

Los Angeles' War on the Poor: A Case Study in Militarism,
Displacement, and Public Space at Echo Park Lake



Luis Sinco, 2021.

Ina Morton

Occidental College Senior Comprehensive Project

Department of Urban and Environmental Policy

Professors Cha, Matsuoka, and Rodnyansky

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Abstract

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“less than lethal” crowd control rubber bullet gun. Though I was shoved back by an officer with a baton, I didn’t break an arm or suffer a concussion from a foam bullet, which happened to other protestors at the park.^{2 3} I was not one of the hundred and eighty-two people arrested those nights, though I had many friends who were.⁴ Though I had a warm residence to sleep after returning home from the displacement, I cannot

nationally.¹⁸ As militarized Los Angeles Police Department officers in riot gear faced off with—eventually striking, kettling, and arresting—activists, organizers, legal observers, and journalists who had gathered to provide eviction defense or to document the removal, residents of the tent community gathered their belongings and spoke to the crowd about the community they had created. “Without the constant LAPD and city harassment uprooting our lives we’ve been able to grow. To come together as a community, not just unhoused but housed as well. Please continue to leave us alone or stand with us,” read a statement released by the community.¹⁹ As the police occupation continued, a crew of public workers slowly began establishing steel fences around the perimeter of the park to enclose the area around the remaining residents. After days of protest, most residents closed in by the fence left with the belongings they could carry, with the remaining few residents being arrested and removed forcibly by the park after they chose to stay at the site.²⁰ At the end of the three-day displacement, the city had spent \$2 million in police salaries and overtime, \$250,000 to install CCTV cameras, and \$104,000 to install fences.²¹

Nearly two months after the displacement, the park re-opened to the public on May 26th with the earlier erected fences becoming a new permanent feature at the park to control access.

locals seeking to rest, camp, or otherwise access the space.²² A host of security cameras and private security guards surveil the park around the clock, limiting public use to city park authorities' desired public. These are the signs left that a community built from nothing over months was destroyed systematically in days, signs that demonstrate the city's determination to ensure that no tent settlements rise at Echo Park Lake again. Though city officials touted their efforts in providing temporary shelter and transitional housing to former residents of the lake, it is unclear how many of the lake's residents remain in housing today or if they have returned to living unsheltered in Los Angeles.²³ Many former residents have organized to form a new organization, the United Tenants Against Carceral Housing, to decry the conditions and stipulations of the aforementioned local shelter housing in programs such as Project Roomkey.²⁴ The demands of Echo Park Lake's residents and their allies articulate that their tent community sought more than simply shelter housing, but dignified housing, the right of the poor to access public space, and the right to urban life free of police harassment and surveillance.

Though unique in its scale, the sweep of Echo Park Lake and the resulting urban insurgency was not one of a kind in its occurrence.²⁵ A militarized police force descending upon the unhoused residents of a public park, injuring protestors and press who stood in their way, encapsulated the sentiment of many housing justice organizers and unhoused Angelenos that there is not simply a housing crisis, not simply a criminalization issue, but a fully-fledged war on the poor in Los

²² Libby Denkmann, "Fencing and Private Security: Echo Park Lake Has Reopened, With Some Big Changes," *LAist*, May 26, 2021.

²³ Erika Smith, "A week later, here's what happened of the homeless people booted from Echo Park," *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2021.

²⁴ Benjamin Oreskes and Emily Alpert Reyes, "Echo Park Lake to reopen May 26, two months after forced removal of homeless campers," May 19, 2021.

²⁵ Ananya Roy, "Emergency Urbanism," *Public Books*, November 24, 2020.

By the mid-1900s, the postcard image of Echo Park Lake was falling into disrepair. The middle class white neighbors and upper class real estate interests fled for more suburban climates, the Pacific Electric Red Car that dropped passengers off for picnics at the lake was discontinued, and the public library which had resided on the park's expanse was demolished.²⁹ During this period of post-war white flight, working-class immigrant families—largely from Mexico, Central and South America, and the Philippines—flocked to the newly affordable neighborhood and created a new history for the neighborhood of Echo Park, one where public art and Chicano culture flourished amidst the navigation of a changing urban environment plagued with disinvestment.³⁰ During this period, the entities that supported the original green and commercial development of Echo Park and Echo Park Lake decried the “blight” and gang violence that purportedly haunted the area. “Which Way for Echo Park – Inner City Oasis or Slum?” read one Los Angeles Times article.³¹ In being made the city's first Historic Preservation Overlay Zone in the 1980s, Echo Park escaped some of the “urban renewal” that demolished housing in many other perceivably “blighted” neighborhoods nationwide. Still, the socioeconomic costs of disinvestment remained as the historic designation was fought for by white residents seeking to prevent the development of federally assisted housing for Echo Park's low-income population after the 1968 passing of the

²⁹ Avila, Eric. “The Nation's “White Spot”: Racializing Postwar Los Angeles,” in *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2004.

³⁰ Kimberly M. Soriano, *Getting Up: Gentrification, Gang Injunctions, and Graffiti in Echo Park, Los Angeles*, University of California: Santa Barbara, June 2019.

