Visualizing Environmental Justice

- Keiko Budech, Lilli Barrett-O'Keefe, Nickelle Raschick, Robert Little
Our project aims to create a visual narrative for the built and natural environment of Los Angeles, California. Inspired by the “Environmental Justice Tour” outlined in A People’s Guide to Los Angeles by Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng, we created this installation to give access to our community and shed light on the lesser-known areas and environmental (in)justices in Los Angeles.

These photos serve as an exploration of the theme of “access.” We have chosen to interpret access in broad terms. Throughout this exhibition, onlookers can visualize the injustices and restrictions to public access to not only land, but to political power, autonomy, and personal expression. Imbedded in these photographs are rich stories of environmental histories that are too often silenced. Individuals, organizations, and citizen groups are joining together to fight against environmental, political, and social injustices that have disrupted, gentrified, and altered their communities in Los Angeles.

These photos were taken by Pitzer and Pomona college students studying in Professor Brinda Sarathy’s Environmental Justice seminar. This seminar challenges students to analyze environmental justice issues as an integral part of the Pitzer Environmental Analysis education. Funding was provided in part by Pitzer Art Collective and Student Senate.

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The Los Angeles River, mostly enclosed by overbearingly high slanted concrete walls and usually running at little more than a weak trickle, has long been a disregarded feature in L.A. In fact, some are even of the opinion that it is not a river at all but more of a drainage channel, about as far removed from “nature” as can be. However, it is only in fairly recent history that this has been the case. For a long time the river was the major source of freshwater in Southern California, bringing life to the Tongva and other Native American tribes who lived along its banks. It was characterized by a pattern of semi-regular catastrophic floods, which were well understood by those with long histories of occupancy in the region. Unfortunately, the reality of flooding was not understood by the European settlers who, in eventually growing the city of Los Angeles, encroached more and more upon its banks. When floods did occur, the destruction became increasingly devastating because surrounding areas were covered in nonporous pavement and infrastructure was built in closer proximity. After two especially destructive floods in the 1930s, the Army Corps of Engineers began a widespread effort to channelize and “tame” the river. By 1960, pavement bedded nearly the entire river.

Although the unnaturalness of the concrete mixed with polluted runoff paints an image of lifelessness and waste, the river also possesses a lesser-known beauty that too few are able to access or appreciate. Even when nature is at its most hidden, it is never completely gone. Largely thanks to the efforts of the Friends of the L.A. River (FoLAR) and similar organizations, a revitalization effort has taken off. The river has even become something of a poster child for restoration. Greening efforts, such as the miniature “pocket parks” that dot the river, abound, and there are many sections where the pavement has been removed. While the return of plants and wildlife has been segmented and gradual, it is a return nonetheless. As of 2011, FoLAR has also developed a multifaceted, all-inclusive plan for reintroducing Angelinos themselves to the river. Their vision involves improving recreational access in a safe, just, and sustainable way that allows a variety of organizations and community members to participate in the process.
Entrance to the L.A. River Center & Gardens

This gorgeous park dedicated to sharing the history, ecology, and beauty of the LA River is open seven days a week and staffed Mon-Fri. Ironically, the river is not actually visible from inside the park.
Fountain, flags, Flowers.

This view from inside the River Center & Gardens shows a glimpse of the beautiful garden oasis that is the park.
Beautification

A family of deer decorates one of the pocket parks along the L.A. River bike path. Their steely presence signifies both the naturalness and unnaturalness of the river.
Visitors

Saturday morning bikers enjoy the ride along the L.A. River. An artfully painted wall adds joy to the scene.
Green Waters

A section of the L.A. River not far from the River Center and Gardens. The lush greenery here hides all traces of the freeways and concrete that define the river along other stretches, proving there is nature in the city after all.
Pocket Park

Gates open to a park along the L.A. River. This tiny pocket park has just enough room for a short lap with your dog or stopping for a quick rest along the bike path.
Street corner view near the 6th Street Bridge overshadowing a more urban section of the LA River. A creative sticker on the sign inspires hope amidst the barbed wire and industrial backdrop.
Desolation

