# Legacies of the Fast Lanes: Los Angeles Freeway Construction and Marginalized Communities, 1921-1999

*Anthony Posada*

Los Angeles, the city of the future. It is hard to imagine Los Angeles without envisioning traffic jams and freeway interchanges intertwining. This city has become synonymous with the automobile; everybody knows that nobody walks in LA.[1] What many do not know, however, is how Los Angeles became the notorious "City of Angels," promising economic prosperity after World War II. Booming with economic growth and urban expansion, Los Angeles became America's second-largest city overnight. New industries and opportunities drove thousands of migrants to the thriving city, both from within and outside the nation's borders. Los Angeles was one of the first urban centers to develop economically in the twentieth century, making the urban expansion different from other American cities and arguably the world. With the rise of the automobile as a mass commodity, Los Angeles developed a car-based infrastructure. While many Angelenos benefited from the growing freeway network, the effects of massive highway construction systems across the city were less favorable for others.

This article investigates who benefitted from building the city's enormous freeway infrastructure, and who did not. Between 1921, when Congress passed the Federal Highway Act, and the completion of the 105 Freeway in 1993, the damaging effects and immediate aftermaths of freeways affected surrounding communities negatively, tearing apart and dividing established neighborhoods. The freeway construction frenzy across Los Angeles benefited primarily White middle-class Angelenos, who utilized the thoroughfares in their pursuit of increasing wealth, and for convenience. The push for freeway infrastructure disproportionately harmed Los Angeles's marginalized minority communities, altering their immediate geography permanently and causing further disparities in their economic status. Nonetheless, LA's marginalized communities counteracted the inequalities caused by freeways, crafting unique identities in the face of division and discrimination.

[1] "Nobody Walks in LA," song lyrics by Missing Persons, 1982.

This project contributes to the dense historiography of freeway construction and the motives for making Los Angeles such a car-centered space. Historians have studied timelines and campaigns for freeway construction in several cities across the nation, laying the groundwork for the national emphasis on constructing intra-state roads. The Federal Highway Act of 1921 was the first congressional legislation to encourage the establishment of a highway system to connect the nation. While no distinct historical arguments were made, it is clear to see the primary foundational motives for freeway construction within this timeline. The inclusion of "The Automobile Club of Southern California publishes its Traffic Survey, proposing a regional grid of expressways and a joint-use scheme in which motorways in the city are seen as elements of urban architecture" into the book's timeline makes a clear statement that perhaps the incentive for building freeways was commercial, benefiting those who will benefit and profit off their construction.[2] Moreover, scholarship by Eric Avila asserts that freeway construction dominated Los Angeles as a result of White visions of modernity and economic prosperity. Avila suggests that freeway construction efforts in Los Angeles were crafted by a vision of modernism by White Angelenos, seeking freeways to expand economic opportunities, while inhibiting ethnic minorities' equal access to this economic growth. Freeway construction was a motive for White Angelenos to accelerate suburbanization away from the urban centers, stating "the intended consequence of homeowners, realtors, developers, and government officials who sought to preserve Southern California's legacy of building separate and unequal communities."[3]

The argument essentially posits that the White visions of economic prosperity driving freeway construction primarily benefited White middle to upper-class communities, while neglecting the working-class and marginalized minority communities.

Similarly, other scholars expand on the notion that freeway construction ran rampant across Los Angeles' marginalized

[2] Joseph F. Dimento, Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013) 8.

[3] Eric Avila, "Folklore of the Freeway: Space, Culture, and Identity in Postwar Los Angeles," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 23, no.1 (October 1998): 13-31.

communities, including racially motivated reasonings. Gilbert Estrada accounts for heavy freeway construction through a lack of political representation among Los Angeles' Hispanic communities.[4] Agreeing with Estrada's findings, Jovanni Perez provides the additional argument that freeways were largely constructed in working-class minority communities out of spiteful racial prejudice by White Angelenos. Freeways were consistently constructed across Black and Hispanic Angeleno neighborhoods to prevent the negative effects of construction and highway pollution for White communities. Scholars also highlight that White Angelenos justified divisive freeway construction through minority communities by claiming they would assist in issues related to crime and poverty.[5] While this historiography provides valuable narratives and motives for why freeway construction took hold, they tend to solely focus on the social issues that surround freeway infrastructure. This article seeks to incorporate economic and social motives for freeway construction and includes a critical analysis of the fight between those who benefitted and those who did not. The struggle to construct freeways in Los Angeles has always resulted in some sort of conflict when interests clashed.

