

# The Beach versus “Blade Runner”: Recasting Los Angeles’ Relationship to Modernity

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On a quiet side street in Venice, California, three blocks from the bustling Ocean Front Walk, a mural that few tourists are likely to see offers a bitter commentary on the historic-geographic dynamics of the landscape they have come to visit (Figure 1). This is the landscape of Los Angeles’ “first” public park, the beach. Painted in 1975 (and re-furbished in 1997 by the community-based arts center SPARC (Social and Public Art Resource Center), the now graffiti-covered mural portrays a bulldozer and an excavator demolishing a simple, shore-adjacent cottage. As the house collapses a woman is revealed sitting cross-legged on the floor inside, making the viewer not only witness to a scene of violence but also an inadvertent peeping tom. The woman clutches her blue-scarfed head in fear and bewilderment while her cat leaps for safety. In the left foreground a group of Venetians protests the demolition, one by spray painting “Stop the PIG!” on a wall. “The People of Venice vs. the Developers” was painted when both property condemnations by the city and gentrification had begun to force out



**Figure 1.** “The People of Venice versus the Developers” (the Venetian spray-painting the words “STOP THE PIG” not seen, left). Photograph by Yoko Nasu.

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the area's low-income, retired and (most famously) beat residents in the 1970s. The increasing financial success of the adjacent pleasure-craft harbor (Marina del Rey), completed in 1965, the passage of Proposition 20 to "save the coast" from excessive development in 1972 and soaring inflation rates had all conspired to raise property assessments in Venice—once so ramshackle it was known as "Appalachia by the Sea"—by as much as 115%. A sign reading "Welcome to the Venice Canals" stands beside the mural today. Given that gentrification continues in the area, with Hollywood, dotcom and other "hipoisie" (hip bourgeoisie) drawn to its countercultural ethos and driving property values into the millions of dollars, the sign and the graffiti contribute diametrically opposing, adscititious ironies.<sup>1</sup>

But what does the mural tell us about the beach? To answer this question we must consider the contrast between the vibrant colors used to depict the collapsing house and the gray, monotonous background. On one level the artists' dual palette makes an obvious point: the city is replacing a unique beach community with the homogeneity of middle-class suburbia. On another level, however, the mural can be seen as reflecting the larger dynamics of modernist development in twentieth-century Los Angeles.

This paper seeks to interpret and elaborate on the mural, as follows: In the first section I expand on the mural's narrative about Los Angeles. According to this (familiar) narrative, the city exemplifies modernist patterns of development, often to the detriment of minorities, the poor and nature. The high-visibility of Los Angeles' modernist excesses (as represented by the Faustian destruction of the cottage and its inhabitant) has, however, obscured the fact that a broad stratum of Angelinos have historically shown ambivalence toward development and change. Thus while the movie "Blade Runner" is taken by some critics to accurately reflect the city's technology-and-change obsessed soul, Los Angeles' relationship to modernity deserves to be reexamined. In this paper, for example, I show that in the early 1970s Angelinos' attachment to place—in particular to the coast, a natural environment with the beach as its center—served as a barrier to modernist development. By joining the statewide movement to "save the coast" Angelinos stood up to a powerful local growth machine and indicated that, in certain contexts, their attachments to place could transcend their traditional allegiance to anti-big government, pro-private development values.

### **The Mural's Narrative: Los Angeles As a Modern City**

The growth of Los Angeles since the post-rancho period has exemplified in many respects the modernist "whirlwind" described so vividly by Marshall Berman – the disorienting norm precipitated by the tendency to develop and create the new by razing and burying the old. Berman revived

Marx's phrase "all that is solid melts into air" to describe the destabilization of experience as modernity removes familiar signposts, lifeways and landscapes to produce change. As the mural indicates, Los Angeles represents for many a supremely modern city in this sense. In the early decades of the twentieth century a "growth machine" spurred local development that rapidly transformed the city's physical environment while helping to establish a culture and an economy that continue to thrive upon artistic, scientific, industrial and personal invention and re-invention.<sup>2</sup>

While rapid change in the industrial sphere contributes to the well being of Los Angeles' post-fordist economy, modern Los Angeles has—like Goethe's development-obsessed Faust—produced its share of victims and tragic situations. The city's often alternately estranged and flippant relationship to its "disposable" past does more than exasperate the history-conscious while liberating moderns to act creatively.<sup>3</sup> To poor and minority groups who have suffered oppression and injustice in Los Angeles, for example, the metropolitan "juggernaut's" assertively forward orientation may suggest indifference to calls for an honest and thorough historical self-examination. The natural environment suffered egregiously as well.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore even as the developmental processes unfolding under the banner of "modernity" transformed Los Angeles in novel and unforeseeable ways, they operated through emplaced actors to (re)produce mostly familiar patterns of inequality and environmental despoliation.<sup>5</sup> Examples to underscore the point are abundant, but three moments in Los Angeles' twentieth-century development history stand out as emblematic. The first is the rejection of the 1930 Frederick Law Olmsted and Harland Bartholomew plan to preserve greenbelts around the Los Angeles River as part of a regional park system. Officials chose instead to channelize the river, turning a potential greenbelt into an aesthetically grim, concrete flood-control ditch that runs through low-income, park-deficient swaths of east and south Los Angeles.<sup>6</sup> The second is the eviction of some 300 Mexican-Americans from Chavez Ravine in 1959 and their ultimate replacement by the "Modern Marvel" of Dodger Stadium.<sup>7</sup> (This event is memorialized in another SPARC mural, "The Great Wall of Los Angeles," located in the Tujunga drainage wash.) The third is the bulldozing of 130 acres of what the pro-development *Los Angeles Times* called a "slum-blighted nightmare" atop Bunker Hill in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the assistance of more than \$50 million in federal urban renewal loans and grants.<sup>8</sup> The three examples illustrate the marginalization and erasure of the poor, minorities and nature under Los Angeles' modernist planning regime. It is important to note that while the word "regime" implies a unity of purpose and centralization of power that did not exist in Los Angeles' planning history (diverse groups of stakeholders jostled with public planning agencies to influence patterns of growth here as in other cities), the

