In Lieu of a Plaza: Exploring Urban Vitality on Sidewalks in Highland Park

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Introduction

Public space in Los Angeles is a long-contested and complex issue—one that affects Angelenos and visitors to the city on a daily basis. Compared to other U.S. cities, public park space in Los Angeles is minimal and the city has developed with few central, public spaces (*Access to Parks and Green Space – Neighborhood Data for Social Change*, n.d.; Wagner et al., 2013). Both the city's history of development and increasingly profit-focused planning environment have contributed to the status of public space in L.A. (Wagner et al, 2013; Scott & Soja, 1996; Davis, 1990). Despite these circumstances, the City of Los Angeles remains a vibrant and unique urban environment, with sidewalks as a major remaining public space. This case study uses two streets in the Northeast Los Angeles neighborhood of Highland Park to ask the following question: in lieu of plazas or central public spaces—which serve as obvious meeting points in urban life—where and how do people experience and create urban vitality in Los Angeles?

Using York Boulevard and North Figueroa Street in Highland Park as the focus of my case study, I use participant observation, surveys, and photography to better understand street-use patterns at my two sites. First, to frame my research, I provide a brief background of my case study sites. Then, I synthesize prior research on the history of plazas, the development of Los Angeles and its relationship to public space, sidewalk theory, and case studies conducted on urban vitality in other cities. Next, I explain the research design of my project, synthesize my findings and analysis, and provide recommendations, concluding with an explanation of the importance of this research.

Background

Highland Park is a neighborhood in Northeast Los Angeles traversed by two main arterial streets: York Boulevard and North Figueroa Street. The neighborhood is relatively dense, populated by single-family homes and the walkable commercial blocks of York and Figueroa (Kamin, 2019). The Highland Park neighborhood is home to the Highland Park Station, a light-rail station on the Metro A Line.

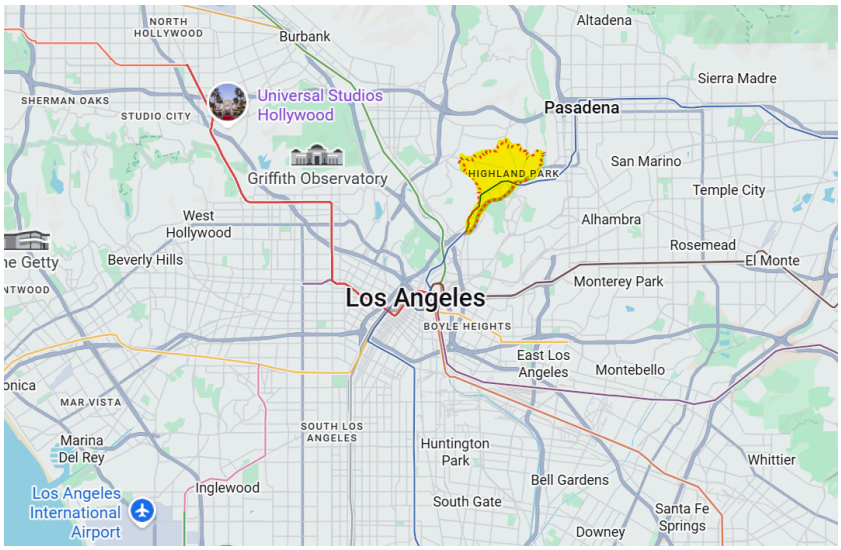

Figure 1: Neighborhood of Highland Park within the greater Los Angeles area.

In 1895, Highland Park was incorporated into the City of Los Angeles and has gone through many changes since, including recent gentrification. According to Neighborhood Data for Social Change, as of 2023, Highland Park had a population of 48,220 (*Neighborhood Data for Social Change Platform*, n.d.). Of that total population, 61.32 percent identify as Latino/Hispanic, 22.04 percent identify as White, and 11.75 percent identify as Asian (*Neighborhood Data for Social Change Platform*, n.d.). The Latino/Hispanic population decreased by 11.56 percent between 2000 and 2023 and the White population increased by more than 10 percent in that same time period. The median household income in Highland Park is

$93,560 and the percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher is 36.83 percent (*Neighborhood Data for Social Change Platform*, n.d.).

In the past couple of decades, Highland Park has gone through rapid gentrification. (Lin, 2019). Author and professor of sociology Jan Lin writes that in the late twentieth century, after a wave of white flight from the neighborhood, Latino and Asian immigrant families settled in the area. This was followed by what Lin refers to as "revitalization sparked by artists and neighborhood activists" which "set the stage" for the gentrification seen in recent years (Lin, 2019, p. 24).

The two sites that I focus on in this case study are York Boulevard between Ave 50 and Ave 57 and N Figueroa Street between Ave 50 and 60 (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Case study sites on York Boulevard and N Figueroa St.

Literature Review

To frame and inform my case study, I am relying on several bodies of literature and prior research. Firstly, I begin by providing the definition of urban vitality that I use in this paper. Then, I start by drawing on literature that explores the history of the plaza as a focal point of urban vitality, as well as the history of urban development in Los Angeles. I put these two histories in conversation, illuminating the connection between public space—or a lack thereof—and urban vitality in present-day Los Angeles. I then draw on the writing of urban scholar Mike Davis, who has written prolifically about the domination of privatizing forces over public space in Los Angeles, to demonstrate why public space in this city is so scarce. To show examples of this, I highlight case studies on downtown plazas in L.A., which have been affected by privatization. As these case studies demonstrate some of the *restrictions* on urban life, I turn to the work of urbanists Jane Jacobs and James Rojas for their observations on expressions of urban vitality and place-making, and specifically Rojas' conceptualization of *Latino urbanism* in Los Angeles. In a city where truly public spaces like plazas are not commonplace and where privatizing forces are putting pressure on cities to prioritize profit over public space, sidewalks, I hypothesize, become even more important vessels for experiencing public, urban life.

A Definition of Urban Vitality

The definition of urban vitality that I use in this paper is developed from the writing of urban scholar Jane Jacobs. In her seminal book "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," Jacobs lays out the qualities of what she sees as a successful city street. For Jacobs, there are several important features of such a street: short blocks, mixed-use development, diverse commercial presence, and continuous use of the streets, during the day and at night, as well as on the weekdays and the weekends (Jacobs, 1961). Jacobs argues that these qualities attract people

to the streets because city-goers desire to be in the company of other people. Jacobs writes that the idea that "the sight of people attracts still other people, is something that city planners and city architectural designers seem to find incomprehensible. They operate on the premise that city people seek the sight of emptiness, obvious order and quiet. Nothing could be less true. People's love of watching activity and other people is constantly evident in cities everywhere" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 37). In my definition for this case study, I want to emphasize the importance of this social aspect—that a successful, vital urban street brings people out into the public right-of-way to come into contact with the built environment and with one another. This quality of a street allows people to experience the spontaneity and diversity of urban life, an idea that is critical for understanding the purpose of this case study.