Signs of occupancy along the L.A. River. At least a few people appear to have made temporary homes close to this spot despite the inhospitable environment for plant growth.
Campsite along the L.A. River. Everything that could be needed for daily survival, including food, water, shelter, and even sunshine, can be found in this semi-hidden alcove.
Extinction

Both life and death have their niche at this spot under the East 6th Street bridge.
There are two phrases that welcome drivers into the city of Vernon. Both are painted on overpasses, one after the other. The first reads, “The City of Vernon – Exclusively Industrial” and the second reading “Commerce is The Bridge to The Future.” The city of Vernon is home to hundreds of businesses ranging from chemical production, industrial plants, warehouses, meatpacking plants, waste management systems, and recycling service facilities. The population in 2010 was 112 and the city covers five square miles.

Vernon is home to the AMVAC Chemical Corporation, which produces a variety of chemical solutions used as pesticides. However, there’s a catch; in addition to producing pesticides for use in the United States like Topramezone SC Herbicide (known as IMPACT ®), AMVAC also produces chemicals that have been banned in the United States. What’s the point of manufacturing chemicals that you can’t sell in America – AMVAC has found that the international marketplace has different standards, and will buy chemicals that can be made cheaply like 1,2-Dibromo-3-chloropropane, a solution that was banned in California in 1977 and is a known sterilizer and carcinogen. The structure of AMVAC is highly guarded, topped with razor and barbed wire fencing, 24 hour security and video surveillance, and mirror windows.

Down the street from AMVAC is the proposed site for the Vernon Incinerator. This incinerator site, should it be built, would be run by California Thermal Treatment Systems (CTTS), and consist of two large-scale hazardous waste incinerators. This CCTS incinerator would burn a wide variety of hazardous wastes (solvents, oils, paint sledges, ect) at a theoretical rate of 22,000 tons a year. Aside from the several thousand tons of ash and physical material that would be produced from the incineration process, an additional possibly more dangerous byproduct would be the gasses emitted from the 75’ tall smokestack at a rate of 83,000 cubic feet per minute. When the CCTS failed to provide an extensive Environmental Impact Report (EIR) during the initial planning stages, a local activist group known as the Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA) forced the CCTS into an extensive legal battle that made its way through the California Superior Court and to the California Court of Appeals. After having a positive decision reversed by the court of appeals, CCTS abandoned the project and the lot remains vacant today, hidden from pedestrians by a covered fence.
Just next door to the proposed site of the Vernon Incinerator plant is the Private Republic Services waste treatment and recycling plant. Industrial as well as homeowner waste is trucked in from neighboring cities and processed at this plant.
Exclusively Industrial

Down the street from an overpass with “The City of Vernon...Exclusively Industrial” and across the street from the proposed site of the Vernon Incinerator, this industrial plant produced a pungent odor not unlike cat food. With a population of under 120, Vernon is full of chemical companies and waste treatment systems.
Amongst the trash-lined Alameda St. and dry grass, lonely plants and flowers sprout from the ruins. This life amid destruction symbolizes the spirit of the farm and the farmers’ constant fight for justice. Hope is not forgotten, and after all the injustices the South Central Farm conflict has endured, community members continue to fight environmental injustices.

At it’s peak, the South Central Farm was the largest community garden in the United States, producing over 100 different crops and providing food thanks to government subsidies for over 350 local families. The low-income community of color surrounding the farm has little access to fresh and affordable food and virtually no access to greenspace. Before the site was a farm, the Los Angeles City Council members wanted to build a waste-to-energy incinerator on the site. This proposal was rejected due to community opposition that was led by the Concerned Citizens of South-Central LA. The city purchased the land by eminent domain, and a community farm was created in 1994. The farm steadily grew until 2001 when the previous private site owner, Mr. Horowitz, sued the city to reclaim the farm. From 2001 to June 2006, the community-members organized and fought to keep the farm. Through grassroots organizing, benefit concerts, and private donations, the farmers raised $16.3 million in five weeks. Although Horowitz said he would sell the land for $16 million, he took back his word and stated that he would not sell the farm for even $100 million. After a day of protesting, violence, over 100 armed police, and bulldozers, the South Central Farm was gone. The abundant crops and vibrant colors were bulldozed while tears were shed on the surrounding sidewalks.