This article relies on newspapers, legislation, public records from the East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU), and LA street artwork. News articles are especially useful in providing different perspectives for why freeway construction was or was not beneficial to any given community. Public records from TELACU offer a unique overview of the many long-term negative effects of freeway construction, while legislation provides early attitudes for why urban planners and lawmakers thought it necessary to transform Los Angeles' geography with freeways.

This article briefly explains the historical context for freeway construction on the national scale. Next, it contrasts the benefits of freeway construction for some communities with the detriments for others. This article also outlines the efforts of resistance to oppressive freeway infrastructure in marginalized communities.

---

[4] Gilbert Estrada, "If You Build It, They Will Move: The Los Angeles Freeway System and the Displacement of Mexican East Los Angeles," *Southern California Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 287-315.

[5] Jovanni Perez, "The Los Angeles Freeway and the History of Community Displacement," *The Toro Historical Review* 3, no. 1 (2017).

The rise of the automobile on the national scale increased the push for freeway construction in Los Angeles. As vehicles rose to prominence with the notable introduction of the Ford Model T in 1908, car ownership increased tenfold in U.S. cities, sparking a push for modernized city infrastructures with increased commercial connections. In the 1930s and '40s federal funding for freeway construction was implemented by a series of federal highway acts. The onslaught of national freeway construction projects was strongly influenced by rural and suburban precedents, inspired by "visions of modernization" meant to only benefit White upper-class Americans in their search for increased economic opportunity.[6]

Joseph Dimento and Cliff Ellis argue that those capable of initializing these projects such as corporate groups and politicians "viewed urban freeways from different angles and tried to shift policy to match their priorities."[7] In other words, the emphasis placed on building freeway infrastructure during the first half of the twentieth century was a priority for the elite, hoping to modernize American cities by expanding mobility and economic opportunity. There were five principal reasons for political actors and corporations to believe that freeway infrastructure was essential.

First, freeways were viewed as tools for land use planning and urban redevelopment for the "comprehensive modernization" of American cities. Second, freeways were considered large-scale architectural objects impacting the image of a city. Third, freeways were considered economic catalysts that facilitated access and improved logistical efficiency. Furthermore, freeway development would be a tool of social policy, influencing the spatial distribution of urban residents by race and class. Finally, freeways would be utilized for national defense, providing transportation routes for the movement of soldiers and supplies in case of war.[8] The motives for constructing freeways on a national scale were quite simple, revealing that benefits were only to increase wealth for the economic and political elite.

The push for freeway construction by engineers, politicians, and corporate owners notably left out vast demographics

[6] Dimento, Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways,* 8.
[7] Dimento, Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways,* 8.
[8] Joseph F. Dimento, Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways,* 9.

of people. The immediate drawbacks of freeway infrastructure to less fortunate Americans were not considered in the years following World War II when freeway infrastructure was being advocated for at the federal level. Perhaps the prejudiced mindsets of elite Americans blinded them from caring about the negative effects for largely ethnic minorities. In fact, freeway construction engineers "shied away from aesthetics and social complexities of urban design, and focused on getting things done."[9] Strong public needs and support along with the alleged importance of freeway construction for economic efficiency and modernized mobility, placed this agenda above those who might not have benefitted from these new freeway systems. It is safe to say the voices of those disadvantaged by freeway construction were drowned out or not even thought about in the grand scheme of modernization and economic expansion.

Widening the scale, an important note must be made: Los Angeles was not always a car-centric city. In fact, prior to freeways, the Pacific Electric Railway connected Los Angeles with nearly 452 miles of Southern California terrain, with lines running northerly and easterly effectively connecting places like Monrovia, Duarte, San Bernardino, Redlands, Riverside, and Covina. Pasadena, Sierra Madre, and Pomona were connected to Whittier, Santa Ana, and Long Beach.[10] The Pacific Electric Railway's extensive network allowed Angelenos to move between regions with relative ease. Owner of Pacific Electric Henry Huntington even stated, "Southern California is a large territory, and the possibilities for railway extension are practically unlimited."[11] At the time, in 1901, Huntington could not predict the rise of freeway and automobile expansion across the region.