Plazas and Urban Vitality

In *Ancient Origins of the Mexican Plaza: From Primordial Sea to Public Space*, Wagner, Box and Morehead explore the origins of the plaza in Mexico and its importance as a public space there and in the United States. They begin by explaining the broader history of these spaces: "Plazas, or communal open spaces of some kind, have been at the core of every town and city in every culture on every continent" (Wagner et al., 2013, p. 42). The tradition of constructing an open, central space spans cultures and nations:

> "This instinct of centering, for the purpose of cohering a community, has continued as a human desire in many physical forms: *forum , atrio , court , piazza , square , plaza , place , platz , town common , maidan* or *musallá* in the Middle East, or *guang chang* in China. At smaller scales in residences and on campuses, the central open space was a *patio , cortile , quadrangle* , English *courtyard* , French *cour* , or Chinese *siheyuan*" (Wagner et al., 2013, p. 42)

Plazas, and other central spaces, have served as gathering places for public life dating back centuries. The origin of the public plaza dates back to ancient civilizations, but reflects an

everlasting human instinct for centering and communal gathering. For example, in modern-day Mexico, the life of plazas is essential as space for public, urban life. The authors use one plaza in San Miguel de Allende as an example of the modern-day Mexican plaza, which serves as "a vital place for business, social networking, and special occasions and is a part of everyday life" (Wagner et al., 2013, p. 198). They describe the diverse sights, sounds, smells, people, and activity one might be exposed to in an open and chaotic city center. The image they paint is one of diverse, spontaneous, and quotidian urban life. This is the kind of contact that public plazas traditionally encourage in urban environments.

One thing that is clear from the history of plazas and the urban life that they facilitate is that while the core principles of public open space have remained the same, this open space does not take one form. American urban scholars like Jane Jacobs (Jacobs, 1961), William H. Whyte (Whyte, 1980), and James Rojas (Rojas, 1991) have all argued in their modern United States contexts that our cities' public spaces should reflect our desire to connect with one another and experience the excitement and diversity of urban life—on city sidewalks, suburban sidewalks, and in New York City plazas. However, many urbanists have also warned of the disappearance of truly public spaces in our cities. Wagner, Box and Morehead suggest that because of urban sprawl and American capitalism, U.S. cities have basically eliminated plazas from their built environments. This is especially true of Los Angeles, whose development as a mega-metropolis has defined its urban form, and in turn, its relationship to public spaces such as the plaza.

Los Angeles and Public Space

I argue that the plaza does not serve its traditional role in the City of Los Angeles due to the low-density development of the city and the pressures of privatization on public spaces. In

their book, authors Scott and Soja detail the extraordinary development of Los Angeles into the mega-metropolis it is today. The City of Los Angeles experienced several waves of growth throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, including a postwar population boom between 1940 and 1970 (Scott & Soja, 1996, p. 8). In that time period, the population of the Los Angeles region tripled—growing from 3.25 million in 1940 to 10 million by 1970 (Scott & Soja, 1996, p. 8). Growth occurred across the region, marking what the authors refer to as "mass suburbanization on a scale never before encountered" (Scott & Soja, 1996, p. 8). Suburban tracts turned into separate municipalities, creating a fractured, polycentric metropolitan area.

Transportation development in the area was defined by this intense growth as well. While cities on the east coast had been growing steadily in population since the early 1800s, Los Angeles was a town of just 6,000 in 1870 (Scott & Soja, 1996, p. 107). For reference, in 1870 New York City had a population of over 940,000 in 1870 (*New York Population History*, n.d.). By the time streetcars were emerging in the late 1800s, cities like New York or Boston had already developed as major urban areas with walking as the main mode of transportation (Muller, 2017). Because of this pattern of development, eastern cities in the United States have dense urban centers, and suburban neighborhoods that grew in these metropolitan areas when street railways took off. In the younger city of Los Angeles, however, no strong urban center was developed before the emergence of urban and interurban railways. Scott and Soja write that "the large core city of walking scale that was well developed in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago did not yet exist in Los Angeles, so the transit-oriented "suburbs" of Boyle Heights, Burbank, Glendale and others sprang up around a much smaller downtown than was the case in those older eastern cities" (Scott & Soja, 1996, p. 108). Without a walkable urban core, the plaza loses its purpose.

"Crusade to Secure the City"

Another major reason that traditional forms of public space, like plazas, are not abundant in Los Angeles is the privatization of the city, as is written about extensively by Davis. Public space has been long-discussed in U.S. cities and Los Angeles. Especially in recent decades, issues of public space in Los Angeles have been complicated by urban renewal projects and privatizing forces. Davis sees what he calls the "crusade to secure the city" as plaguing Los Angeles and other American cities (Davis, 1990, p. 223). This crusade, Davis explains, is the push to turn cities into controlled, profitable, homogenous entities that propagate illusions of safety to cater towards luxury and marketability, rather than diverse, connective urban life. This is demonstrated in an obsession with security-oriented, isolating, aesthetics-based design and "the architectural policing of social boundaries" (Davis, 1990, p. 223). In order to profit off of "public" places, these places must cater towards the upperclasses and push out those on the margins, the poor and the unhoused.

Privatizing forces also push out urban vitality. Cities, according to urban scholar Jane Jacobs and as I will discuss later on, thrive on activity and contact with others. The result of privatizing forces is "urban redevelopment" plans that increasingly border up cities and destroy accessible, open public space. A prime example of privatizing forces at play in Los Angeles can be seen in privately owned plazas downtown.

The Effect of Privatization on Traditional Public Space: Plazas

Loutkaitou-Sideris and Peterson both explore the effect of privatization on public spaces in their case studies on privately owned public plazas in Downtown L.A. (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1993; Peterson, 2006). Privately Owned Public Spaces, or POPS, are an important concept in the

conversation around public space and privatization, as they are increasingly popular "solution" to what some people and governments believe are the problems of cities (e.g., crime, the presence of unhoused people, poor people, people experiencing mental health or drug issues, uncleanliness) (Davis, 1990).

In her case study, Loukaitou-Sideris examines the development process and design characteristics of three plazas in Downtown L.A. (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1993). Loukaitou-Sideris describes one major drive towards privatization in Los Angeles: past policy—especially property tax policies. These policies have led to a reduction in funding for public spaces. Proposition 13, enacted in 1978, has had a large impact on public open spaces. Proposition 13 "requires assessment of each taxable property based on its fair market value and limits a property owner's general levy tax to 1 percent of the assessed value" (*Los Angeles County Office of the Assessor*, n.d.). Public spaces felt this cut deeply. In 1981, twenty-four recreation centers were closed, and funds for the rest were reduced significantly (Loukaitour-Sideris, 1993). One of the solutions to this funding reduction for public spaces was privatization, exhibited in the POPS she focuses on in her study.

Loukaitou-Sideris argues that the kind of design choices made in plazas fueled by private forces lead to spaces which prioritize solitude, homogeneity, and order as its top values, rather than connection, diversity, or newness. One of the main design features of the three plazas was introversion—or an interior to the plaza which is hidden or not visible from the outside streets. This can look like plazas which are elevated or lowered from street-level, have high walls or limited street access. This kind of design removes the user from the activity of the street, isolating the plaza from spontaneous city life. In fact, at two of the plazas, 40% to 45% of people surveyed in Loukaitou-Sideris' case study named "solitude" as a reason they were attracted to

the plaza. Additionally, Loukaitou-Sideris writes that many of these plazas emphasize a modernist design—an architectural style that prioritizes minimalism and sleekness—to emulate luxury and create a clean design look.