³¹ Dial Torgerson, “Which Way for Echo Park—Inner City Oasis or Slum?” *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1971.

Fair Housing Act.^{32 33 34} “Echo Park’s hill liberals are now fighting federally assisted housing for the underprivileged. People keenly aware of a housing shortage find themselves saying: poor, go elsewhere,” wrote Los Angeles Times reporter Dial Torgerson in the aforementioned article.³⁵ This mantra of “poor, go elsewhere” would follow low income Echo Park residents into the 21st century where gentrification and displacement would pose a threat to the neighborhood’s working class immigrant population.

In 2011, the city ushered in a return to the Echo Park Lake as they knew it in 19th century Los Angeles by investing \$45 million into improvements and renovations for Echo Park Lake and implemented a gang injunction to deter all “gang-related” activity. On paper and in design, it was a beautification project to restore Echo Park Lake to its former glory. In effect, Echo Park’s non-white, particularly Brown youth population, were made unwelcome at the park for the recreation of white parkgoers.³⁶ With wealthier residents moving into the hillside homes, new coffee shops and record stores popping up onto Glendale Boulevard, and now the neighborhood’s centerpiece public green space restricted, Torgerson’s question of “Are the poor to inherit Echo Park?” seemed to answer itself. As March 2021 rolled around, whispers of another potential clean up and renovation hit Echo Park Lake, this time apparently in response to the large Echo Park Lake tent community encampment.³⁷ Echo Park’s historic conflict between disinvestment and investment,

³² Echo Park Historical Society, 2021.

³³ Matthew Fleischer. “How did Echo Park become so stratified with landed gentry and poverty? There was a plan 50 years ago.” *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2021.

³⁴ Andrew Small, “The Wastelands of Urban Renewal,” *Bloomberg CityLab*, February 13, 2017.

³⁵ Torgerson, 1971.

³⁶ Soriano, 2019.

³⁷ Benjamin Oreskes, “City plans to close Echo Park Lake and clear homeless encampment,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2021.

mortality since 2015, despite only a 50% increase in houselessness during the same time span. Of those 1,383 unhoused deaths in 2020, only 315 are reported to have been caused by underlying health issues.⁴⁶ Just 4% died of COVID-19.⁴⁷ Despite the city's sunny reputation for mild and warm weather, significant unsheltered exposure to the weather has led to more people experiencing houselessness dying of hypothermia in Los Angeles than in San Francisco and New York City combined.⁴⁸ The steadily increasing deadliness of houselessness in Los Angeles has become a rallying cry for housing and houseless advocates who argue that the lack of affordable housing and quality transitional shelter has become little short of a death sentence for Los Angeles' unhoused. "It is a complete failure of leadership.... None of these people needed to die. The reason this is happening is because there's not proper housing," said organizer Adam Rice with the Los Angeles Community Action Network in an interview for *The Guardian*.⁴⁹

LAHSA, Emergency Shelter, and Project Roomkey

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), a joint power-authority between the City and the County of Los Angeles, is the lead civic agency coordinating shelter housing and homeless services throughout the county of Los Angeles in the Los Angeles Continuum of Care. LAHSA describes its mission as "to drive the collaborative strategic vision to create solutions for the crisis of homelessness grounded in compassion, equity, and inclusion," but has received

⁴⁶ Center for Health Impact Evaluation, "Recent Trends in Mortality Rates and Causes of Death Among People Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles County," Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, January 2021.

⁴⁷ Center for Health Impact Evaluation, 2021.

⁴⁸ Lexis-Olivier Ray, "In Sunny Los Angeles, More Homeless People Die From the Cold than in SF and NYC Combined," *L.A. Taco*, January 19, 2021.

⁴⁹ Sam Levin, "More than 1,000 homeless people died in Los Angeles county last year," *The Guardian*, October 30, 2019.

individual space in a congregate setting.⁵⁴ Between the increased risk of contracting COVID-19 at congregate shelters, extremely limited bed availability, and resistance to offers of congregate shelter, there was, and continues to be, an immediate need for non-congregate and non-carceral housing to meet the needs of the city's houseless population.

Project Roomkey was launched by California Governor Gavin Newsom in April 2020 with the purported aim to mitigate the aforementioned health risk of congregate emergency shelter during a pandemic with the provision of hotel and motel rooms for people experiencing homelessness.⁵⁵ The program was to be funded first by the state of California before being reimbursed from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and managed on the local/regional level. As the region's homeless services authority, LAHSA was responsible for the program's implementation in Los Angeles County, stating: "To combat the spread of COVID-19 and address the needs of the most vulnerable individuals in the community, local leaders created a hotel/motel program, entitled Project Roomkey to provide temporary housing for asymptomatic people experiencing homelessness (PEH) who are most at-risk of contracting COVID-19. High-risk individuals are those 65+ or who have certain underlying health conditions."⁵⁶ By all accounts, Project Roomkey was foremostly a public health project to place particularly vulnerable members of the unhoused population into a medically protective environment, rather than a transitional housing project.

