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626
The Rise of an Asian American Suburb and the Future of Housing and Place in America

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“Know history, know self.”

— José Rizal

“Our ultimate objective in learning about anything is to try to create and develop a more just society than we have seen.”

— Yuri Kochiyama
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Abstract

This project explores the physical and social changes caused by demographic transition in western San Gabriel Valley — a suburban region east of Downtown Los Angeles — since the late 1970’s. During that time, what was once a string of overwhelmingly white suburbs transformed into one of the largest Asian American enclaves in the continental US. This dramatic transformation has had profound effects on the area’s built environment, including significant increases in density, reconstruction of the existing housing stock, and the proliferation of Asian American businesses and growth of commercial development. Much of the existing literature on the area has focused on the racial aspect of the San Gabriel Valley’s transformation, and used racial conflict as the lens of understanding the tensions between existing and new residents during this period. Using a combination of census and property tax data, archival research of local newspapers, and examination of the built environment, I seek to augment that narrative with a focus on issues of development and growth. Much of the changes that occurred in the region — and consequent backlash — often mirror patterns of increased density and tear-downs of older single-family homes found in other metropolitan areas in America that have experienced influxes of new residents in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. To this end, I posit that conflicts around the built environment is a primary cause of tensions in the area, which has significant implications for similar ongoing trends of development elsewhere in the United States.
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And I also could not have done this without all the labor that the ancestors and forebears have put in, and whose shoulders I stand on today, from the Chinese workers who built the railroads to the generations of activists who have fought for a more just and equal Stanford and America. I can only hope that I can live up to their legacies.

I would like to thank the San Gabriel Valley, the place I call home, the place that raised me and made me into who I am today, and the place that taught me how to be unapologetically Asian American. I wanted the culmination of what I have learned since I have been away from this place to be for producing a better understanding of it, but also of Asian America at large, and I hope that I have done at least a little bit of that here. To quote T.S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring will be
To arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Finally, I’d like to thank Half & Half on Baldwin, for the needed caffeination, and for teaching me what actually good boba tea tastes like.
Preface and Introduction

The San Gabriel Valley is a suburban area in the east of Los Angeles, roughly 15 minutes by car to Downtown on a good day. In the past four decades or so, the area has gone through a period of astounding demographic change, transforming from a string of overwhelmingly white suburbs into one of largest Asian American ethnic enclaves in existence, home to more than a million people, and with more than a dozen Asian American-majority cities — including the first ever in the continental US.

Growing up in the San Gabriel Valley, it was always conceptually obvious that the place we live in is unique. We are an Asian American enclave, we would tell ourselves The rest of America doesn’t look like this. These were universally-accepted truisms that people would toss around from time to time. However, in practice, folks who have never lived anywhere else (including me and most of my peers growing up), had no real conception of how different our community actually is.

The first time I really saw this place that I thought I knew from someone else’s eyes was during my freshman year of college, when I invited some friends home for Thanksgiving. They were awed and baffled throughout their entire stay: by just how many signs and storefronts that lined the busy commercial streets had Chinese characters, how many Asian American businesses catering to ethnic needs there were, and how many of my neighbors were Asian American like me. Sometime after the turkey, we headed over to one of the eight boba tea shops within a half-mile radius of my block so that most of them could try one of the San Gabriel Valley’s most iconic foods for the very first time. They were awed and baffled that the shop would be open and
well-patronized on Thanksgiving day. They were even more awed and baffled by what they found inside the shop. On the one hand, they were clearly in America: the young people inside spoke English, and Chance the Rapper was playing in the background; yet, it was also the first time any of my friends have been in a room where everyone but them were Asian.

At some point, we were joined by a few of my friends from high school. As those friends and I sat on chairs that we’ve sat on countless times growing up, we realized that we could never truly understand just how novel these spaces that are deeply familiar to us — whether it be this particular boba shop or the San Gabriel Valley writ large — must have appeared to my college friends: the visual impact of someone seeing one of the largest Asian American enclaves in existence for the very first time must be stunning.

Indeed, to the casual observer, it is probably difficult to see past the dim sum restaurants, Asian supermarkets, and boba shops that line the commercial corridors or the Chinese characters on their business signs. It was the most natural thing in the world for my friends — visitors passing through for the first time — to fixate on the sights that make the San Gabriel Valley unique. However, what this view of the place misses is that the commercial plazas that house these Asian businesses with their bilingual signs are still in quintessential Californian styles like Mission revival, even if they were built recently by Asian Americans. It also misses the swathes of residential areas beyond the commercial strips with houses and apartment complexes all built exclusively in, again, familiar Californian styles, even if they were purpose-designed for Asian American owners. These were subtleties that they missed because of the brevity of their visit. They gawked with amazement at the things that made the place stand out and look different. They did not have a chance to see how, at heart, the place may not so different after all.
My friends’ reaction is emblematic of how the changes in the San Gabriel Valley can be perceived — namely, it is at times difficult to look beyond its unique racial composition or, to put it more bluntly, how Asian it is. The narrative of racial change tends to overshadow other aspects of change because of the sheer speed, magnitude, and visibility of that change. However, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that the area’s transformation is far more complex and multifaceted than a mere demographic transition from white to Asian.

One of these other, more overlooked transformations has to do with development — that is, the forces that have been driving a continuous flurry of development in the San Gabriel Valley in recent decades. These consist of new apartment buildings and newer, larger houses built to replace older homes, as well as new commercial plazas and malls. The general theme is that the construction has resulted in larger, denser new developments.

Issues of development are a staple in American cities and suburbs. However, in the San Gabriel Valley, they became heavily racialized almost as soon as they arose. In the backdrop of racial tensions between the newcomers and the overwhelmingly white long-time residents, controversies surrounding new development became just another bullet in the arsenal of nativist appeals against these newcomers and the changes they’ve brought. Quickly, concepts like development and density became synonymous with the Asian newcomers.

When academics became interested the San Gabriel Valley, what caught their eye was, again, its unique demography. Researchers were fascinated by the racial dynamics of the first suburban Asian American enclave: how new political coalitions formed in the wake of a quickly changing citizenry, and how a new nonwhite majority came to define itself in the face of racial conflict and hostility. While this research is fascinating and invaluable, it is important to note that
any research focusing on racial dynamics in the San Gabriel Valley is actually focusing in on reactions to the newcomers. For example, with respect to development, much of the existing research has focused on what happens after a project is proposed or a new house is built: conflicts between developers and existing residents, or stories of longtime residents dissatisfied with the new look of their neighborhoods. In this project, I seek to expand this perspective by examining the transformation of the San Gabriel Valley with a focus on development. Instead of investigating how people reacted to development, I ask the question: what exactly did the Asian Americans of the San Gabriel Valley build?

What I found is that unlike its unique demography, the changes to the built environment of the San Gabriel Valley was anything but unique. In fact, in terms of the end products of development, there is little distinguishing the San Gabriel Valley from many other similar urban environments in America. For example, the shift towards larger houses and denser developments reflected not peculiar local or ethnic tastes, but broad, national trends. Aesthetically, there was also nothing distinctly Asian about the vast majority of these new developments. Rather, developers built projects that would not look out place elsewhere in the state or even country, and deliberately so.

In fact, despite a large-scale shift in the demographic composition — and consequently, culture — of the San Gabriel Valley, one element of culture that has remained remarkably static is the way in which residents relate to property. In that respect, neither the demographic shifts nor the changes in built environment proved particularly transformative. In fact, taken as a whole, the new Asian American residents of the San Gabriel Valley have essentially assumed the same old attitudes towards property and real estate as a means of acquiring and maintaining
privilege and wealth. These were the attitudes that initially led to the creation of American suburbs like this one, not only as places where middle class people with the requisite level of privilege could live, but also as sites where those same people could invest and build their wealth through homeownership.

The changes that the San Gabriel Valley experienced — and how residents have reacted to them — say more not about Asian Americans or even immigrants writ large, but about America, and specifically how we as Americans relate to property and changes in our communities. That latter point is especially relevant today as many of America’s communities are experiencing rapid change in an era of demographic shift and gentrification. In this respect, the experiences of the San Gabriel Valley are far more important and influential than merely the story of a one-off ethnic enclave, but rather an extremely valuable case study in helping us understand and think about the ramifications of change in America’s communities.

In the chapters that follow, I will begin with a brief overview of the San Gabriel Valley and the communities that will be explored, including a history of the academic research that has been done on the area. I will then explore the nature of the San Gabriel Valley’s Asian American-driven developments and demonstrate, as I outlined above, how changes to the area’s built environment was anything but radical with respect to the politics of aesthetics, the continuity of attitudes towards property, and the area’s adherence to national trends of development. I will then follow with a history of racial tension and conflicts in the San Gabriel Valley in recent decades to explore the ways in which development issues became racialized and used to advanced racist causes. Finally, I will conclude by offering some thoughts on what the
San Gabriel Valley can tell us about what the future holds for cities in a rapidly changing America.
A Realtor’s Gamble: 
An Introduction to the San Gabriel Valley Story

“Chinese immigrants helped build... our great cities.” — President Barack H. Obama¹

In the late 1960s, a young Chinese American engineer working for the City of Los Angeles named Frederic Hsieh was looking to rent an apartment with his wife and soon-to-be-born child.² However, when he could not find a landlord who would rent to him, Hsieh decided to buy up a four-unit apartment complex instead, living in one of the units and renting out the other three units to pay for costs.³ Thus began a legendary career in real estate that arguably set in motion the entire transformation of the San Gabriel Valley.

Hsieh’s entrance into the real estate market came at a crucial crossroads in the history of Asian Americans. In 1965, reforms to the longstanding American policy of racial exclusion ended a virtual ban on immigration from Asia that has been in place since the beginning of the century. Hsieh was one of the few who understood the ramifications: large scale immigration from Asia was coming, and these new immigrants will need places to live, and the limited amount of residential stock in already-crammed Chinatowns simply would be sufficient to meet their needs.⁴

³ Ibid.
Hsieh found an antithesis to the old Chinatowns in the sleepy, hilly suburb of Monterey Park, located a few miles east of downtown Los Angeles: it was a community that was spacious, beautiful — perched in hills that were said to resemble those of Taipei, and cheap — less than one-seventh the cost of land in Chinatown.\(^5\) Impressed with what he found, Hsieh moved to Monterey Park in 1972, and founded Mandarin Realty in 1973 to begin buying up land in the suburban city.\(^6\) To accompany these efforts, Hsieh took out extensive advertisements in Taiwanese and Hong Kong news media, advertising the city to would-be buyers as a “Chinese Beverly Hills.”\(^7\)

By 1977, Hsieh’s attempt to buy up as much of Monterey Park as was financially possible for him had raised eyebrows among the city’s civic and business leaders, who found his behavior inexplicable. More than anything else, Monterey Park was a community in stagnation if not downright decline, as commercial activity moved to suburban malls further east; against this backdrop, investment — especially in such a massive scale — perplexed many.\(^8\) Wanting to clear the air, Hsieh invited about two dozen of these city fathers to lunch at a Chinese restaurant. To his all-white audience, Hsieh declared his vision for Monterey Park:

“You may not know it, but... Monterey Park is going to become the next Chinatown..., [it] will serve as the mecca for Chinese business.”\(^9\)

\(^{5}\) Ibid., 29.  
\(^{6}\) Ibid.  
\(^{9}\) Horton, *The Politics of Diversity*, 28; and Berthelsen, “Frederic Hsieh Is Dead at 54.”
Hsieh was met with derisive disbelief at the time. However, within a decade, Hsieh’s plans had come to fruition in a spectacular way as Monterey Park was declared America’s “First suburban Chinatown.”

Yet, even as he was being recognized by incredulous people on all sides for this bit of prescience, Hsieh was already scheming even further. In 1987, he made a second prediction, claiming that Monterey Park would merely be the “hub” of

“... an even bigger Chinese community that resides in San Marino, Arcadia... and throughout the San Gabriel Valley... This whole region will become a mecca for Chinese by the year 2000.”

This prediction was, again, seen as unrealistic, and even some of the academics who had turned their attention to the area by this time had rejected this possibility. Yet, the reality in the San Gabriel Valley today is exactly as Hsieh predicted: once again, he had been proven right.