guiding logic in these cases was similar. Cold, formalistic rationalism operated within a capitalistic system to make narrow, economic determinations of what constituted an area's "highest and best use." As Neil Smith and Setha Low observe, this logic derives historically from the Lockean reaction against aristocracy which privileges the bourgeois right to privatize and put land to its most profitable use. In the modern context, however, this logic operates independently of the Lockean proviso that such rights are valid only when "enough and as good" land is left for others. Cut loose from this concern for fairness, the "logic" too often becomes morally irresponsible in its call for economic development. Hence it was unmoved by the "evisceration, burial and social death" of the communities destroyed at Chavez Ravine and Bunker Hill or by the loss of verdant riparian landscape caused by the channelization of the Los Angeles River. Neither did this "logic" value Venice's modest residences when the City reassessed property values in the early 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the gray space surrounding the cottage in "The People of Venice vs. the Developers" evokes not only the encroachment of convention-bound suburbia, but also the undifferentiated space of modern planning. By failing to recognize and give value to the richly idiosyncratic meanings and emotions that people attach to specific places and to nature, the modernist sensibility projects a neutral, Cartesian space as a field for action. What this implies about the Los Angeles beach in particular is the subject of this paper.

The critique of modernism that emerges from the Venice mural (and other sources, popular and scholarly) has been complemented by a variety of efforts to reinsert the places and histories of marginalized groups and nature back into Los Angeles. Some of these efforts function simultaneously as reinsertions and as critiques of the regime that prompted them (such as the SPARC mural and the Power of Place's Biddy Mason Wall) while others seem to be more purely reinsertions (such as efforts to restore the ecology of the Los Angeles River and the placing of historical interpretive signs along the skyscrapered streets of Bunker Hill).<sup>10</sup>

Los Angeles is, of course, not unique as a modern city.<sup>11</sup> As a young, far-western American city that exemplifies modernity in striking ways, however, it has become a high-profile symbol of urban-based modernity. While not all reviews are negative (recall Rayner Banham's enthusiasm<sup>12</sup>), the general consensus constitutes a shadow over the city in popular as well as scholarly media. When seen inside this shadow the city is a Faustian-modernist *fait accompli*, albeit one scattered with signs of regret and remembrance. While critics formerly held up Nathanael West's novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939) as the most incisive fictionalized portrait of Los Angeles, for some Ridley Scott's movie *Blade Runner* (1982) has taken its place. West caricatured the bizarre adaptations to southern California urbanism by Midwestern immigrants who arrived with grandiose, booster-fueled illusions about the region; Scott, draw-

ing on Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel, presented a dystopic future of sensory-overloading, noirish techno-blight. West's book dealt with themes contemporary to its Depression-era publication; Scott's movie evoked multiple time periods simultaneously. As *Blade Runner* opens the viewer soars along a nightmarish, futuristic skyline in which jets of fire erupt from the towers of a sprawling oil refinery and jumbotrons beam advertisements from atop ziggurat-like towers. The camera then descends through layers of smog and darkness to a street scene reminiscent of a fictionalized 1940s-era Bunker Hill, a rain soaked warren of pedestrian alleyways where detectives and criminals alike lurk in shadows. The future is thus placed (literally) atop a darkly nostalgic past in this image, eliminating the chronological gap between them and evoking an eerie sense of the destabilization and change that is a hallmark of modernity.<sup>13</sup>

The larger ambition of this paper is to argue that this noirishly dark assessment of Los Angeles' relationship to modernity should be reassessed. Although many accounts suggest that the Faustian-modernist imperative to develop via destruction has had broad-based cultural support from the dominantly WASPy population, sustained challenges to development have also taken place. Recognizing this fact is a necessary step toward recasting Angelinos' relationship with modernity as having been more ambivalent than is often assumed.

In order to make its case, this paper focuses on a dramatic illustration of how Angelinos firmly opposed modern development when it threatened to destroy a symbolically central (if spatially marginal) landscape in their city, the beach. By joining the statewide movement to "save the coast" in the early 1970s, a movement that culminated in the passage of Proposition 20 in 1972 (and the subsequent enactment of the Coastal Act in 1976), Angelinos revealed that their attachments to place could, at least in some cases, trump their frequently expressed, pro-development, modernist sensibilities. A vote for Proposition 20 was a vote to encumber the operations of the free market with a powerful new layer of government bureaucracy and to withhold important resources from the growth machine—despite warnings of dire consequences from power companies, developers and government officials including Governor Reagan.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the Los Angeles River, Chavez Ravine and Bunker Hill, which were fed directly into the maw of the growth machine, the beach was perceived as a place whose "highest and best use" could not be measured in purely economic terms. Angelinos mobilized to protect the coast under the influence of three major factors: 1. The cumulative impacts of beach development under the modernist regime and the political precedent set for reigning in this development by the San Francisco Bay Conservation Development Commission (BCDC); 2. The increasingly acute lack of public park space in the rapidly growing metropolis; 3. The spread of the environmental move-

ment in the post-war era.