Los Angeles became America's model city for freeway construction in the 1930s and 1940s. Following the nation's push for a connected freeway system, Los Angeles took the lead in establishing the first plans for freeway construction. On Decem-

[9] Joseph F. Dimento, Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways,* 6.

[10] "Ten Million Dollars is the Capital Stock Huntington Lines Organize Articles of Incorporation Filed Giving the Company the Right to Build a Network of Interurban Electric Roads," *Los Angeles Herald,* November 13, 1901.

[11] "Ten Million Dollars," *Los Angeles Herald,* 1901.

ber 7, 1939, the City of Los Angeles Transportation Engineering Board released "A Transit Program for the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area." This forty-page plan was drafted by three principal members of the LA Transportation and Engineering Board: Lloyd Aldrich, K. Charles Bean, and John Coffee Hays. The plan consisted of recommended construction plans, engineering and design standards, public operations, financial planning, and many other logistical matters in highway construction.[12] The men on the board and Los Angeles Area District Representatives agreed that freeway, or in this case "parkway" construction, was necessary to improve mobility and relieve traffic on busy Los Angeles roads. Among this blueprint for freeway construction, several proposed parkways were named including Hollywood Parkway, Arroyo Seco Parkway, Santa Monica Parkway, Harbor, and Inglewood Parkways.[13] Figure 1 exhibits one of the various blueprint construction plans. With this plan now in full motion, the first parkway in United States history opened in Los Angeles on December 30, 1940.[14] The Arroyo Seco Parkway, now known as the 110 Freeway, began as a simple raised wooden bicycle path. Now transformed into the nation's first freeway, this commenced the rapid construction of freeways in Los Angeles.

Another point must be raised: the "Transit Program for LA" included plans to integrate rail and rapid transit with the new freeways. Notably, L.A. engineer Lloyd Aldrich advocated for utilizing freeway rights of way for public transit.[15] Although rail transit was included in the project plans, these ideas never came to fruition. This was due to most mass transit systems being privately owned, and it was not seen as a public responsibility deserving federal or state funding. A *New York Times* article discusses the selling off of several Pacific Electric lines, signifying the closure of what was once the most extensive rail transit in Southern California.[16] The year 1940 signifies the beginning of what would later define Los Angeles. With the opening of Arroyo Seco Parkway and

[12] City of Los Angeles Transportation Engineering Board, "A Transit Program for the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area," December 7, 1939.
[13] Los Angeles Transportation Engineering Board, "A Transit Program," 1939.
[14] Colin Ryan, "America's First Freeway: Arroyo Seco Parkway, AKA The 110," *Truck Trend,* (July-August 2018): 78.
[15] Los Angeles Transportation Engineering Board, "A Transit Program," 1930.
[16] "Pacific Electric RY. Sells Local Services," *New York Times,* June 6, 1940.

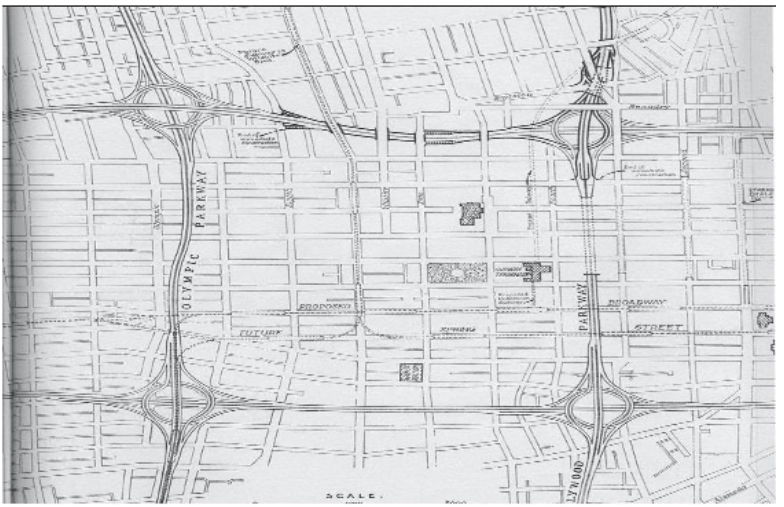


**Figure 1:** CIty of Los Angeles Transportation Engineering Board, "A Transit Program for the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area."

the closure of several Pacific Electric lines, automobile traffic, and freeway construction now started to run rampant across Los Angeles, benefiting only a select few. From this point forward, Los Angeles was fully committed to the freeway and the private automobile. Numerous freeway construction projects from the 1940s onward defined how Angelenos move around today.