I do not mean to invoke a kind of “great-man history” narrative with Fred Hsieh, because the demographic transformation of the San Gabriel Valley was undoubtedly part of far greater historical forces than the doings of one man. Hsieh did not come up with tens of thousands of new Asian incomers willing to move into the San Gabriel Valley out of thin air. Outside of the comparatively diminutive preexisting Asian American population in Los Angeles, the bulk of the San Gabriel Valley’s new arrivals were immigrants from Asia who had arrived after the 1965 immigration reforms. Without them, the kind of large-scale immigration that changed the area

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11 Ibid.
(and America) forever could not have occurred. Hsieh had nothing to do with setting these phenomena in motion: he was not a political figure who helped make these reforms happen, or had any role in getting these people to immigrate to America.

However, what Hsieh did manage to do was take note of these trends, and take advantage of them by marketing to the newcomers; in this sense, his role in transforming the San Gabriel Valley cannot be understated. Because these new immigrants could have gone anywhere in America. It was by no means a forgone conclusion that they would end up in Los Angeles, and it was certainly not a forgone conclusion that they would somehow end up in a string of sleepy, overwhelmingly white suburbs called the San Gabriel Valley. Hsieh’s importance (and business acumen) stems from the fact that he was able to market a site of his choosing to these newcomers from Asia so that, of all of America’s cities and suburbs, the San Gabriel Valley would become the place where so many of them would choose to settle. Moreover, it is important to note that there is inevitable clustering of Asian Americans settling around places with availability of Asian shops and services that they need or want, such as Asian grocers, ethnic foods and restaurants, professional services that speak their mother tongues, and the like (which are often organized into large suburban shopping centers, or “Asian malls”13 anchored by a grocer).14 In other words, there is effectively a virtuous cycle whereby the existence of ethnic shops and services will encourage Asian American in-migration, which will stimulate more business and more ethnic shops and services, which in turn will attract even more in-migration. So, Hsieh’s initial choice of location — which, indeed, included the construction of the very first Asian American

shopping center in the area\textsuperscript{15}—had an outsized influence in the coalescence of the ethnic enclave, because the ensuing processes naturally reinforced and affirmed that choice of location.

Absent that choice, however, these new immigrants to America could have settled anywhere in the country. And, given the proliferation of Asian American settlements in the suburbs of major cities all around America, it is fairly clear that Asian immigrants today are doing just that. There is nothing intrinsically special about the San Gabriel Valley compared to other similar suburbs all across Los Angeles or, for that matter, America. In fact, it seems like the large wave of Asian residents choosing to settle in the San Gabriel Valley was largely a product of Hsieh’s marketing. The transformation of the area into an epicenter of Asian American community, then, seems remarkably path-dependent, specifically on Hsieh’s initial decision to sell real estate there. In other words, it is reasonable to suggest that if Hsieh had not been there to advertise the place, the San Gabriel Valley’s transformation may not have even happened. In other words, had Fred Hsieh been from Denver or Charlotte or Portland instead of Los Angeles, and chose to invest in and market real estate in one of those cities, it is not inconceivable that the first and largest suburban Asian American enclaves would have formed in one of those cities instead. So, it is perhaps ironic that by recognizing Fred Hsieh’s tremendous role in transforming these communities, we are also implicitly conceding that the communities he transformed were completely average and ordinary to begin with.

\textsuperscript{15} Horton, \textit{The Politics of Diversity}, 29.
The San Gabriel Valley Today

The Asian American communities in the San Gabriel Valley now form two clusters, one in the west and one in the east. Both parts share the same area code, 626, which is used by many to refer to the region at large. The western valley is home to seven Asian American-majority cities: Monterey Park, Alhambra, San Marino, San Gabriel, Rosemead, Temple City, and Arcadia, as well as several unincorporated areas. The eastern valley is home to two such cities, Walnut and Diamond Bar, as well as the unincorporated community of Rowland Heights.
This project will only focus on the seven cities in the western cluster. I distinguish between the western and eastern San Gabriel Valley because there are significant structural differences with respect to these two sides of the valley. Whereas the western cluster of cities are all older inner-ring suburbs that were largely built-out during the post-World War II boom, the eastern communities are newer, and many parts of it were not built up until during the influx of Asian Americans to the area. So, from an urban planning and development perspective, these represent different urban typologies and require different frameworks of analysis. I focus on the western communities because they continue to be the focal point of Asian American settlement in the San Gabriel Valley, partly due to its larger size and partly due to the fact that it contains Monterey Park, the area’s original Asian enclave.

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There is a great deal of variation in the socioeconomic characteristics of each of the seven western cities this project will focus on. San Marino is the wealthiest of the bunch. It is solidly upper-class and contains virtually no commerce, and its housing stock consists exclusively of single-family homes, most of which are large and situated on similarly large lots. The homes in San Marino follow a north-south gradient with regard to size, with the southernmost parts of the city having the most (comparatively modest) homes. Areas of northern Alhambra and, especially, San Gabriel that are adjacent to San Marino tend to have a similar upper-middle class feel, although those two cities’ southern parts, along with Monterey Park and Rosemead further south, are mostly middle class, with a greater variation in socioeconomic status among residents. These four cities, along with Arcadia, are also more varied with regards to land use, all having a significant amount of retail developments and denser, multi-family housing developments. However, Arcadia, despite being more mixed-income, is perceived as mostly upper-middle class. Finally, Temple City is similar to San Gabriel, Monterey Park, Rosemead, and Alhambra in terms of socioeconomics and character, but has fewer multi-family developments.

The people that make up this in-migration are also by no means a monolithic crowd. First, there is still a diverse range of immigrant generations within the population. Indeed, while the area may have been famous for being a destination for new immigrants, there is nonetheless a significant population of native-born Asian Americans in the area, some of whose families have been in America for multiple generations; there is by no means an implied homogeneity between these groups, the bond of a common Asian-ness did not arise automatically, but rather had to be consciously cultivated. As one native-born Asian American resident of Alhambra put it:
“For a native Californian like myself, the new Asians seemed so different. But because I had an Asian face, they related to me, and it was easier to establish communication.”

In other words, while the San Gabriel Valley narrative is often dominated by that of new immigrants making it the first stop in their new country, not all the newcomers to the area fit that demographic, and some of the new arrivals to the San Gabriel Valley were, in fact, native-born Asian Americans who might be, for example, moving in from Chinatown, looking for an upgrade to their housing situation.

Second, while “Asian” and “Chinese” are often used interchangeably when referring to the Asian American population of the San Gabriel Valley, there is actually a fair amount of ethnic diversity in the area as well. While ethnic Chinese do predominate in the area, there are also sizeable populations of those of Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, and Thai descent. The ethnic Chinese community is also by no means a unified group. The Chinese American population is divided in terms of language (that is, for those who speak Chinese at all), primarily split between Cantonese and Mandarin speakers. It is also divided by geographic origin, primarily consisting of three groups: those from Hong Kong, those from Taiwan (also known as the Republic of China), and those from Mainland China (that is, the People’s Republic); however, there is also a sizeable population of ethnic Chinese who trace their origins to the Chinese diaspora in Asia, a major example being ethnically-Chinese Vietnamese refugees.

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19 Ibid. Also of note is that this is very similar to the situation in neighboring suburb of Montebello, which acted as an upgrade for Latino residents who were able to move out of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles which, like Chinatown, was a poorer area closer to the urban core.
who arrived after the war, but there are also Malaysian, Indonesian, and Singaporean Chinese, among other groups.\textsuperscript{21}

Those three main geographic origins also represent distinct waves and sources of transnational capital that played a crucial role in shaping the San Gabriel Valley and fueling its transformation. The sheer scope of this transnational capital was one of the most important factors that contributed to the sheer scope of the changes in the San Gabriel Valley. However, the importance of the distinctions between the three polities, whose economic fortunes still operate somewhat independently from one another to this day, is that capital was exiting those three places at different times, often for different reasons. First came capital outflows from Hong Kong partly caused by the then-colony’s imminent transfer of sovereignty to the People’s Republic. Then came capital from Taiwan, generated through the newly-industrialized island’s booming economy. As the progress of economic reform continued in mainland China, Taiwanese capital was eventually joined by the largest wave of capital yet from the Mainland\textsuperscript{22} — which continues to pour in as the main source of transnational capital to the area today.

So, the San Gabriel Valley did not receive just one single wave of immigration or capital injection. Rather, it was the recipient of several, arguably independent waves of immigration and transnational capital injection — in addition to native capital from non-immigrant Asian Americans — that are connected together into one through the shared geography of the San Gabriel Valley itself. The impact of that capital is far greater, and the effects more amplified, because it meant that inflows of capital came in staggered waves that, when combined, made for a period of (arguably still ongoing) capital inflow that is both more prolonged and more stable.


than most observers assume. For example, noting an ebb of incoming money from Hong Kong, the Los Angeles Times in 1984 proclaimed that

“… the days of extremely wealthy Chinese [moving to the San Gabriel Valley]... are for the most part over.”

This was a call that proved, of course, to be laughably premature in retrospect. Indeed, as the 1980s continued, the money just kept coming, fueling the area’s transformation, and eventually piquing the interests of academia.

23 Jesus Sanchez, “Monterey Park Becomes Banking Center for Wealthy Immigrants,” Los Angeles Times, April 15, 1984
The Academics Arrive:
The San Gabriel Valley in Academic Literature

“Our ultimate objective in learning about anything is to try to create and develop a more just society than we have seen.”

— Yuri Kochiyama, Asian American civil rights leader

Monterey Park was the first municipality in the continental United States to become majority-Asian American, a milestone it officially reached in the 1990 census. This was considered highly unusual at the time. Even today, the San Gabriel Valley is extremely distinctive for having such a high concentration of Asian American communities in a country where Asians only constitute a small minority (about 1.5% in 1980 and around 7% today). The unique demography of the area caught the eyes of academics, who found the story of demographic transition in the area compelling enough to warrant further study. This early phase of research culminated in several highly influential books written on the area — with an emphasis on Monterey Park — that were published in the 1990s, including Timothy Fong’s *The First Suburban Chinatown* in 1994, John Horton’s *The Politics of Diversity* in 1995, and Leland Saito’s *Race and Politics* in 1998.\(^2\)

Together, these three books are all arguably seminal in the academic study of the San Gabriel Valley, as they observed many of the key elements of the area’s recent history that shape

its identity today. First, they observed that in-migration to the San Gabriel Valley can be seen as part of a broader shift in the makeup of the Asian American population in the wake of the 1965 immigration reforms. Those reforms resumed immigration from Asia for the first time since it was effectively halted more than a half-century prior, and saw a small, mostly native-born Asian American population quickly joined by an increasingly larger cohort of foreign-born immigrants that often differed in outlook and socioeconomic status. Second, they saw that the path to assimilation for these newcomers in the San Gabriel Valley was often rocky as a result of cultural conflicts between them and the existing, overwhelmingly white population. Third, they observed that in the face of rapid change, existing residents often felt a sense of culture shock and a loss of familiarity with their old suburban environments, which was mostly expressed as the sensation of “takeover” by the newcomers. With respect to this point, they saw that the sheer magnitude of change was partly a product of the relatively quick speed and large scale of the in-migration, and also of the fact that many of the incomers were wealthier immigrants with access to capital and, therefore, the ability to create immediate and significant changes to the local economic landscape. They also saw that much of the opposition to the newcomers became politicized in the arena of local government, where nativist sentiments fueled the passage of both symbolic measures — like city ordinances designating English as an official language — as well as ones with significant consequences — like memoranda on new condo developments.

But, all told, Horton, Fong, and Saito’s research are at the most basic level about relationships between people: they explore such things as how whites relate to newcomers, how the Asian American newcomers relate to their new community and its politics, and even how foreign-born Asian Americans relate to native-born ones. The three are influential for identifying
these key themes in this period of history that help later researchers think about and study the San Gabriel Valley. But, they are also influential in setting the research focus around documenting how people react to change or to new neighbors, but not necessarily studying the nature of the change itself.

“Suburban Chinatown” or “Ethnoburb”?