⁵⁴ Rebecca Cohen, Will Yetvin, Jill Khadduri, *Understanding Encampments of People Experiencing Homelessness and Community Responses*, US Department of Housing and Urban Development: Office of Policy Development and Research, January 7, 2019.

⁵⁵ Anna Spencer and Kathy Moses, *Snapshot*, Center for Health Care Strategies, April 2020.

-19 Innovation

⁵⁶ Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, *Project Roomkey*, lahsa.org, April 2020.

people into permanent housing was further undermined by its own lackluster housing outcomes. Despite the city and county's aim to place 15,000 people into Project Roomkey, fewer than 9,000 participants had actually been placed as of July 2021 when the program first began phasing out before being ultimately extended until June 2022.⁶⁰ According to the same LAHSA data set, 73% of the program's participants went into other temporary shelter, had returned to unsheltered homelessness, had since passed away, were institutionalized, incarcerated, or entirely unaccounted for after having exited Project Roomkey.

Literature Review

This literature review presents the major existing theoretical and methodological frameworks analyzing urban displacement and spatial injustice in Los Angeles. Engaging with how previous scholars have conceptualized urbanism, colonialism, and policing—in the context of Los Angeles as a postmodern, global city—will provide the early foundations for this research and contribute to understanding how local policy and politics facilitated the removal of unhoused people from Echo Park Lake. Through the framework of militarism, I intend to weave together multiple theoretical frameworks to place Los Angeles' colonial, urban, and carceral histories in the same continuum of militarist violence that utilizes state weaponry, footmen, and powers to subjugate a perceivably violent populous—in this case study, the unhoused community, and their supporters at Echo Park Lake. After a review of scholarship on policing, homelessness, and urbanization as it relates to militarized displacement and dispossession, a final framing of how public space and public parks have been identified as significant, contested geographies for the city's unhoused population will set up this paper's analysis of Echo Park Lake as a flashpoint for Los Angeles' struggle with poverty and militarized violence, contextualizing why homeless

⁶⁰ Anna Scott, "The end of Project Roomkey leaves some unhoused people in limbo," *KCRW*, July 26, 2021.

activists and houseless justice organizers have decried the city's

white boosters and developers who sought to position the city as the nation's "white spot." The banishment of racialized workers in the settler colony is an early example of later local policies in Los Angeles which effectively do the same, identifying non-white or poor residents as inherently unworthy and incapable of serving visible roles in the city.

Lytle Hernández identified the racialized fantasy or colonial imaginary of whiteness as emblematic of both Los Angeles and the United States as a whole as settler colonial projects, writing "Settler cultures, institutions, and politics simultaneously trend toward excluding racialized workers from full inclusion in the body politics, corralling their participation in community life...deporting, hiding, or criminalizing them or otherwise revoking the right of racialized outsiders to be within the invaded territory."⁶⁷ Avila argued similarly, writing that though the city's contemporary existence as a "cultural kaleidoscope of global proportions" exists demonstrably in contradiction to the racial fantasy of Los Angeles as a "white spot"—as the city is now predominantly non-white demographically—the persisting spatial injustice and segregation of the region fulfills fantasies of whiteness which have awarded white Angeleno communities with wealth, housing, investment, and space at the disadvantage of the city's poor and BIPOC populations well into the 21st century.⁶⁸ Together, Avila and Lytle Hernández represent a canon of academics grounding contemporary analyses of urban spatial injustice and militarized displacement in their historic origins in land dispossession and racial exclusion. Their analysis of colonialism's past and present bears weight on potential policy recommendations arguing that given that the foundations of contemporary discriminatory public policy and planning are deeply embedded in systems of colonialism and racial capitalism, any possible solutions should speak to

⁶⁷ Lytle Hernández, pg. 8.

privacy and surveillance, suburban safety, and urban violence, are to the sociospatial arrangement of the city.

Dear and Flusty's postmodern move represents an ideological and theoretical shift for urban scholars in the late 20th century, with more academics embracing nonconventional schools of urbanism like the Los Angeles School that identify the disorganized, polarized urban form of

eager to cater to these monied demands.⁷⁸ In his both spatial and political historic analysis of Los Angeles as a “hostile” city, Davis identifies the militarist character of governance and development therein. As the state utilizes its own law enforcement agencies for its militarist agenda of armed response, it likewise influences a culture of private security neighborhoods for those who can afford it and social vulnerability and police harassment for those who cannot.

Militarism and Policing

Framework synthesizing colonialism, imperialism, and hostile urbanism into a continuum of American militarism has been adopted by critical scholars of policing and criminalization who look at the policing and incarceration of Black and Brown bodies as American military violence turned inwards. Scholars of militarism and policing argue that foreign policy both starts and ends at home, fulfilling a cycle of violence that utilizes military tactics, ideologies, and strategies to subjugate marginalized peoples who don’t serve the financial or political interests of the state. “Although they may take a different form upon return, violent or repressive policies deployed

police violence and imperial violence have been backed by both quantitative and qualitative methods.⁸⁰

The study of militarism and policing goes beyond an analysis of militarization as merely the act of police adopting military tactics and becoming more heavily weaponized but moves towards a synthesis of the concepts that understands urban policing as being representative of the same strategies and ideology of imperial militarism. In a 2007 article on policing: *Militarization and Policing Its Relevance to 21st Century Police*, author Peter Kraska breaks down the false

demonstrating its existence broadly. With the agreed universality of militarization within policing, many scholars have dropped the adjective militarization and integrated an understanding of militarism and militarization into policing broadly as interlocking and symmetrical matrixes of power.