### Modernist Development and the Beach

With the emergence and growth of "Anglo" Los Angeles (the period beginning roughly with the arrival of the railroads in the 1870s and 1880s), the population grew in near-continuous jolts and the overwhelmingly white, middle-class civilization became more substantially integrated with its coast in two ways. First, Angelinos used the beach as recreational space. As Los Angeles' "first public park" the beach was transformed from a more or less natural state in ways that were roughly analogous to the ways in which urban parks were changing nationwide in the period. Previously, urban parks in America had been conceived as spacious enclaves of nature that would relieve the stress and uplift the morality of the urban-based working class.<sup>15</sup> In the post-Romantic period, however, parks became less "natural" in appearance and were segmented into zones for active recreational activities.<sup>16</sup> The Los Angeles beach likewise lost its natural appearance and became built up with recreational facilities. The second way the beach became integrated with the metropolis was as an extension of the city—a Cartesian space for development toward its "highest and best use." In other words, the modernist "whirlwind" began to engulf the beach into the "artificial landscape of urban-industrial patterns and forms" that spread over the Los Angeles River, Chavez Ravine and much of the vast Los Angeles basin with history-making speed. It was in opposition to this second type of transformation that the "save the coast" movement would mobilize. I begin with the first, however, to show that humanization of the beach per se was tolerated so long as the beach was made into a park-like landscape. It would not be tolerated when the beach was used for utilitarian development.<sup>17</sup>

The population of Los Angeles began to rise swiftly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but there was a lag before the shore became entrained into the path of development. Prior to the electric streetcar era, traveling to the coast from downtown was difficult and time consuming, inhibiting shoreline development. Moreover, the rugged topography of the Santa Monica Mountains helped deter visitors from exploring the coast to the north of Santa Monica. This area was so uncharted by Anglos that a 1908 *Los Angeles Times* story headlined "Strange Land's New Mystery" warned that a volcano "belching sulfuric fumes" had been reported near the beach in Pulgas Canyon. (Subsequent investigation by geologists revealed the source of the smoke to be a smoldering deposit of oil-rich Miocene shale just below the surface.)<sup>18</sup>

Patterns of property ownership established in the rancho period and obstacles presented by shoreline geography also conspired to limit beach de-

velopment along portions of the shore. Until 1910, for example, the coast from Venice south to Redondo remained under the control of a single family as the Sausal-Redondo Rancho. Even after electric streetcars made this section of beach accessible, the founding of beach resorts was discouraged by strong winds, shifting sand dunes and the rockiness of the surf zone. In the early 1870s development to the north of this area was patchy and included Shoo Fly Landing, a small pier used to ship asphaltum from the La Brea tar pits to San Francisco, and a campsite at the mouth of Santa Monica Canyon to which Angelinos trekked by horse and wagon over rutted roads.<sup>19</sup>

By the early 1900s, however, the beach had begun to become segmented and built up with structures in a way that paralleled the changes taking place in urban parks in the period. Thus by the early 1900s growing seaside communities like Santa Monica and Manhattan Beach had constructed piers to draw visitors, help market real estate and serve as practical elements of urban infrastructure.<sup>20</sup>

The completion of a coastal trolley route from Santa Monica to Redondo Beach in 1903 intensified user demand for recreation facilities along sections of the shore. The trolley developers, Moses Sherman and Eli P. Clark, attempted to establish a literary colony called Shakespeare's Beach at Redondo. The bid was unsuccessful, however, so they built and sold beach cottages instead. Evidence of the entrepreneur's abandoned dream can be found today in the street names of the area, which include Longfellow Avenue and Keats, Shelly and Tennyson Streets.<sup>21</sup>

In 1905 businessman Abbot Kinney launched another beach-related venture that had a lofty cultural side (even if this was lost amid its mass-entertainment appeal). Kinney's Venice of America was Los Angeles' first theme park and included a pleasure pier, a miniature railroad, sixteen miles of canals in which gondoliers paddled boats imported from Italy, arcaded buildings and a lecture hall meant for edifying public presentations. That same year Henry Huntington announced his intention to purchase the Redondo Improvement Company, which owned most of Redondo Beach.<sup>22</sup> Huntington had already gained control of the Redondo Railway, which operated two lines from Los Angeles. "The magic name of Huntington," as the *Los Angeles Times* put it, emboldened speculators and triggered a two-week real estate frenzy. As a result Huntington sold about three million dollars worth of Redondo Beach property. In the wake of this boom Huntington opened the Plunge at Redondo. With three heated pools, steam and Turkish baths, over 1000 dressing rooms and capable of holding 2000 bathers at a time, Huntington's facility was advertised as the largest indoor salt water plunge in the world. To lure the public to the area, Huntington hired George Freeth, now considered the father of modern-day surfing, to exhibit the sport to crowds gathered on the shore. Huntington had learned of Freeth from Jack London, who had writ-

ten an account of Freeth and his littoral avocation in "A Royal Sport," an essay first published in *A Woman's Home Companion* in 1907.<sup>24</sup> London had met Freeth after sailing his Snark to Waikiki Beach earlier that year. Entranced by Freeth's ability to "walk on water," London asked for lessons. He wrote in his essay:

Shaking the water from my eyes as I emerged from one wave and peered ahead to see what the next one looked like, I saw [Freeth] tearing in on the back of it, standing upright on his board, carelessly poised, a young god bronzed with sunburn.<sup>25</sup>

Soon after the essay was published Huntington's agents arrived in Hawaii to offer Freeth a job. From then until his death from influenza a dozen years later, Freeth would demonstrate surfing on a heavy wooden board at Redondo Beach.<sup>26</sup>