A later academic who did pay more attention to the nature of the San Gabriel Valley as a place and the characteristics of the new Asian American community is Wei Li. This allowed her to challenge the three early researchers, and particularly Fong, on an important point. Fong titled his book *The First Suburban Chinatown*, and as these three early scholars were able to set the agenda on later research in the San Gabriel Valley, the moniker “suburban Chinatown” stuck. In some ways, the name was a convenient shorthand for conveying the racial and ethnic characteristics of the new Asian American enclave, but it was also a problematic connection to make, not only because of how deeply loaded in meaning the word “Chinatown” can be, but also because the new enclave was radically different from the old Chinatowns in multitudes of ways, ranging from socioeconomics to aesthetics.

After penning a series of articles on the subject, Li’s work culminated in a 2009 book entitled *Ethnoburb* — the term she uses to describe communities like the San Gabriel Valley. At its heart, her argument is that these new Asian American settlements are simply too different: compared to the old Chinatowns, the Asian American of the San Gabriel Valley are more affluent, more educated, and more upwardly-mobile. In other words, the population of Asian

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26 Li, *Ethnoburb*.
American ethnoburbs like the San Gabriel Valley bear a strong resemblance to that of a generic, non-enclave middle class American suburb by a wide range of socioeconomic factors — and certainly much more so than it does to the image of the kitschy separateness from mainstream America that the word “Chinatown” can evoke. Of course, the San Gabriel Valley is undoubtedly an ethnic enclave. It has the prerequisite cultural amenities, shops, and services, as well as a sense of both spatial and communal cohesion and insularity, and these features define it as an “ethnoburb” as opposed to just a generic suburb. However, the groundbreaking point made by Li is that despite the presence of these features, communities like the San Gabriel Valley are not outlandish or anomalous, and actually more so than not resemble a typical white middle-class American suburb. This is a crucial point of understanding for a community that has entered academic attention precisely for being perceived as different and seemingly foreign.

In addition to differences in theory, Li’s research is also obviously far more recent. As such, her research covers all the places in the San Gabriel Valley that have become significant sites of Asian American settlement, including all seven cities in the study area for this project in the western part of the valley, as well as the now-Asian American-majority communities of Walnut, Rowland Heights, and Diamond Bar in the eastern part of the valley. But, her definition of the “ethnoburb” is more far-reaching than just a single area of Los Angeles. Since the times of Fong, Horton, and Saito, new Asian American communities have not just sprung up and grown in the San Gabriel Valley, but in suburbs all over America, and Li’s theoretical framework is meant to be generalizable to all of them. She acknowledges that these are all still unique communities with distinct backgrounds and socioeconomic makeups, and findings from one
community will not necessarily hold true in others. However, the broad trends of the “ethnoburb” she identifies are nonetheless found in many other suburban Asian American enclaves that exist alongside more traditional urban Chinatowns. Examples of these enclaves include Flushing in Queens, New York (in contrast with the old Manhattan Chinatown) and the South Bay in Northern California (in contrast with the old San Francisco Chinatown). That latter area, explored in Willow Lung-Amam’s 2017 book Trespassers, is of particular interest due to the recent nature of her research and her frequent cross-referencing of the San Gabriel Valley in exploring near-identical phenomena in Northern California, including demographic change, the advent of Asian American malls and shopping plazas, and so-called “mansionization,” to be discussed much more later.

After Li, academics have continued to conduct new research on the San Gabriel Valley that focus primarily on race relations, as Saito, Fong, and Horton had. A key example is Wendy Cheng’s The Changs Next Door to the Díazes, published in 2013. Cheng uses a mostly interview-based approach to study a familiar topic — the area’s racial transformation and its effects on race relations. In doing so, she distanced herself from the strain of research exemplified by Li, and centers her focus to interethnic relations, like Fong, Horton, and Saito had focused on. However, Cheng differs from these three in that she placed less emphasis on political actors, and instead looked at the daily lives of regular residents who are not necessarily

31 Ibid., 34-35.
seated at the metaphorical table as developers, city council members, or leaders of citizen groups.

Also, an important focus of her, as the title of her book implies, is interethnic relations between the San Gabriel Valley’s Asian and Hispanic communities. As such, Her research spans four Asian American-majority cities in western San Gabriel Valley that also have substantial Hispanic populations — Monterey Park, Alhambra, San Gabriel, and Rosemead, while excluding San Marino, Temple City, and Arcadia.

**Beyond Monterey Park**

The focus Fong, Horton, and Saito placed on race and inter-race relations was sensible given their historical moment. Writing in the late 1980s, they not only had to document the demographic breakthroughs of the area, but they had to do so in the context of a huge groundswell of xenophobia and nativism in California politics. So, it is no mystery why all three would be interested in the racial dynamics of the San Gabriel Valley — a place with a large and rapidly growing minority and immigrant population — given that context. However, that context has also changed since then: California’s political consensus has shifted significantly leftward (to say the very least) and away from that anti-immigrant disposition, and the San Gabriel Valley’s racial climate has also generally improved from that fierce vitriol which characterized an earlier era.

It is not merely racial attitudes that have changed since then, either. For one, all three researchers focused almost exclusively on Monterey Park, since it was the original center of Asian American settlement in the region. This is understandable because at the time when their
research was conducted, Asian Americans had only just begun to settle in the neighboring cities to the east, and Monterey Park was still indisputably the center of the community. However, since then, the Asian American enclave has expanded significantly to encompass the entirety of the western San Gabriel Valley, not to mention a second cluster of communities in the east like Rowland Heights and Diamond Bar. In fact, of the seven cities in this project’s study area, every one of them except Monterey Park only became majority-Asian American after Fong, Horton, and Saito published their research. So, not only were none of the three able to see these new developments at the time of their writings, their predictions for future patterns at the time have also wildly missed the mark in several occasions, particularly when it came to the degree to which Asian American settlement would expand geographically.

Fong, for example, predicted that Monterey Park would become as much as 80% Asian by the year 2000, likely anticipating that the growing population of Asian Americans would remain within the city. In reality, many Asian Americans began to bypass and move beyond Monterey Park starting around the time of his writings, largely for the same reasons that Hsieh had bypassed Chinatown in the 1970s — because the city’s land rents had become too high: a victim of its own success. Consequently, Monterey Park’s racial composition has largely stabilized, remaining at approximately 65% Asian since the 2000 census. Saito, along similar lines, predicted that the wealthy city of San Marino (and other wealthy cities adjacent to it, like Arcadia), which had been almost exclusively white, would act as “buffers” in halting the geographic expansion of the Asian American enclave. However, reality has proven to be just the opposite: San Marino and Arcadia were magnets for new Asian residents, and became

32 Fong, The First Suburban Chinatown, 177.
33 Horton, The Politics of Diversity, 32.
34 Saito, Race and Politics, 194.
majority-Asian American just like their neighbors. In fact, San Marino was arguably the most welcoming of the newcomers of all the cities in the study area (for political reasons that will be discussed more later). This is not to use the cheap power of hindsight to begrudge these early researchers. To use Saito as an example, he made an educated prediction that, based on the circumstances at the time, seemed eminently reasonable — certainly more seemingly reasonable than the opposite prediction made by Fred Hsieh that the San Gabriel Valley will become majority Asian, even though the latter turned out to be right. Rather, Saito’s error just goes to show the incredible scale of the changes that the San Gabriel Valley experienced.

The Primacy of Race?

Development issues have always been present in the literature about the San Gabriel Valley. Indeed, Fong, Horton, and Saito all mention these issues in their research to some extent. What all three noticed was that there had to be a conscious effort to “disentangle nativist and racist elements from genuine slow-growth issues,” both on their part in thinking about these issues, but also on the part of people at the time who fought against those racist and nativist attitudes. However, the differentiation between development and nativism was not at all present the ground. For most, “[development]’ became a codeword for Chinese immigrants,” and even though anti-development movements were theoretically against “uncontrolled development in general,” they targeted “Chinese-directed development in particular.” The end result became that phenomena that are part and parcel of any place undergoing a increase in population —

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35 Fong, *The First Suburban Chinatown*, 34; and Arax, “Nation's 1st Suburban Chinatown.”
things like increased density, traffic, and less available parking — became associated with, and blamed on, the Asian American newcomers. By extension, it also meant that development issues had to be talked about not in their own right, but merely as one of the many subtexts of the larger racial conflict.

However, some later researchers have continued to associate race and development, at times in dubious ways. Cheng, for example, invokes a theoretical framework in her research called the “moral geography of differentiated space,” which argued that people of color in the nonwhite-majority areas of the San Gabriel Valley have developed different worldviews compared to the older white residents with regards to their communities and how they fit within it. On the one hand, this is a useful framework for contextualizing much of her findings about the social lives of the people of the San Gabriel Valley: for example, she uses it to explain how the San Gabriel Valley could give its Asian American residents a sense of belonging and freedom from racism that they would not necessarily feel when they are somewhere else. And, in these respects, Cheng’s work is excellent. However, in areas related to property and development is when this theory, which is deeply grounded in race, fails. In particular, Cheng theorizes that these residents have developed differing views of property from those of “mainstream” white culture. Specifically, she labeled the motivation to maximize property values and profit as emblematic of a “white” approach to property. However, that conclusion is nonsensical because at least some Asian Americans were certainly doing exactly that — pursuing real estate developments for the purposes of profit — in fact, this is exactly what Fred Hsieh, the man who arguably set in motion the entire set of processes that are being studied, did.
Indeed, disagreements within the Asian American community over the issue of development has always been present. Even during an arguably nascent stage of Asian American settlement in the area, the three early scholars all noticed that racial unity amongst Asian American could not simply be assumed. Most significantly, there were major rifts between some longtime Asian American residents of Monterey Park who preferred the status quo and the newcomers who wanted more development — and that was back in the 1980s. The internal diversity within the Asian American community of the San Gabriel Valley was already profound even when it was largely limited to the confines of Monterey Park. In the almost four decades since, it can only grow even more profoundly diverse as Asian Americans moved to new communities with new and distinct socioeconomic characteristics, and in-migration of new groups from both abroad and from other parts of the US continued. So, those internal divides are only likely to be greater now than they were decades ago, and it seriously challenges the premise of the conflicts in the San Gabriel Valley being centered around the nexus of race, as opposed to development. As a result, Cheng has particular difficulties contending with conflicting views over development within the Asian American community, because it is a serious challenge to her claim that attitudes towards property and development are shaped by the area’s racial makeup. The reality, of course, is far more complicated.

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38 Saito, in particular, delves into the process by which something resembling a common Asian American or nonwhite identity had to be actively created; see Saito, Race and Politics, ch. 5.
There Goes the Neighborhood:  
“Overdevelopment” and “Mansionization”

"Who is to say it's ugly or not ugly? If you come to Hong Kong, which is in a boom and everyone comes there admiring it, it is very congested. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

— Frederic Hsieh, real estate developer

Much of the dispute over development in the San Gabriel Valley fall into two categories: complaints about “overdevelopment” and complaints about “mansionization.” The former refers primarily to the construction of new apartment and condo complexes in a region where single-family homes once dominated (and, to a lesser extent, still do), but also occasionally to the construction of new, often large commercial spaces. The latter refers to the phenomenon where older single-family homes are torn down and replaced by new, often far larger houses.