These characteristics create a sanitized image of the city—one that detracts completely from the natural, spontaneous life of cities that is created by the people who inhabit them. Loukaitou-Sideris writes that the purpose of the POPS she studied "reflect a desire for escapism and relief from the city" (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1993, pp.153). If plazas are traditionally understood as meeting grounds for urban life, which facilitate human connection and interaction, the features of the privatized plaza detract from this purpose entirely.

Peterson also explores the drive toward profit and the increasing privatization of public spaces in a case study of California Plaza in Downtown L.A (Peterson, 2006). California Plaza (a privately-owned public plaza) was built on what was once the neighborhood of Bunker Hill, in an attempt at "urban renewal." For the purpose of eliminating poverty and crime in the area, Bunker Hill was targeted for an urban renewal project in 1958 that demolished the neighborhood and displaced at least 8,000 people (Halperin, 2025). What replaced the neighborhood was intended to be turned into public space. Peterson argues, however, that the downtown plaza constructed on this razed neighborhood was built on the premise of an "idealistic public" from a "mythical past" to ease present-day anxieties about what an appropriate and good public looks like (Peterson, 2006, p. 358). Here, Peterson suggests that the plaza was constructed to fit the image of what a "good" city and "good" city-goers look like—a sanitized version of urban life—rather than to hold the natural life of the city.

Features of the California Plaza are similar to those downtown plazas that Loukaitou-Sideris describes in her case study—separation from street life, surveillance-oriented

design, and modernist style (see Figure 3). Much like the three plazas in Loukaitou-Sideris' case study, California Plaza is removed from the street, stripping it of democratic use. Peterson argues that California Plaza is built under the premise of an "agreement" signed onto by the public—an agreement based on order and cooperation: "Organizing public life around consent rather than dissent erodes what is considered a fundamental aspect of democratic public space" (Peterson, 2006, p. 359). If we understand public plazas in Los Angeles as being defined by privatizing pressures that market to a general, "mythical" public rather than create space for a specific, place-making public, we must turn elsewhere to see urban vitality in L.A.

Figure 3: California Plaza (Grand Performances, 2021)

Sidewalk Theory

Urban scholar and author Jane Jacobs wrote that "streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs" (Jacobs, 1961). Jacobs sees sidewalks as what makes up the image and experience of a city: "Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 29). Seeing sidewalks as an incredibly important part of urban life, Jacobs describes qualities of a vibrant city sidewalk—the major quality being people *on* the

sidewalk. One of the most important points Jacobs makes is that *people* are what attract people to sidewalks—not a certain aesthetic or design style. She rejects the idea that "city people seek the sight of emptiness, obvious order and quiet. Nothing could be less true" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 37). Urban vitality and a "good" sidewalk depend on the presence of people—to ensure people feel safe, to draw people to a space, to allow people to come into contact with others. Jacobs also stresses the importance of "a clear demarcation between what is public space and what is private space" to maintain what she calls "city privacy" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 35). "City privacy" refers to the positive interactions one has with other city-goers of different backgrounds that does not bleed into each other's private lives and maintains the vitality of public life. This is one approach to understanding public space and life. However, some urban scholars have challenged this notion.

Tension Between Public and Private

While Jacobs emphasizes the essentiality of private-public boundaries, urban planner and scholar Margaret Crawford contests the rigidity of the public-private binary all together. In her journal article "Contesting the Public Realm: Struggles over Public Space in Los Angeles," she argues that despite the narrative of loss around public space, "urban residents are constantly remaking public space and redefining the public sphere through their lived experience" (Crawford, 1995, p. 4). Los Angeles residents are shaping public, urban space throughout the city, despite an overall agreement amongst critics that "The city's traditional public spaces support the argument that public space and public life in the city are either commodified, bankrupt, or nonexistent," as can be seen in the case studies of both Loukaitou-Sideris and Peterson (Crawford, 1995, p. 5). However, Crawford uses street vending and the presence of

unhoused communities as examples of groups that push the boundaries of the public and private divide in Los Angeles, and make demands of an urban environment which frequently excludes those on the margins.

Latino Urbanism and Place-Making

This contestation Crawford introduces in her article proposes a tension critical to understanding Rojas' term *Latino urbanism*. *Latino urbanism* refers to the way Latinos—marginalized in Anglo-centric urban spaces—shape the built environments they inhabit. In his writing on urban expression and space-use in Los Angeles, Rojas examines the way Mexican and Mexican Americans use front yards and streets in residential areas to engage in *place-making*. *Place-making* refers to people collectively shaping and reinventing public spaces in accordance with the community's needs or desires for the space (*What Is Placemaking?*, n.d.). He demonstrates that in interactions with one another, physical infrastructure, and what he calls "props" (such as sofas or plastic chairs), Latinos turn their "private" lives into public expressions and vice versa. Central to Rojas' work is the idea that the boundaries of public and private are not so cut-and-dry. In a 2015 interview with Rojas, he explains this idea in relation to the traditional European or Latin American plaza:

> "Take the use of public versus private space. The American suburb is structured differently from the homes, *ciudades*, and *ranchos* in Latin America, where social, cultural, and even economic life revolves around the *zócalo*, or plaza. In the U.S., Latinos redesign their single-family houses to enable the kind of private-public life intersections they had back home" (Rojas, 2015).

Rojas uses the single-family home to demonstrate this kind of urban expression. In East L.A., Mexicans and Mexican Americans may bring a couch out onto their lawn, or use their fence as a meeting place with neighbors and friends. This is a form of place-making which turns what

might otherwise be general public right-of-way into streets and sidewalks full of connection and expression.

Urban Vitality Case Studies

Other case studies have explored the patterns of urban activity in major cities, attempting to reveal what kinds of infrastructure support vitality and connection. One case study uses Photovoice to assess youth perceptions of urban vitality in public spaces in Barcelona, Spain (Gomez-Varo, 2023). In this study, they ask youth from ages fifteen to twenty-four to take photographs of features or spaces that do or do not contribute to a sense of urban vitality. They then have youth select fifty-one photographs to discuss how they fit into the concept of urban vitality in public spaces. Using the commentary from youth in five sessions of the Photovoice study, the researchers synthesize the participants' perceptions of these selected spaces. The study identifies six different themes: outdoor public spaces, urban furniture, facilities and local businesses, buildings and their relationships to the outside streets, orography, and symbolic meanings of vitality. Among other findings, researchers find that micro-scale features of urban space, such as "urban furniture," as well as broader qualities, like mixed-use environments, are important to the participants' perception of vitality. An additionally important theme in the study was activity around private spaces, such as restaurants and bars, encroaching on public space. While this case study focuses on holistic neighborhood vitality—this might look like having a place to go on a peaceful walk as well as the presence of public seating on the street—my study aims to explore vitality through a lens of interaction and connection with other people and the built environment. What spaces allow people to be in relation with one another and their urban environment?

