and the long decline of Hollywood's relative land values began. As the business, professional, and entertainment elites increasingly settled to the west, Hollywoodland became inhabited by performers and professionals with middling careers.

The areas in the flats housing the more modest masses in Hollywood were similarly affected. After the Second World War, the construction of the 101 (Hollywood Freeway) diagonally across the Hollywood hills linked downtown to the San Fernando Valley. Every major east-west street through Hollywood had a dedicated exit/entrance to the 101. These ramps sucked buyers seeking single-family houses into the valley's massive new suburban areas, where for less money they would control more land and be as close or closer in commuting time to downtown and the new centers of employment further west.

The drop in relative land values set the stage for the creation of new types of neighborhoods in Hollywood and for the transformation of the social identity of existing neighborhoods. The change did not happen immediately. At first the new, more economically modest residents were English-speaking whites from other areas in the US and from Canada. But as chain migration links built up after a new US immigration law was passed in 1965, a demographic sea change became perceptible. In previously

unified areas that had been broken up by the freeway, cheap property made it possible for low-income Armenians and Thais to move in. Deteriorated rental units immediately adjacent to the highway became affordable for very low-income Mexican and Central American immigrants, especially those who could make what were officially single-family apartments operate as rooming houses.

### **The functionally constant but substantively changing impacts of social ecology**

By the end of the 20th century, the people living on the lots Spaulding had created were no longer radically different in values and lifestyles from the people living in West Hollywood, which had become a liberal, gay-friendly city. Based on Margarethe Kusenbach's interviews and participation observation, we estimate that in 2000, about one-fourth of residents were gay or lesbian, mostly couples. They still could not open liquor stores, but their social values were inverse to those Spaulding expected to institutionalize.

Most significantly for urban sociology, the original ecological relationship between Spaulding's lots and the areas to the west still held. West Hollywood remained distinctively beyond the limits of conventional moral supervision throughout the 20th century. Sunset Boulevard hosted open street prostitution and easily accessible illegal drug sales. But the owners of Spaulding's lots, however similar they had become to residents to the west, were not at peace with the 'victimless' street crime that showed up in front of their houses. They began to organize complaints about prostitution in the 1970s and exerted sufficient pressure to push law enforcement to adopt new policies of prosecuting open prostitution.

The movement to create an officially recognized neighborhood and to resurrect Spaulding's name to grace the nameless area with historic symbols grew out of a multiyear, increasingly sophisticated effort to engage police, city government, and state legislative powers to repress local prostitution and associated drug trafficking. Once organized, homeowners in Spaulding Square discovered how much power they could wield. Becoming a historic neighborhood was a way of grasping an unfolding series of rewards.

The shifting functions of Hollywood churches also exemplify the historical reversals that result as established institutions adapt to new social contexts. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Christian churches and urban service agencies like the YMCA were endowed by elite Hollywood philanthropists. After the Second World War, as white, middle-class populations shifted to the suburbs, the area's many churches lost their congregations and were surrounded by new demographic groups. In the

1960s, 'runaways' were a common sight around Sunset and Hollywood boulevards. Adult homeless men, many of them alcoholics, congregated in public spaces such as De Longpre Park. This small park was created in the 1920s when citizens convinced the city council to seize land that Japanese residents were planning to use for housing and their own church. The Christian establishment had structured the ecology of Hollywood in a conservative direction early in the century, but that was reversed as Hollywood became receptive to various homeless populations. The first outreach effort to young street people was a YMCA prostitution intervention program. Covenant House, a Catholic institution, opened a residential facility for street kids in the 1980s. Homeless men commuted to food lines at various church kitchens. In the 1980s, crack-addicted prostitutes formed another Hollywood homeless population. One dubbed an imposing Catholic church on Sunset 'The Church of the Blessed Lingerie' because of the surprising things she found in bins of donated clothing. Currently a battle is raging over the construction of a facility for the chronically homeless. The site is property conveyed to the city by a Presbyterian church; the chief opponent is a homeowner from Hollywoodland.