The terms “overdevelopment” and “mansionization” are in quotes because they began originally as informal names given by residents, and phased into popular usage simply because of how well they caught on. But, neither of these terms have — or could have — formal definitions. In the case of “overdevelopment”, what scale of developments would be considered “over” is entirely a matter of opinion; and in the case of “mansionization”, there is also no formal or legal definition of how big or luxurious a house needs to be to be considered a “mansion.” For

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all intents and purposes, the criterion for identifying instances of “overdevelopment” or “mansionization” are as clear and sophisticated as the criterion the Supreme Court uses to classify pornography as stated by Justice Stewart: *I know it when I see it.*

And for longtime residents of the San Gabriel Valley, that may just be good enough, because the changes that these words are meant to describe are extremely visible. Chronologically, “overdevelopment” erupted into controversy first. The demand for more housing produced by the influx of newcomers was met with the most logical response: “[tearing] down homes [with] extensive backyards and [replacing] them with multistory condominium and apartment complexes” where “existing zoning standards or… approved variances” allowed.41

On paper, such acts seem neither drastic nor revolutionary, especially in the context of the far direr housing shortages that California has began to face in the 2010s. However, for the residents on the ground, the transformation was drastic and shocking. To quote a news report from the mid-1980s, when construction was at breakneck speed:

> “Gabriel Vasquez, 16, and his friend David Reyes, 18, both of Rosemead, retraced some of those dizzying changes while walking down Muscatel Avenue one afternoon. The two teenagers, sounding like a pair of wistful grandfathers, recalled what their block had looked like six years ago, before the influx of large numbers of Chinese and Vietnamese. Shade trees lined both sides of the street and formed an unbroken canopy, they said... All over, there was the feeling of wide-open country. Vasquez pointed to a lot where a single-family house and expansive yard once stood. Two years ago, he said, Chinese developers razed the house, subdivided the property and created a cul-de-sac of 10

41Arax, “Nation's 1st Suburban Chinatown.”
virtually identical homes. Farther up the block, where Muscatel dead-ends at the San Bernardinó Freeway, Chinese developers have built a dozen two-story condominiums on a small lot. ”

Figure 3: An example of an older ranch-style home with an extensive yard in Arcadia, dwarfed by a newer condo complex developed on the adjoining lot of roughly equal size.

“Mansionization” came second, and had a similarly jarring effect on residents. In exploring the issue, I interviewed Philip K. Chan, one of the area’s foremost architects and

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43 Photo by author.
builders of new single-family homes (or the so-called “mansions”). In his gleaming new studio building in the heart of Arcadia adorned with plans and photographs of his projects, Chan recounted some of the opposition he has seen so far in his career. For some, opposition to the construction of a new home could be boiled down to something concrete, such as privacy:

“If someone is in the neighboring home — it’s a small one story ranch style home, where they have a huge backyard — they would want more privacy. So, we can design in a way where there's no big windows that can look into [that] backyard easily. Some of the windows we can create above eye level, we can relocate some of them towards the front, so that their bedroom windows are facing the front and some windows facing the rear... [but] nothing facing the side.”

Figure 4: An example of “mansionization” in Temple City, with the newly-built two-story home to the left dwarfing the older home on the right.

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44 Interview with Philip K. Chan, September 14, 2018.
45 Photo by author.
However, even such an issue that is comparatively “easy” to resolve in Chan’s perspective gives a sense of just how jarring it would be for a longtime resident suddenly finds a brand new home next door that can physically loom over their home or back yard.

Indeed, for longtime residents, the changes in their environment is visceral, because these changes are producing a radically different look and feel to a place that they feel like they know. They know “overdevelopment” and “mansionization” when they see it — it is wherever they experience the jarring disconnect between the familiarity of the location with the utter unfamiliarity of the new visuals of the place. And while these may just be feelings and anecdotal observations, they also happen to be backed up strongly by data. In order to quantify the changes that have taken place in the residential landscape of the San Gabriel Valley, I use property tax data — with information on every residential unit in the area — to see how characteristics of homes differ based on the year they are built.

The data on “Mansionization”

When it comes to “mansionization”, the verdict from the data is as clear as can be. As seen on Figure 5, houses in the western San Gabriel Valley are clearly getting bigger — much bigger. In 1950, single-family homes averaged in size around the vicinity of of 1,500 square feet. In 2016, however, the average has jumped to the vicinity of 4,500 square feet. In other words, the typical house built in the area now is, on average, three times as large as one built in the 1950s, when much of this area was developed. So, the perception that houses in the area are getting bigger is absolutely accurate.
Even though this result is already shocking, it still probably understates the true scale of change. The measurements obtained for the average size of houses from the 1950s are based on houses from that time that are still standing and paying property taxes in 2016. But, in an area where there is such a strong pressure to tear down older houses to build new structures, the older houses that are still standing are more likely to have some quality that makes them worth saving from the wrecking ball — such as being larger or nicer. This then suggests that the figures for average home size from the 1950s used here actually only represents the higher-end homes from that era, and that the real average home size from the era may be even lower.

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46 Specifically, this figure was constructed from data contained in the proprietary property tax records dataset from CoreLogic. From the larger dataset, a subset of just under 100,000 records that fall under the study area was extracted. These zip codes are 91006, 91007, 91108, 91754, 91755, 91770, 91775, 91776, 91780, 91801, and 91803. The CoreLogic dataset is certainly not perfect. However, it is considered an industry standard of sorts and widely used as a decently reliable dataset. See Quentin Brummet, *Comparison of Survey, Federal, and Commercial Address Data Quality*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau Center for Administrative Records Research and Applications, 2014).
More importantly, this data is not only significant because it shows that newer houses tend to be bigger. While this property tax data is only one snapshot of a particular moment in time, the context of how mansionization works allows the data to be interpreted in terms of change over time. Since nearly all of these “new” houses are being built on existing lots, the implication is that they are replacing an older building on the lot: namely, a smaller house from the area’s older class of housing stock. So, it is not just that the newer houses are, on average, three times bigger than the older houses. The more remarkable interpretation of this data is that if the average older house were torn down and replaced by an average new house, that new house would be two or three times larger, even though the size of the lot has remained the same.

The data on “Overdevelopment”

Figure 6: Percentage of housing constructed in each year that are not single-family homes. The construction years, grouped into five-year intervals, are presented on the x-axis.
The same data also validates the perception that the San Gabriel Valley has seen a spike in the number of denser, multi-family developments. As seen on Figure 6, for every five year period until 1969, the share of housing units built during those years that are not single-family homes has hovered around 15%, and never exceeding 20%. However, in the 1970-1974 period, that number jumped to 40%, and jumped further to its peak of over 65% in the 1980-84 period. Since then, it has generally hovered around the 50% range. In fact, the year 1970 is a stark dividing line: just over 15% of the housing units built before then were apartment or condo units; however, a majority of those built in or after 1970 were apartment or condo units.

These results are also shocking to hear. When the majority of the homes in a suburb that have been built in the past century have been apartments and condos, that challenges the very conception of what suburbs are and look like. It is easy to say that residents of Monterey Park are being unrealistic for expecting to live a “small town” or “park-like community” despite being only 10 minutes away from Downtown Los Angeles on a good traffic day. However, that was arguably what Monterey Park was like when these residents first moved in. Whatever the respective merits of each style of development, these residents did sign up for low-density and single-family homes, not dozens of new apartment and condo complexes that stretch on for entire blocks.

Granted, there is a strong argument to be made that denser neighborhoods are, in fact, preferable from any number of policy lens. However, that is not the problem at hand. For better or worse, these residents have made a choice to live in a sprawling, quiet suburb. The problem is that they were forced to confront the fact that in a few short years, that suburb fundamentally

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48 Arax, “Nation's 1st Suburban Chinatown.”
changed in character, and the ideal place to live they have chosen no longer existed, and this is clearly a recipe for conflict.

**Looking for a Culprit**

So, what is causing the San Gabriel Valley to change? Popular perception linked the arrival of new Asian residents in the region to both “overdevelopment” and “mansionization” because all three things became noticeable around the same time. However, this is one instance where the appearances are not backed up by the data. Monterey Park did not become substantially Asian American until the middle of the 1970s, and the much larger wave of in-migration of Asian newcomers to other cities of the western San Gabriel Valley occurred even later. Yet, according to the data, average housing size has been increasing consistently since the 1950s. Moreover, the spike in apartment and condo units occurred in the early 1970s — also before the mid-1970s. And, because the housing market does not react immediately to new demand due to delays in planning and construction (especially when it comes to larger multi-family projects) the condo and apartment units completed in the earlier 1970s are more likely responding to demand felt in the late 1960s, which is even further removed from the advent of Asian Americans.

In other words, while “mansionization” and “overdevelopment” seemed to have coincided with the first large wave of Asian American arrivals to the region in the mid-1970s, they were actually already underway by that time. So, the question remains: what exactly caused these changes?
**Fighting the Inevitable:**
Change as a National Economic Phenomenon

“*Anytime you go into anything that's different and new, there's a bit of fear.*”

— Kelly Marie Tran, Asian American actress

For the most part, development issues in the San Gabriel Valley are seen as local issues. This is true in most places in America — they are local because they are usually adjudicated by local government. Places like city councils and zoning boards are the venues where these battles over particular projects are fought, zoning codes are amended, and cities’ disposition towards development is shaped. In the San Gabriel Valley, the idea that the development trends it faces could be unique is further strengthened by its distinctive demography and history.

However, this seemingly intuitive train of thoughts is actually not grounded in reality, which paints a far different picture. To begin with, the San Gabriel Valley’s “mansionization” problem is actually national. Looking at the data, it is immediately obvious that so-called “mansionization” is not limited to just the San Gabriel Valley. There has been an unmistakable and dramatic upward trend in home sizes all over the country. The average home size in the country went from just under 1,000 square feet in 1950 to over 2,500 square feet in 2016. This two-and-a-half-fold increase in average home size is not unlike the threefold increase observed in the San Gabriel Valley.
**Figure 7:** Average size of homes in the San Gabriel Valley, based on year built (shown in red),\(^49\) compared against the Census Bureau’s figures for average sizes of homes across the country, based on year built (shown in red).\(^50\)

![Graph comparing average home size in San Gabriel Valley to national averages](image)

Indeed, while there is a divergence between the two trend lines, these differences are best thought of as cosmetic variations on a broad national trend. The San Gabriel Valley should not be expected to match the national trends perfectly because it, just like every other place in America, will have more localized forces that shape the area in finer ways. First, the Los Angeles real estate market is significantly more competitive than the national average. Second, this deviation

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\(^49\) This is the same data as presented in Figure 5.

\(^50\) The national figures are obtained from a variety of sources. Figures for years 1950 and 1954-56 are from a 1958 Bureau of Labor bulletin entitled “New Housing and its Materials, 1940-56;” figures for years 1964-69 are from a 1970 issue in a series of construction reports prepared by the Census Bureau and issued jointly with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, entitled “Characteristics of New One-Family Homes: 1969;” figures from 1973 onward are from a 2016 report entitled “2016 Characteristics of New Housing” prepared jointly by the Census Bureau and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Data from the missing years appear to be unavailable.
also reflects the large influx of immigrant and foreign capital into the San Gabriel Valley has attracted due to its demography.\textsuperscript{51} Both of these factors play a role in fueling a real estate market that is more competitive than the national average, which in turn drives a more intensified demand for development.

But, again, these differences do not detract from the validity of the larger point, which is that “mansionization” is by no means a San Gabriel Valley-only phenomenon, but rather a national trend. While the newness of both the term and the phenomenon means that academic research on the subject is still relatively scant, what research has been completed confirm the findings from the property tax data that “mansionization” is happening all over America. Based on an incomplete count from a survey research project from 2007, anti-mansionization regulations have been put in place in dozens of cities in states all over the country, from California to Ohio to Massachusetts, many of which were prompted by the same kinds of pressures to regulate “mansionization” on local governments that is seen in the San Gabriel Valley.\textsuperscript{52} However, unlike the San Gabriel Valley, most of these communities have not also undergone significant demographic shifts with regards to race.

One of the few existing in-depth studies about mansionization in a particular city was completed in Chicago, where many of its suburb have also experienced a process of rapid and large-scale “mansionization” very similar to that of the San Gabriel Valley.\textsuperscript{53} The epicenter of that change is located in the affluent suburbs of Winnetka and Kenilworth on Chicago’s North

Side. where in the ten short years between 2000 and 2010, up to 8% of the single-family homes in the two towns have been rebuilt.\textsuperscript{54}

Beyond mansionization, Kenilworth and Winnetka also bear strong resemblance to parts of the San Gabriel Valley in other respects. Winnetka, in particular, is strikingly similar to San Marino. While they may be on opposite sides of the country, the two cities seem like almost twins separated at birth. Both are leafy, high-end suburbs that used to be a short commuter train ride from their respective metropolitan cores. Both are zoned exclusively for single-family homes, and both have near identical population sizes that, as a result of the zoning, have not changed significantly for more than a half century. Both had populations that were almost 100% white.

