

Which Way for Echo Park---Inner City Oasis or Slum?

Fight Begins to Save Last Viable, Close-In Area

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A new map of Los Angeles emerges from the computer—one which shows housing, healthy or blighted. It shows what is happening to downtown: Blight is closing a circle almost completely around it. The Normandie District, Watts, Central Avenue, East Los Angeles surround the Central City on three sides.

But the circle is not complete. Two miles northwest of City Hall lies Echo Park, the hilly, multiracial, multiethnic home of both the poor and better off.

Some say it is the last viable, close-in residential area near downtown.

Change is coming to Echo Park, too: puzzling changes now being studied by sociologists, demographers, city planners—and, inevitably, real estate developers—as a key to the Central City's outer fringe.

Near Slum—In Demand

Echo Park is becoming a near slum and a much-in-demand middle-class community at the same time. It is going up and down simultaneously.

The population is now 70% Spanish surname: Chicanos, Cubans, Mexican immigrants, Central and South Americans. Most are shopkeepers, municipal workers, nurses, seamstresses, mechanics. But newcomers from poorer areas are crowding into substandard housing, and youth gangs have become active.

At the same time, there is a different influx: that of the middle class. Older couples who sold homes in distant suburbs and young marrieds with college degrees are seeking homes and rentals in the hills.

Never was a neighborhood more literally stratified:

Black spraypaint on the wall of a neat white home on the valley floor reads "Viva la Raza." "C 14" says another legend, the mark of a Chicano gang accused of window breaking along Echo Park Ave.

Looking down on the avenue from a handsome duplex high above is a TV news executive whose \$185-a-month apartment also affords a view west to Bel-Air. Landlords with such hillside units keep vacancies secret, since there is always a waiting list, and 100 people have answered an ad for a single vacancy. Which way will Echo Park go?

Opposing Views

Peter Melzer, who made a sociological study for the city's Community Analysis Bureau, points out that private enterprise never has taken advantage of Echo Park's unused acres of lots zoned for apartment houses. He predicts Echo Park will become almost entirely Latin American.

The Rev. Frank Kelley, pastor of the local Episcopal Church and chairman of the city's board of zoning adjustment, disagrees. He expects real estate values to rise, leading to replacement of substandard units. The very poor will have to move again, leaving a mixed but viable area.

Don Brackenbush, West Coast manager for a consultant firm making a downtown study for the city's general plan, believes Echo Park "an area of opportunity," renewable as a successfully mixed community with islands of different kinds of people living together in harmony.

"Such a renewed community would help the central business district," said Brackenbush. "It could have a tremendous impact on entertainment and cultural growth downtown."

Some observers believe Echo Park

must be saved not just for itself, but for its effects on downtown Los Angeles, too.

If blight settled on Echo Park, the Central City would be surrounded by it, in the classic manner of the slum-surrounded downtowns of the East, with only the Wilshire Blvd. corridor and, of course, the safe-conduct lanes of the freeways—connecting it to safer streets beyond.

"The rapidly changing ethnic composition of the Silver Lake-Echo Park communities will soon transform Echo Park into a Mexican-American barrio," said a UCLA study for the city's new general plan.

"We strongly urge that, via the process of community organizations and related efforts, steps be taken to avoid further ghettoization."

Many long-time residents of Echo Park, members of its Latin community, object to experts' blaming Latins as the bringers of the slum.

Actually, the spread of blight is not just a movement of any racial or ethnic group, nor is it simply a deterioration of housing. Blight is something the helpless, hopeless poor bring with them, whatever their background or color.

It is a willingness to be victimized and to victimize. Victimized, they think, by unscrupulous landlords,

the merchants and the schools, the angriest poor bring vandalism and violence to wherever they move.

And, as the saying runs, "there goes the neighborhood."

The fight to save flatland Echo Park by the "community organizations and related efforts" referred to in the UCLA report is already under way.

It centers around a campaign to aid the young people whose gang activities are a manifestation of incipient blight, and, on another level, a fight to reduce density to stop inflow of the urban poor.

Not since the black community advanced on Jewish neighborhoods near Carthay Circle on the West Side have people of avowed good will been forced into such unaccustomed roles.