Santa Monica Beach, several miles north, would also become a major recreation center. Dutchman Charles I. D. Loeff, a former Coney island-based carousel maker, began construction of a pleasure pier in the town in 1916. Newspaper accounts convey the swirl of excitement surrounding the pier's construction as Loeff, hoping to complete the pier in time to draw crowds to Santa Monica's "north beach" for the summer season, had his men work in continuous shifts. Arthur Loeff, Charles' son, directed operations on the pier from dawn until midnight while crews drove pilings into the sea floor. On July 1, about a month before the pier's announced opening date, the *Los Angeles Times* covered a publicity stunt under the headline, "Great Amusement Pier Soon to be Finished." The article describes a scene of pandemonium as nearly a thousand Los Angeles Sunday school children boarded the Pacific Electric trolleys for the fourteen-mile trip to Santa Monica. Once there, they ignored a "keep out" sign that had been posted and "swarmed" over the pier, bringing construction to a halt. When the pier opened officially (almost a year behind schedule, on July 4, 1917) 100,000 visitors packed the wooden structure.<sup>27</sup>

Accounts such as these suggest that the coast became integrated with the growing city of Los Angeles as a particular sort of recreational space. The beach was not a romantic-type park, one that concealed overtly human elements in favor of picturesque renderings of natural scenery, as had nineteenth-century pleasure grounds. Instead, the beach was built up with artificial amenities as it became integrated with the metropolis to serve as a recreational space (Figure 2). This transformation occurred at a time when urban parks across the country were also being segmented and equipped with recreational facilities.

Although the beach was becoming a *de facto* urban park, it was simul-



**Figure 2.** The Santa Monica Pier looms like a miniature industrial skyline over the “Gold Coast” of beach homes in this 1927 photo. The pier and other recreational infrastructures up and down the coast segmented the beach into diverse recreational zones in early twentieth-century Los Angeles. This echoed the nationwide pattern in which large urban parks—originally envisioned as uncluttered, naturalistic landscapes—were broken into discrete, humanized zones for recreational activities. The Pacific Electric tracks, power lines and residential and commercial structures visible in the photo reveal that the beach was more than just a park, however. It was also used as developable space for housing, infrastructure, resource extraction and other utilitarian, non-recreational needs. (SECURITY PACIFIC COLLECTION/ Los Angeles Public Library.)

taneously being treated as developable space for housing, infrastructure, resource extraction and other utilitarian, non-recreational needs. Perhaps no story better illustrates the modernization of the beach in this regard than that of Malibu. It begins in 1887, when Frederick Hastings Rindge, a millionaire immigrant from Massachusetts, purchased a 27-mile long swath of former Chumash land along the Malibu coast. “When first I sought a country home I told a friend I wished to find a farm near the ocean, and under the lee of the mountains, with a trout brook, wild trees, good soil, an excellent climate, one not too hot in the summer.” Malibu was the perfect site for this personal arcadia, as Rindge wrote in his memoir, *Happy Days in Southern California*.<sup>28</sup>

Rindge was fiercely possessive of his Malibu Rancho, which he con-



**Figure 3.** The Malibu movie colony and the Pacific Coast Highway, three years before May Rindge's death. Rindge's home is visible on the hilltop in the left background. (The Benjamin and Gladys Thomas Air Photo Archives, Department of Geography, UCLA. Neg. 17a-0-5630. Malibu. 5 March 1938. Fairchild.)

sidered to be spiritually distinct from the corrupt world of the city. "It is delightful to live in such a place that, when the prevailing winds blow, one can send one's mind in the direction whence the wind comes, and realize that it sweeps over a pure expanse of ocean, or over righteous aromatic mountains; and not to be obliged to breathe the air that is blown over an iniquitous city." Thus even though Rindge was a successful Los Angeles businessman (he was President of the Conservative Life Insurance Company) and owned a second house in the city's West Adams district, he considered Malibu to be his spiritual center.<sup>29</sup>

Rindge lost paradise when flames destroyed his mansion in 1903. Two years later, he died. His wife, May, would claim that on his deathbed Frederick begged her to keep out developers and settlers and to preserve the Rancho, Frederick's earthly paradise, intact. In effect, Frederick thus charged May with the task of preventing the "whirlwind" that had begun to churn over Los Angeles (with Frederick's help) from sweeping Malibu into its Faustian path. May fought for three decades against development. She closed the private roads of the rancho to through-traffic, surrounded the entire property with fences and rode horseback with armed guards to chase away surveyors and thwart lawyers who came to serve papers.<sup>30</sup> At one point Interior Sec-

retary James R. Garfield personally visited the area to insist on the rights of homesteaders and settlers to cross the rancho. Rindge even defeated the Southern Pacific Railroad by building her own private railroad to facilitate public transportation through the area. Her fight against the railroad—a palpable expression of modernity and a literal machine in the garden—perhaps best symbolizes May Rindge’s campaign as anti-modern.<sup>31</sup>

Rindge lost one of the most protracted legal battles in California history, however, when in 1925 a superior court judge granted the state right of way across Rindge land to build the Pacific Coast Highway (California Highway 1).<sup>32</sup> The state’s voters also supported the project, having approved spending far beyond the road’s initial proposed budget. Unmoved by popular opinion, however, Rindge fought against the road’s construction. With an air of defiance she hemmed in the road after it was built with barbed wire fences. Many people, sensing that Rindge was losing ground in her fight to keep the Rancho intact, however, cut through the fences and set up squatter encampments.<sup>33</sup>

In 1927 Rindge exhausted her financial resources midway through the construction of her new, 40-room Malibu mansion, and was forced to lease part of the rancho. Real estate agent Art Jones opened an office for this purpose and began leasing lots on the barrier spit at the mouth of Malibu Creek. Thus the Malibu movie colony was born with Clara Bow, Barbara Stanwyck, Ronald Coleman, Jack Warner and other Hollywood celebrities as tenants (Figure 3). The incursion of popular icons from the movie industry represented a profound transformation of “the Malibu” (as the area was then called) from Rindge’s anti-urban ideal. Lawrence Clark Powell, the former California State Librarian, sensed the profundity of Malibu’s transformation while driving through Malibu on the new Highway 1:

On the day of the opening of the coast road back in 1928, after a long fight to gain a public right-of-way, I drove over it in a topless Hupmobile roadster from Santa Monica to Oxnard and back via Calabasas, an all-day trip, and even then the beaches were withheld by barbed-wire fence. I can still recall the sense of discovery I had during that first day on the Malibu, three hundred eighty-six years after Cabrillo.<sup>34</sup>

Powell’s “discovery” of a landscape that looked almost unchanged since the days of Cabrillo marked the end of the age of discovery—an age when landscapes retained an ageless, “natural” appearance—in Malibu. Lacking funds, May Rindge could no longer ban the public from the area. Rindge ended her reign as the so-called “Queen of the Malibu” in 1940 by putting the rancho up for sale. Powell saw the irony marked by Rindge’s abdication—the resultant freedom of access and discovery for Angelinos like himself meant that

soon there would be development and no new lands to discover. Thirty years after paralleling Cabrillo's voyage in his Hupmobile, Powell would reflect on this theme in an epitaph for Rindge:

May K. Rindge did not live long enough to know that her uncompleted hill-top home was sold for \$50,000 – to be transformed by the Franciscan Order into the Serra Retreat. She did not live to watch the bulldozers moving into the Malibu to level off the building sites and to gouge out driveways, nor the parade of trucks delivering lumber, sand and gravel, glass, fixtures, and furnishings. She did not see the advancing army of architects, contractors, and artisans.

Practically without funds, May K. Rindge died in her West Adams home on February 8, 1941 at the age of 75.<sup>35</sup>

Powell's comments reflect ambivalence toward the modernist transformation of the beach and adjacent coast. Although Rindge's defeat meant a victory for the public (the opening of a large private property provided space for the housing, recreation and transportation needs of a teeming metropolis), the victory was bittersweet. Not only did May Rindge personally suffer as a victim of Faustian development, but also the "parade" of developers turned a unique natural area into just more urbanized space.

Elsewhere along the coast the "parade" of development was also taking place. The beach and adjacent landscapes continued to draw crowds seeking recreational opportunities and engineers became ever more skilled at manipulating the geologically complex and dynamic environment to satisfy the demand. In 1958 Los Angeles County, with matching federal funds signed over by President Eisenhower four years earlier, enlisted the Army Corps of Engineers to carve through the beach at Playa del Rey to create a marina in the local salt marsh. Boasting 6,000 slips, Marina Del Rey became the largest man-made pleasure craft harbor in the world when it opened for public use in 1965.<sup>36</sup>

Even 30 years earlier, however, sizeable chunks of the shore had already been subsumed into urbanized space as a result of economic development. Long stretches of beach were blanketed with pollution-generating industrial activities, most notably oil drilling and shipping.<sup>37</sup> Oil operators fought with much success against wealthy coastal residents for the right to pump the estimated five billion barrels of crude that lay in sub-shore pools from Huntington Beach to Santa Barbara. Meanwhile, population growth in the region led to increased housing construction along the shore, with the attendant armoring causing beach and headland erosion up and down the region's—and the state's—coast.<sup>38</sup>

By the end of the 1960s, California would have the largest population in the nation, and the majority of Californians would be concentrated in coastal counties. Planners strove to facilitate this growth, but many of their plans would have significantly altered the coast's aesthetic character and further reduced public access. These projects illustrate the modernist view of the beach as unexceptional, that is, as space that is no more worthy of preservation than any other landscape being developed. Worse, from a coastal preservationist point of view, the centuries-old perception of wetlands as ugly, watery wastelands made much of the coast a preferred target for development.<sup>39</sup>

The unexceptionalist view of the coast fit neatly with the surging, mid-century faith in technology and progress. The political philosopher Langdon Winner, who grew up in the central coast county of San Luis Obispo in the 1950s, witnessed the destruction of its agricultural landscapes. As fields of winter tomatoes, Brussels sprouts, garbanzo beans and other crops were dug out to be replaced by freeways and subdivisions, the local community reacted with the ambivalence that is often aroused by modernity. "That's progress,' people would say; or 'You can't stop progress.' They certainly did believe these changes were for the better, but they also believed that somehow the process was beyond their control. They were mere spectators, consumers of change."<sup>40</sup>

A striking illustration of a more gung-ho modernist mentality and its unexceptionalist view of the coast is recorded in a 1967 *Journal of Geography* article by Willis Miller, the Director of Planning for San Diego County. For Miller, the incorporation of the coast into urbanized space raised no appreciable ecological or aesthetic concerns.<sup>41</sup> To the contrary, Miller seemed enthusiastic about the novel engineering possibilities offered by the beach and ocean. His article details three plans to build artificial islands in southern California. Miller speculated that, due to projected population growth in coastal California counties, the plans represented the first in a potentially long list of such projects. If they materialized the projects would help transform the beach from the edge of the oceanic wilderness into the median strip of a humanized coastal zone.

Only the first of these plans had been successfully realized by the time Miller's article was published. These were the four, ten-acre "THUMS" islands (a joint venture by the Texas, Humble, Union, Mobil and Shell companies) constructed offshore from Long Beach. Made of rock quarried from Santa Catalina Island, the islands served as platforms for slant drilling into the East Wilmington oil field. Oil derricks still function on the islands today. Next Miller described Bolsa Island, a proposed joint project of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and Southern California Edison. The island was to lie 2,800 feet offshore from Bolsa Chica State Beach Park in Or-

ange County.<sup>42</sup> Located one mile from the Newport-Inglewood fault and directly upwind of the population center of Orange County (a relative location Miller failed to emphasize), the 40-acre island was to support the largest nuclear power plant in the US.<sup>43</sup> The plant would generate enough electricity for a city the size of San Francisco, and would power the largest desalination plant in the world. A two-lane causeway mounted on concrete pilings would connect the island to the shore.