In a case study of Portland, Oregon, authors Lenore Newman and Katherine Burnett examine the city's relationship with street vending and vibrant urban spaces. Portland has an extensive street vending scene. By the 1980s "city planning began to include spaces for food carts" (Newman and Burnett, 2012, p. 237). The results of Newman and Burnett's study attribute part of the vibrancy of the street vending culture in Portland to several qualities of urban form in the city: small blocks, pedestrianism—created in part by street vending itself—and the space created by surface parking lots which, normally "dead space," are zoned for retail use. Newman and Burnett write: "the presence of street food prevents the parking lots from being dead space, as the edge space is used for commerce, contact, and socialisation" (Newman and Burnett, 2012, p. 239). In this study, the authors mention some of the different purposes street vending serves compared to sit-down restaurants:

> "While restaurants in downtown Portland provided table service and indoor seating, food carts offered quick and relatively inexpensive takeout meals. Unlike the more institutionalised and regularised restaurants, food carts added a degree of spontaneity to the urban landscape" (Newman and Burnett, 2012, p. 243).

In my case study, I focus on how this kind of urban feature encourages urban vitality and connection on the *sidewalks* themselves.

Conclusion

Understanding the conditions under which public space has been constructed and shaped in cities globally and specifically in Los Angeles frames the way I approach this case study. Jacobs informs my view of the sidewalk as essential to urban life. Urban expressions like those explored by Rojas in his work are excellent jumping off points for my research, as they highlight informal but demonstrative practices that exist within restrictive, and often privatized urban environments. Seeing these kinds of practices as integral to urban vitality, my case study focuses

specifically on where and how urban expression and place-making does and does not show up on the sidewalks of my two sites. In Los Angeles, Rojas posits that “The concern of the enacted environment is the ground level; the curb, the sidewalk, the asphalt. All pictures I used, except for one, were shot at eye level. Real life begins where people meet the ground, not by the images and abstractions of skylines.” (Rojas, 1991, p. 90). My case study also asserts that real urban life begins where people meet each other and will ask the question of *where* and *how* that happens on the streets of Highland Park.

Research Design

The data I collected for my case study project comes from a combination of participant observation, survey, and photography to demonstrate what I found in my participant observation. The combination of participant observation and survey make up a general ethnographic approach to the data collection involved in my project, however the focus is not on one subculture but rather detailed observation and data collection focused on two sites in Highland Park.

Participant observation and surveying street users were my main data collection methods as the findings seek to directly address my primary question: In lieu of plazas or central public spaces—which serve as obvious meeting points in urban life—where and how do people experience and create urban vitality? The participant observation and surveys took place at two sites on York Boulevard and Figueroa Street, the two main thoroughfares in Highland Park. I selected several blocks of the street to study—on York Boulevard between Ave 50 and Ave 57 and on Figueroa Street between Ave 50 and 60—each section approximately one and a half miles (see Figures 4 and 5).

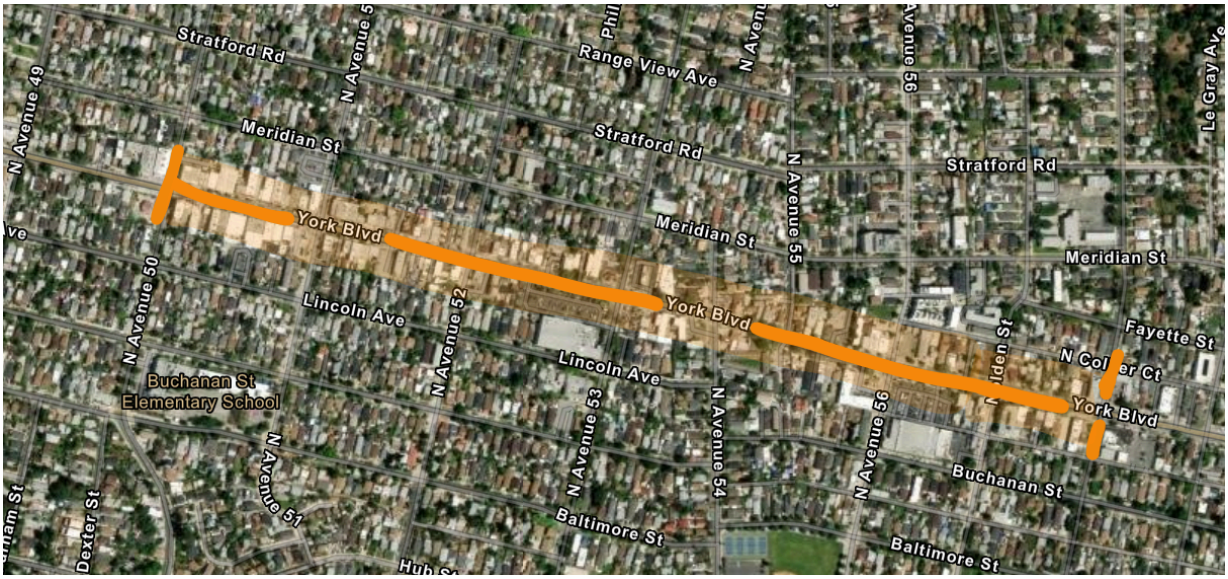

Figure 4: Avenue 50 to Avenue 57 of York Boulevard.

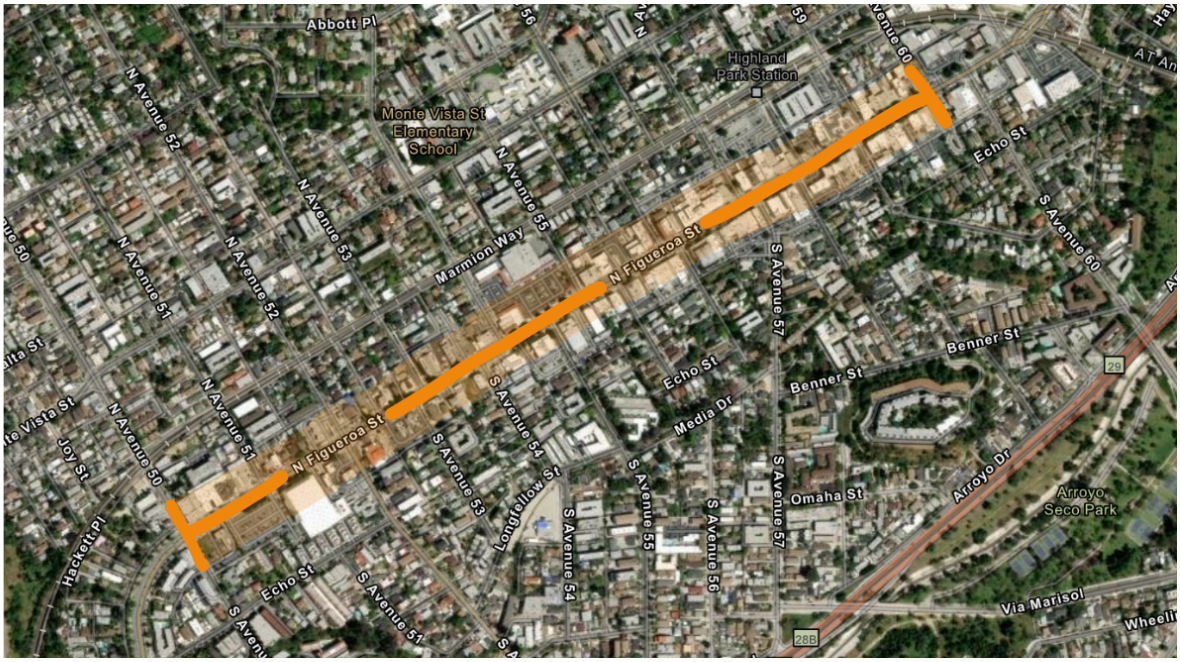

Figure 5: Avenue 50 to Avenue 60 of N Figueroa Street.

