Final Paper:

Photography of Urban Renewal in Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine

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According to the United States Census Bureau, the population of Los Angeles more than doubled between 1920 and 1930 from just under 600,000 people to over 1.2 million. In the mid twentieth century, Los Angeles experienced unparalleled growth into the sprawling metropolis we know today. Los Angeles is a city of constant and rapid change, from the initial arrival of American settlers to the rapid suburbanization in the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1950s, one controversial method of development was urban renewal. In this process, the city of Los Angeles gained ownership over properties or entire neighborhoods, demolished existing buildings, and sold the land to private developers or created new plans for other uses. The neighborhoods Chavez Ravine and Bunker Hill underwent significant changes due to urban renewal. Chavez Ravine was initially demolished to rebuild the entire neighborhood as a public housing development, and Bunker Hill was demolished to make space for other residential, commercial, and governmental buildings. Notable Los Angeles photographers including Leonard Nadel, Don Normark, and Julius Shulman captured pivotal moments of urban renewal in Chavez Ravine and Bunker Hill, showcasing the transformations of urban space. The photography surrounding these events informed the visual culture of Los Angeles by reflecting Angelenos' negative reactions toward the local government and business interests through the photography's messages which foreshadowed the government's overstepped authority over urban renewal in Bunker Hill, emphasized injustice by showing the government's displacement of Chavez Ravine residents, and reminded the people that the elite retain control over the future of Los Angeles.

Leonard Nadel was a documentary photographer for the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) whose works foreshadowed the government's unjustified dominance. He documented the physical environment, buildings, and daily life of residents, mostly in or near downtown Los Angeles. This photo was taken in Bunker Hill, a dense, overcrowded

neighborhood of ethnically diverse and low-income residents. The photograph I chose is entitled *HA-12* and was taken on gelatin silver print in 1948 as part of a larger collection including negatives, prints, envelopes, and notes. It is one of many photographs under the category "Mixed use areas (industrial and housing)" in an archive belonging to the Getty Research Institute. HACLA viewed the photograph as one part to a whole collection, hence the labeling *HA-12* rather than a meaningful title. Photography was used in urban renewal as a "publicity tool for public housing and politics," as stated in the week four lecture slides. During this year, the city of Los Angeles used Nadel's photography to evaluate the possibility of urban renewal in Bunker Hill.

For context, the 1945 California Redevelopment Law allowed the creation of local redevelopment agencies. These were encouraged to "acquire, sell, and develop land; finance its own operations by borrowing public money and selling bonds; impose land use and development controls; and relocate persons by redevelopment."[1] Redevelopment agencies sought to designate neighborhoods as "blighted" and acquire funds to redevelop property. They often borrowed money from bonds to offer funding to private developers.[2] In addition, the 1949 Federal Housing Act offered further support through the federal government for urban redevelopment. Federal money was offered to local redevelopment agencies for the purpose of initiating redevelopment plans in blighted neighborhoods.[3] Business interests and local government leaders supported the designation of Bunker Hill as blighted and therefore in need of redevelopment. City officials in the Health Department, Los Angeles Police Department, and City Planning Department pointed

[1] Stephen Jones, "The Bunker Hill Story: Welfare, Redevelopment, and Housing Crisis in Postwar Los Angeles," (Master's diss., City University of New York, 2017), 40.
[2] Jones, "The Bunker Hill Story," 40.
[3] Jones, "The Bunker Hill Story," 15.

to Bunker Hill as an unsanitary, crime-ridden, and low-value neighborhood.[4] City Council concurred with these assessments and authorized the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) to redevelop the area. This led to the CRA buying all 362 properties in Bunker Hill, demolishing them, constructing new infrastructure, and dividing the land into parcels to be offered to private developers.[5] Around 12,000 residents were evicted from their homes and displaced.[6] Despite the promise of new affordable public housing to replace previous dwellings, the resulting urban renewal did not improve the housing shortage for the locals.[7] Overall, the city's evaluations and assessments were undertaken with little regard to the residents.