Lastly, Miller described a "most dramatic"—if blatantly amateurish—1966 effort by California businessmen to construct an island, Abalonia, 100 miles offshore from San Diego. The businessmen, who included an ex-Hollywood actor and the son of a former Mexican President, planned to use a half-submerged freighter as the nucleus of the island. They would tow out and sink the freighter, the *Jalisco*, on the Cortes Bank, an undersea anticline rising to within twenty feet of the ocean surface. Then they would fill the hold with rock and construct a breakwater around the exposed upper deck. When completed, the island would contain an abalone processing plant, a ship fueling depot, a weather station, a direction finder station and a radio station. Because Abalonia would lie beyond the US economic zone, lawyers questioned whether the island might become a sovereign nation. This intriguing question was to become moot, however. "Unfortunately," Miller wrote, "November 15, 1966—the day the 'Jalisco' and the tug towing it arrived at Cortes Bank from San Francisco—was stormy." The wave-battered freighter sank at a tilted angle, tossing several sailors overboard. (They were rescued by the tug.) The businessmen abandoned the project, but others were inspired by their ambition. "On November 23, 1966," wrote Miller, "a Seattle group announced its intention to spend almost \$14 million to build and develop a new 976-acre resort island nation on Cortes Bank."<sup>44</sup>

Miller did not betray the slightest anxiety about how such island-making endeavors might affect the character of the region's beaches or broader coast. His conclusion did not, in even a *pro forma* manner, reflect on the aesthetic or ecological impacts of the anticipated profusion of artificial islands. Instead, his final sentence captures a gung-ho spirit: "Should it be legally possible to build an artificial island, on say Cortes Bank, which is not subject to United States jurisdiction, a gambling casino would enhance its attractiveness as a resort and well might constitute its principal economic base."<sup>45</sup>

Those who viewed the beach and adjacent coast as developable space included not only municipal planners and private developers, but state agencies as well. Notorious among the latter was the Division of Highways, which in 1961 commissioned the Army Corps of Engineers to study the feasibility of constructing a 13-mile section of the Pacific Coast Highway through the center of Santa Monica Bay. With a projected cost of over 150 million dollars, this would have required constructing a causeway with an estimated 206

million cubic meters of dirt. In the summer of 1962 the Corps used a converted Navy minesweeper to take 40 sample borings from Santa Monica to Malibu Point along the proposed causeway route. The environmental consequences of the project were not well understood, but after taking the samples the Corps endorsed the plan as feasible. Proponents of the proposal, including real estate developers who saw an opportunity to build luxury high rises and a marina in the enclosed area, spent the next years eagerly pressing for its approval.<sup>46</sup>

By the late 1960s, beaches and coastal lands up and down the state, not just in southern California, were in serious jeopardy. Two-thirds of the state's original wetlands were gone, decimating populations of migrating waterfowl along the Pacific Coast Flyway; the agricultural land to which many wetlands had been converted was becoming increasingly urbanized; beaches were disappearing due to the damming of the streams that transport sediment to the coast; the littoral drift of the sand along the coast was interrupted by the armoring of the coast with seawalls, revetment, groins and the like to protect ocean front houses and other structures. Pollution from sewage outfalls and oil drilling operations was fouling the coastal ocean; and, a crowning insult, Californians found it increasingly difficult to reach the shore through the coalescing layer of private development adjacent to it. By 1971, only 249 miles of the 1100-mile coast were publicly owned. Only 149 miles—about 12% of the total—were actually useable for public recreation; the rest were reserved for military and other governmental purposes and were kept off limits to the public.<sup>47</sup>

One of the most egregious cases of failed coastal management in the state was in Malibu. Once the Rindges' zealously guarded private arcadia, the Malibu coast had gradually opened to the public but then closed again due to the construction of luxurious houses along the shore. Ordinary Angelinos neither could neither afford to buy these houses nor, since each abutted the next, get around them to reach the ocean. Fifteen hundred wealthy property owners had turned about 20 miles of beaches into their *de facto* private backyard.<sup>48</sup>

Against this backdrop of despoliation and diminished access one particular event stood out as shocking—the 1969 oil spill in Santa Barbara. The spill, from Union Oil's Platform A six miles offshore, spewed a thousand gallons of crude an hour, 2.1 million gallons total, into the ocean. Four days after the platform ruptured the oil began to reach the Santa Barbara shore, where crowds had gathered to demonstrate at Stearn's Wharf.<sup>49</sup> The sight of crude drifting to shore shocked more than just Californians. That a full-blown environmental disaster could occur in an affluent resort and university town in central California, and not just in the blighted cores of industrial cities, triggered alarms throughout the nation and contributed to the growth of the

modern environmental movement. Outdoorsman John McKinney described the spill in language so intense that it seems borrowed from accounts of the then-escalating Vietnam War:

Especially the smell, the smell of hell, fumes that catch in my throat, that make me cough and choke and heave, dry heave because I've eaten nothing, can't eat anything, not with birds dying screaming in my arms, not with the black tide bringing ever more corpses to a shore that is itself dying. I gasp for air, every now and then walking away from the shore to catch my breath, then returning to the bedarkened beach and the tormented birds, feeling the pain of a world gone black, the agony of creatures screaming in their death throes. This is the look of hell before the Devil lit a match.<sup>50</sup>