Transformations in the significance of a continuous local ecology also guided the emergence of a low-income Latino immigrant neighborhood around Santa Monica and Western. After the major studios left for larger work spaces elsewhere, many ancillary jobs in post-production remained. While the entertainment elite lived and worked elsewhere, Hollywood became a steady media employment center and entertainment destination. In the mid-20th century, native-born, English-speaking, white, high-school educated white-collar and film industry workers populated the area. Its status as a respectable working and lower-middle class residential area was anchored by the Sears store, Jewish and Armenian retail shops, and affluent adjacent neighborhoods.

Large numbers of Mexicans and Central Americans built up the residential population during the 1970s and 1980s, in part because the ecology around Santa Monica and Western had outstanding attractions. As a major stop on east-west and north-south public transportation lines, the intersection was frequented by Latino workers traveling to jobs in or through Hollywood. The Sears name had become well known in Latin America and the store became a popular place to outfit new households with appliances and other large items. Low-wage employment was readily available in restaurants, some of them serving Mexican and Guatemalan food (Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001). Affluent households in the hills offered immigrant women domestic service jobs. By the 1980s, the persisting features of the environing landscape had made critical contributions to the reformation of the neighborhood in a demographic direction that had never been anticipated.

The archipelago pattern that characterized LA's new neighborhoods figured into the ecological process that formed Santa Monica and Western into a center for Latino immigrants. Although the area has had exceptionally high crime and poverty rates relative to other LA neighborhoods, conditions there were more attractive for newly arrived Mexicans and Central Americans than in the downtown areas where they first settled. Bus-riding Latino immigrants observed the Latino-oriented retail that by the 1980s had replaced Jewish and Armenian businesses near the intersection. Also important as a diffusion mechanism were home-based parties, especially birthday celebrations for young children. For over 30 years now, on every weekend, virtually every block in the area has groups milling outside around a barbeque or piñata, the guests invited through kinship, hometown, and work connections from the other islands in their particular national or regional Latino immigrant archipelago.

### **A historical basis for identifying what is new in the process of neighborhood formation**

By researching how contemporary neighborhoods have evolved over time, we can document the changing substantive direction of the same types of social processes. Population movements and changes in relative land values and ecological relations within and among local areas are always significant, but not in a uniform way. Diffusion or marketing processes, too, change over time in ways critical to substantive transformations in neighborhood character. Iddo Tavory's article (this issue) explores the transformation of the La Brea-Melrose area into an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood by tracing the institutions and residents whose arrival gave it a new public identity. Sex-segregated religious schools, ranging from early childhood to post-secondary levels, have proliferated in the area. The schools expose local housing possibilities to the families of commuting students. With hundreds of families congregating around schools, would-be large donors can anticipate that large audiences will see their names honored on buildings. Changing diffusion processes also transformed the social character of Spaulding Square. Its development into an activist, close-knit neighborhood was promoted indirectly through the work-based networks of existing residents, especially women employed in the entertainment industry.

We can identify historically changing 'retail' commitments, investments that are tailored to and underwrite the specific character of local areas. These mechanisms include restrictive covenants written into deeds to govern architectural style or control the racial-ethnic identity of residents; ethnic-themed retail stores; and large residential buildings with small apartments, cheaply built from 1940 to 1970, which shape the rental market of the area



over the long term. Not all 'retail' commitments are commercial. Churches and social service programs such as the YMCA have found new purposes in serving the Latino immigrant and street populations that have arrived since the 1960s.

Over the last 30 years, new 'wholesale' machinery has emerged to underwrite certain types of neighborhoods. Like research universities, local yeshivas are supported by students and funds that are drawn to the neighborhood by reputations established in an international education network. Without public debate on the matter, the California Department of Transportation and other transit agencies have designated ethnic neighborhoods with signs announcing 'Chinatown', 'Little India', and 'Historic Filipino-town' at freeway exits. Anup Sheth's article (this issue) explores the 2003 controversy that transformed the state's behind-the-scenes operations into matters for public review on the local level. The indirect effects of this 'Balkanization' of urban areas deserve attention. Around Santa Monica and Western, developers have been targeting properties for housing that will require higher incomes than the immigrant population can manage. They may not appreciate the indirect aid they are being given by current applications from residents of the Pico Union area, where competing groups are struggling to have different versions of their neighborhood designated 'Little Central America'. Since the 1970s, Los Angeles' city planning department has investigated and stamped approvals on applications for recognition as 'historic' neighborhoods, a designation that brings potential tax deductions to property owners and enhances their voice in forums where community reaction is sought.