Leonard Nadel's photograph was taken before renewal initiated for the purpose of assessing the "blighted" status of Bunker Hill. The foreground depicts a commercial parking lot next to a motel. The background shows two historic buildings, with one behind the parking lot and another further distant on the right side. However, the focus of this piece is city hall, which appears faded in the smog or fog. It highlights an ominous tone as city hall appears omnipresent in overlooking the neighborhood. The imposing appearance of city hall serves as a symbol for governmental power, which has disastrous consequences if used improperly. It foreshadows the government's decision to designate the neighborhood as a "slum" worthy of complete and utter demolition. In hindsight, the photograph reflects the idea that the government held too much power over the people, straying from its mission of serving the original residents. City officials used their powers poorly because they destroyed the community despite some good intentions. Many residents wrote to their city council representatives, expressing their frustration at being

[4] Jones, "The Bunker Hill Story," 10.
[5] Jones, "The Bunker Hill Story," 41.
[6] Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), 111.
[7] Jones, "The Bunker Hill Story," 42.

forced to move from their homes to which they were emotionally attached.[8] As a result, citizens gained negative perceptions of the government as a powerful, unaccountable entity that fails to serve them. Today, the Getty Research Institute owns Leonard Nadel's collection, a reminder of the cultural landscape that was demolished for the sake of so-called progress.

In a similar vein, Don Normark photographed Chavez Ravine and portrayed the rural enclave as a peaceful community that suffered injustice at the hands of the government. Normark stumbled upon the neighborhood as a photography student looking for a high point to capture views of Los Angeles. He discovered the Mexican American neighborhood, and, in his own words, "sensed a unity to the place."[9] Normark photographed the landscape, residents, and daily life of Chavez Ravine in 1949. He was driven by fascination with the community and a desire to highlight the difference in lifestyles compared to the rest of Los Angeles. Unfortunately, his photos were taken by HACLA and used for their agenda of branding Chavez Ravine as a "slum."[10]

The city government targeted Chavez Ravine alongside Bunker Hill as a blighted area fit for redevelopment. Chavez Ravine was originally intended to be demolished and replaced with public housing. To start, city government sought to fix the postwar housing crisis in Los Angeles, which had worsened due to the influx of wartime industrial workers and the return of veterans.[11] The 1949 Federal Housing Act pledged "federal contributions and loans to local housing authorities" for public housing, and the City Council directed HACLA to contract with

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[8] Jones, "The Bunker Hill Story," 1.
[9] Eleanor Boba, "Far and Near: Images of Chavez Ravine," August 17, 2017, http://photofriends.org/tag/don-normark/.
[10] Boba, "Far and Near: Images of Chavez Ravine."
[11] John H. M. Laslett, *Shameful Victory: The Los Angeles Dodgers, the Red Scare, and the Hidden History of Chavez Ravine* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 57.

the federal government.[12] After signing this contract, the housing authority declared they would demolish Chavez Ravine to construct a large public housing project named Elysian Park Heights.[13] Once again, city authorities justified the demolition of the entire neighborhood by designating it as a slum. In actuality, the quality of the residences "varied considerably, depending on their age and the resources of the families who owned them."[14] In addition, the housing authority failed to prepare the residents for the demolitions or explain to them why complete demolition was necessary. Residents were confused and outraged that their homes had been labeled as substandard, as they were deeply attached to the homes they built.[15] City authorities harbored a racial bias against Mexican Americans in deeming their properties as substandard because similarly self-built properties in white neighborhoods were not deemed substandard. In addition, many residents had experienced police violence, the Zoot Suit Riots, and other forms of racial discrimination, resulting in their suspicion of the government's intentions.[16] Authorities began offering cash to homeowners in 1950, starting the process of eminent domain. Opposing residents protested at hearings of the City Planning Commission in 1951, asserting their economic rights and belief that they could not be evicted from their own homes.[17] The Elysian Heights public housing project was cancelled in 1951, but not due to citizen pushback. The City Council voted to repudiate the authorization of construction because of the Red Scare and the association of public housing with communism.[18] Nonetheless, Chavez Ravine was largely cleared out by late 1952, with fewer than two hundred residents remaining.

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[12] Laslett, *Shameful Victory*, 60.
[13] Laslett, *Shameful Victory*, 63.
[14] Laslett, *Shameful Victory*, 63.
[15] Laslett, *Shameful Victory*, 64.
[16] Laslett, *Shameful Victory*, 69.
[17] Laslett, *Shameful Victory*, 75.
[18] Laslett, *Shameful Victory*, 81.