Both sites exhibit important characteristics of "good," vibrant city streets, according to the criteria of Jane Jacobs (Jacobs, 1961). Each of these streets has users on it fairly consistently during the day and in the evenings and has a diverse commercial presence. Jacobs explains that the presence of people on city streets is made possible through an abundance of stores, bars, and restaurants, as well as public spaces (Jacobs, 1961). The streets of York and Figueroa meet this criteria of an abundance of establishments which draw people to the street. However, neither of these streets has a public plaza or park located near its high-foot traffic blocks—with the exception of a gated playground on the corner of York Blvd and Avenue 50. This leaves sidewalks as the main public right-of-way on these parts of the street. The goal of my project was to observe and analyze where and how urban vibrancy happens even without this traditional open, public infrastructure. The focus of this observation was on sidewalks, and more specifically the space between the road and the structures on each street.

The participant observation focused on people's behavior with one another and with the built environment on the sidewalks of the two streets. When conducting this part of the data collection process, I used the Public Space Research Group Center for Human Environments's Toolkit for the Ethnographic Study of Space (TESS) and "Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes" by Emerson et al. (1995) as guides. The TESS lays out the process for writing field notes, mapping a space, conducting participant observation, and interviews.

The questions that guided my observations were:

- Why/when do people use the sidewalks?
- Do they use sidewalks to get from Establishment A to Establishment B or Establishment A to their cars?
- Do people linger/hang out on the sidewalks? If they do, where and how?
- Do people sit? If so, where?
- Where is urban activity—eg. People interacting on the streets, vending, farmers markets—centered on these streets?
- Where do people come into contact with one another?
- What kinds of infrastructure on the streets encourages interaction between people?

I additionally used questions from the TESS to reflect on my positionality during my participant observation and surveys: What did I learn about the space from my own experience? What unexpected ideas or questions emerged? Were there any surprises? What was it like to be a participant? Did I learn anything about how other users might feel and experience the space? (Low, et al., 2019).

I conducted participant observations during two-hour blocks in the afternoon and in the evening on both weekdays and weekends to get a full picture of street use on different days of the week and at different times of day (see Table 1). These participant observations took place in late October and early November of 2025. This data collection highlights pedestrian use of space and has informed my best practices and policy intervention on how to best support people's use of sidewalks.

Day	Time	Location
Weekday (Tuesday)	Morning/Afternoon (11am-1pm)	York
Weekday (Friday)	Morning/Afternoon (11am-1pm)	Figueroa
Weekday (Monday)	Evening (5pm-7pm)	York
Weekday (Tuesday)	Evening (5pm-7pm)	Figueroa
Weekend (Saturday)	Afternoon (3:30pm-5:30pm)	York
Weekend (Sunday)	Afternoon (1:30pm-3:30pm)	Figueroa

Table 1: Days of the week and times that the participant observations were conducted.

To collect information on users' perceptions and feelings about York and Figueroa, I conducted surveys of street-users at the two sites. To recruit participants for the surveys, I stood and walked around several different blocks at each site. Depending on the busyness of the sidewalk at the time, I approached every *N*th person on the street to reduce bias. *N* was different at each site and I established the *N* upon arriving at the site each time I went out to survey. When first approaching my survey participants, I introduced myself and the project, and asked them if they would be willing to spend five minutes on the survey. I asked participants to answer several

questions (see Appendix B). To incentivize participation, I compensated my survey participants with funding I was awarded through Occidental's Academic Student Project Grant. I offered survey participants a $10 gift card as compensation for their time and responses.

To analyze the qualitative data from my participant observation and surveys, I used structural coding to identify patterns toward answering my research questions.

I used some photography to visually document and illuminate street-use patterns by street-users on York Blvd and Figueroa St. I use this as part of my data collection and to demonstrate my findings to readers.

Limitations

I want to note several limitations to my project. Firstly, participant observation as a data collection method is at risk of being affected by bias and subjectivity. While I did my best to reflect on my positionality and potential biases during the data collection and analysis process, this remains important to consider in this case study. Secondly, due to time constraints, the sample size of my surveys was limited to 10 participants.

Findings and Analysis

Through my data collection, I aimed to answer the following question: where and how do people experience and create urban vitality on the sidewalks of Highland Park? Several themes developed from my findings: sidewalk use as almost exclusively related to business patronage, the use or non-use of public, private, and informal seating, as well as the impact of street vending and one-time and weekly events on urban vitality. I want to note that I often use the informal phrase "hang out" in my descriptions of street-use patterns. This phrase is meant to describe instances where street-goers stand, sit, eat, drink their coffee on the sidewalk without an obvious purpose (e.g. waiting for the bus, waiting for a friend, or waiting to be seated at a restaurant), aside from simply enjoying the life of the street.

Activity: Private Establishments

One of the major findings of this research is that the overwhelming majority of activity on the sidewalk on both streets is directly and indirectly related to the patronage of private establishments on the street. A recurring theme in my observations was people using the sidewalks to get from establishment to establishment and lingering on the sidewalks only when waiting to order food at a restaurant or to receive their food. In my participant observation on York, I noted several times that activity between Ave 50 and Ave 51 consists mostly of people going to and from the coffee shops, clothing stores, art supply stores, and restaurants. On both streets, the use of the sidewalk to go from Point A to Point B is prominent. I often observed that groups of people not only walk to and from the different establishments on the street, but often conversation is centered around which ones to enter. These sections of sidewalk seem to be dominated by activity related to the establishments and private spaces on the street. Under these

conditions, the life of the sidewalk becomes less about the sidewalk itself and more about what is behind the doors of restaurants, bookstores, galleries, coffee shops and clothing stores on the street. This essentially privatizes the street.

When I asked survey participants on York what they like most about the street, two participants identified the businesses as the most attractive quality about the street ("The type of businesses on this street" and "The restaurants and bars to hang out with people at"). In response to a prompt about what they would change about the street, several of the participants on both streets mentioned establishments they'd like to see open. One participant I spoke to while he waited for the bus joked with me multiple times saying "the only thing I want to change is for there to be a 99 cents store." Another participant said he wanted something open 24 hours. A third participant said she wished that the busyness of the street was not so dependent on the block, with most of the activity being on Ave 51 to Ave 52. One woman I spoke to who works on Figueroa mentioned some storefronts that are closed and said "it would be nice if they were open." Each street's establishments were major focuses of survey responses. This privatization of the sidewalk is also reflected in the seating options on the street.

Seating: Public

Seating is an important aspect of urban street life because it allows pedestrians to enjoy the activity of the street, while being a part of that activity as well (Whyte, 1980). I noted overwhelmingly that public seating on the sidewalks is extremely limited on York and Figueroa. The most popular use of public seating along York and Figueroa is that of bus benches. The use of public transportation is a significant draw of people to the sidewalks (see Image 1). The bus benches serve as a place for resting, especially while waiting for the buses. I experienced this

myself when I sat down at a bus stop bench on Figueroa, as there was nowhere else on the street to sit down that was not attached to a business. Within a couple of minutes, a woman sat down next to me and we struck up a conversation.