Just as Jewish residents found themselves fighting against an influx of blacks into their schools, Echo Park's hill liberals now are fighting federally assisted housing for the underprivileged. People keenly aware of a housing shortage and themselves saying: poor, go elsewhere.

Echo Park, they say, must stay as it is: one of the few really successfully blended communities in the city of Los Angeles.

Ten Minutes From Downtown

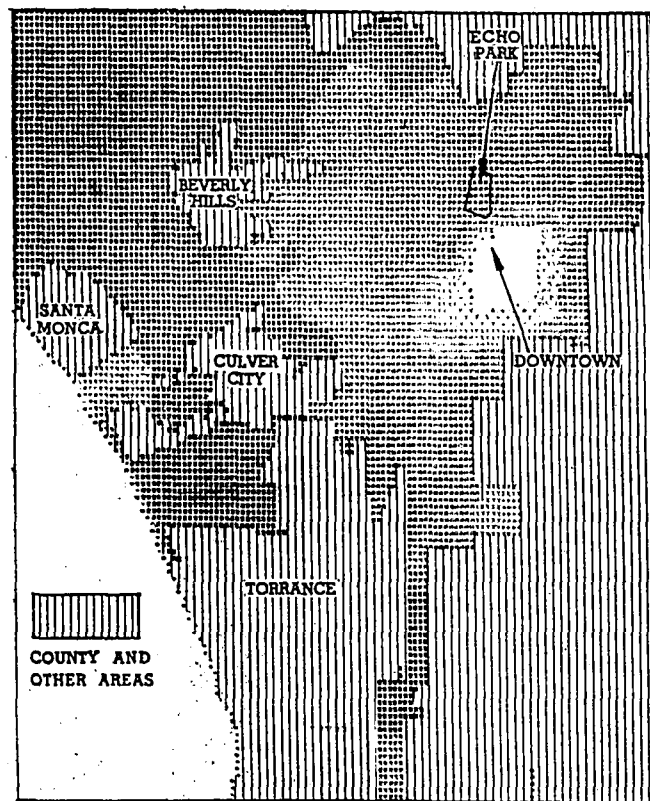
It lies between 575-acre Elysian Park (and Dodger Stadium) on the east, the Golden State Freeway on the north, the short Glendale Freeway (and its proposed extension) on the west and Hollywood Freeway to the south. It is 10 minutes from downtown by car. Six bus lines serve the area.

Echo Park Lake, Aimee Semple McPherson's Foursquare Gospel Temple and a thriving, 24-hour-a-day business district at Sunset Blvd. and Echo Park Ave. are among the landmarks. Most remarkable, however, are the people.

Different Latin groups have their

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AN AIR OF SERENITY -Echo Park Lake, as seen from the porch of structure at 1705 Belmont Ave., retains suburban flavor though only minutes away from downtown. Times photos by Bruce Cox and Rick Browne



COMPUTER MAP -This is map made by computer from census data fed into it by city's Community Analysis Bureau. Lighter areas indicate poorer housing sections. Information on regions designated as "county and other areas" was not processed for this map.



PASSING TIME -A fisherman tries his luck in Echo Park Lake.



TALKING THINGS OVER - William Garcia, YMCA representative in Echo Park area, discusses

school and sports with Frank Garcia (no kin) near store whose graffiti-covered walls tell own story.

own restaurants and meeting places. Some blocks are mostly Oriental. The city's largest Filipino community lives west of Echo Park Lake, around which dwell senior citizens and the fresh-faced fledgling evangelists of the Life Bible College.

St. Andrews Church, in what was once a sea captain's 1920s Chinese castle, serves a Ukrainian community. A taco stand is a nightly gathering spot for Yugoslavs. There are many interracial couples, who blend virtually unnoticed in Echo Park's cosmopolitan neighborhoods.

The Hip community calls it "The Other End," the other end of Sunset Blvd. from the Strip. Barefoot hippies buy food with food stamps in the same supermarket lines with young deputy public defenders with mod clothes and lavish mustaches.

Chicano street types dress in a uniform of neat jeans (or overalls) and clean white T-shirts; they haven't learned, as have their Anglo contemporaries in the suburbs, to believe that dirt is somehow revolutionary.