Community and community-aligned researchers have led this shift towards aligning policing and militarism studies with analyses of policing seeing modern policing as inherently militarized and centering the personhoods of victims of urban police violence

militarism and racialized policing are supported by a city hall that routinely introduces militarist measures, ordinances, and programs which utilize the language of “law and order” to combat perceived future violence with actualized militarized state violence.⁸⁷

The Criminalization of Houselessness

Contemporary literature on the criminalization of houselessness is nearly unanimous in its agreement that criminalization is an ineffective, inequitable, and inhumane tactic in mitigating houselessness, yet legislation criminalizing acts nearly or completely unavoidable by unhoused people has only continued to increase nationally and in Los Angeles. The act of criminalization is at the crux of the relationship between not just carceral systems and houselessness, but of militarism and houselessness, as it provides a moud5(a)7(j7(ou)(j)7(us)-6(prof)-6(hi)7(z)7(a)-13(t)7(i)7)7()7(d

area...The bigger the park, the better. Astoria Park is no good, it's not that big and they patrol it," wrote one unhoused memoirist Cadillac Man who wrote of his experiences living outside in New York City.⁹⁶ This inclusion of memoirs that highlight the three overarching themes of living in urban park space while unhoused—privacy, survival, and solace—provides a glimpse into the value of a methodological and epistemological approach that centers personal narrative as knowledge.

There is limited research documenting the specific intersection between militarized policing, public parks, and houselessness; with much research on houselessness and public parks largely looking at the physicality of living in green space, research on militarized policing and public parks focusing on armed response in public space broadly, and research on militarized policing and houselessness together taking a less site-specific or spatial approach.^{97 98} In the absence of research generally studying the militarized policing of unhoused people in public parks, a specific case study of Berkeley's People's Park offers particular insight by comparing phenomena of militarized displacement of unhoused populations from public parks. Owned by the University of California since its 1967 acquisition via eminent domain, the parcel known as "People's Park" has long been a site of renewed protest and activism as students and local organizers have staved off development of the space predominantly occupied by houseless people for decades. Like at Echo Park Lake, the residents and supporters of the People's Park unhoused community sought to create a "haven for persons evicted by dominant society."⁹⁹ In 1969, when

⁹⁶ Speer and Goldfischer, 2019.

⁹⁷ Setha Low and Neil Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, New York: Routledge, 2006.

⁹⁸ Forrest Stuart, *On the Streets, Under Arrest: Policing Homelessness in the 21st Century*, *Sociology Compass*, Vol 9, Issue 11, 2015.

⁹⁹ Don Mitchell, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 85, No.1, 1995.

the university sought to transform People's Park into volleyball courts, activists and residents who refused to leave the park were met with a police response that consisted of wooden and putty bullets, physical beatings of activists, and other violent crowd control measures. People's Park activists ultimately won and maintained control of the park, marking it as "an important symbol of political power" for these supporters of public space.¹⁰⁰ Invertedly, the displacement of the unhoused community at Echo Park Lake has been seen as a political blow to the housing justice movement in Los Angeles that were unable to retain control over the park in the face of a militarized police response.

The aforementioned colonial, urban, and police studies of Los Angeles can be synthesized together through militarism, which has provided the ideology and means for cities to banish, incarcerate, and brutalize populations it identifies to be undesirable, dangerous, and therefore deserving of violence—from Los Angeles' original genocide of Indigenous Tongvaar peoples to today's displacement of unhoused and low income BIPOC populations. The militarist theoretical framework situates the eviction of the Echo Park Lake tent community into a continuum of spatial injustice, hostile urbanization, and policing, disagreeing with the *Los Angeles Times* that it was a "flashpoint in L.A.'s homelessness crisis" and suggests that the displacement is more accurately understood as another chapter of the city's history of colonial urbanism. In L.A.'s militarist urban geography, Echo Park Lake's public park space represents a battlefield between the city's political interests and those banished to the urban hinterlands.

Methodology

Case Study Research Design

¹⁰⁰ Mitchell, *The End of Public Space?* 1995.

To address the primary research question—What are the structural, policy, and legal factors that facilitated the March 2021 displacement of the Echo Park Lake tent community?—I employed an explanatory case study research design that utilized the specific context of the displacement of Echo Park Lake’s tent community to explore the militarist mechanisms behind the larger phenomenon of displacement and dispossession from urban public space. This research design recognized that though the Echo Park Lake displacement is neither a perfectly interchangeable example with other sweeps from public space, nor an incomparably unique one, it was an example altogether worth analyzing for its embodiment of what housing organizers and people experiencing houselessness fear most from a sweep—violent removal, police brutality, political loss, and the potential construction of a new blueprint for displacement in Los Angeles.¹⁰¹ Echo Park Lake as a microcosm of militarized displacement in Los Angeles is doubly relevant in a city which itself can be described as a historic microcosm of police militarism and displacement nationally, if not internationally.

