

Beneath I-280: Excavating a Neighborhood Lost to San José Freeways

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A composite photo created to show a street-level, mid-block perspective of homes that were demolished. L to R: 451, 449, and 441 Delmas Ave. Original photos from Caltrans Right of Way Assessments 1960 - 1970 archival collection, San José Public Library.

Introduction

Beginning in the 1960s, hundreds of homes—sometimes entire communities—were acquired and demolished by the State of California using eminent domain to make way for the expansion of the interstate freeway system in central San José. Through research into never-before-studied state archives and the creation of an interactive map and website, this project aimed to tell the story of this displacement and the people and neighborhoods lost to the freeways.

Study Methods

In the fall of 2022, a team led by community-based researcher Leila Ullmann gained access to an archival collection, the CalTrans Right of Way Assessments 1960–1970, held in the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library’s California Room, as yet unprocessed. The collection includes appraisal and sale documents, maps, and even photographs that the CalTrans Right of Way division created when assessing properties that the State of California intended to purchase for demolition in order to build new freeways. With the support of San José State’s Institute for Metropolitan Studies and the Mineta Transportation Institute, the research team explored and indexed the archival records, deciding to focus on the area underneath and around where the I-280 / CA-87 freeway interchange

stands today, just southwest of downtown San José. In this area—the historic Gardner and Washington-Guadalupe neighborhoods—the appraisal records for hundreds of homes were analyzed and historic photos of each home were digitized. Researchers also consulted other studies, contemporaneous news accounts, historical maps, city and community records, and even a conversation with a former resident in order to learn more about the community and what happened there. Next, the archival data, including the photographs, were linked to historic and contemporary maps of the area, producing a dynamic, interactive map and website where information about the lost homes can be explored.

Findings

The archival research produced insights about the state’s eminent domain process and the communities that were lost. Among other issues, visits by assessors were often the first time that residents learned about the state’s plans to acquire the properties. Research into community organizing around the impacts of the freeways led to the records of the Ernestina García collection (also housed in the King Library’s California Room archives), including nine transportation policy

demands produced by a local Chicana civil rights group in 1977 that represent a striking example of community activism and engagement in the often-unjust planning process. The photographs contained in the archive, taken of each property by the assessors, were an unexpectedly rich finding, revealing more about everyday life in these places than could have been intended of the impersonal snapshots.

It was soon clear to the researchers that these archival records, and the stories they could help tell, demanded to be shared in a form that could help the public access them. This recognition inspired the decision to produce several community-facing resources: an online database of the archival records, an interactive map, three new spatial data layers for use with geographic information science software, and an interactive “Story Map” website that tells the story of the freeway development atop historic neighborhoods and invites users to explore information about each home, including one-of-a-kind photographs, and see each home where it stood on historical and contemporary maps.

Newly unearthed archival records tell the story of neighborhoods lost to San José’s freeways in interactive “story map” from MTI and SJSU’s Institute for Metropolitan Studies.

Policy/Practice Recommendations

Accounting for the past is critical when designing and planning the urban environments of the future. By investigating and transforming the previously unstudied archives into more publicly accessible resources, we hope to preserve this history and spark contemporary conversations—both about the history of these communities and about urban displacement more broadly. Urban planners and community members alike should be aware of the human implications of large-scale urban development projects and of how compensation for assessed property values through the eminent domain process falls far short of appreciating the impacts of destroying a home or a neighborhood.

In particular, the compelling transportation policy recommendations drafted by the civil rights group Confederación de la Raza Unida—nine creative

ideas for a more just and functional transportation system—offer grassroots planning visions that are still relevant today. Planners, organizers, and researchers may wish to study the pertinence and feasibility of these proposals or look to them as models of (a missed opportunity for) community engagement.

About the Authors

Leila Ullmann

Born and raised in downtown San José, Leila Ullmann is a research fellow at SJSU’s Institute for Metropolitan Studies and a graduate student in Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Her work draws on her experience as a community organizer and political strategist to build dialogue around historical and contemporary injustices in urban development.

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Gordon Douglas is the director of the Institute for Metropolitan Studies and an associate professor in SJSU’s Department of Urban and Regional Planning. His research focuses on social inequality in planning and development, neighborhood identity and gentrification, and peoples’ relationships to their physical surroundings.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2304



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