Trouble Comes in Stages

All went well for years. Then trouble came, in stages:

—Oldtimers who had lived in Echo Park since it was developed as a 1920s suburb began to die out. Their heirs, living in newer suburbs, sold the cottages and two-on-a-lot houses to absentee landlords.

—Chinatown, affluent and expanding, spread westward around Alpine Hill, a long-time Latin neighborhood north across Sunset Blvd. from the Board of Education headquarters. As ancient, low-rent homes were replaced with rows of new apartment houses, poor residents had to move.

—County health officers and city building and safety inspectors condemned rat and roach-infested slum buildings south of the Hollywood Freeway in the Temple St. area—a district so blighted it has long been a top candidate for the bulldozer brand of urban renewal. More families were moved.

—Many absentee landlords' Echo Park properties, unpainted, uncared for, were in such condition owners had nothing to lose by renting them for \$85-\$100 a unit to fatherless welfare families from Alpine and Temple.

—Youths from impoverished, disadvantaged families, coming to "La Echo Park" from areas with histories of gang warfare, found themselves unable to achieve, advance or even cope. They turned to gangs again.

Revival of Juvenile Gangs

There had been gangs, from time to time, in Echo Park before. The newcomers, denied other outlets for prestige, brought them back to life, joined by the least disciplined kids in even the best schools.

Said Beverly Mason, principal of Elysian Heights School:

"In the last school year almost 30 new children came in. Nearly all were Spanish surname. Some were bilingual, and some can't speak a word of English.

"One mother enrolled eight children in school. She didn't speak English, and her oldest boy had to do the best he could to translate for her. There was no father. They came from Temple St."

Last semester Elysian Heights had 56 Oriental children, 11 black children, 118 Anglos and the rest of the 460 students were Spanish surname. Despite the influx of children with language and related scholastic

problems, the school scored 70 on sixth-grade reading tests, compared to a national norm of 50.

Almost 12% of Elysian Heights' students rate as gifted, compared to a normal of about 3% per-school. The average IQ is 104. The gifted students bring up the scores of the disadvantaged.

The Elysian Heights area, in a

steep valley at the end of Echo Park Ave., is mostly a middle and lower-middle-class area. But from the elementary school's tree-shaded lawn, the trouble spot is easily seen: for several blocks along Echo Park Ave. lies a district of added-onto cottages, low in rents and badly crowded.

It is from this area that the gang

Please Turn to Page 2, Col. 1

Echo Park: Near Slum That's Much in Demand

Continued from First Page called Clanton 14 draws its ugliest recruits. The youngest are Elysian Heights students. What if the Clantons increase in strength and number? Would the parents of the gifted 12%, fearful for their children, move?

A youth was fatally stabbed in a clash of older gangs under the Hollywood Freeway overpass at Glendale Blvd. where the Echo park turf meets that of Temple St. So far such violence has been intramural, one gang fighting another.

But even in the Elysian Heights area, where there are only a comparatively small number of gang members, there have been schoolground tussles between Clantons and those who refuse to join. Parents are becoming alarmed.

When the Echo Park Community Organization took a survey to find out what people considered the district's worst problems, they listed: drug abuse and neighborhood gang activities; vandalism by youth and loitering.

The spray paint of juvenile delinquents' graffiti is providing the Echo Park's future with the handwriting on the wall.

Different citizens groups are attacking the problems. The city's planning machinery is grinding toward what may be a long-range solution. But on the streets of Echo Park, much of what is being done for the young is being accomplished by one man: Bill Garcia.

Garcia, 28, grew up in Echo Park, earned his degree in chemistry at UCLA, and came back to work with the youths he's afraid may never make it to UCLA—or, for that matter, through Belmont High School.

He is the Hollywood YMCA's Echo Park representative, working endless hours with the boys of six different grade schools for \$7,000 a year. "I could make more in chemistry," he says, "but I'm the only one here." (The only city recreation center is at the far south end of Echo Park.)

The local Lions and Kiwanis Clubs bought the bus and van Garcia uses to show youngsters what may be their first glimpse of snow, or even a beach. He drives them to sports events and coaches school teams.

In between he goes through his territory, making the personal contact he finds it takes to get Chicano lads to sign up for a Y program.

"Do you know about our programs?" he asks Sergio Restori, whose added-onto duplex is one of the better-looking units of the Echo Park Ave. district near Elysian Heights School.