Interviews

Within this case study research design, my primary research method was qualitative semi-structured interviews to capture varied perspectives on the causes and mechanisms of the Echo Park Lake displacement, as well as to capture the phenomenology of militarized displacement as not only a policy, legal, or political act but as a harrowing physical experience belonging to a larger canon of state seizure and police violence. It is, of course, critical to have quantitative data representative of the scale and urgency of houselessness and displacement, but the dimension of personal storytelling and oral history added by qualitative interview most closely captured the multifaceted and fundamentally embodied experience of the Echo Park Lake displacement. I

¹⁰¹ GoFundMe, “Echo Park Rise Up,” 2020.

conducted ten interviews with subjects selected for their personal experience, organizing, or scholarship with the Echo Park Lake community: three housing justice organizers who protested the displacement, three researchers of displacement and houselessness, three unhoused activists and former residents of Echo Park Lake, and one Echo Park neighborhood councilmember.

maintaining, or placing personal property in the public-right-of-way,” and legal analysis on one particular decision, *Martin v. Boise* by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, a decision

The Displacement as a Military Invasion

A predominant theme that emerged in all ten interviews was the nature of the militarized displacement, both as experienced by organizers and residents of the park, and as viewed from the outside by researchers and neighbors who watched it unfold on social media. Interviewees used language such as “violent,” “terrifying,” “chaotic,” and “disturbing,” to express the physical and emotional experience of being on the ground at the displacement and facing off with deployed police officers. On the first night of the displacement, housing and racial justice organizer Albert Corado, who is running for Los Angeles City Council in District 13, the council district in which Echo Park Lake is situated, described the police presence as a military occupation: “It was what I imagined an occupied territory would look like. There were cops in riot gear everywhere, covering every block, laughing at us as we were trying to hold down a line.” Corado’s running on a campaign of police abolition, working to defund and abolish the Los Angeles Police Department after two LAPD officers opened fire into a crowded Trader Joe’s in Silverlake, killing his younger sister Melyda Corado who was store manager.¹⁰⁴ “It was hard not to feel like we were physically losing a battle to the police,” said Corado.

Steven Chun, a housing justice organizer with Jtown Action and Solidarity, recounted his own experience as a demonstrator at the second night of protests at Echo Park Lake: “I keep coming back to the idea of how chaotic it was, just pure chaos, the most terrifying thing ever.” On that night of protest, Chun vividly remembers fear sinking in as he watched officers seemingly target smaller women in the crowd for arrest. He pushed himself to the front of the skirmish line where protestors were being pushed back by police officers outfitted in riot gear in an attempt to deescalate, and in doing so was beaten repeatedly by a police officer with a baton so severely that

¹⁰⁴ Liam Fitzpatrick, “‘If We Don’t Do Anything, They’ll Keep Killing People,’” *Knock-LA*, July 16, 2020.

he received a contusion which lasted several months. Chun was not alone in his experience with police brutality at the Echo Park Lake protests, with at least two other known incidents: one in which protestor Isaac Scher received a “nightstick fracture,” a nickname many doctors use to describe an injury inflicted on someone with their forearm raised as one would to block a blow from a baton or “nightstick,” and another in which Echo Park resident Becca Standt sustained severe head injuries after LAPD officers charged an alley Standt was standing in, knocking Standt to the ground repeatedly.^{105 106} In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Scher stated that he was protesting in support of the encampment’s unhoused residents when he sustained the fracture and in opposition to the “stigmatization of poverty in a neighborhood that is increasingly gentrifying.”

all journalist arrests or detainments in the US in 2021 came from that single incident.¹⁰⁸ “When I think back to it, that night, I think we were only there for a couple hours, but it felt like forever,” spoke Chun. The expression of feelings of chaos, terror, and loss that was repeated by a number of interviewees and demonstrators, was overwhelmingly described as resulting from the massive police presence at the lake and the exertion of militaristic crowd control tactics ranging from kettling, to arrest, to outright brutalization. Housing justice organizers and unhoused activists shared that while it was not unique for a displacement to utilize police as some sweeps are monitored by a member of law enforcement, the particular role that the militarized police presence at Echo Park Lake played made it less comparable to smaller encampment sweeps, and more comparable to police resistance faced by protestors with the Black Lives Matter movement in Los Angeles’ Fairfax District in May 2020.¹⁰⁹

Strategic Silence and Outreach Failures

Central to the frustration experienced by organizers and lake residents surrounding the displacement was what they felt was deliberate and strategic deception from the local councilmember’s office to stifle organized opposition to encampment displacement; a strategy that cameam

coming. Outreach workers from the Los Angeles Housing Services Authority had begun visiting the camp, offering some residents placement in hotel rooms through Project Roomkey. The news that the encampment would be swept on March 25th was eventually made public via a confidential whistleblower who reportedly worked for the city.