Even though the city decided to sell the land back to Horowitz, the South Central Farm community was successful in bringing agency to the farmers and collectively fighting for justice. The South Central farm has been a valuable educational and empowering space for the community, and has allowed the farmers to develop lifelong leadership skills and tools to critically assess future injustice issues. The farm has also been an example of land use rights and the familiar paradigm of treating community gardens as a removable and replaceable space in the name of profit. When the land the garden sits on can be developed for economic benefits, gardens are highly vulnerable. The story of the South Central farm and indeed community farms in general is a story of community engagement and environmental agency to meet community needs. As is the case with all urbanized space, the struggle is always present between community autonomy and corporate profit development schemes. The community organizing and leadership development the South Central Farm and representative farmers represent is an example of why community gardens in urban areas need to be protected and how they can provide not only healthy food for the community, but a space to restore the environment, expand social networks, improve mental and physical well-being, and express culture.
In 2008, clothing company Forever 21 wanted to buy the South Central farm site for a warehouse and distribution center. Due to the railroad tracks across the street, the land is a perfect site for the warehouse. Community members protested this proposal since the warehouse would generate air pollution and create dead-end jobs. Forever 21 and Mayor Villaraigosa have close connections, which makes it difficult to deal with the land in a fair way. Currently, the former farm site is still an empty lot.
Nowhere Land

A plant grows from the dry and neglected land. This land was once a thriving garden with over 100 different species of plants growing. Plants were used for food, herbal medicine, and spiritual purposes. Farmers had an abundance of crops and were able to feed their families and sell excess produce. In South Central, there is a lack of access to healthy food. The South Central Farm gave the community food sovereignty and allowed them to inexpensively produce their own healthy and cultural food.
Street Trash

This street was where community-members and farm supporters held hands and resisted the bulldozers that were ready to tear down the farmland. A diverse group of South Central Farmers, environmental activists, actors, and singers came together to defend the farm. Now, the sidewalk is empty and is a space to dump trash. The site is just another unused space. South Los Angeles is one of the most polluted and greenspace-poor areas in America.
Farm is not Forgotten

Here are the remnants of felt flowers placed on the fence that surrounds the site. These flowers once spelled out farm, and commemorate what this land once was. The 27-year South Central Farm political saga is still alive and the fight will never end. The farm empowered community members, allowed them to be confidently active in politics and to stand up to injustices. The farm is not forgotten.
Color Contrast

The colorful flowers represent the diversity of people, plants, and ideas the farm brought to the community. Over 350 families benefitted from this 14-acre plot.
Silent Laughter

The dry and vacant land is temporarily being used as storage for a carnival a few blocks away. The community fought hard to keep the farm, and even after raising $16 million, Horowitz said he would not sell the land for even $100 million. His laughter silently rings on this desolate land.
New Growth

The fence lining the former South Central Farm is permanently locked and barbed wire lines the chain-link fence order to prevent the community from trespassing on land that was once theirs. The farm is an example of a community organizing and fighting for justice. This story has tremendous value and will guide other communities as they fight for similar justice. As vines grow and weave through the barbed wire, there is still hope for new positive growth for future urban gardens.
La Cultura de la Comida

A man grilling Nopales and Pollo on the corner of the site. Community members would regularly cook and celebrate their indigenous culture at the farm.
You’re Out