During the period, the push for freeway construction was largely motivated by the prospect that freeways had the potential to bring greater economic advances along with commercial successes. Angelenos who supported the freeway emphasized their potential economic gains; while beneficiaries of the now-completed projects saw economic success at the expense of others who were adversely affected by the construction. For example, The Automobile Club of Southern California's 1937 published report was a call to action for the construction of motorways in Los Angeles and displays a corporation's desire for expanded economic profits. The writers of this report cite traffic and congestion issues in LA's heavily used roadways, blaming Pacific Electric street cars for increased congestion, and even including numerous photos and maps exhibiting this influx of traffic issues. The Automobile Club additionally incorporated statistical data on the rise of automobile usage, as well as the inclusion of bar graphs demonstrating an increase in car and pedestrian accidents resulting in casualties.[17]

[17] Engineering Department of the Automobile Club of Southern California,

This survey by the Automobile Club of Southern California was perhaps motivated by financial and commercial gains. The Club's proposal of a grid-like system of expanded highway infrastructure in Los Angeles was based on expanding profits for the company. The utilization of statistical data and graphs reflecting the rise in traffic accidents was framed as a justification for why the club pushed for expanding freeway infrastructure. Perhaps if the Automobile Club saw an opportunity to increase profits from increased freeway construction, this could incentivize more Angelenos to take to the streets in vehicles, creating additional customers for the company. It is also important to note the claim made by the Automobile Club blaming Pacific Electric Street cars for causing increased congestion of Los Angeles roads. The Automobile Club decided to blame Pacific Electric street cars for increased congestion in an attempt to influence Angelenos to purchase vehicles rather than taking streetcar lines, thereby increasing profits.

Interestingly, this was not the only time the Automobile Club urged Southern Californians to expand freeway construction. In fact, in 1986, the company made another bold proposal, claiming the Los Angeles region needed a nearly $20 billion freeway expansion project. Again, the Automobile Club seemed to justify their advocacy to the expanding number of cars on LA's freeways, claiming that without adding more freeway miles to Southern California "freeway travel speeds, for example, will drop from an average 37 miles an hour to 17 miles an hour."[18] The company's primary interests are obvious, profiting off the potential of a city with even more automobile usage. This validates the notion that freeway construction principally benefitted those who sought to increase economic opportunities.

Another key example displaying the notion that freeway construction only benefitted Angelenos who sought to expand economic wealth is seen through the process of suburbanization. The construction of freeways brought new developments to what was previously agricultural land, largely benefiting property owners and developers. Because freeway construction allowed for these developments, affluent individuals seeking expanded economic power were the primary beneficiaries of freeway construction. A 1966 *LA* Times article explains that the recent

---

"Traffic Survey Los Angeles Metropolitan Area Nineteen Hundred Thirty-Seven," February 17, 1938.

[18] Ray Herbert, "Club Urges $20-Billion Expansion of Freeways," *Los Angeles Times,* October 14, 1986.

construction of the San Gabriel, Santa Ana, and Garden Grove freeways allowed for massive development in homes, shopping centers, and industrial projects. The article then highlights a developer, seemingly applauding his 800-home development project.[19] Freeways appeared to benefit those who possessed the capital for suburbanization, as well as Angelenos who made money from development projects. This concept underscores that the Angelenos who benefitted from the construction of freeways largely increased their wealth and prosperity.