The only difference is that in San Marino and the rest of the San Gabriel Valley, that demographic has obviously shifted significantly. Kenilworth and Winnetka, on the other hand, remains over 90% white to this day, which again refutes the notion that “mansionization” is in any way intrinsically related to Asian American immigrants, their supposedly different aesthetic preferences, or their supposed disrespect for their new neighborhoods’ aesthetics. Rather, the desire for larger houses is actually broadly and wholly American.

Similarly, the issue of “overdevelopment” can find parallels all over America. A particularly striking case is that of Denver, Colorado. In 2018, advocates in Denver hailed an important victory when the city council voted to ban a form of townhouse called the “slot-home.”\textsuperscript{55} The term “slot-home” refers to the design where a dead-end driveway is constructed perpendicular to the street extending to the end of the lot, and townhouses are built

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 1512.
lining either side of the driveway, which thereby turns the driveway into the namesake “slot.”

And, by and large, Denverites hated this design, invariably decrying them as cheap-looking, detrimental to the overall walkability and friendliness of the street and, simply, ugly.

**Figure 8:** Illustrations produced by Denver city government to illustrate the changes to the zoning code following its slot-homes ban.

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57 Ibid.
58 Images created by the City and County of Denver, but taken from Andrew Kenney, “Denver's Banning Slot Homes. 6 Illustrations Show What Could Come Next,” Denverite, last modified May 7, 2018.
Figure 9: Condo complexes in in the San Gabriel Valley (left: Arcadia, right: San Gabriel).\textsuperscript{59}

Yet, while the term “slot-home” may be specific to Denver, that particular design is by no means limited to Denver alone, and any resident of the San Gabriel Valley shown an image of the Denver slot-home can immediately see that they are almost identical to the prevailing design of most townhouse complexes in the area, even if there is not a specific name for it. More tellingly, despite lacking a name, the history of this style of townhome in the San Gabriel Valley, which began decades earlier than it did in Denver, was nonetheless eerily similar. In both places, these complexes were created by “[tearing] down homes [with] extensive backyards” — in other words, taking advantage of and maximizing lots with short street frontage but extensive depth.\textsuperscript{60} In both places, there were objections to the questionable aesthetics and functionality of the building format; as one San Gabriel resident dismayed about these complexes:

\textsuperscript{59} Photos by author.
\textsuperscript{60} Arax, “Nation's 1st Suburban Chinatown.”
“There are no patios, no pools, no places for kids to play. They’re just cement driveways with rooms above.”

However, despite all this, the style was popular in both places likely because of its practicality from the developer’s standpoint, as it allows for sizeable apartment complexes to be built on the sites of just two or even one single-family home. This is to say that in both places, the construction of these complexes was driven less by an actual desire by anyone for the particular format of housing, but more by the sheer profit motive to meet burgeoning demand. This was true in the San Gabriel Valley, where the new influx of residents required a similar boom in new housing to meet demand. And, in Denver, too, this was very much the case; as one developer of the slot-homes put it particularly bluntly:

“I think the only thing that’s driving that demand [for slot-homes] is price.”

The Theory of Change

It is not a coincidence that the suburbs undergoing mansionization in Chicago and Los Angeles bear striking similarities, or that the ugliest of Denver’s apartment complexes come to resemble those in the San Gabriel Valley. The Chicago study is particularly good because it was able to identified some characteristics that makes a house more susceptible to being torn down and redeveloped. Generally, properties with smaller houses on relatively big lots — or, in other words, a low floor area-to-lot size ratio — and properties located in desirable neighborhoods — such as those in good school districts — are most likely to experience demolition and

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63 Murray, “Denver’s Slot Home Crackdown Comes Too Late for Some Neighborhoods.”
redevelopment. The justification is simple: land is an expensive commodity — and that is especially the case for land in neighborhoods that are in demand. So, landowners will naturally want to maximize the value of the property, and that goal is best accomplished by building something that could take the greatest advantage of the land, which often means a larger house that use up a greater portion of the lot.

This is broadly in line with the conclusions of a seminal paper on the subject, Neil Smith’s “Toward a Theory of Gentrification.” Smith theorized that the potential value of a property (which he conceptualizes as “ground rent”) will inevitably increase, while the price of the house will decline as it ages. This process, left to continue, will produce what Smith terms a “rent gap” that will widen with the passage of time, as the value of the house continues to depreciate while that of the land will continue to increase. As he writes:

“Gentrification occurs when the gap is wide enough that developers can purchase shells cheaply, can pay the builders’ costs and profit for rehabilitation, can pay interest on mortgage and construction loans, and can then sell the end product for a sale price that leaves a satisfactory return to the developer. The entire ground rent, or a large portion of it, is now capitalized; the neighborhood has been “recycled” and begins a new cycle of use.”

Smith intended for his theory to explain gentrification in inner-city neighborhoods. However, the only real requirements for this model to hold true is that a house is deteriorating in condition and

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66 Quoted from ibid., 545.
losing value over time — which is universally true — and that the land it sits on is gaining value over time — which is generally true for economically healthy and growing cities, Los Angeles included. In that way, Smith’s model can apply to any house in most metropolises in America, and they certainly do hold true in the San Gabriel Valley. In fact, the process is particularly accelerated in the San Gabriel Valley because demand for housing was especially high and concentrated. Land values consequently become especially high, thereby causing an exceptional mismatch between the existing and potential values of older properties — because of the area’s particular desirability to Asian Americans seeking an ethnoburb experience and because of the intensity of the capital inflow.

**Figure 10:** Percentage of property’s appraised value derived from land value, contextualized based on year built. For this analysis, only single-family homes were considered.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Newton, “Housing Sales Go Through the Roof.”

\(^6\) This was also constructed from the CoreLogic dataset.
Figure 10 compares, on the y-axis, the percentage of a property’s appraised value derived from the value of the land itself, based on the year built, on the x-axis. By using a percentage measure, the depreciation of the built improvements on properties over time can be captured and compared across properties of differing overall values. There is a clearly visible trend whereby older properties derive a significantly larger proportion of their value from the land on which they sit on, rather than the value of anything on it. As seen on the graph, the oldest buildings included in this analysis dating to 1925, only constitute less than 30% of the total values of the properties on which they sit whereas the newest developments contribute as much as 50%, which confirms Smith’s conceptual framework: houses lose value when they age, and building a newer house (which is also likely to be significantly larger) helps recapture some of the potential value of the property.

Also of note is the convex shape of the trend line, whereby the rate of depreciation is particularly steep in relatively earlier years whilst flat in more recent years. This also confirms Smith’s framework that “…house value will only very slowly begin to decline if at all... But eventually sustained depreciation of the house value occurs.” For a different view of the chart, Figure 11 has both axes inverted, thereby showing (by proxy) the depreciation of the value of the improvements as they age. This is done to present the data in this case in the same terms as Smith’s diagram from his paper, also reproduced. One can see that the trend line on this graph closely resembles its counterpart on Smith’s graph, labeled “house value.”
Figure 11: The data from the San Gabriel Valley (left) juxtaposed with Neil Smith’s diagram illustrating the rent gap (right).\textsuperscript{69} The analogous curve on Smith’s diagram is highlighted.

Built by Market Forces

These findings have immense implications, because they explain why neighborhoods are changing all over the country, and who is to blame for them: and the short answer is, frankly, nobody. The drive to demolish an older house to build a newer one or even an apartment complex is not attributable to any race or group of immigrants because it is a purely economic and rational choice. In fact, to not pursue such an opportunity would be to leave free money on the table, and that holds true for anyone, not just newcomers or Asian Americans. The same holds true for the older white residents as well: they stood — and often still stand — to benefit tremendously by selling their homes and moving away when offered with big cash buyouts that far exceed the value of their homes, and many do take up on that offer. There are plenty of stories

\textsuperscript{69} Graph from Smith, “Toward a Theory of Gentrification,” 544.
of longtime residents, even leaders in anti-development groups, who have simply sold their homes and moved. Philip Chan told of such a case he personally encountered during his career:

“I was checking the aerial map of the old property [for one tear-down and rebuild project]... and there were ‘Save Arcadia!’ signs\(^70\) on the front lawn. ... [Of the] older homeowners who sold their lot, as much as they want to oppose it, or as much as they want to believe in something, a lot of them end up just up selling to the highest bidder... and couldn’t care less what they do with [the property].”\(^71\)

In some way, this might seem hypocritical, but regardless of value judgements, these stories highlight just how natural — and market-driven — of a process the change in the San Gabriel Valley has been.

So, it doesn’t make sense to say that changes in the San Gabriel Valley are distinctly Asian American in the same way it wouldn’t make sense to say that post-WWII suburbanization in America was distinctly veteran. The San Gabriel Valley is Asian American as a matter of demography. In other words, the participants of its transformation are largely Asian American, and that lends a degree of visual Asian-ness to the end product. However, the forms that this transformation created were nonetheless essentially American.

\(^{70}\) The signs were part of an anti-development campaign.

\(^{71}\) Interview with Philip K. Chan; emphasis his.
Looking Asian:
Defining the Aesthetics of Asian America

“Drenched in café au lait stucco, the mall was bordered by an example of America’s most unique architectural contribution to the world, a parking lot... One could drive for miles along a boulevard and see nothing but parking lots and the kudzu of strip malls catering to every need, from pet shops to water dispensaries to ethnic restaurants and every other imaginable category of mom-and-pop small business, each one an advertisement for the pursuit of happiness.”

— Viet Thanh Nguyen, Asian American novelist

In 1985, a row erupted in Arcadia over a newly-built home on a quiet residential street that, to neighbors, looked simply too Asian. Indeed, in many ways, the large, three-story house was distinctive. Perhaps its most noticeable feature was its blue glazed roof tiles, which evoked some visual reminder of the sloping roofs of the Forbidden City in Beijing. If one looks closer, one might also notice a similarly-adorned Buddhist shrine at the end of the driveway. However, in other ways, the house was also similar to others on the block, with its boxy shape and white stucco walls.

The house belonged to Sho Kosugi, a Japanese American martial artist and karate champion who had also gained fame on the big screen in series of ninja movies. To Kosugi, the home, where he lived with his wife and children, was well-designed — he expended a lot of

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72 Quoted from Viet Thanh Nguyen, The Sympathizer (New York: Grove, 2015), 143.
money and effort to make sure it was so. In fact, he went so far as to hire a fengshui expert to make sure that the home would be as auspicious as possible. However, the community’s response was another thing altogether. From the very beginning, the Kosugis were met with extreme hostility. A city councilman compared the house to a “wart on the nose.” People would stop their cars in front of the house and glare with disapproval during the day; at night, they would simply drive by, hurling objects and racial slurs. The situation only deteriorated with time. In the two years after they moved in, the front windows of the Kosugi house had been broken more than 20 times; nails were thrown into their swimming pool; rotting fruit and garbage were left on the front lawn; there were still people driving by every day shouting racial slurs.

Through it all, Kosugi himself remained defiant, accusing his detractors of racial prejudice and jealousy of his wealth. However, what is also clear that the animosity the Kosugis faced was about far more than them or their house. “Wart” or not, it is undeniable that the Kosugi house stood out on a street — and, arguably, a city — of understated rancho-style houses. As such, it became a strong visual symbol for the ongoing demographic transition of the San Gabriel Valley and, specifically, the arrival of new Asian residents into cities like Arcadia which, until then, had been almost homogeneously white.