The public seating options that are not bus benches on York and Figueroa are clustered around the brick-and-mortar businesses that bring the most activity to the streets. On York, these public seating options consist mainly of a couple benches between Ave 50 and Ave 52. I noted several times in my observation that these benches were not consistently in-use, with the exception of benches outside of a popular restaurant on the corner of Ave 51 and York. The bench outside of this restaurant is consistently in-use during the peak operating hours of the restaurant (from 12 p.m. to 10 p.m.). People use it to wait to be seated or to eat their take-out. Similarly, on Figueroa, one of the only public seating options is a bench outside of a string of restaurants between Ave 59 and Ave 60. In one instance, I sat down at this bench to observe, and a couple followed suit several minutes later, eating their takeout on the bench next to me.

Image 1: People using the bus benches in front of a taco truck next to a car wash on York Blvd.

Most survey participants reported being dissatisfied with the seating options on the street (see Figure 6). Two participants, both of whom work at businesses on York, remarked that there was virtually no seating on the sidewalk that was not a bus stop or did not belong to a private business. One participant, when asked about public seating on the street, said "I think LA in general doesn't do that."

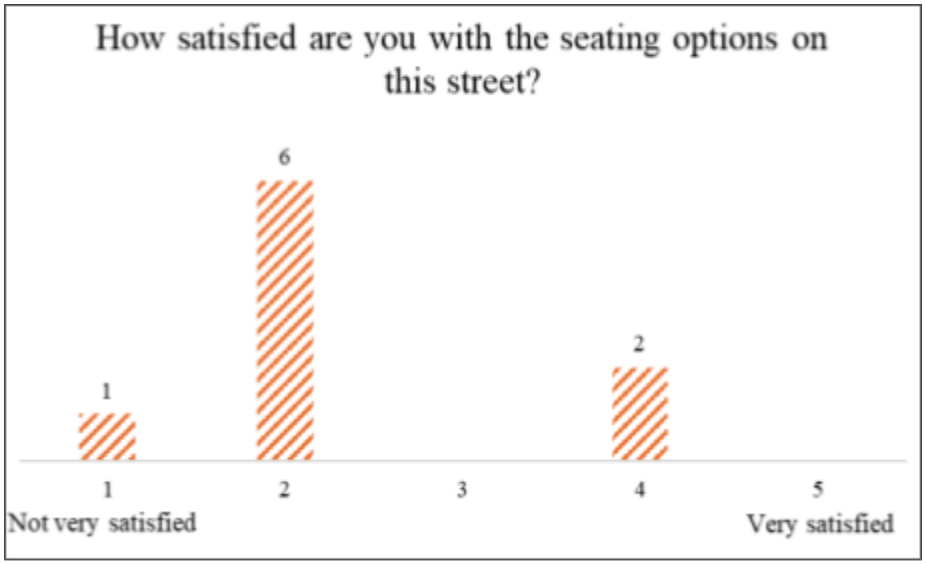

Figure 6: Nine survey responses to a question about seating.

Seating: Private

I noted in my participant observation that private seating makes up the overwhelming majority of sidewalk seating options on both Figueroa and York. During my observations on York between 11am-1pm, the outdoor seating of cafes between Ave 50 and Ave 51 was consistently in use. The same was true of several restaurants on Figueroa, especially between Ave 59 and Ave 60.

The drawback from this form of sidewalk activity, however, is that it privatizes the sidewalk. This form of seating is often coupled with signage that says something like "for

customers only" (see Image 2). Due to the fact that this seating is private, that form of sidewalk activity is bound by the establishment it is attached to. During my participant observations on York, I noticed that in the evening hours on weekdays, when the coffee shops close, their seating is removed from the street. After the coffee shops close, the space that originally provided a place for street-goers to hang out loses its hospitality. In comparison to an established park or plaza, this vessel for urban vibrancy is limited in scope.

Image 2: Outdoor seating at a coffee shop on York Blvd between Ave 50 and Ave 51.

There are, however, plenty of private seating options on the street that go consistently un-used. For example, on York there is a set of outdoor seats on the sidewalk outside of a record store between Avenue 56 and Nolden Street (Images 3 and 4). This seating has several qualities which might discourage use based on the research of urbanist and sociologist William H. Whyte. Whyte writes: "Benches are design artifacts the purpose of which is to punctuate architectural

photographs. They are most often sited in modular form, spaced equidistant from one another in a symmetry that is pleasing in plan view" (Whyte, 1988, p. 116). Whyte posits here that benches often lose their functionality in the name of symmetry and aesthetic. While this may be considered an overgeneralization, I noted several times benches on the street which seems to prioritize "pleasing" symmetry over pedestrian use. The bench pictured in Image 3 is shallow and the plants on top of it make it hard to sit comfortably. Importantly, these benches are not concentrated where human activity is. These benches are removed from most of the pedestrian activity on York. Many urbanists like Whyte assert that people like to be where other people are, which is why Whyte instead advocates for two other main forms of seating: integral seating and (moveable) chairs (Whyte, 1980; Jacobs, 1961). I observed the use of integral seating and moveable chairs throughout my data collection on York and Figueroa.


Images 3 and 4: Benches attached to a record shop on York Blvd between Ave 56 and Nolden Street.

Seating: Informal—Integral and Moveable Seating

Despite the lack of formal public seating, people manage to create seating options on the sidewalk for themselves through "informal seating." Informal seating is the most popular form of public seating on both streets. Informal seating can be broken down into two types, according to

Whyte: integral seating and moveable chairs. On York and Figueroa, this informal seating takes many different forms: retaining walls in parking lots, ledges of planters, foldable chairs, and curbs (see Image 5). I noted that this kind of space-use happens in groups or on parts of the sidewalk close to some sort of urban activity—outside of restaurants, strip malls, bus stops, or food stands and trucks. In one case, a group of people picked up food from a burger place on the street, and rather than eat it in the designated indoor-outdoor seating area, they opted to sit on the side of a building facing the street. This observation supports the idea that people in urban settings are drawn to one another and will shape their own environments to make this kind of interaction and connection possible.

Image 5: Someone using a retaining wall as seating on York Blvd.

I categorize moveable chairs (regardless of if they belong to a business or not) as informal seating because their use is dictated by the user rather than a business owner or city government. Especially heavy, tied down, or strictly-managed private seating does not allow itself to be shaped by the user. An example of this kind of seating might be heavy, metal chairs outside of a cafe. An example of a moveable chair might be a plastic or folding chair outside of a food stand or outside a residence on the street. Many of the businesses along York and Figueroa, both brick-and-mortar establishments and stands or trucks, have these types of moveable seating (Image 6). One

prominent pupusa stand on York that I ate at during one of my participant observations had this kind of seating at a table on the street. Throughout my meal, people who came to eat moved the chairs to fit more people at the table or so they could wait for their food. This kind of agency in urban experience is the kind that James Rojas describes in his concept, *Latino urbanism*, where people shape their own urban environments. These patterns are seen in other forms of place-making that I will expand upon further in my results.

Image 6: Moveable seating outside of a restaurant on York Blvd.