The various wholesale mechanisms for institutionalizing local neighborhood character appear at first glance to have nothing in common because they range over neighborhoods that in demographic composition and cultural identity are segregated and indifferent to each other. What is new in the social processes of urban neighborhood formation could be called the 'sanctification' of neighborhood, the assignment to local areas of some form of culture on the basis of which residents and local organizations can demand respect, enhanced voice in public debates, and money in the form of tax relief, policing, and neighborhood improvements. Increasingly, for residents observing the sanctification of neighborhoods elsewhere, having something similar becomes a *sine qua non* of a self-respecting neighborhood.

### **On the macro-social formation of contemporary neighborhoods**

The sanctification of neighborhood has historical precedents (Firey, 1945), but something novel occurred about 40 years ago, when deference was



withdrawn from national, state, and central city authorities and relocated at the local level. A major shift in power dynamics set the stage for the emergence of the sanctified neighborhoods that are proliferating today. What happened was demonstrably not the result of globalization or de-industrialization, which, when they are specified historically at all, are usually located later. What began in the 1960s became manifest in city neighborhoods in the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps for this reason, social processes that became buzz words in those decades are misperceived as causal. It is more likely that the effects of world trade and an information-based occupational order were guided into urban social geography by fundamental changes that had already been put in motion.

Starting in 1965, and for about ten years thereafter, protest movements for the first time slowed and successfully blocked highway building plans formed by the state's transportation department and advocated by city government as well as local chambers of commerce. In Hollywood, the proposed Laurel Canyon and Beverly Hills freeways were never built specifically because of locally based opposition.

This turnabout was not simply the result of the power of affluent residents who were moved to block highway construction when the 20-year program of building a highway system around LA finally impinged on their immediate concerns. Hills neighborhoods discovered their power through the success of the highway protests. The memory of that success helped institutionalize a federation of hills neighborhoods. A similar process of resistance was directed to urban planners in New York and other large cities, where many of the blocked projects were not in the higher-income parts of town. Something more profound was occurring during the 1960s. At the time, the Watts riot and other urban uprisings were not recognized as parallels to the resistance to city and state authority that was being exerted through the lobbying of political representatives by white residents of middle-class areas. A sociological account of the rise of the sanctified neighborhood must comprehend a larger, historically specific narrative that connects the new neighborhood formation processes to the simultaneous vanishing of the sacrosanct status of local interventions by centralized authorities. What was happening was not the advent of globalization but, in a way, the reverse, a shift back to pre-Second World War local power. The period from 1935 to 1965 was defined by the extraordinary power that was seized by and granted to national governments in response to worldwide economic crisis and war. Within 20 years after the end of the Second World War, deference to centralized authority, which had been based on a fear-driven reverence for political leaders, was withdrawn by city residents across the social spectrum. Highway construction was only one of the megaprojects that centralized government authorities no longer could execute within cities

with presumptive authority. Public housing and airport construction was also stymied or pushed away from urban centers.<sup>3</sup>

With government authorities no longer revered, the search for respect turned back toward the level of local community. Before the Second World War, funding for utilities and transportation projects depended on local votes, which often did not materialize. Neighborhood life flourished for Mexicans, African Americans, Jews, and the Japanese during the 1920s, albeit without honor and protected status. Contrary to what current observers of 'Little Tokyo' might assume, people of Japanese origin were not massed in a singular ghetto around downtown. They were living wherever cheaply rented 'truck' farmland and holes in segregation allowed, in a chain of dispersed settlements running from extensive agricultural fields east and south of downtown through islands of small farms and nursery supply areas out to the coast (Modell, 1977). Before the in-migration of blacks during the 1940s, African Americans populated distinct islands, some created by extended families that had maintained contact since migrating from the south, including one near east Hollywood (Bond, 1972 [1936]). With the advent of the Second World War, the centralized power of the federal government destroyed the archipelago of Japanese neighborhoods by interning citizens and non-citizens alike. The war brought blacks and Jews to LA in unprecedented numbers through military conscription, troop movements, and job opportunities in industry. For 20 years thereafter, the development of suburban residential communities was spurred by the expansion of the federally funded highway system.