"Sure," said Restori, a chunky, \$200-a-week machinist. "What's it going to accomplish? You going to teach my boy to swim? He's 14, he doesn't know how to read, doesn't want to go to school. What good is teaching him how to swim?"

Does Restori know about the C14 gang?

"Know about it! I think it was my son started it!"

Could the Y program help him, perhaps?

"Nothing's going to help him. He's been in trouble for everything. Glue sniffing, stealing, cutting school, you name it. I'm taking him back to Mexico. He'll be with different kids, with more discipline. I sold this place for \$20,000, and as soon as the money's out of escrow, we're going to Mexico."

Where is his son now?

"He's seeing his P.O."

His probation officer. Suddenly Restori looks carefully at Garcia and another visitor. "You aren't cops, are you?" he asks. "My son hasn't done something else, has he?"

Garcia, later, shakes his head, sadly: 14-year-olds are probably too old to change.

Age of Impression

"You've got to start with the kids in grade school," he said. "You can impress them with what they can do if they just stay in school."

"I introduce them to Mexican-American men who have become leaders

in the community. They see where they can go. One day I took them to a baking plant. They stared at those people putting cookies in the pans, hour after hour, moving like machines.

"They wanted to know why they had to do work like that. I told them it was because they had no education and couldn't get a better job. I could tell. It was something they were going to remember."

Coach Garcia has taught his boys things like the double play, the infield fly rule and the full court press. Sports, for some, have provided the outlet for high spirits which might otherwise have been expressed amid the breaking of glass.

Five, for Sure

Garcia doesn't know what he might have done in chemistry, but he can measure, in a way, what he has accomplished for the YMCA.

"I know," he said, "that I've reached five kids."

While Garcia works 70 hours a week to change lives by the handful, the Silver Lake-Echo Park Citizens Advisory Committee and the staff of the City Planning Department are working to change them by the acre.

Last December, when

builder Lawrence S. Ames announced plans to build 94 units of low-rent housing near Elysian Park on Morton St. under a government-supplement program sponsored by the FHA and HUD, a citizens' group banded together to stop it.

"They demand that the allowable density not just on Morton St. but in the entire Echo Park residential area be rolled back drastically.

Their complaints to the planning commission and a lawsuit alleging a threat to the ecology of the neighborhood failed to stop Ames, although he cut the project back to 66 units.

Zoning Agreement

But the zoning rollback plan found itself blessed in high places.

The city's general plan concept called for concentrating commercial and high-density apartment zoning in a Sunset Blvd. "center" and reducing the housing density in other areas. The anti-Ames movement agreed with it.

The planning commission referred the rezoning suggestion to a citizens' advisory committee. City aides who organized it said they couldn't get renters interested in taking part, and most of the members were property owners. Many had been active in the anti-Ames group.

Not everyone agreed with the zoning rollback. Replies to a questionnaire distributed by Councilman Robert J. Stevenson found

that although 67% opposed the Ames project, 65% also opposed a general cutback in density.

At a series of meetings, meanwhile, the advisory committee worked on rollback plans. The area is zoned for much more density than exists. Many single-family or two-houses-on-a-lot homes are on lots zoned R3 or R4 for apartment houses.

Third of Maximum

The Elysian Heights area north of Sunset Blvd. and between Echo Park Ave. and Elysian Park is now zoned for a maximum of 13,000 units, and contains about a third that many. The planning department recommends holding future housing to 7,400 units.

At a meeting at St. Athanasius' Episcopal Church with City Planner Frank Fielding and Planning Assistant Jean Ackerman, the advisory group's housing subcommittee recommended zoning the area for 8,400 units, much

of it limited to a density of 19 units per acre.

"We were talking before about 15 units per acre," said Grace Simons, a longtime campaigner for conservation of Elysian Park.

"This is quite an increase." "There has been a tremendous opposition to this rollback," said Glenn Cummings, subcommittee chairman. "A lot of people don't want any change at all. This area will go to hell unless we allow a certain density."

Returns on Investment

"People must be allowed to build units from which they can make a decent return, or there'll be no new building."