Chavez Ravine - Before Dodger Stadium was constructed in the late 1950s, the plot of land it now sits on was the poor but close-knit Mexican-American community of Chavez Ravine. In order to build the stadium, a project that was part of a land repurposing act to boost prestige, the City of Los Angeles forced Chavez Ravine residents to relocate. They were often required to settle far from the family, friends, and homes they cherished. The story of Chavez Ravine remains a sharp pain in the memory of many former residents and their descendants, and to this day a number of people refuse to support the Dodgers because of the terrible impact their franchise has had.
The Malibu Coast is one of the most recent battlegrounds in the struggle for social justice in Los Angeles. The 27-mile coastline has become a highly politicized clash between the wealthy elite and the greater public. Technically, the entire Malibu coast is public land of the State of California, but as developers have built multi million-dollar houses, the lines between private and public domain have become blurred. Small beachfront lots sell for a minimum amount of $15 million, which has created a dominantly upper-class demographic in Malibu. Some homeowners have erected rope fencing and signage. Others have opted to hire private security guards and create physical barriers to block off public access to the coast. Of course, most of the beachgoers are of a lower socioeconomic bracket who use beach as an escape from their highly industrial landscape.

Today Malibu is 89% non-Hispanic white and 25% of households have incomes of $200,000 or more per year, compared to the greater Los Angeles County, which is 31% non-Hispanic and only 3% have an income of that amount.

Several battles have been brought to court, a continued act which help illustrates the tension between the private stakeholders and the public. Media Mogul David Geffen filed suit to cut off access to the beach; his suit was dismissed 6 times before he gave up and opened a nine-foot path from the Pacific Coast Highway to the beach. In June of 2005, property owners used heavy equipment to remove sand from Broad Beach, to use in their own respective private properties. Not only did this action destroy the natural landscape, but it also reduced public access to the beach. According to the California Coastal Mission, “The state of California owns… the land seaward… of what is called the mean high tide line.” Which means that the public has access to the wet sand and not the dry sand above the tide line. The stories are not hard to come by: many homeowners have put in giant walls and barriers to physically block entranceways from the street. Some of the injustices have been more indirect, such as the Dan Blocker County Beach. The mile long beach has a chain link fence, no parking, no restrooms and no pathway down the 20-foot bluff. These deterrent mechanisms are not surprising due to the beaches prime location between two strips of packed beachfront lots which house celebrities and other billionaires.

There have been many varying activists that have taken a grassroots approach to resolving these differences. Urban Rangers, Access For All and The City Project are all organizations that are centered on providing equal access to all. Urban Rangers have created manuals that provide information about California beach laws, and the group even carries out “safaris” which shows the public how to find, park, walk, picnic and sunbathe in Malibu legally and safely. Frequent beachgoers have even created their own signs to post in contrast to the false signage already in place. Citizens have posted signs such as: “Public Access Any Time,” “Please Respect Public Property,” and “Park Anytime.”

Los Angeles County Residents continue to attempt to visit the unethically privatized beaches for the same reasons people buy coast side properties for millions of dollars: privacy, beauty, and recreation. Malibu is an ideal case study to explore in terms of access to natural space in the urban landscape.
Malibu has 27 miles of coastline, which is *technically* entirely public. According to The Public Trust Doctrine, tidewaters and land below the high water mark are held in trust for the people in the state. Malibu has become an extreme cultural divide as public land has become increasingly privatized.
Recreation

According to The City Project, Only 14 to 28 paths from the road to the beach are open along Malibu's coast. There should be a path to the beach every quarter mile. Homeowners have created barriers to block access to the beaches.
Deception

This sign was posted adjacent to a public beach. According to Urban Rangers and other Non-Profit groups, these signs are false and are put up by private parties rather than the city of Malibu. These signs threaten people, encouraging them to remain in areas in which are heavily populated by the “public.”
PUBLIC BEACH BEGINS APPROXIMATELY 25 FEET FROM THIS SIGN
Private homeowners have smothered recreational activities. The citizens of Malibu are trying to ban camping and promote privatization of beaches. These actions will exclude those who are unable to pay to stay at an upscale hotel or pay to enjoy the beach.
HOMEOWNER'S PROPERTY EXTENDS APPROXIMATELY 25 FEET EAST FROM THIS SIGN.