While middle-class Angelenos who benefited financially from expanded freeway infrastructure were products of suburbanization, there were also niche economic beneficiaries of this transportation system. Successful business owners were also included in the few Angelenos who benefitted from freeway construction. New owners of shopping centers and suburban expansion gave increased profits to businesses. Insanely, some business owners were able to profit off freeways by establishing businesses directly underneath them. For example, Caltrans (California Department of Transportation) gave opportunities to businesses by leasing parcels of space directly beneath the Santa Monica Freeway, utilizing the concrete roads above as ceilings while constructing walls for each individual space. Various businesses took advantage of these spaces directly underneath the freeways, ranging from warehouses to storage spaces, window blind manufacturing, and phone firms. Nearly 900 parcels were leased underneath 15,130 miles of freeway. The State of California generated approximately 3.5 million dollars in profits annually from these real estate leases, increasing state revenue. Furthermore, lessees such as Bruce Steinbaum, operator of rental storage units beneath the freeways, applauded the practice. Steinbaum said of his leased space, "The access is perfect. People know that if we are beneath a freeway, then we must be near a freeway that they can use."[20] Profiteers like these business owners also account for the few groups of people who benefitted from freeway construction infrastructures, seeking increased economic opportunities and profit from expansion. These business owners exhibit a direct relationship between uti-

[19] Tom Cameron, "Freeways Boost Orange Tract Construction," *Los Angeles Times,* July 17, 1966.

[20] Dave Larsen, "California Life Under the Fast Lane: Many Businesses Find Homes Below," *Los Angeles Times,* April 8, 1982.

lizing freeways to increase revenue.

Other Angelenos who chased the ideology of modernizing Los Angeles through freeways were also primary benefactors of these systems. It is important to note that the vast majority of Angelenos who propelled the vision that freeway infrastructure would convert Los Angeles into a modern utopia happened to be White and upper-middle class. One prime example that illustrates this notion is evident in *California Highways and Public Works* magazines from 1948. In the article "Santa Ana Freeway" the commencement of construction of an extension of the Santa Ana Freeway is reported. The author appears to praise the state for swift action on the ongoing construction, claiming the evacuation of nearly 200 residential buildings was highly efficient for quick progress. The author states, "This highway construction project is remarkably free of adverse traffic conditions and obstructions."[21] The assertion seems to gloss over the evacuation of hundreds of residential buildings as if they were considered unimportant in the grand scheme of this extension project. The author essentially applauded the removal of these housing units to support the vision of modernizing the city of Los Angeles, choosing not to humanize individuals who have been displaced but rather highlight the "improvement" of city infrastructure. This exemplifies that Angelenos who chased this vision of modernization appear to have been the ones who principally benefitted from freeway construction.

Another publication from *California Highway and Public Works* aligns with this push for modernization through freeway construction. In an issue from September of 1948, a list of names of members of the State of California's Department of Public Works was published.[22] While it is apparent that all of these individuals supported the increase in freeway infrastructure, their wealth and status in society would principally benefit them. One important aspect to note of these names is a clear absence of any Spanish-surname individuals, addressing the fact that the primary beneficiaries of freeways were mostly White-Upper Class individuals, not ethnic minorities. In essence, Angelenos who benefited

[21] B.N. Frykland, "Santa Ana Freeway: Another Unit is Well Under Way," *California Highways and Public Works,* September-October, 1948, 43.
[22] "Department of Public Works," *California Highways and Public Works,* (September-October 1948): 51.

from increased freeway construction were primarily wealthy upper-middle-class White individuals. Many of these individuals were closely aligned with businesses and corporations, seeking to expand economic profits for opportunities. Politicians were also in favor of increased freeway expansion out of a vision of modernizing the city, exclusively benefiting themselves and other wealthy Angelenos.

As previously stated, the expansion and construction of freeway infrastructure was primarily meant to benefit White-upper class Angelenos, leaving out marginalized communities of color. The expansion of freeways in mid-twentieth century LA was devastating and tumultuous for LA's underserved working-class communities. The irony of freeway construction was that many of the supporters viewed it as an advancement in transportation opportunities and travel times for all Angelenos, however, this simply was not the case for Angeleno communities of color. According to The East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU), transportation for East Angelenos became even more difficult despite the availability of freeway infrastructure post-construction. In TELACU's "East Los Angeles Transit Needs Study," unequal access to transportation systems is evaluated. The study found that despite East LA's proximity to freeways, the community is "highly transportation disadvantaged," with 26 percent of families living below the poverty line.[23] The study additionally noted that 24 percent of East LA residents stated transportation is a recurring problem for them, with 27 percent of families having no access to automobiles, and 48 percent of families owning only one vehicle. The study then goes on to address these disparities by proposing various solutions such as increased state funding for public transportation, expanding Dial-A-Ride services, and Spanish language transportation materials.