Don Normark's photograph entitled *La Loma, Chavez Ravine, Los Angeles* was taken on gelatin silver print in 1949 before the clearing of Chavez Ravine. This photo along with others in the collection focuses on the community with the landscape as a secondary consideration. This demonstration of interest in the daily life of the neighborhood reflects Normark's empathy for the community. *La Loma* shows a man walking on a trail, presumably on his own property where he tends to the land. The freeways are a main subject, covering the foreground and stretching into the distance toward downtown Los Angeles. The freeways physically separated Chavez Ravine from other parts of the city. They also serve as a symbol of political separation since residents did not have a voice in decisions that affected them. In the distance, downtown Los Angeles looms over the rest of the city. City Hall is also a subject in this photograph as it overlooks Chavez Ravine, just as the political elite overlooked residents' opposition to losing their homes. Overall, the photograph conveys a peaceful community which received unfair treatment from a government supposed to represent their interests. Normark's photographs of Chavez Ravine differed from Nadel in his focus on the personal life of residents rather than their physical living conditions. Around 50 years after photographing Chavez Ravine, Normark returned to Los Angeles to collect previous residents' memories of the community. His work resulted in the 1999 book and 2004 documentary, both entitled *Chavez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story*.[19] These works include the photograph *La Loma* and express the injustice suffered by Mexican Americans whose homes and community were destroyed, forever entrenching the disaster of Chavez Ravine into collective memory. Normark utilized photography as a means of remembering the past, especially as it pertains to Mexican Americans and other groups who suffered from injustice in Los Angeles.

[19] Boba, "Far and Near: Images of Chavez Ravine."

Julius Shulman contrasts with the other photographers because he documented occurring urban change as well as the aftermath. His photographs captured the process of urban renewal in Bunker Hill and its completion. One such photograph is *The Castle, 325 South Bunker Hill Ave., Los Angeles, California* taken in 1968 on gelatin silver print. The photograph depicts two historic houses in Bunker Hill and the Union Bank skyscraper. The right residence was called "The Castle" and the left residence was called "The Saltbox."[20] These were the last historic mansions in Bunker Hill, and The Castle was the last notable Victorian mansion. These demolished buildings signify the end of an era as demolition was completed in Bunker Hill. In the background, the Union Bank skyscraper towers above the two mansions, symbolizing the "new" downtown and Bunker Hill. The skyscraper is an intimidating building due to its utilitarian appearance and towering height over the mansions. It represents the interests of corporations and government leaders rather than the people.

The eventual completion of Bunker Hill represented a corporate victory over government prioritization of the welfare of previous residents. As private developers rushed to transform the empty parcels of Bunker Hill, residents were forced to move into surrounding areas. An example is how "Hill Street became a local Berlin Wall separating the publicly subsidized luxury of Bunker Hill from the lifeworld of Broadway, now reclaimed by Latino immigrants as their primary shopping and entertainment street."[21] In the subsequent years, Bunker Hill developed as a distinct, non-residential district primarily dominated by office space. The leftist author Mike Davis writes, "With historical landscapes erased, with mega-structures and superblocks as primary components, and with an increasingly self-contained circulation system, the new

[20] "Early Views of Bunker Hill (1930s-Present)," Water and Power Associates, accessed April 26, 2024, https://waterandpower.org/Museum2/Bunker_Hill_1930s_Plus.html.
[21] Davis, City of Quartz, 207.

financial district is best conceived as a demonically self-referential hyper-structure."[22] This is quite a critical perspective on the urban renewal of Bunker Hill, yet the sentiment is likely to be shared among those who were displaced because of the process. In the end, business interests succeeded as city officials "gave the Downtown interests what they really wanted: the removal of 12,000 residents to pave the way for Bunker Hill redevelopment and Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine."[23] Bunker Hill became a symbol of elite interests prevailing over the people of Los Angeles. Shulman's photograph *The Castle* further reflects the idea that the city's future will be influenced most by the elite and their desires. *The Castle*'s dichotomy of the future versus the past exacerbates citizens' negative perceptions of the city government.

Photography in mid-twentieth century Los Angeles reflected citizens' negative reactions to the government by foreshadowing oppressive government power over enacting urban renewal in Bunker Hill, conveying injustice through the representation of a community wronged by eminent domain, and suggesting that business interests dominate public affairs by dichotomizing old urbanism versus new urbanism in Los Angeles. Leonard Nadel, Don Normark, and Julius Shulman each compiled impressive collections of the urban landscape of Los Angeles, urban change, and the daily life of residents. These photographers enrich the visual culture of Los Angeles by providing mediums from which to interpret history. Art reflects and preserves public sentiment, whether implicitly or explicitly, as Los Angeles continues to experience change while grappling with its past.

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[22] Davis, *City of Quartz*, 205.
[23] Davis, *City of Quartz*, 111.

Leonard Nadel, *HA-12*, gelatin silver print, 1948

Don Normark, *La Loma, Chavez Ravine, Los Angeles*, gelatin silver print on paper, 1949

Julius Shulman, *The Castle, 325 South Bunker Hill Ave., Los Angeles*, gelatin silver print, 1968

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