However, if houses like the Kosugis’ are meant to be heralds for the arrival of new Asian residents, they are terribles ones at that. More than three decades later, the Kosugi house remains

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74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Arax, “Asian Newcomers Create Consternation in Arcadia.”
80 Ibid.
both the first and the last house with Asian-inspired features to be built in that neighborhood, even as a steady stream of Asian residents continued to move in, and the formerly whites-only Arcadia eventually became majority Asian.\textsuperscript{81}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Figure 12: The former Kosugi home in 2018.}\textsuperscript{82}
\end{center}

The Kosugis no longer live at the house; since then, the Buddhist shrine has gone, and a tall hedge has been added along the street-facing side of the lot. Yet, despite all this, the house and its glazed blue tiles remain as distinct and visible as ever in a neighborhood that, although having changed a fair bit since 1985, still had an architectural palette that otherwise drew only from classic American and European styles. So, in a way, the outsized reactions generated by the

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Photo by author.
Kosugi house and houses like it (around the same time, a house containing a vaguely Persian-looking central dome, which earned the moniker “Taj Mahal”, caused controversy in San Marino\textsuperscript{83}) belies the fact of how unrepresentative of the landscape they actually are. In other words, these houses draw attention precisely because of how unique they are compared to what is present in the surrounding neighborhood. But that also means, almost by definition, that the controversial styles and motifs that they represent are not widespread enough to make them appear anything but visually shocking. However, if the aesthetics of the Kosugi house, once held as a visual symbol of the newly-arrived Asian residents, were not replicated, then the question must be asked: what does the Asian American suburb look like? And, frankly, as far as residential areas are concerned, there are few obvious visual cues that would reveal a particular residential street or neighborhood to be Asian American. As one San Marino resident put it:

“... you don’t really know the Chinese are here unless they live right next door.”\textsuperscript{84}

Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find residential homes donning Asian motifs in the San Gabriel Valley outside of rare standouts like the Kosugi house. Driving down residential streets, one would see a lot of the Mission revival style, a lot of the Mediterranean style, and a lot of other miscellaneous European and American styles one would expect — the same stylistic palettes one would see driving down most residential streets in Los Angeles. This remains true regardless of whether that street happens to be in middle-class San Gabriel and Monterey Park or in upper-class San Marino, and regardless of whether that street is lined with single-family home or apartment complexes. The same patterns of generic American aesthetics found in residential.

\textsuperscript{83} Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz, “Design Assimilation in Suburbia,” 345.
districts largely holds true for commercial developments, as well; barring a few early developments in Monterey Park, commercial properties also largely maintain a look.\footnote{Horton, The Politics of Diversity, 31. Similarly noted in Lung-Amam, Trespassers, 100-101; and Chang, The Global Silicon Valley Home, 105, 110-11.}

![A residential street of single-family homes in San Gabriel.](image)

**Figure 13:** A residential street of single-family homes in San Gabriel.\footnote{Photo by author.}

But is there anything wrong with this particular aesthetic consensus? Or, put in another way, what should an Asian American built environment look like? These are difficult questions to answer partly because any Asian American aesthetic must have arisen out of an America that is largely governed by mainstream white standards of aesthetics — what is considered normal or not normal, what is considered appropriate or inappropriate. The most obvious manifestation of this regime are the codified planning procedures that, in many cases, imposed white design consensus upon Asian America. For example, San Gabriel Square, the area’s most prominent
Asian American commercial center, was constructed in the Mission revival style, partly so that the development would match the architectural style of its surroundings and, therefore, have an easier time clearing the city of San Gabriel’s design review process. Similarly, the efforts of cities to legislate and codify what is considered acceptable or appropriate architecture with regards to residential spaces must be seen in the context of demographic transition: it is an attempt by existing residents to exert control over suburban space — and all the privileges these spaces afford — that was once exclusively theirs, but had passed from their control when they were bought up by nonwhite outsiders.

Figure 14: A section of San Gabriel Square.

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88 Photo by author.
Figure 15: View of a pedestrian-only section of San Gabriel Square,\(^89\) which the Los Angeles Times described as “kitschy on its own terms, in a brazen Asian nouveau-riche way, as opposed to the hokey kitschiness of Chinatowns built to trap tourists.”\(^90\)

However, it is noteworthy we cannot prove the contrapositive — that is, that Roger Chen, the developer of San Gabriel Square (and, incidentally, the founder of the national Asian American grocery chain 99 Ranch), would have opted for a more Asian-looking structure had the design review process allowed for such. Similarly, while it is important to acknowledge the existence of these codified procedures that enforce these aesthetics in suburban space, we also cannot say whether the San Gabriel Valley’s Asian Americans would have preferred a more

\(^{89}\) Photo by author.

Asian-looking San Gabriel Square. Moreover, what precisely does *Asian-looking* mean? In terms of other existing Asian American spaces, the San Gabriel Valley’s look contrasts most starkly with that of older Chinatowns. One needs look no further than the still extant Chinatown in Los Angeles, from which many Chinese Americans had migrated to Monterey Park, for an example. LA Chinatown is built in an explicitly and flamboyantly Asian style for a look that far more resembles the Kosugi house than the cityscapes found in the San Gabriel Valley, which represents a sharp break with that Chinatown past. In a sense, then, one could say that Wei Li’s observed similarities between Asian American ethnoburbs and the typical white suburb extends beyond just demographics, but to aesthetic styles as well.

However, as Li discussed, Chinatown was a much different kind of community situated in a different historical context. Los Angeles Chinatown, like many others across the country, serves the dual function of being both an enclave for Chinese Americans but also as a tourist attraction for society at large.\(^1\) And, to a large extent, the aesthetics of Chinatown are created and maintained to serve that purpose: curio and souvenir shops meant for tourists dominated the central areas;\(^2\) vendors often put on fake Chinese accents or donned traditional costumes that they do not wear in everyday life to provide entertainment to their tourist clientele.\(^3\) Specifically, that entertainment was a particular brand of faux authenticity made attractive by its geographic

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accessibility, put into words best by a full-page advertisement taken out in local papers that promised would-be visitors “the enchanting charm of Old China in Los Angeles.”

Figure 16: An old postcard for Los Angeles Chinatown. These aesthetics largely persist in the current day. Note the caption advertising an “enchanting Chinese settlement.”

In such a context, the Asian-looking aesthetics of Chinatown seems contrived, even forced. The aesthetics of Chinatowns, therefore, represent less of what Asia looks like, and more what non-Asian tourists wanted and expected Asia to look like, and at best could only coincidentally represent the aesthetics that the community actually wants. To that point, the Asian-looking architectural motifs are not built using anything resembling traditional

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95 The image is in the public domain.
architectural methods, but were rather just tacked-on cardboard cutouts — a pioneering use of a technique that is now employed broadly in theme parks, showing just how tourist-centered Chinatown and its “Chinese” aesthetics are. The San Gabriel Valley, on the other hand, did not have to pander to such considerations. It was never meant to attract tourists, and never relied on tourists for its economy. In other words, the San Gabriel Valley represents a much more self-reliant economic model with regards to its Asian American businesses, which serve mostly Asian American locals with considerable purchasing power in their own right, and so it does not need to market itself to the outside using ethnicized aesthetics. As Justin Lin, the renowned director of Star Trek and The Fast and the Furious fame, said of San Gabriel Square when he was still a student at UCLA:

“In old Chinatowns, every building looks like a temple to bring in the tourists. It’s nice to see a place that doesn’t have to do that to thrive. It’s empowering.”

This is yet another one of many ways in which the San Gabriel Valley represents a new era for Asian America, one in which the definitions — in this case, the aesthetics — of the past no longer hold the same relevance or credibility.

Between all this, it is difficult to ascertain what the preferred aesthetics of the newcomers truly are, or the precise reasons why a more discernibly “Asian” aesthetics — whatever that might entail — prevailed in the San Gabriel Valley in its de facto aesthetic consensus, and I in no way assert that I have answers as to either of them. However, Philip Chan, the architect, seemed

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96 Shen, “Repositioning Chinatown Las Vegas,” 19-20
98 Lung-Amam, Trespassers, 100-101.
99 Hong, “New Voices Emerge to Tell the Story of Ordinary Americans.”
to have at least some clue as to the answer to the first question. When asked whether any of his clients ever request Asian motifs or styling as part of the design, Chan was quick to downright dismiss the prospect:

“[My clients] respect the [aesthetic] compatibility... Some will ask for some fengshui elements, or some statue out front, but with [the exterior] styling of the home... I don’t have any clients [who ask for that].”

Figure 17: A slot home-like townhome development in Arcadia.

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101 Interview with Philip K. Chan.
102 Photo by author.
In fact, Chan points out that if there is any deviation from the default regional stylistic preferences on the part of his mostly Asian clients (the default in the Los Angeles area being Mediterranean, which Chan calls the most “safe” from the point of view of a developer or builder), it would be for something even more “traditional”, like an “English style” home.\textsuperscript{103} Admittedly, Chan’s clients are by no means representative of the Asian Americans in the San Gabriel Valley as a whole, since they are typically people looking to spend seven figures on their homes. However, they are representative of the very real fact that, of those who can afford and who are interested in building the San Gabriel Valley, changing the built environment might be on the agenda, but changing the overall aesthetics is not. And, more broadly, the fact that Asian architectural motifs remain exceedingly rare even after decades of construction and development largely driven by Asian residents and their capital offers some level of intuitive assurance that ethnic expression through visually Asian features — however they be defined — in architecture has not been a priority of the community.

The Fight Over Foreign Language Signs

Architecture aside, one of the most visible indicators of the San Gabriel Valley’s changing demographics has been the increasing presence of non-English signs that accompanied the arrival of Asian-owned and oriented businesses. Most of the signs are in Chinese, but there is a substantial minority in Vietnamese and a smattering in other Asian languages. They are a common and unmissable sight in just about every commercial district in the San Gabriel Valley.

\textsuperscript{103} Interview with Philip K. Chan.
(with the notable exception of San Marino, which will be discussed later), and are arguably an inseparable part of the visual identity of the area as an Asian American enclave. However, their ubiquitous existence was not always taken for granted. In fact, they were the focal point of one of the most significant and longest-running points of contention in the San Gabriel Valley’s recent history.

The signs controversy first arose in 1984, when Monterey Park was in the process of revising its ordinances regulating commercial signs. It was not the first city to propose such a law. In the Los Angeles area, both Gardena (which has historically had a large Japanese American population) and Temple City (which, in contrast, had only received a negligible influx of Asian residents at the time) had laws dictating that businesses must have at least one sign in English for the stated purpose of helping emergency responders identify them quickly. Proponents for these laws argued that foreign language-only signs would be unreadable to non-speakers, thereby hindering their ability to report emergencies at those establishments, and the ability of emergency responders — also likely to be non-speakers — to quickly identify those locations. Initially, Monterey Park had proposed something far more wide-reaching, stipulating that at least half of any commercial signage must be in English. However, it eventually adopted something more akin to the Gardena ordinance.

Initially, the proposal went mostly unnoticed amongst the more than 2,000 Asian American businesses in Monterey Park, which made up roughly 75% of the total number of businesses in the city. Even some who were aware of the news did not feel like they could attend

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105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
the public meetings due to linguistic barriers. However, as time went on, Asian business owners’ uneasiness with the ordinance grew. As prominent Asian American business leader David Ma put it in 1985:

“I’m beginning to see another purpose in these ordinances. I’m afraid some people are using them to send out a message to Asians that you’re not welcome here.”

The example of Monterey Park — which was by then almost 50% Asian, and very visibly so — had prompted other cities in the Los Angeles area to race to craft their own so-called “English-also” ordinances. During this time, Monterey Park’s transformation from a sleepy, white-majority suburb into the beating heart of Asian America was arguably at its most breakneck pace. In response, there was a prevailing sentiment amongst the leaders of many suburban cities in Los Angeles to avoid becoming “another Monterey Park.” As a result, cities rushed to pass ordinances regulating signage, even if they did not have significant minority populations — so many, in fact, that even reporters at the Los Angeles Times had lost track. In Baldwin Park, further east in the San Gabriel Valley, the president of the chamber of commerce argued to the city council that it should pass an ordinance, even though

“...we don’t have a problem with non-English signs yet, now may be the time to nip it in the bud — it is much harder once a sign has been painted and is up.”

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107 Ibid.
110 See Mirna Alfonso, “Sign Law Would Require English in South Gate,” Los Angeles Times, October 20, 1985; in the article, the reporter states the number of cities in Los Angeles County that had passed similar ordinances as “at least six” when the real number is closer to ten.
111 Arax, “More Cities Move Toward Laws Requiring 'English-Also' Signs.”
Just one town over, in neighboring West Covina, the mayor echoed these sentiments, declaring:

“Let’s get this ordinance on the books... before signs in Korean or Arabic become a problem... Prevention is a lot better than cure.”  