RIGHT TO PASS BY PERMISSION AND SUBJECT TO CONTROL OF OWNER: SECTION 10008, CIVIL CODE.
Bridging The Gap

There have been many grassroots actions to bring justice to the public. Organizations have created smart phone applications and specialized Malibu beach manuals to be able to navigate the highly politicized area. The City Project and Urban Rangers host events and forums to educate the public on their rights, the groups have also created accurate signage to help guide the people fairly.
WELCOME TO THE BEACH!

Just a stone’s throw from Los Angeles, the world-famous Malibu coastline offers 27 miles of scenic public beaches. Spend a day in the sun on one of the beautiful all-public beaches. Or head for the 20 miles of public beaches that are lined with private beachfront—where you can go beachcombing and wildlife-watching on the state lands below the high tide line and sunbathing and sign-watching on the abundant public easements on the dry sand. Whether you’re visiting from far away or from the properties next door, Malibu’s public beaches will reward you with abundant opportunities for recreation and discovery.

"Development shall not interfere with the public’s right of access to the sea...including...the use of the dry sand and rocky coastal beaches to the first line of terrestrial vegetation."

— California Coastal Act, Section 30211 (1976)

"The state of California owns...the lands seaward of what is called the ‘mean high tide line’...Although it is difficult to ascertain the boundary between public and private lands, a general rule to follow is that visitors have the right to walk on the wet beach."


WHERE IS THE PUBLIC BEACH?

Private property

Public Easement
Many private beach properties have public easements on the dry sand.

Maps:
- High Tide Line (HTL), 185 years of mean high tide (unmarked)
- Daily High Water Line (DHWL), 10year boundary (last high tide)
- Wet Sand
- Public property—You can walk here!

Photo-maps like the one below are a handy tool for locating dry-sand easements, and are available on the Coastal Commission website for Broad and Carbon beaches. Less detailed public access maps for all of the beaches are also available under the "Malibu LCP" section. See www.coastal.ca.gov/pubs.html.

ACCESS TO PUBLIC-PRIVATE BEACHES

- Lechuza Beach
  - Broad Beach Rd at West Sea Level Dr
  - Broad Beach Rd at Bunnies Ln
  - Broad Beach Rd at East Sea Level Dr
  - All-public beach between West Sea Level Dr and 1 house west of Bunnies Ln

- Broad Beach
  - Between 31346-31340 Broad Beach Rd
  - Between 31138-31202 Broad Beach Rd

- Escondido Beach
  - Between 27420-27490 PCH
  - Just west of Geoffrey’s restaurant
  - Between Malibu Cove Colony Dr and Escondido Beach Rd
  - Just east of Geoffrey’s restaurant

- Latigo Beach
  - Latigo Shore Rd
  - Park on PCH
  - Malibu Rd

- Malibu Beach (Malibu Colony)
  - Take the path west from Malibu Lagoon parking lot.

- Carbon Beach
  - Zonker Harris Accessway,
  - East edge of 22076 PCH
  - West edge of 22126 PCH

- Big Rock Beach
  - Between Moonshadows and 20340 PCH
  - Closed due to storm damage
  - Between 20000-19958 PCH

Beach hours vary. 7am-10pm at most all-public beaches. Public-private beaches open 24 hrs; access gates open sunrise-sunset for entry, 24 hours for exit (all but #16, not locked from beach side).

Legend
- Access to public-private beaches
- Restroom
- MTA 534 bus stop, www.metro.net
- Bold indicates all-public beaches.
- East of Broad Beach, public-private beaches are often not passable at high tide. See other side for "Reading a Tide Chart."
For a Safe and Enjoyable Visit

SAFETY TIPS
Be sure to take precautions against these common hazards:

Sun and Wind: Use sun protection. Carry an extra layer of clothing.

Pacific Coast Highway (PCH): Use caution when parking and extreme caution if crossing is necessary.