In order to understand what globalization has to do with the formation of urban neighborhoods today, we must first appreciate that it was the dismantling of the globalizing forces of worldwide depression and war that put in motion the transformations that only became readily visible in the 1980s. Unwittingly, the US Congress ceded centralized power over large scale demographic change when it voted in 1965 to change national immigration policies that had favored immigrants from northwestern Europe and excluded Asians. Policy changes aimed at family reunification and refugees from communism were not intended to bring millions of Latin Americans to southern California, but over time, would-be immigrants took the federal government's stance as a signal that it would no longer enforce border restrictions.

Globalization, deindustrialization, the information economy, gentrification – all of these popular terms are now casually used in urban sociology in ways that misplace the period of historical transformation that is critical for understanding contemporary city neighborhoods. Those who became the flag-bearers for the 'historical' identities of Los Angeles neighborhoods were often migrants from northern California, the Midwest, and the East Coast. A new urban demographic started to emerge in the 1960s, as the

vast postwar expansion of higher education in the US enabled women to attain powerful professional and managerial positions. When they acted as grassroots leaders of neighborhood organizations, they were likely to interact with local public officials as class equals or superiors. The paradox here is revealing: newcomers and new social types, not the old, conservatively disposed elites, created the residential form of the conservancy movement. This configuration becomes apparent when what the ethnographer can observe in situ today is complemented by what can be learned through biographical interviews and historical records. While these influences have continued to shape city neighborhoods in ever more visible ways since at least the 1980s, their beginning points were in institutional changes created about 20 years earlier.

The key question for urban ethnography today is not whether to work on a macro- or a micro-level, or whether to embrace theory over grounded data, but to realize that we start participant observation at the current end of a temporal continuum on which the relevant past is elaborately obscured. When we put time squarely at the center of urban ethnography, we may start with contemporaneous observations, move to biographical interviews, and then on to archival descriptions of times that define an ethnographic picture of place beyond the lives of our informants. In this manner we can analyze how current social patterns took shape, step by time-ordered step. When we emerge from the temporal labyrinths of our case studies, perhaps surprised to realize the past formative era we find ourselves brought into, we will have an independent base for a historical contextualization of contemporary urban life that we can defend through seamless links with our own ethnographic data.

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## Notes

- 1 Perhaps the best example of what is needed is Brian Godfrey's (1988) largely neglected geography of multiple ethnic and class neighborhoods as they emerged and changed in San Francisco. Twenty years after its publication, ten years after a positive mention in a high-profile review essay by Roger Waldinger (1989), Godfrey's richly documented, carefully composed study shows only 38 references in Google Scholar.
- 2 Each of these neighborhoods is part of several larger local political units,

including city council districts and neighborhood councils, both of which are too large and too diverse in population to be meaningful to residents as neighborhood organizations. Margarethe Kusenbach (2008) focused at the level of individual phenomenology on two of the six Hollywood neighborhoods we studied, finely differentiating the various meanings residents give local community.

- 3 Megaprojects reappeared about 20 years later, most notably in forms consistent with the imagery of globalization, as tunnels and bridges of unprecedented length, high-speed trains, and airports used to connect countries, regions, and metropolitan areas. Local opposition often complicated rather than stopped these translocal projects. See Flyvbjerg et al. (2003). Altshuler et al. (2003) identify four eras in the history of urban public investment in the 20th century; they date the most active era as from the 1950s through the late 1960s, and they characterize the era that followed as guided by a policy of 'do no harm'.

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