I frequently also observed people using their cars as “seating” on the street. On both streets, I observed people sitting in their cars to eat, to talk, and even, at times, to work. When one faces a lack of public, usable seating options, the car is as good as any. If most desirable seating options come with a paywall, people will retreat to their own, private space. But our cars do not connect us to the street and other users of it in the same way a pedestrian experience does.

Activity: Street Vending

Street vending is a prominent example of activity on sidewalks on both York and Figueroa, and is often partnered with the kind of informal seating I outlined above. As with brick-and-mortar businesses, food stands and trucks are hotspots of activity on both streets. The difference between these two types of business activity is that street vending brings and keeps people out on the sidewalks. The sights, sounds, smells, and personal interaction that public spaces like plazas and parks traditionally allow for is introduced to the sidewalks through activity like this.

Additionally, in my coding process, I found a strong correlation between street vending and open space (see Image 7). The majority of food stands and trucks on York are located in front of the Super A Foods parking lot and in a car wash parking lot (see Figures 10 and 11). On Figueroa, the same patterns emerge outside of the Grocery Outlet and Food 4 Less (see Figures 7 and 8 below). These open spaces allow for non-traditional use of space—a retaining wall for a parking lot becomes a seat, a wide sidewalk allows the place for a food stand, table and chairs. Because of the rules and regulations imposed by the City of Los Angeles Bureau of Street Services, street vendors are limited in location—street vendors cannot be within certain distances from various street infrastructure and cannot block the flow of pedestrian traffic (City of Los Angeles Bureau

Image 7: A fruit and goods stand in the parking lot of the Bank of America on Figueroa St.

of Street Services, 2024). This makes any open, public space an important potential site for street vending and the human activity that it encourages.

Many of the instances of urban vitality that I observed and experienced during my participant observation were forms of place-making. The most salient examples of activity and connection on the sidewalks of York Blvd and Figueroa St were activity around street vending. Not only does street vending create economic opportunities for Angelenos who otherwise would not have access to business ownership, but it brings what is typically private (a brick-and mortar-establishment) out into the public, urban experience of sidewalks. With street vending, urban vitality is no longer relegated to inside the walls of private businesses, but is brought out onto the sidewalk for everyone to enjoy. Additionally, on both York Boulevard and Figueroa Street, the retaining walls of supermarket parking lots become places to sit and connect (see Image 8). On Ave 55 of Figueroa St, people bring their own chairs to the supermarket parking lot and vending encourages people to linger on the street. As Rojas describes in his writing on *Latino urbanism*, bringing "private" furniture out into public spaces is a common example of place-making in Latino communities in Los Angeles. On York Blvd, the

Image 8: Ave 55 on Figueroa St is a popular block for street vending and creation of informal seating.

open space of concrete parking lots and car washes provide space for patrons to hang around the taco truck or the pupusa place, which become gathering places.

Figure 7: Each red pin represents a food stand or truck on Figueroa. Building labels are meant to show the surrounding built environment.

Figure 8: Each red pin represents a food stand or truck on Figueroa. Building labels are meant to show the surrounding built environment.

Figure 10: Each red pin represents a food stand or truck on York Blvd. Building labels are meant to show the surrounding built environment.

Figure 11: Each red pin represents a food stand or truck on York Blvd. Building labels are meant to show the surrounding built environment.

Activity: Events

Weekly and one-time events taking place on York and Figueroa had a significant effect on the liveliness of the street during the times I conducted my participant observation. On Figueroa, a weekly farmers market on Tuesdays fills what is normally road and parking spots with food stands and pedestrian paths (see Image 9 and Figure 11). The farmers market drew many people in and encouraged interaction, creating a pedestrian-oriented space. Benches on this side-street that normally went unused were in-use. A similar vitality was experienced on both streets during the 2025 World Series—bars opened their windows and doors to the streets and people hung out on the sidewalks watching the games on their phones or leaning against their cars. On a weekend afternoon during my participant observation, a concert was being set up on Figueroa. They converted road space into stage and audience space which drew people to the area. These kinds of one-time events bring new activity and interactions to each of these streets, but also reveal the significance of extending the open, public space that sidewalks provide. On Friday afternoons and some weekends on York, businesses bring out clothing stands and individuals set up tables to sell goods on the sidewalk.

Image 9: A weekly farmers market on Figueroa St.

When asked if the street encourages people to gather, one participant said, “I think on the weekends, when they put out the clothes on the street.”

Figure 11: The green highlight and pin represent the road area used for the weekly farmers market on Figueroa.

General Perceptions of Liveliness

Overall, survey participants rated the liveliness of both streets highly (see Figure 7). In their responses however, it was common for participants to mention that this liveliness was temporally-oriented. After giving their rating on a scale of “Very vibrant/lively” to “not very vibrant/lively,” many participants expanded naturally on the question. One participant said “It depends on the day and time,” another said that it can get “weird at night,” and another noted that it is “especially [lively] on the weekends.”

Figure 7: Ten survey responses to a question about the liveliness of the street.

When I asked participants how well they felt the street encourages people to gather or hang out on the sidewalks, most participants took a second to think about the question. Ratings varied among participants. When I asked a 59-year-old man who I spoke with at the bus stop, he said about York, "It gets them to move, check out places," and signaled down the street, motioning to show people moving.

Overarching Analysis

In Highland Park, much of the urban vitality that exists on the streets is in direct correlation to businesses on the streets. Survey participants identified this as well. Activity is oftentimes dependent on the operating hours of bars and restaurants. While it is considered important to have diverse businesses which attract people to a street (Jacobs, 1961), this kind of activity turns the public right-of-way of the streets into avenues for consumption and private interaction as opposed to sidewalks for democratic use, connection, and experiencing urban life. If a public space—in this case, the sidewalk—is merely a way by which to leave it (a direct line

from one's car to a restaurant, from a clothing store to a coffee shop), it is not much of a public space at all. If the purpose of the sidewalk is to get you off the street and into a store, a bar, a restaurant, it cannot hold all of the vibrance of urban life that a public space should.

Street vendors provided a partial antidote to this problem. Food trucks and stands turned empty space—a parking lot or a wide sidewalk on a less populated block—into seating out on the street. Open space, even in the form of a parking lot or blocked off road, allows for people to gather on and enjoy city sidewalks. If commerce is a main draw to sidewalks, let it be commerce that makes our sidewalks places of connection, community and expression.

Finally, a major takeaway from my research is that people will create places to linger on the sidewalk even when the built environment does not provide formal spaces to do so. I observed countless instances where people turned retaining walls, steps, planters, and the sides of buildings into places to sit, eat, or rest and even brought their own chairs from home to be able to sit and enjoy the street. When asked what he liked about the street, one survey participant I surveyed on Figueroa who had lived in Highland Park for 20 years said, "The environment and energy, the people, and the food." An indispensable part of that "energy" comes from this kind of place-making that people do on a daily basis in urban environments.

Although sidewalks play an important role in Los Angeles urban vitality, open public spaces are still essential for city life. There is still a need for open spaces that reflect a city's inhabitants and more park space in every neighborhood. However, even when given few resources to do so or when pushed to the margins, people find ways to create life and engage in place-making urban expressions. In Highland Park, these expressions came through in micro-interactions with the built environment on the neighborhood's sidewalks—the use of a

grocery store parking lot retaining wall as a vibrant gathering space on Figueroa, or the community created at the pupusa stand on York.