The way things were going, an observer in the late 1960s might have anticipated that as its population continued to rise the California coast would become increasingly tarnished and eroded. In Los Angeles, the most heavily urbanized region, the beach seemed destined to be enveloped in artificial constructions, transforming a natural landscape into an urbanized one of freeways, oil derricks, power plants, private homes, marinas and artificial islands containing more of the same. Already, however, a model for how to rein in some of the worst excesses of coastal development was being created in northern California. A root issue was zoning. Since the 1920s, the authority for determining zoning regulations lay among local city and county governments which, most people presumed, were better equipped to handle the numerous, intricate and, from federal and state perspectives, often trivial land use issues in their jurisdictions. However, with regulatory power dispersed among literally hundreds of entities—coastal counties and cities as well as state and federal agencies and state-sanctioned special districts—there were few coherent and enforceable policies to protect coastal resources. Local officials operating in this regulatory environment sought the benefits of growth but had little incentive to mitigate the external consequences of oil drilling, freeway construction, housing development, power plant construction and so on. Meanwhile, the precedent for establishing centralized coastal planning was being set in northern California. The San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) was established in 1967 to plan protection, regulate shoreline development and guarantee public access around the bay. It had grown out of the grassroots "Save the Bay" movement founded in 1960 by Catherine Kerr, wife of U.C. President Clark Kerr. Kerr had been appalled by a federal report stating that by 1959 the water surface of the bay had been reduced from 680 to 400 square miles, a rate that if continued would reduce the bay to a ship channel in less than a hundred years. Moreover, less

than 10 of the 276 miles of bay shore were accessible to the public. By 1965, the Save-the-Bay movement had grown to 18,000 members, won a moratorium against filling the bay and had led to the creation of BCDC. As William Duddleson writes, the emergence of a centralized shoreline regulatory agency for the San Francisco Bay provided inspiration to the growing number of Californians who believed that the entire state's coast should be regulated by a single entity.

### The Lack of Park Space

William Fulton has described the grand irony of southern California's development history—the region's allure as a garden helped attract so many settlers that the landscape of orchards, hobby farms, empty beaches and other sub-urban elements became a metropolis that remains “in denial” about its transformation. In the 1970s, Fulton notes, Japanese auto makers were caught happily off-guard when Angelinos purchased far more pickup trucks than anticipated. Relatedly, an imagined contact with nature provides a theme in the regional paintings of David Hockney and Edward Ruscha, writes William A. McClung. “In the characteristic iconography of L.A., a natural paradise co-exists with developers' ambitions or is even impervious to them.”<sup>52</sup>

On its original growth trajectory as a garden city, a place of detached houses separated by lawns and foliage and with the rural periphery nearby, developers saw little need (and had little financial incentive) to set aside open space. As the city continued to expand and become more densely settled, however, Angelinos in the center found themselves surrounded by little greenery. Already in 1930, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Harlan Bartholomew had reported that Los Angeles had set aside less than two percent of its land for parks—a paltry amount compared to other big cities. Moreover, the open space that did exist was poorly distributed: While Griffith Park represented one of the largest urban wildernesses in the nation, only 0.5% of the city south of the Santa Monica Mountains was set aside as parkland. The deficiency of neighborhood parks was therefore a glaring problem.<sup>53</sup>

Little wonder, then, that a poll taken in 1960 showed that 17% of visitors found Los Angeles “unattractive.” The downward-spiral of the once-beautiful region's landscape had by then become an object lesson in the perils of modernist development and a national joke—albeit one of dubious comic value. The city was “Smogtown,” a place where people had “an old complaint: Los Angeles is one vast plain of asphalt interrupted by some warts of buildings and some chains of hills.” “Nature,” a *London Times* correspondent would write, had been crushed into “irregularities beneath angled planes of brutal raw concrete.” Such accounts were satirical, but they contained a hard-to-deny grain of truth.<sup>54</sup>

The 1965 Watts Riots would give Angelinos cause to reflect more soberly on this truth. The development regime had fatally compromised one of the signal virtues of the region and produced a massive central city with inadequate park space for its low-income residents. Los Angeles had become inhumane and dangerous, a city in crisis. What had been the city's WASPy heartland of detached, single-family houses close to industrial work sites was now a deindustrialized and impoverished "inner city" that white Angelinos avoided. Eyes would quickly turn from the nightmares of Compton and Watts to another landscape in the region, suggesting an innate connection between them. The beach appeared a landscape of redemption for Los Angeles, a place whose naturalness, recreational possibilities and democratic openness to all visitors could partly compensate for the excesses of the growth machine, the overdevelopment and the economic evisceration of the inner city. Such hopes, at any rate, animated a report by UCLA's School of Architecture, Urban Planning, Environmental Science and Engineering, *Future Alternatives for the Santa Monica Pier* (1973), published eight years after the riots. In neo-Olmstedian terms, the report lay much of the blame for the urban crisis on the lack of open space in the city interior. The report recommended that rather than demolish the pier on the western shore of the metropolis (per the current lease agreement), Santa Monica should maintain the structure as an open space resource. The authors contended that the pier helped to defuse the pent-up aggression of "urban" and "inner-city" youths. They stressed the Pier's utility as a "safety valve" for millions of urban dwellers in Los Angeles City and County inner-city areas." Echoing the determinism of Olmsted's own beliefs about the impact of the physical environment on human beings, the report asserted that unrelieved urban blight breeds aggressive, criminal behavior. As an escape hatch leading to the open blue sea, squawking birdlife and fresh air, the pier offered "relief from the tensions and exasperations of overcrowded and industrialized urban life."<sup>55</sup>