However, despite the palpable racial subtext, cities maintained the rationale of these ordinances as being for protecting public safety. Monterey Park’s city attorney at the time, Richard Morillo, went so far as to explicitly instruct the city council in 1985 to justify the city’s sign ordinance in terms of safety, reasoning that such a justification would have the greatest chance of surviving constitutional scrutiny.

This initial wave of cities’ signage laws mostly came in the mold of the Gardena ordinance: that is, requiring businesses to have a sign that in some way identifies it in a fashion legible to an English speaker, whether by way of an address or a business name in English. However, even as these comparatively lax regulations were still making their rounds, cities who have already passed them moved towards even stricter regulations. Temple City, one of the first movers on the issue, implemented one of the toughest rules in the area by banning foreign languages on signs in its downtown area altogether. Arcadia, too, toughened its stance on signage, requiring two-thirds of the area of any sign to be devoted to the Latin alphabet and Arabic numerals. However, the most dramatic of these battles to make signage ordinances even stricter undoubtedly took place in Monterey Park.

112 Ibid.
114 Arax, “More Cities Move Toward Laws Requiring 'English-Also' Signs.”
115 Ibid.
Figure 18: A signpost located at the entrance to a shopping plaza in Monterey Park, containing a mostly multilingual collection of the signs for the various merchants.\textsuperscript{117}

Just a year after the initial, so-called “English-also” ordinance was passed, the Monterey Park city council was again under pressure from white residents for an even more restrictive signage ordinance. The new ordinance required businesses to have signage in English that includes a description of its nature (i.e. restaurant) that was visible from at least 100 feet away.\textsuperscript{118} Originally, an exception was proposed for “well-known” businesses with logos that convey “universal meaning” — there isn’t “anyone who doesn’t know Shell means gasoline,” the argument went.\textsuperscript{119} Lily Chen, the only Asian American member of the council (and later the first

\textsuperscript{117} Photo by author.

\textsuperscript{118} Arax, “Stronger Rules on English in Signs Pushed by Council.”

Asian American mayor of Monterey Park and, by extension, any municipality in the continental US), cried foul, pointing out the double standard this would create between Asian American and white businesses.\footnote{Ibid.} Her objection underscores the farcical nature of the new, stricter ordinance, because the problem with businesses not having any English signs — and the supposed safety risks that poses — had been, by all measures, solved. A survey, conducted at the time that the new ordinance was being debated, showed that just 14 of the city’s 3,215 businesses — or a paltry 0.4% — still lacked proper English signage.\footnote{Ibid.} Yet, rather than recognizing their ridiculous position of attempting to legislate on a problem that no longer exists, the other councilmembers responded to Chen’s objections by removing the proposed exemption and making the ordinance apply to all businesses so that, indeed, even a Shell gas station would have to post a sign declaring \textit{GAS STATION}.\footnote{Ibid.}

Tensions intensified even further in Monterey Park after the passage of Proposition 63, which declared English the state’s official language, in the 1986 elections. As the conflict became more heated, many in Monterey Park were all too happy to drop the veneer of race-neutral concerns about fire safety and move into openly xenophobic rhetoric. One such figure was councilmember Barry Hatch. After the 1986 elections, Hatch rode the political wave and vowed to “return Monterey Park as an English-speaking city.”\footnote{Mike Ward, “Bolstered by Prop. 63 Vote, Foe of Non-English Signs Renews Attack,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, November 9, 1986.} For Hatch, sign ordinances were needed not because of safety, but because “when people walk down the street, they feel like they’re in a foreign nation.”\footnote{Ibid.} In fact, to him, signs should be “all-English,” with whatever
foreign language signage confined to “a small neat sign at the bottom of the window” that would indicate what foreign languages the business’ staff can speak. Another councilmember serving alongside Hatch, Betty Couch, went even further with her racial dog-whistling, stating:

“It’s more than just English-only. I want signs that look like we’re in America.”

But, beyond these explicitly divisive outbursts, the xenophobia behind the ordinances was also implicit. It was implicit in the decision to justify them using the supposedly more constitutionally-sound rationale of safety, which all but announces the existence of unspoken real motives behind the signs that are too discriminatory to pass constitutional muster. It was implicit in the rush by other cities in the Los Angeles area to institute the signage ordinances to avoid becoming “another Monterey Park”, which all but announces their unspoken opposition of not only the city’s demographic transition and its new equilibrium but also of people of color moving into their own cities. However, it does appear that Hatch may have overplayed his hand in his use of more outright, hard-line bigotry: he was unable to get a majority to join him in creating an even stricter signage law, and by the beginning of 1989, it became clear that the status quo would largely be maintained.

This proved to be the beginning of the end for the signage issue. In 1989, a local Asian American civil rights group, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC, now known as Asian Americans Advancing Justice — Los Angeles), filed suit in Federal court challenging the signs ordinance in the city of Pomona, situated further east of the San Gabriel Valley, and the city

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126 Hudson, “Monterey Park Grapples Anew With Language Law.”
lost resoundingly.\textsuperscript{128} As it turned out, the supposedly robust safety rationale that had been used to justify these laws did not pass constitutional scrutiny. First, the wave of signage laws was by no means limited to Chinese-language signs. For example, in nearby South Gate, a heavily Latino suburb, Spanish-language signs were targeted.\textsuperscript{129} In this case, the safety rationale makes no sense, since Spanish is spelled phonetically in Latin script, so identification of a business should not be an issue to an English speaker. Second and more importantly, signs for a business is not the most efficient way to identify a place in an emergency. This was something the judge focused on in his ruling on the lawsuit:

"Identification by street address would appear to be the most expedient way in which to report the location of an emergency. Requiring ‘advertising copy in English alphabetical characters’ would not necessarily insure the posting of a sign that would be helpful in reporting the location... It takes one half of all signs written in foreign characters without regard to the size and location of the sign or the amount of space necessary to identify the building. There is no reason suggested for seizing such a large portion of the signs nor an explanation provided as to why the ordinance was not drafted to limit the space taken to that necessary to identify the building."\textsuperscript{130}

Seeing the results from the Pomona ruling and under threat of additional lawsuits from the APALC, many San Gabriel Valley cities buckled.\textsuperscript{131} Shortly after the ruling, Temple City suspended enforcement of its ordinance.\textsuperscript{132} In 1990, Rosemead loosened its own signs ordinance,

\textsuperscript{129} Alfonso, “Sign Law Would Require English in South Gate.”
which had previously also required half the area of the sign to be in English, like Pomona had. For some other cities, the issue simply faded away. In Monterey Park, for example, Asian business owners were largely happy with the existing, looser regulations. Monterey Park decided to toss out the entire law altogether in 2013 during a routine review of zoning laws, and the issue of constitutionality was raised again. This time, the matter was settled with none of the commotion that it once commanded. As one city councilmember put it:

“People say that having the ordinance is just common sense, but the thing is, in the modern day, in our city, it's already common sense for business owners to have two languages on the sign.”

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An Anatomy of Conflict and Botched Harmony:  
Race and Development in an Era of Conflict

“In America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gives you.”

— Amy Tan, Asian American novelist

Part of what makes these signs such a powerful magnet for xenophobia is the fact that they carry completely different connotations to different people. For the vast majority of the white residents who could not read the Chinese characters on a sign, the only significance those characters will have for them is the fact that they are foreign. And because these signs were (and arguably still are) the most tangible and visible mark of the demographic transformation taking place (since, again, the actual act of a new arrival moving in is invisible to all but their closest neighbors), it is not surprising that white residents perceived the foreign words on these signs as marks of the arrival of the new residents and, by extension, symbols for the transformation of the San Gabriel Valley as a whole.

This was the interpretation that one of the newest pieces of research on the area largely followed. In their paper, “Design Assimilation in Suburbia,” the researchers, Becky Nicolaides and James Zarsadiaz, attributed the visual distinction between San Marino and neighboring places such as San Gabriel and Monterey Park — and specifically, San Marino’s lack of a

136 Stewart, “Chinese in San Marino: Isolation,”
prominent business district dotted with bilingual signage — to a difference in the level of desire for “ethnic expression” between San Marino’s Asian American residents and those of the surrounding “ethnoburbs.” To them, because San Marino has significantly fewer explicit visual identifiers of its Asian American population, it was considered more “design assimilated,” which also meant that its Asian residents must not want to express their ethnicity as much as those in neighboring communities.

One can see why Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz would make this argument, and it has to do with the continued predisposition towards using a race-based approach to explain away development patterns. In other words, if one is to view the history of the San Gabriel Valley as one of conflict whose battle lines are drawn along racial identities, it would make sense to view the signs as expressions of those identities, and to see the prevalence of foreign languages on signs as the triumph of one identity over the other. This is, however, decidedly not the case. In attributing symbolic meaning to multilingual signs, both white residents and these two researchers have overlooked the actual meaning and purpose of these signs — or, for that matter, of any store sign: to advertise the business in question.

Of course, something as mundane and utilitarian as a sign on a storefront can be political; in fact, to many older white residents, the signs were perceived as a mark of threat. As one of the most outspoken critics of the Asian newcomers in Monterey Park put it:

“They’re putting their signs in Chinese because they think their language and customs are superior to ours… There’s a feeling of cultural superiority.”

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137 Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz, “Design Assimilation in Suburbia.”
This perception can be understood by way of how many New Yorkers reacted to the city’s graffiti in the 1970s and 1980s — as theorized by geographer Tim Cresswell — which proves to be surprisingly analogous to the signage situation. In the case of the graffiti, which were viewed as a symbol for the broader phenomenon of general disorder (or, more concretely, crime), there was

“...an alleged transgression, an activity that is deemed ‘out of place.’ [However, along] with this transgression is an alleged transformation... of the meaning of a place... Put another way, the transgression threatens to bring about a meaning for place that is not favored by those involved in creating the discourse...”

One can easily see how this analysis of New York City’s graffiti could just as easily apply to the San Gabriel Valley’s multilingual signs. In both cases, they are symbols for a potentially new order that represents a drastic departure from the existing familiarity with the paradigm of the place that many of the existing residents clearly cherished, and hints at the arrival at a new place where they no longer feel belonging or comfort. The train of thought operates, according to Cresswell, roughly in four steps:

“1. If the transgression continues, the meaning of the place will change.
2. If the meaning of the place changes, the place itself will change.
3. The new meaning will be... the meaning of the Other.
4. The place in question will become... the place of the Other.”

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140 Ibid., 59.
141 Ibid., 60.
However, the problem with exploring what white residents perceived to be the symbolism behind the signs entirely ignores the other half of the equation: namely, the motivations and the intended symbolisms of the Asian Americans who put up the signs in the first place.

One of the features of the San Gabriel Valley that was of special interest to academics was the fact that, despite its suburban and often affluent character, the area was one of Los Angeles’ primary ports of entry for immigrants from Asia. This is noteworthy because having a suburb be a primary port of entry for immigrants is uncommon, especially in the context of the 1980s and 1990s, when that function was still identified with neighborhoods that are neither suburban nor particularly affluent — like Boyle Heights and Chinatown (whose role rapidly became supplanted by the San Gabriel Valley). This is an important piece of context because in such an environment, using Asian languages on signage is not a choice. Rather, because the San Gabriel Valley will be the very first home in America of many of the new residents, the number of non-English speakers make multilingualism a utilitarian necessity.

Today, more than 70% of the residents in the study area speak a language other than English at home, and more than 37% reported speaking English less than “very well” — showing just how large the demand for language accommodations were.\footnote{Census figures from 2017.} The same can be observed anecdotally through the tremendous strain on language services that the area experienced during the 1980s and 1990s as existing infrastructure and services struggled to keep up with the influx of newcomers.\footnote{Alan Maltun, “Arcadia School Board a Study in Peace,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, April 7, 1983; and Victor Valle, “Arcadia Elects 2 to School Board,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, April 18, 1985; school officials in Arcadia were attempting to “push for rapid integration of the district’s growing Asian student population by attempting to improve English fluency among limited-English-speaking students and their parents.”} The point being, the demographic and language situation in the San Gabriel Valley makes it essential, even if from a purely utilitarian standpoint alone, for multilingual
arrangements to emerge and exist — and a key part of that arrangement is multilingual signage. The Chinese American owner of a printing shop illustrates this point regarding the business necessity of the signs:

“[The reason] why we put the Chinese on the sign... is I’ve got Chinese customers. If City Hall guarantees me business from white people, English-speaking people, I will put a huge sign in English out front.”