This is the crucial decision still to be made by the citizens' committee, the planning department which acts on its advice, the planning commission which studies department advice and the city council, which will act on commission recommendations: How much density will

be enough to stimulate new building?

Is duplex zoning enough? Or will it take the R3 and R4 apartment-house zoning some fear will encourage overcrowding and blight?

How do the experts measure blight, anyway?

Some feel it follows inevitably when an older neighborhood turns completely minority, resulting in the ghettoization the UCLA report warns against. Others say it comes when mere density becomes overcrowding.

On the eighth floor of a downtown law-office building, the city's community analysis bureau is working on an early warning system against blight.

Using certain indicators which show which way a neighborhood is going, analysts run census data through computers which print the information in map form.

The bureau's indicators last year placed Echo Park 18th in a list of 20 communities under threat of blight. Here, in statistical form, are how some of the viability indicators apply to Echo Park:

Sound housing: 86% (compared to 92% city-wide); renters — as opposed to home owners—64% (citywide 55.6%); median rent \$80 (citywide \$98).

Education: high school dropout rate 39% (citywide 27%); scores on 10th grade reading tests 26.3 (citywide 30.5).

Income: median earnings

Please Turn to Pg. 3, Col. 1



HOLDING FORTH -Oldtimers in area still gather in park to exchange views. Times photo

ECHO PARK AREA

Continued from Second Page
ings \$5,965 per year (citywide \$7,132); number of white collar workers 30% (citywide 39%).

Public safety: reported felonies per 100 persons .93 per year (citywide .98).

Other factors used as indicators are recreational facilities, health and accessibility via car or transit system. But, according to the bureau's division manager, Charles A. Johnson, education is the most important key to what is happening to a district.

"A person with less education has less capability of producing income, and these are the people who end up in the worst housing," he said.

In his air conditioned office, surrounded by computer printouts complex enough to forecast the Andromeda Strain, Johnson is talking about those cookie makers Bill Garcia's YMCA charges stared at—and an angry dropout of 14 who may be frightening gifted children from using a playground after school.

Absentee Owners

Another important key, said Johnson, is absentee ownership. Matilija (Matt) Noonan, who helped displaced families find housing in Echo Park before her job with the city's human relations bureau was phased out, agrees:

"You can drive through Echo Park and pick out the places which belong to absentee owners," she said. "The owner takes pride in his property. People who rent a substandard place for what to them is a lot of money don't bother to take care of the place. Why should they?"

"The people who live in the front house and rent out the back one are careful who they rent to. A lot of people don't want big families of kids in their units. The absentee landlord's place gets run down, so he rents it to a big family for what he can get for it.

"The kids break the door locks so they don't need a key. They start breaking the windows, writing on the walls. The next time the landlord has to rent it to someone even more desperate. Families with no father, the mother working, the kids without supervision, kids who drop out of school. Properties start to deteriorate fast."

Federal Subsidies

Presumably some of the residents of the deteriorated units will be able to move into Lawrence Ames' Morton Gardens project, where federal subsidies will make up the difference between 25% of a family's adjusted income and rental costs.

A family will be able to rent a \$225 two-bedroom

unit for \$153, under the federally assisted program. Ames hopes most will be local people. "Maybe 660 units might be able to do something to the housing shortage in Echo Park," said Ames, "but 66 units won't even touch it."

Miss Simons, bitterest foe of Morton Gardens project, was invited by Ames to join a committee to screen prospective tenants. Said Miss Simons:

"We are not at all concerned about what kind of people they are. The only thing we are worried about is density. I'm afraid Mr. Ames is starting a trend to an instant slum, at a time when we are at a crossroads.

Matter of Numbers

"This area can proliferate with chicken coop apartments, or it can go the other way. It can become an area where it would be profitable to put up nice, large, two-bedroom duplexes.

"The trend of young people to this area is beginning now. It is a reverse of the trek to the suburbs. These are young people who have better value judgment than their parents. They can appreciate the seclusion, the views, the cosmopolitan nature. Much of Echo Park has the country feeling people look for in the suburbs—but don't find."

There are crickets and owls in Echo Park, and, in the hills, even a few roosters to crow at dawn. When Santa Ana winds blow from the north the strange acoustics which give the area its name bring the sound of train whistles as freights roll out of the Southern Pacific yards.