Shifting now to the region of South Los Angeles, the more recent construction of the 105 freeway also represents the dichotomy for whom freeway expansion is meant to benefit, and who it harms. While the construction of the 105 freeway certainly benefited commuters living outside the region of South Los Angeles, central-class residents did not reap the benefits of construction. The $500 million project for construction displaced nearly 21,000 South LA residents, with 7,000 resident units being bulldozed for development.[24] In East Los Angeles, the 105 freeway was not

[23] East Los Angeles Transit Needs Study, TELACU Collection, Box 11, Cal State LA Special Collections, California State University, Los Angeles.

[24] Joseph F. Dimento, Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of*

successful in reducing travel times for central South Los Angeles residents. In a study of the 105 freeway's impact on travel times shortly after its development, urban studies analysts concluded that "results consistently show that residents outside the central corridor area experience a decrease in travel time. Residents in the central area, an economically distressed and non-white part of Los Angeles, experience no change for this trip purpose."[25] The study additionally estimated that only 15 percent of central area residents were White, while 43 percent of residents outside the corridor were White. Ethnically diverse central Los Angeles communities encountered disruptions in travel times and the loss of thousands of housing units, highlighting a stark contrast in individuals who did not reap the benefits of newly built freeways like the 105.

These two studies from East and South Los Angeles exhibit the clear disparities in the construction of freeways formed in LA's marginalized communities of color. While the development of this infrastructure was crucial to wealthier and whiter Angelenos living outside the urban core, the reality is that inner-city communities did not reap the benefits of those living on the periphery. Freeway expansion in these communities destroyed dwelling units and made transportation for residents more difficult, not benefiting them.

Apart from disturbing residential units and causing transportation issues to damaged communities, freeway construction also brought further disparities to property values while simultaneously deteriorating homes that were spared by freeway expansion. Continuing to analyze East Los Angeles, the carve-up of this community by numerous freeways (Santa Ana, San Bernardino, Long Beach, Pomona, and Hollywood) damaged urban spaces and housing within the community. With freeways crisscrossing all over East LA, residents saw the deterioration of urban planning and housing, being neglected by city officials who aimed to prioritize freeway infrastructure and not the neighborhoods affected. TELACU's "Barrio Housing Plan" exposes the disparities brought about by freeway construction. The Housing Plan accounts for this dissection of East Los Angeles neighborhoods as a key factor for the impaired living circumstances, further cit-

---

*Urban Freeways,* 193.

[25] Drusilla Van Hengel, Joseph DiMento, and Sherry Ryan, "Equal Access? Travel Behavior Change in the Century Freeway Corridor, Los Angeles," *Urban Studies*36, no. 3 (03, 1999): 547-562.

ing patterns of income disparities faced by the region's Chicano residents. Addressing these systemic issues, TELACU stated that "obvious patterns of racial discrimination exist" when accounting for these inequalities compared to White Angelenos.[26] The Barrio Housing Plan sought to undertake these issues by providing housing rehabilitation, familial services, and maintenance education for preserving urban spaces. The mere existence of an urban rehabilitation plan for a community severely damaged by freeway construction signifies just how negative freeway infrastructures were for inner-city minority communities. The damage inflicted upon East Los Angeles was immense, even going as far as to leave a horrible mark on housing and urban spaces. This proves that freeway construction was not made to benefit these working-class minority communities, but rather wealthy White Angelenos who lived on the fringes of LA.

Expanding freeway construction in Los Angeles' inner-city communities further harmed residents' health. Air pollution from freeways increased throughout the decades following freeway expansion, increasingly distributing dangerous chemicals such as lead into the air in Los Angeles. In 1976 the rise in lead particles had overwhelmingly exceeded the levels deemed safe for Angelenos, with areas near the San Diego Freeway in the South Bay of Los Angeles reaching 7.9 micrograms per cubic meter of air. This is far above the measure of 1.5 micrograms deemed safe for residents. Numerous scientific studies pointed to the potential neurological and respiratory damage to populations breathing in lead-contaminated air. In fact, a study conducted by UCLA found that student families living near the San Diego Freeway had 50 micrograms of lead in their bloodstream in comparison to only 20 micrograms for populations residing in the remote area of Lancaster. Roger Fontes of the environmental board's air pollution specialists affirmed these concerns, "chronic effects are having more of a detrimental effect than we previously thought."[27] These health threats display yet another dangerous result from the aftermath of expanded freeway infrastructure. Increasing air pollution led to undesirable health dangers for Angelenos living near free-