Petering described the “...bizarre feeling of knowing something was going to happen without knowing when or how” to me, stating “Of all things, the way it went down, and the amount of deception involved, was just wrong.” Petering recounted that on the day of the displacement, organizers were scrambling to find temporary shelter placement in hotels for lake residents who had no viable alternatives for housing than at Echo Park Lake and no offers for placement within Project Roomkey. Residents recounted in interviews feeling torn between packing up all of their belongings and being determined to stay put in the park and resist displacement in their newfound home. On the strategic silence and misinformation from the councilmember’s office, Petering said:

It didn’t have to happen that way. Lying to us, lying to the press, putting up a fence in the middle of the night, these things are shady and are not the way these things should happen. It was very telling of Mitch’s priority to sweep the encampment, not house people. It was so obvious to me the reason he was doing this.

Now on the campaign trail for re-election, Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell has been championing his clearing of the park. In an emailed response to my request to speak to a member of the councilmember’s office on the displacement, Communications Director Dan Halden wrote: “Respectfully, what occurred in 2021 at Echo Park Lake was not a “displacement,” but rather a *placement* of nearly 200 people—who had been living in dangerous, inhumane conditions in the park—into safe, secure, managed, transitional housing. The transitional housing placements were the result of substantial outreach efforts that took place over a period of three months.”¹¹⁰ These

¹¹⁰ Mitch O’Farrell’s office’s full response to my inquiry can be found in the appendix of this paper.

statements were denounced by organizers, lake residents, and researchers I spoke to who described the relocation of residents into interim or permanent housing by the council office as entirely unsuccessful with next to no residents having been successfully placed in longer term housing. LAHSA's most recent data on housing outcomes since the encampment's sweep reports that of all 183 residents displaced from the park, 174 were in interim housing, five were unaccounted for, and only four had been placed in permanent housing as of October 2021.¹¹¹ An internal estimate by Streetwatch LA organizer Jed Parriott was that approximately 63 residents had accepted housing services from the city at the time of the displacement.¹¹²

Though the councilmember's office continues to celebrate the clearing of the Echo Park Lake tent community and its declared extensive efforts to place former residents into transitional housing, former residents of Echo Park Lake emphasized in their interviews that not every resident received a shelter offer and that those that were offered, were often done so under the implicit or explicit threat of being reported as service resistant if not and therefore subject to citation, arrest, or even institutionalization. "The city expects people to take anything and be grateful for it, and if we don't take it, we're criminals," said Will Sens, a former resident of Echo Park Lake currently staying in a Project Roomkey shelter. The purported offer of housing, regardless of if it is actually made (or if the offer in question is actually housing) provides the legal justification for the city to clear an encampment in compliance with LAMC 41.18. Sens described the outreach workers with LAHSA and contractor Urban Alchemy who were visiting the community leading up to the displacement as "car salesmen for shitty hotel rooms who will tell you anything to get you to leave

¹¹¹ Sam Levin, "LA clears another park encampment in battle over worsening housing crisis," *The Guardian*, October 14, 2021.

¹¹² Jamie Loftus, "Former Echo Park Lake Residents, Internal LAHSA Communications Contradict Housing Placement Claims," *Knock-LA*, April 1, 2021.

Angeles has continued to expand its regime of racial banishment. It is about displacement and dispossession...it's a sort of state organized violence against unhoused communities and working class communities of color more generally," spoke Roy.

Dr. Gary Blasi, Professor of Law Emeritus at UCLA Law echoed a similar sentiment to Roy from his perspective as a legal scholar, describing the dubious legality of some encampment displacements in Los Angeles as indicative of how legality is a "relatively trivial consideration" for decision-makers in the city. "The law is always just another way of playing politics. The displacement was completely political. The political will to displace comes first, the law comes after." These statements from researchers embody the sort of chicken-and-the-egg debate surrounding displacement governance, wherein some view the criminalization of houselessness, and policy restrictions of public space—be it noise abatement, anti-sit-lie ordinances, etc.—as the documents providing impetus for displacement. Scholars like Roy and Blasi however, argue that when those policies do not exist, policymakers create them. When laws or legal decisions discourage criminalizing behavior, the city takes on the legal and financial risk by opposing them or failing to abide by them. The foundational mechanism

“cornerstone of the City’s failed approach to homelessness,” citing a costly history of litigation with the ordinance for its unconstitutionality across iterations.¹¹⁶

Figure 1: 41.18 Anti-Homeless Zones Map in the Echo Park Lake area, map courtesy of the Kenneth Mejia for LA City Controller campaign. Red indicates zones designated as a specific area for enforcement.