After Effects

What would happen, ask those who wish to protect this way of life, if 660 new low-rent units were built in the area? Wouldn't 660 more families, poor and desperate, fill up the substandard units from which the luckier ones moved?

Are the poor to inherit Echo Park?

On the lawn of St. Athanasius, Father Frank Kelley pointed west across Echo Park Lake to where freeway-bound traffic was already fighting — at 4 p.m.—for car-length gains.

"Look at those people on their way into the suburbs," said Father Kelley. "They'll be home in an hour. Maybe more. But see that hill on the other side of the lake. With those old Victorian homes on top?"

"You'd expect the neighborhood to be completely filled with poor people. Instead you see sports cars parked out in front, and inside you find young couples renewing those old homes. They don't have to drive to the suburbs."

Father Kelley, a big, pink-faced man with a

crushing handshake, has become familiar with housing trends as part of his city zoning work.

"With the development of downtown Los Angeles, with property values rising, the poor people are not going to dominate this area," said Father Kelley. "Someplace else must be found for them. The housing authority must recognize their problem and do something about it."

The UCLA report for the Los Angeles general plan stated:

"... On the border of Elysian Park, view properties are quite valuable. For many families, the wooded and rustic character of the environment so close to downtown produces a very positive effect.

"The value of this effect should not be underestimated and is another explanatory variable in identifying why people choose to live in the area, even though much of the housing is old. . . .

"Some indications are present that the hilly parts of Echo Park have attracted young married couples, single adults who are college graduates, artists and students of middle-class background. It supports the notion of a generally rich ethnic and socioeconomic mixture."

On a wooden staircase rising through a eucalyptus grove toward Elysian Park, artist Charles McCauley explained to Sal Altamirano, field deputy for Councilman Stevenson, the explanatory variables of why he is painting in Echo Park instead of making TV commercials in New York City.

Can Afford to Paint

"I was sitting at a desk, wearing a tie, doing something I didn't want to do," he said. "Then I came here and bought that little house. It's not much. A bedroom, living room, dining room. Built in 1918. But you know what I paid for it? It was \$5,100.

"Paying that little for my house, I can afford to paint. I'm making enough that I can keep going without having to sit at that desk."

McCauley questioned Altamirano about the zoning rollback. His neighbors had heard it was a conspiracy: after new construction was halted by a freeze on apartment building, blight-hunting city inspectors would condemn aged homes for safety violations so high-rise developers could buy the land cheaply.

"Nothing to it," said Altamirano. "The rollback plan started just over that 94-unit apartment project on Morton St. As for area-by-area building code inspections, Councilman Stevenson is strictly opposed to them in this district."

"My house would never pass an inspection," said McCauley. His wood-frame home on the slope below the stairs resembles

older, single-story cottages still found in parts of Laguna Beach. "How many old homes here would?"

"I know someone who bought a charming little home on the other side of the hill for \$7,200. There are many lovely old homes here. We have to protect them. We have to keep it all together. It's a beautiful place."

Stairs like that by McCauley's house abound in Echo Park. They were built in the 1920s to connect upper and lower streets of the community. Laurel and Hardy once delivered a piano—and quite badly—up and down one of the towering stairways.

The stairs and most of the same houses around them are still there. But

today they connect different communities.

At the top, amid the trees and looking at the view, are \$40,000 homes and secluded cottages of the media people, lawyers, writers, stockbrokers. Their sports cars bear slogans of the Sierra Club ethos: ecology flags, bumper strips urging saving the coast, the Tule elk, Mineral King.

Now, in the defense of what they consider their district's viability, they find themselves taking stands which would bar better homes for at least some of the poor of Echo Park.

In the valleys below, T-shirted lads sit on tiny lawns in the summertime dusk, wondering what to

do. Cars are older, slogans Chicano, conditions more crowded and priorities reordered. They don't want to help the elk. They help themselves and, when they can, each other.

"Carlos Manresa is from Cuba and 12 years old," two 6th graders wrote about newcomers in the school paper at Elysian Heights School. "He came to America because in Cuba there is lots of work but little food.

"Lolita Castro speaks Spanish. Maria helps her with math, English and reading. Maria remembers when she came here she did not speak English and children told her the wrong things to do. Maria wants to really help Lolita."