[26] Barrio Housing Plan, TELACU Collection, Box 1, Cal State LA Special Collections, California State University, Los Angeles.
[27] Irv Burleigh, "Land Use Near Freeways Seen as a Health Peril: Land Use Near Freeways May Pose a Health Hazard," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1976.

ways. Marginalized communities living near these freeways were subjected to these health disparities, meanwhile more affluent Angelenos lived comfortably away from health-deteriorating urban spaces.

Beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, resistance efforts from these marginalized communities in Los Angeles began taking shape. Principally consisting of Black and Latino Angelenos, the fight against expanding freeway infrastructures and their negative impacts turned into political activism. Marginalized Angelenos became tired of the disparities their communities endured throughout the previous decades and began opposing harmful policies. This resistance to further disparities brought about by freeway construction is seen in various protests and resistance movements to the most recently constructed freeway in Los Angeles, the Century Freeway 105. A 1981 *LA Times* article illustrates the strong opposition against the construction of the 105, suggesting this would be the last freeway construction project in Los Angeles. "Increasingly, their [freeways] benefits were weighed against the damage done by their construction."[28] With much of the Century Freeway's trajectory being in the South Los Angeles city of Hawthorne, many residents were opposed, becoming part of class action lawsuits against Caltrans. These lawsuits included plaintiffs like the Environmental Defense Club, advocating for environmental rights, The Nation Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and a group of Hawthorn residents called "Freeway Fighters." These lawsuits made by prominent organizations suggest that marginalized Angelenos of color were fed up with freeways causing damaging effects to their communities, opting to resist construction through various means.

In a letter critiquing the construction of the Century Freeway, deputy executive director of the state air management agency James D. Boyd attacked the potential air quality effects on the southeast corridor of Los Angeles County. "Spending $670 million of public funds for a new freeway, which provides no improvement in air quality and supports increased vehicular usage does not contribute to the attainment of national standards which require reductions in emissions."[29] Opposition to the construction

[28] William Trombley, "Public Rebellion: The Century: Last of the Freeways? FREEWAYS: The Romance With Fast Lanes Is Fading FREEWAYS: An End of the Road? FREEWAYS: End of the Fast Lanes? FREEWAYS: End of the Fast Lanes? FREEWAYS: Ardor for Fast Lanes Fades," *Los Angeles Times,* August 31, 1981.

[29] Larry Lane, "ARB'S Negative View of Freeway Debated: ARB Letter Critical of Norwalk Freeway Construction Attacked by 2 Legislators," *Los Angeles*

of the Century Freeway reached the level of a California state official, effectively demonstrating the clear inequities freeways brought to colored communities of LA while placing the plight for marginalized rights at the center of resistance movements. This mere notion displays the success of marginalized Angelenos speaking up for their rights and the disparities caused by freeway construction to achieve a call for an end to harmful construction policies.

To explore continued resistance efforts against freeway construction in other parts of Los Angeles, Chicano communities in Boyle Heights employed protest measures to take charge of their rights to clean air, responding once more to the many inequities that evolved from freeway construction. As the decades passed, Chicanos protested for equality. Images of large Chicano protests in East Los Angeles are found within the Boyle Heights Collection, advocating for improved equality and the termination of discriminatory policies in Los Angeles.[30] Angelenos additionally fought back by engaging in politically motivated actions in efforts to gain political power and appropriate legislative representation. An article by *California Journal,* illustrates Latino communities' responses to racial discrimination throughout the entire state of California. The article underscores the rising number of Latino elected officials throughout the state, citing newly elected Los Angeles officials. "For the first time in years, the community was saying enough to policies that brought freeways slicing through neighborhoods,.."[31] The struggle for expanded political representation in Los Angeles by Latino residents is a direct response to freeway construction and the disparities that have been caused throughout LA's marginalized communities.