The militarized enforcement of Echo Park Lake’s displacement coupled with widespread establishment and enforcement of 41.18 zones and pre-existing criminalization policies, has given further credence to the perception that public space is somewhat of a myth in Los Angeles. A number of interviewees I spoke to suggested that it is no longer a question of preserving public space for the general public, but about creating it, as no public space currently exists in Los Angeles. Theo Henderson, founder of the We the Unhoused podcast and Activist-in-Residence at the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy, spoke to me on his experiences living

houseless at Echo Park Lake, and in public space in Los Angeles, for several years. “There is no public space in Los Angeles. It is so very regulated that you are not allowed to stay in public space without the threat of violence from police if you are unhoused, or even if you support the unhoused,” said Henderson. Another interviewee Steven Chun shared a similar sentiment, saying: “Something we’re seeing across the city is this segregation of public space, all around the city places are being fenced off, supposedly for the public, but it’s really for the white public.” Roy likewise agreed, stating “Whatever seems to be ‘public space’ isn’t quite that, with the constant

The fact of the matter is most people in Los Angeles don't want to walk past human beings who are forced to sleep outside. It's a terrible human rights travesty on our streets and NIMBYs who support criminalization offer an easy answer to concerned people. It's not a real idea, and it's not rooted in the reality that there's not enough shelter for unhoused people in Los Angeles, but it is an easy solution.

Policy Shift and Organizing Challenges

While housing justice organizers and activists have been pushing leftward for transformative housing measures to end houselessness such as rent cancellation, vacant property and hotel seizure, and social housing, the Overton window (the politically acceptable range of policy ideas and solutions in the mainstream population) for policy responses to houselessness has been seemingly moving to the right in alignment with NIMBY organizing and advocacy. When asked if they believed the city was moving towards or away from policies, practices, and ideologies that led up to the displacement at Echo Park Lake, all ten interviewees stated that they believed the city has moved towards such policies, hastening or escalating what interviewees perceived as the new status quo approach for housing. Though the "Housing First" model which identified housing as the primary and imminent solution for unhoused populations with a variety of needs had grown in popularity since the mid 2010s, officials have begun pivoting towards a more criminalization-focused approach.¹¹⁸ This "safe sidewalks," pro-criminalization approach is best embodied by 15th District Los Angeles City Councilmember and mayoral candidate Joe Buscaino, who has laid bare his commitment to physically removing unhoused people from public view with police force, as well as his support for a significant expansion of the police force to meet that

¹¹⁸ Emily Tumpson Molina, *Housing America: Issues and Debates*, Oxfordshire, United Kingdom: Taylor and Francis, 2017.

enforcement need.¹¹⁹ “The dominant view, the public opinion of people with political power, has certainly shifted far to the right on homelessness,” spoke Blasi.

While sharing what they believed to be the necessary solutions for preventing displacement from happening again, all organizers expressed doubt for if the necessary circumstances for such

Militarism is the overarching through line that ties together the multifaceted nature of the displacement. Silence from the council office on when a sweep would occur or what it would look like, and the crafting of a discursive narrative that frames the Echo Park Lake tent community as a hub of violence and danger despite no evidence to prove such, laid strategic militarist groundwork for eviction. The violence of the militarized police invasion and the continued brutalization of former residents of the park represented the demonstrated the tactical militarism of the Los Angeles Police Department and the extent to which the city was determined to clear the park. The displacement of the Echo Park Lake tent community has captured in a single incident how the City of Los Angeles is adopting militarist tactics and ideologies to justify their reestablished regime of armed banishment, their war on the poor.

Policy Recommendations

The results of this research project have found that the overarching and mechanisms for the displacement were not any particular policy or law, or even policy or legal framework, but rather pervasive political and structural causes in a city guided by militarist ideology and practices. The militarized displacement of Echo Park Lake's tent community is inextricably intertwined with the only increasing houselessness crisis in Los Angeles, housing unaffordability and unavailability, the political structure of the City of Los Angeles that empowers councilmembers to respond only to the desires of their most influential NIMBY constituents, and a heavily funded, politically powerful, and highly militarized, local police state. Larger contexts of colonialism, spatial injustice, and racial capitalism all inform the origins and persistence of the aforementioned issues of housing, policing, and displacement in Los Angeles, and a complete resolution of such is predicated on an approach not only informed of these systems, but critical of the continued nature of their existence through abolitionist and a

possession orders, sweeps of unhoused people from public space are generally enforced by Los Angeles police officers accompanying city sanitation employees. Outside of sweeps carried out pursuant to 41.18 and related measures, armed police officers frequently interact with unhoused communities when housed residents unhappy with the residence of their unhoused neighbors call the police on them for sidewalk obstruction, mental health crises, and simply existing in shared space. A number of these interactions ultimately escalate, and in 2019 the LAPD reported 801 use of force incidents against people experiencing houselessness, representing 1/3rd of all use of force incidents in that year.¹²¹ The police disproportionately target and arrest unhoused populations, endanger unhoused communities, and obstruct efforts to meaningfully end houselessness through connection to resources, services, and housing. Policing disproportionately targets Black and

Defunding the police is therefore an effective mechanism to move towards demilitarization and also a locally popular one for moving towards reinvesting in other public goods and social services. Though the essential solution to the white supremacy and classism, that is not only pervasive but foundational to policing, is police abolition, defunding poses an actionable policy mechanism to move towards that goal.