Rip Tides: Swim in areas with lifeguards; stay in shallows in ones without. Note: public-private beaches and many all-public beaches at off-peak times (and a few at all times) do not have lifeguards.

Urban Runoff: Stay out of water after rains. Avoid water near storm drains and creek outlets at all times.

Security Guards: Carry easement maps when using dry-sand easements. A copy of the CA Coastal Act is not necessary but can be useful.

BASIC BEACH ETIQUETTE
Respect public and private property, whether visiting from next door or far away:
- Deposit trash in receptacles provided.
- Use established restrooms only. Note: no restrooms on public-private beaches.
- Do not trespass on private property. Refrain from using beach furniture that does not belong to you.
- Refrain from posting signs and guards to keep people from using the land that belongs to everyone.

PARKING
Parking is ample in public lots and on roads off the PCH, and less so on the PCH at peak beach-going times. Note: barriers to public parking are common, and range from "movable" (orange cones, trash cans) to "unmovable" (mailboxes, trees, lawns) to "can be moved but not recommended" (large potted plants, guards, illegal "no parking" signs).

Visit your local hardware store to make your own "no parking" sign for as little as $25.

FLORA AND FAUNA
The coast supports a rich and colorful array of life forms—underwater, overhead, and on the sand. Pelicans, dolphins, sea stars, and other year-round native wildlife are joined seasonally by whales, seals, and other migrants. Common exotic species include potted palms in gardens and illegal dogs on the beaches, while bacteria and viruses greatly increase in abundance after rainstorms.

Since the last owner of the Malibu Ranch lost fierce legal battles in the early 1900s to block the building of the PCH, the human residents have become more abundant but have remained strongly territorial and litigious. Some are year-round inhabitants, while many use their dwellings primarily on weekends and holidays. While the residents are 89% Caucasian, day-use weekend visitors include a more diverse array of families, surfers, star-stalkers, and the silicone-enhanced. On weekdays, gardeners, maids, and construction workers visit beach-adjacent properties in large numbers but are seldom seen on the beaches.

SIGNS
Signs on the public-private beaches are abundant and diverse. While often confusing, they fall into four basic taxonomic categories:

True: "No dogs allowed," "Private property" (if on private beach property without dry-sand easement)

Somewhat True: "Private property both sides of this walkway" (true only on properties without dry-sand easements)

Usually False: "Private beach extends 70 ft seaward from this sign" (or most other #s)

False: "Private beach," "No stopping," "Right to pass by permission" (on a public right-of-way)

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Los Angeles Urban Rangers
www.laurbanrangers.org
"Malibu Public Beaches" guide and safaris

CA Coastal Commission
www.coastal.ca.gov
(805) 585-1800

LA County Dept Beaches & Harbors
beaches.co.la.ca.us/Main/BandH/Main.htm

State beach info
Santa Monica Mtns Conservancy
www.lamountains.com/parks_search.asp

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Crafted by Earthlink.net
(310) 455-4224
Nonprofit public-access advocate

Courtesy of Los Angeles Urban Rangers
Handmade signs made by LA Urban Rangers posted to counteract illegal signage made by private homeowners in Malibu.
We understand your need for privacy, but let's find a way to share the beach.

The ocean is such a treasure for us to love and respect. Why would any one person claim ownership?
Los Angeles Environmental Injustice Photo Tour Sites

1. AMVAC Chemical Company
2. Proposed Vernon Incinerator
3. Former South Central Farm
4. Bridge at 6th Street
5. Dodger Stadium
6. LA River Center & Gardens
7. Steelhead & Oso Pocket parks
8. Malibu Private Beaches
Sources


This booklet was made by students Keiko Budech, Lilli Barrett-O'Keefe, Nickelle Raschkic, and Robert Little along with an art installation on the Pitzer Mounds as a final project for Professor Brinda Sarathy's EA086 Environmental Justice class, Spring, 2013, with funding help in part from Pitzer Student Senate and Art Collective.