Recommendations

Urban connection and vitality can grow even in environments where open, public space is not abundant. However, cities can construct environments that allow this to happen more easily. City governments and agencies can create, inside of parks, plazas, and sidewalks, vessels for people to create the vitality that we enjoy so much. Based on the findings of this case study, I make three main recommendations to the City of Los Angeles, and specifically the City Council and the Bureau of Street Services.

1. Support the expansion of rights for street vendors.
    a. Implement protections for vendors from enforcement agencies.
    b. Support pilot projects that allow street vendors to self-govern.
        i. Support these efforts which are currently coming from community organizations at both the City and the County level.
    c. Purpose:
        i. Street vending brings economic and social vitality to parts of the streets that may otherwise be empty.
        ii. Street vendors often offer less expensive food options that may bring more economic and demographic diversity to the street (Newman and Burnett, 2012).
2. Encourage more community events that allow for road space to be pedestrian space temporarily.
    a. Collaboration between City Councilmembers and the Department of Cultural Affairs to support community and cultural events in each district.
    b. Purpose:

i. Bring people out of brick-and-mortar private establishments and onto the streets.

ii. Create public, pedestrian space where cars might otherwise dominate.

3. Build more public seating options on the sidewalk

   a. Create seating that brings people out onto the sidewalks and allows pedestrians to enjoy the streets (an example of this can be seen below, in Image 10).

   b. Purpose:

      i. Provide usable space in the public right-of-way sidewalks.

Image 10: Sidewalk-facing seating on York Blvd.

Conclusion

In many cities across the globe, urban areas have developed with dense, city cores and with walking as the main mode of transportation. Los Angeles developed as a poly-centric, low-density city, rewiring the "typical" orientation of major cities. Similarly, urban public spaces—which allow for people to experience diversity, spontaneity, and newness—are not the same in Los Angeles as in other cities around the world. Sidewalks are important forms of public space that have been studied before as essential places for urban life. I argue in this paper that they are especially important in Los Angeles.

The major finding that came out of my research is that most activity on the sidewalks of York Blvd and Figueroa St is directly or indirectly related to the businesses on the street. This was demonstrated also through the fact that the overwhelming majority of seating on the sidewalk is private. However, I also found that where there was not readily accessible public seating on the street, people created it—using retaining walls, ledges, planters, and steps as seating, and even bringing folding or plastic chairs out onto the street. Additionally, street vending was a major source of activity on the sidewalk. This sort of commercial activity brings people out onto the sidewalks, where brick-and-mortar establishments might not. One-time and recurring events were major draws to the sidewalks as well.

All of these findings suggest that people are drawn to the life of the sidewalk. In order to make these spaces usable and welcoming, the City needs to support street vending, community and cultural events which encourage gathering, and public seating. At the same time, it is important to recognize the ways people already shape their urban environments. This kind of activity on the streets is what makes our sidewalks truly public spaces where people are exposed to the diversity, spontaneity, and connectivity of the city.

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Appendix A: *Survey Participants*

Category	Count
Residential Neighborhood	
Highland Park	6
Eagle Rock	2
Downtown Los Angeles	1
Unspecified	1
Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic/Latino/a/e	2
White	4
Black	1
Asian American/Pacific Islander	1
Prefer not to answer	2
Gender Identity	
Female	3
Male	5
Non-binary/other	1
Prefer not to answer	1
Age (mean)	39
Years Living in Los Angeles (mean)	
1 year or less	2
Between 1 and 5 years	3
More than 5 years	2
Unspecified	3

Appendix B: *Survey Questions*

Questions:

Closed-ended

Why do you come to this street? / *¿Por qué viene a esta calle?*
Work / *Trabajo*
Public transit / *Transporte público*
Shopping / *Ir de compras*
Eating / *Comer*
To go for a walk / *Dar un paseo*
To meet up with someone / *Para reunirse con alguien*
To take my dog or child for a walk / *Para sacar a pasear a mi perro o niño*
Other / *Otro*

How often do you come to this street? / *¿Con qué frecuencia viene a esta calle?*
Every day / *Cada día*
Several times a week / *Varias veces a la semana*
Once a week / *Una vez a la semana*
A few times a month / *Varias veces a la semana*
Several times a year / *Varias veces al año*
Other / *Otro*

How do you get to this street? / *¿Cómo llega a esta calle?*
Car / *Carro*
Bike / *Bicicleta*
Walk / *Caminar*
Bus / *Autobús*
Train / *Tren*
Other / *Otro*

Do you feel like the businesses on this street satisfy what you're looking for/cater to you? / *¿Siente que los negocios de esta calle cumplen con sus necesidades/le atienden bien?*
Yes / *Sí*
No / *No*

Could you please expand? Why or why not? In what ways? / *Por favor, cuénteme más sobre su respuesta anterior. ¿Por qué o por qué no? ¿De qué manera?*

Do you feel welcome/comfortable on this street? / *¿Se siente cómodo/bienvenido en esta calle?*
Yes / *Sí*
No / *No*

Could you please expand? Why or why not? In what ways? / *Por favor, cuénteme más sobre su respuesta anterior. ¿Por qué o por qué no? ¿De qué manera?*

Scaled (1-5)

For the following questions, please answer on a scale from one to five. / *Para las siguientes preguntas, por favor, responda en una escala de uno a cinco.*

How would you rate the vibrancy and liveliness of this street? / *¿Cómo calificaría la energía o la vitalidad de esta calle?*

Not very vibrant 1 2 3 4 5 Very vibrant
Poco viva *Muy viva*

How well do you feel this street encourages people to gather? / *¿Qué tan bien cree que esta calle alienta a la gente a reunirse?*

Not very well 1 2 3 4 5 Very well
No muy bien *Muy bien*

How satisfied are you with the seating options on this street? / *¿Qué tan satisfecho está con las opciones de sentarse en esta calle?*

Not very satisfied 1 2 3 4 5 Very satisfied
No muy satisfecho *Muy satisfecho*

How well do you feel this street prioritizes pedestrians (as opposed to cars)? / *¿Qué tan bien cree que esta calle prioriza la experiencia de los peatones (en lugar de los carros)?*

Not very well 1 2 3 4 5 Very well
No muy bien *Muy bien*

Open-ended

Where do you spend most of your time on this street? / *¿Dónde pasa la mayor parte de su tiempo en esta calle?*

What do you enjoy most about this street? / *¿Qué es lo que más disfruta de esta calle?*

What do you not like about this street? / *¿Qué es lo que no le gusta de esta calle?*

"If I could change something about this street, I would…" / *"Si pudiera cambiar algo de esta calle, haría…"*

History

Where do you live? / *¿Dónde vive?*

If you live in Highland Park/Eagle Rock, how long have you lived here? / *Si vive en Highland Park/Eagle Rock, ¿cuánto hace que vive aquí?*

Demographics

If you feel comfortable answering, I have three demographic questions to ask, but no worries if you would rather not. / *Si se siente cómodo hacerlo, tengo tres preguntas demográficas, pero no se preocupe si prefiere no responder.*

What is your gender identity? What is your racial/ethnic identity? What is your age? / *¿Cuál es su género, identidad racial/étnica, y edad?*