owned housing that services people from all backgrounds and demographics.¹²⁹ A number of policy mechanisms can be used to create social housing; from eminent domain, to construction and development, to the purchase of existing buildings. The comprehensive investment in all three policies of social housing creation could radically shift the state of housing provision for unhoused people from one of “shelter” to one of housing, affirm the human right to housing for all, and even lead to the eventual decommodification of housing by transforming housing into a public good. Though the cost of significant investment into the creation of state-owned housing may be the most significant challenge faced while advocating for social housing, utilizing existing funding streams and reallocated funding from the law enforcement budget provide clear financial pathways. The current model utilized by the city that combines criminalization and an average cost of \$596,846 per carceral housing unit constructed is ineffectively expensive, and the cost of social housing’s investment should not prevent the city from pursuing such a solution.¹³⁰

Preserve and Create Public Space

At the heart of sweeps and the Echo Park Lake displacement is a contestation for public space, namely, a space free of policing, surveillance, and harassment that can be interacted with by any member of the public at any time. The usage of public space as incidental refuge for unsheltered people with no other place to go is as an appropriate use of public space as a picnic, a jog, or a brief sit. The antagonism is specifically levied at the mere presence of poor people in public space, a similar antagonism levied to Brown and Black people existing in public space. Until the city can sufficiently house all of its residents, public space likely will continue to exist as refuge for those with no other place to reside providing an impetus for both the preservation of

¹²⁹ Jenna Chandler, “Will LA start building public housing again?” *Curbed LA*, February 12, 2020.

¹³⁰ Linus Chua, “LA is Paying \$600,000 Apiece for Units to House Homeless People,” New York City: *Bloomberg*, February 23, 2022.

existing public space and creation of new public spaces. Alongside removing policies that criminalize and restrict the usage of public space, the city should adopt planning practices and policies that seek to turn the tide on the privatization of public lands, spaces, and commons and create possible sites for the creation of new public spaces already hosting public movement. Such a policy would require a political shift away from the private redevelopment of urban space particularly in downtown areas and financialization of land use generally, but would represent a step towards what David Harvey described as “the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves...one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights,” a freedom most possible in space where the public may freely interact without state or corporate intervention.¹³¹

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displacement, the displacement was ultimately not a function of any particular policies but of deeply structural polyc

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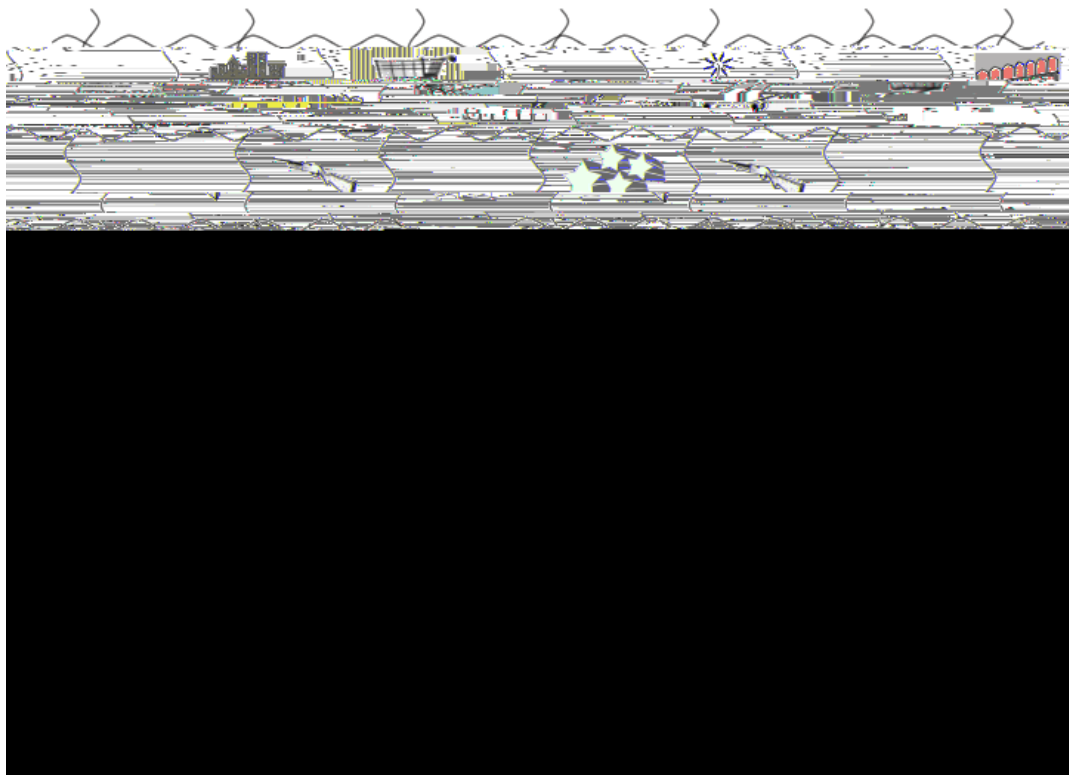
Appendices

Appendix A: List of Interviewees

Appendix C:



Appendix D: The Keno Capitalism Model of Postmodern Urban Structure



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