While the construction of the freeways prevailed, resistance movements opposing construction achieved an effective expansion of rapid rail transit, an objective of many marginalized

---

*Times,* January 26, 1978.

[30] Protest Images, Cultural Needs Assessment, Boyle Heights Collection, Box 1, Cal State LA Special Collections, California State University, Los Angeles.

[31] Louis Freedberg, "Latinos; Building Power from the Ground Up," *California Journal,* January, 1987, Cultural Needs Assessment, Boyle Heights Collection, Box 1, Cal State LA Special Collections, California State University, Los Angeles.

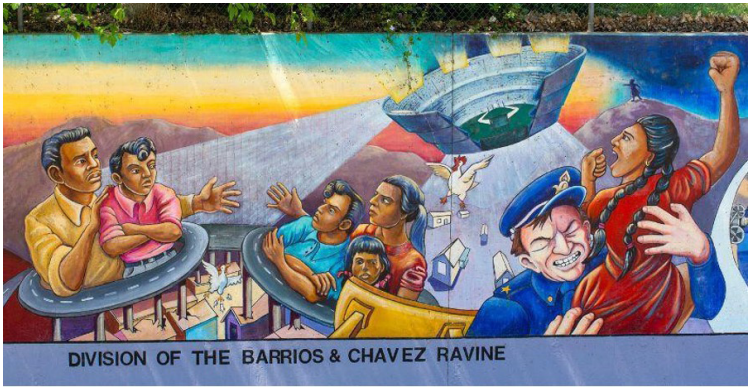


**Figure 2:** Judith Baca, portion of *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, 1978, Valley Glen, Los Angeles, CA

Angelenos. In response to a call for more rapid public transit, the Century Freeway saw the construction of a rail line in the center of the freeway. Through resistance efforts made by community members, Caltrans director Adriana Gianturco increased light rail transit across LA, stating: "I am in favor of a balanced transportation system… What we have now is a well-developed freeway and highway system, but almost no rapid transit."[32] This emphasis on the development of rapid transit for Angelenos took hold with high-ranking officials such as Gianturco, who for the first time, pledged to provide much-needed infrastructure to benefit LA's marginalized communities of color. The strides made by those who did not benefit from freeway construction are significant and displayed political resistance to halt further damage to minority communities.

Other than lawsuits and political resistance, marginalized Angelenos achieved other means to express their resistance against freeway construction, crafting unique identities in the face of disparity. Angelenos of color expressed resistance through art, crafting a shared experience with the mural and street art mediums. Judith Baca's *Great Wall of Los Angeles,* located in Valley Glen, features images of Mexican American experiences from Spanish colonization to the late twentieth century.[33] The wall is nearly 2,754 feet in length, with a small section titled "Division

[32] William Trombley, "Public Rebellion," *Los Angeles Times,* August 31, 1981.
[33] Judith Baca, "The Great Wall of Los Angeles" North Hollywood, Los Angeles, 1978.

of the Barrios & Chavez Ravine" (Figure 2). In this section of the mural, Latino residents observe their homes being crushed by freeway ramps, displaying expressions of sadness and confusion. Baca effectively captures the raw emotions of what many marginalized Angelenos felt about freeway construction, highlighting the injustice and disparities they faced as a result. Baca also emphasizes the preservation and memory of the shared history that many Angelenos faced regarding freeway construction. The creation of a unique shared identity through this art piece represents the collective resistance to the many injustices Angelenos of color have endured throughout the twentieth century.

Freeways were constructed on the primary basis of benefiting wealthy and upper-class Angelenos. These Angelenos benefitted from freeway construction through economic expansion and a vision of a prosperous, modern Los Angeles centered on automobile infrastructure. Meanwhile, Angelenos of color living in marginalized communities were not beneficiaries of the construction of freeways. Freeways in these Angeleno communities brought destruction, displacement, and urban deterioration. Nonetheless, Angelenos communities of color resisted these efforts, raising awareness and fighting for their voices to be heard in the face of class and racial oppression. These Angelenos of color effectively left their marks of resistance from the onslaught of freeway construction, leaving them with a history of oppression while crafting a shared unique identity. Today, these identities are cherished, with LA's communities of color continuing to fight the lasting legacies of the disparities brought about by freeways.