### The Spread of the Environmental Movement

The third factor that contributed to the hardening of Angelinos' anti-development stance on the beach was the democratization of the national environmental movement in the years after World War II. Hal Rothman has chronicled how public interest in environmental protection, as reflected in the number of dues-paying members of the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society and other such groups, had fallen well below its interwar peak. Concern for the environment would rekindle in the post-war period, however, as increasingly affluent Americans took to the highways to visit the national parks and found them suffering from years of underfunding and neglect.<sup>56</sup> Some parks, such as Death Valley, were exploited for resources (e.g. salt) during the war,

further compromising their environmental integrity.<sup>57</sup> Americans encountered a bruised and atrophied version of the landscape that Aldo Leopold had found appalling during its interwar heyday when popular interest in the environment had been at a crest. In that period increased road building had facilitated automobile travel to national forests, leading to the rapid, unplanned urbanization of some of the West's most scenic landscapes.<sup>58</sup> Leopold formulated his "wilderness idea" against this backdrop. Hence for Leopold wilderness was antithetical to not only the urban realm, but to the roads that permitted urbanites to depart from it and overwhelm national forests with their cameras, tents and trash, to build and patronize hotels, diners, and entire recreational infrastructures in scenic areas.<sup>59</sup> Leopold's stance against roads would ultimately become inscribed into the 1964 Wilderness Act, which prohibits the construction of permanent roads in wilderness areas. The post-war public was dismayed at the neglected condition of the infrastructure that Leopold had found innately disagreeable. The spread of the environmental movement was also stimulated, of course, by the pioneering work of Rachel Carson, the televised napalming of South Asian jungles, the testing of nuclear weapons in Pacific waters and other contemporary events.<sup>60</sup>

In the context of a rapidly deteriorating coast, an invigorated national environmental movement, and in the immediate wake of the Santa Barbara oil spill and the successful precedent set by the BCDC, 53 percent of southern Californians went to the polls to check "yes" on Proposition 20 on the November 1972 ballot to "save the coast." This show of support was significant, especially given the open-shop, pro-development orientation of southern California's then-numerically dominant WASPy population. Proposition 20 created the California Coastal Commission, which was given the responsibility of regulating development in a 1000-yard wide coastal zone. This transferred the authority for making coastal land-use decisions from the hundreds of separate agencies along the coast—municipal and county governments and special districts—to a new, extremely powerful, centralized commission. In addition, Proposition 20 led to the writing of the Coastal Plan (passed into law in 1976), which had several core objectives, including maximizing public access to the beach; protecting agricultural lands; preventing sprawling, leapfrogging development; protecting scenic areas; and locating coastal-dependent industry and port development to urban areas. In the words of Michael Fischer, the Coastal Commission's former executive director, California's new coastal regulatory regime was "the most comprehensive, restrictive, ambitious and controversial in the nation."<sup>61</sup> A broad coalition of southern Californians had set aside their traditional anti-big government values, and drew limits around the growth machine, in order to protect and improve access to the beach.

Public involvement did not end with the passage of Proposition 20.

The public was deeply engaged in the drafting of the Coastal Plan. Hundreds of thousands of citizens received newsletters, attended more than 250 public hearings and hundreds of informational workshops, filled out mail-back questionnaires or heard presentations about proposals during the period. Coastal Commission chair M. B. Lane's letter of introduction to the final 443-page plan, which was submitted in December 1975 to Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr., stated that it had evolved through "public participation in resource planning on a scale unmatched in California." Coastal Commission Executive Director Peter Douglas called the plan, "more than any other I know, the public's law."<sup>62</sup>

What the public created was a natural space where their right of access was protected. The Coastal Plan opens with a "Summary and Introduction" that defines the coast. "The California coast is many things along its nearly 1,100 miles of land and water, from the redwood forests of the north to the palm trees of the south." The seemingly simple, throat-clearing statement is in fact rhetorically significant. By bookending the state's coast in arboreal verdure, the statement foreshortens the coast into an internally consistent, natural space, reversing the erasure of nature that so often occurs in modernist development. With this majestic, tone-setting image the plan erases the humanized world from the coast. Moreover, as Shaul E. Cohen has written, trees are particularly powerful and appealing symbols of what Americans believe is "good in nature and the environment."<sup>63</sup> The plan's statement thus illustrates Cohen's point that as symbols trees can be manipulated to a variety of ends. (Sand and rock are more typical of the littoral zone that defines the coast.) As the first concrete image of the coast presented in a document that was produced over a three-year period with an "unprecedented" amount of public input, the statement illustrates what the coast represented to Californians: an idealized natural landscape.

Angelinos, who are so often presented as enthusiastic modernists and urban fantasists, nevertheless rallied to protect the beach as nature. As the metropolis had grown under the twentieth-century development regime, nature had receded to isolated mountain pockets and distant margins beyond the often-fuliginous airshed. A broad spectrum of Angelinos mobilized, in this context, to ensure that one particular landscape—the beach—be kept natural and accessible to the region's population. Like the angry crowd in "The People of Venice versus the Developers," Angelinos protested modernist development when it threatened to eradicate a particular place by making it an extension of urban space. This upwelling of anti-modernist sentiment in the middle decades of the twentieth century occurred as a result of three converging factors: the cumulative impacts of decades of poorly regulated development on coastal landscapes, the acute need for park space in the rapidly growing city and the spread of the environmental movement. That this sen-

timent was expressed among a significant swath of the region's traditionally pro-development, WASP-dominated population clearly recasts them as ambivalent modernists.

### Postscript

In September 2006, the City of Santa Monica prevailed in a lawsuit filed against it by wealthy beachfront homeowners who sought to prevent the city from creating a public beach club on the former estate of movie actress (and William Randolph Hearst mistress) Marion Davies. The lawsuit alleged that the beach club would create traffic, noise and safety problems, but some observers saw the spirit of May Rindge at work: they interpreted the suit as yet another attempt by wealthy beachfront homeowners to maintain a swath of beach as a *de facto* private arcadia. As this local victory for the beach (and the public) shows, battles to protect the beach as one of southern California's most democratic and natural public places are ongoing.<sup>64</sup>

### Acknowledgements

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