While these signs may have become eventually politicized, it is difficult to argue that their initial purpose had been primarily political or one of “ethnic expression” when they are so necessary from a utilitarian standpoint.

This further begs the question: what counts as “ethnic expression” when it comes to the built environment? Take LA Chinatown: as discussed earlier, it might appear ethnic in that ethnicity is clearly being expressed in the architecture; however, does it matter that this expression likely has less to do with the desires of community members to express their Chinese-ness, and more to do with economic necessity — namely, as a branding exercise to encourage tourism? Along the same vein, then, it would also be tenuous for Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz to claim that commercial signage, which are perhaps more utilitarian in their context as an economic necessity for the stores they belong to, could be instruments of ethnic expression.

The understandings of these issues must be nuanced rather than viewed through binary terms like assimilation or ethnic expression, white or Asian, because the reality of the situation transcends those dichotomies. The Asian newcomers — particularly the new immigrants among them — certainly did not assimilate to the San Gabriel Valley’s existing fabric and norms as

144 Hudson, “Monterey Park Grapples Anew With Language Law.”
quickly as some of the existing white residents apparently expected, particularly with regards to language use. However, it also does not mean that they were therefore taking a resolute stand of “ethnic expression” simply by not speaking English or putting up non-English signs at their businesses. On the one hand, the high number of immigrants in the cohort — a phenomenon that continues to persist today — means that it is pragmatically necessary and inevitable that the community would retain a degree of linguistic separateness, which has translated into visual expressions of separateness in the form of multilingual signage. On the other hand, it is also difficult to say that they have not, in Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz’s terms, “design assimilated.” After all, in terms of architecture and the built environment, the only visual signifier that the San Gabriel Valley is inhabited by Asian Americans is the pervasive existence of bilingual signage in the commercial areas. Ironically, by identifying foreign-language signs as their leading example of “ethnic expression”, Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz have actually indirectly validate the point that the actual levels of ethnic expression from Asian Americans in the San Gabriel Valley is actually not as high as what the prevalence of Chinese characters on the area’s storefronts may suggest.

This is not to discredit the two’s research. Outside of this instance of flawed analysis, it is quite excellent in other respects. They introduce an invaluable conceptual distinction between the older suburbs in the western portion of the San Gabriel Valley and those in the eastern portion that developed in earnest much later and concurrently with the influx of Asian Americans into the area, and this is the same framework I use to define the study area for this project.145 They also provide a detailed and much-needed in-depth study of San Marino, one of the most distinct communities within the San Gabriel Valley. And indeed, they are right in that San Marino is

distinctive when compared to its neighbors. However, that has far more to do with the overall patterns of development in San Marino — namely, that the city lacks significant commercial developments altogether — than some particularly distinctive feature of its population.

Commerce maintains a diminutive and muted presence in San Marino, not in the least because the city has arcane rules that govern all aspects of life, including a ban on parking in one’s own driveway for more than a day or two, making it one of the country’s most regulated cities.\(^\text{146}\) For businesses, these rules include a wholesale ban on neon signs.\(^\text{147}\) As a result of this planned aversion to business, the city only has two small commercial strips, whose storefronts are as populated by banks and professional offices as they are with actual retail stores. In fact, the city of 13,000 does not even have a grocery store or strip mall within its borders.\(^\text{148}\) Instead, residents would go to neighboring communities in the San Gabriel Valley like Alhambra and Monterey Park to shop, including to access Asian American shops and services — a pattern that is true across the San Gabriel Valley’s more residential areas.\(^\text{149}\) It is not that San Marino’s residents need these commercial services — including ethnic shops — any less, the city is merely spatially segregated from them. As one resident remarks:

"You can do all that [accessing ethnic shops and their services]: just drive another two miles."\(^\text{150}\)


\(^{147}\) Ibid.


\(^{150}\) Nicolaides and Zarsadiaz, “Design Assimilation in Suburbia,” 351.
To put more simply, there are no multilingual signs that would visually confirm the city’s Asian American majority because there are very few easily-visible commercial signs in the city to begin with.

So, the more obvious explanation of the visual differences between San Marino and, say, San Gabriel lies in their differential attitudes to zoning and development. In other words, San Marino’s lack of a bustling Asian American business hub is not primarily the product of significant difference in attitudes towards race and assimilation between Asian residents of San Marino and those living elsewhere in the San Gabriel Valley. Rather, it can be explained in terms of the city’s antipathy to commercial development due to fears that that could bring traffic and crowds to a serene, verdant mansion district — fears that, importantly, transcended racial lines. And, indeed, the conflict over development in the area was often fought in terms of development priorities (such as preserving landscapes like San Marino’s), which do not always translate neatly into racial camps.

A Botched Harmony Panel

In 1987, an urban planning professor at the University of Southern California and a resident of Arcadia named Eric Heikkila became increasingly concerned about the deteriorating racial situation in the San Gabriel Valley. As he put it:

“The issues become confused, and someone upset over physical changes starts launching into ethnic slurs. When people muddy the waters, there is little chance for rational
dialogue. The result is a community divided... Only when public officials and community leaders begin separating the tangle of issues can Monterey Park become whole again.”

Heikkila decided to provide this “rational dialogue” himself. To this end, he organized a Wednesday night “harmony” panel at Monterey Park City Hall. The panel consisted of himself, the chairman of the city’s planning commission, a city councilmember and, of course, the man who started it all: Frederic Hsieh. Residents were invited to attend free of charge and bring questions.

The event failed in spectacular fashion. Whereas Heikkila had hoped for a panel of experts calmly discussing about the issues, the event quickly turned into a 2-hour-long public heckling of Hsieh. The audience shouted pointed questions at Hsieh, and Hsieh, who is nothing if not enthusiastic and confident of his vision for the San Gabriel Valley, shouted equally confrontational answers right back. Meanwhile, Heikkila was largely ignored at his own panel, as were the two city officials.

However, the panel’s devolution into chaos nonetheless produced a surprisingly large number of moments of lucid insight. One such moment outlined the fact that race and attitudes towards development do not necessarily correspond, and it unexpectedly came during an audience member’s attack of Hsieh. The man said:

“I would guess there are 30,000 Chinese living in Monterey Park, but I don't believe there are 30,000 developers... I'm sorry Mr. Hsieh sees himself as representative of the

152 Ibid.
153 Estepa, “Monterey Park 'Harmony' Panel Turns Into Debate.”
154 Ibid.
Chinese, [but] I'd like to see some real Chinese representation on this panel... [because]

I have Chinese neighbors, [and] they are equally as concerned as I am about noise,
about pollution, about where to shop.”  

This bit was clearly intended to attack Hsieh by characterizing him as a greedy developer who did not represent the views of residents, but he also helped underscore the oft-overlooked fact — that anti-development movements in the area have never been racially homogenous. In fact, Asian American voices can be found on both sides of the metaphorical aisle when it comes to development issues, which runs counter to the notion that the conflict in the area is motivated only by race. For example, an Asian American resident of San Marino expressed a general desire for the city to remain quiet and residential as follows:

“Even the Chinese don’t want Huntington [Huntington Drive, the main street of San Marino] to look like Valley [Valley Boulevard, a heavily-trafficked main commercial thoroughfare through Alhambra, San Gabriel, and Rosemead]. I don’t want it to look like that.”

There was an implicit buy-in on the part of San Marino’s civic leaders to the idea of welcoming the city’s Asian newcomers and incorporating them into the city’s anti-development political culture. They did so by taking a decisive stand against the kind of biting, bigoted rhetoric that was seen in Monterey Park. They likely did so because they made the (correct) assumption that the specific set of newcomers who wanted to (and could afford to) live in a place

155 Ibid.
like San Marino as opposed to apartments in Monterey Park or Alhambra would also be predisposed towards preserving the city’s status quo. Indeed, by buying property in San Marino, the city’s Asian Americans consciously assumed the same privileges that their white neighbors had, and it makes sense that they would naturally also hold the same anti-development views of their white neighbors. And, support among Asian Americans for anti-development sentiments were not limited to San Marino. For example, Arcadia resident Sheng Chang, who would later become the first Asian American elected to Arcadia’s city council, declared in 1991:

“We don’t want Arcadia to become a... business town. We want to be a quiet bedroom community.”

Similarly, white attitudes towards the area’s transformation was also not monolithic, and there exists an (admittedly small) segment of the white population that was less critical towards the area’s transformation. For example, one Monterey Park resident, when interviewed by the Los Angeles Times with his wife, became animated when she criticized the newcomers:

“Anybody who tells you that Monterey Park before the Chinese came was this peaceful little paradise where everybody talked to each other over the back fence is full of crock. I think a lot of the anger is simply jealousy over their wealth and success.”

This contention that the animosity directed towards the newcomers arose at least partly out of jealousy is, incidentally, very reminiscent of Sho Kosugi’s own assessment about the vandals of his home.

159 Chang, “Challenge to Arcadia Sign Law Rebuffed.”
160 Arax, “Selling Out, Moving On.”
Still other white residents had even more positive impressions. An elderly Monterey Park couple, for example, credited the newcomers for “reinvigorating” their lives. Remarking that they “can’t remember the last time [we] had so much fun” when recalling being invited to the wedding of the son of their new Chinese American neighbors, the couple called their Chinese American neighbors

“the best we ever had... more considerate, more thoughtful, and more helpful than our people.”

All these goes to prove that motives of the existing white population should be understood in more nuanced terms. This was a group that was, as a whole, clearly anti-development and keen on preserving a quiet suburban environment. Recognizing this fact neither excuses nor minimizes the racist and bigoted behaviors that existing residents directed towards newcomers throughout the course of the San Gabriel Valley’s transformation. It does, however, add much-needed nuance in understanding this history by allowing for a more complex understanding of both the dynamics of the transformation as a whole and the relationship between demographic and spatial transformation. Moreover, this is also proof of the independence of the development issue as an axis of conflict, and the inadequacy of making a simplistic correlation between views on development and views on race. Indeed, the cross section of the people holding pro- and anti-development sentiments reveals a much more complex set of racial coalitions than a purely racial view of the conflict would suppose.

161 Ibid, emphasis mine.
The False Dichotomy between Race and Development

Another highly instructive exchange at the event was centered around one of the most contentious issues discussed: an imminent city ballot measure that aimed to limit the height of new commercial developments. Hsieh emphatically denounced the idea as “racist”, arguing:

“Here you have a lot of Chinese coming, and suddenly there are a lot of laws restricting this and restricting that. [You] say it's for everybody, not just for the Chinese, but if nine out of ten... of the new owners are Chinese, whether you intend it or not, the Chinese will be affected.”

Heikkila, from the side, tried to interject and argue against Hsieh’s assertion that the changes would be racist:

“... moratoria on development are being debated in areas where the question of ethnicity is not involved [like San Diego and Orange County]. This issue is being debated just as vigorously in areas where the ethnic element does not come into it.”

The tense, combative atmosphere of the event certainly hampered its ability to create consensus, and this exchange is a particularly frustrating example of such because, when read in retrospect, it is clear that the two men are not saying contradictory things.

On the one hand, Heikkila was absolutely right in that the battles over development in the area were nothing new or special: they were (and still are) going on all over the country, often in places that are not undergoing the kinds of ethnic changes that the San Gabriel Valley has seen.

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162 Estepa, “Monterey Park ‘Harmony’ Panel Turns Into Debate.”
163 Ibid.
The perspective he offers was — and still is — crucial to understanding the area’s transformation.

However, on the other hand, Heikkila’s arguments also do not negate Hsieh’s. Hsieh’s argument is essentially a restatement of the textbook definition of the concept of “disparate impact” in civil rights law, which is an assertion that a policy is considered discriminatory so long as it disproportionately targets or affects a certain group, even if the policy was not outwardly discriminatory or was not designed with discriminatory intent. In trying to counter Hsieh’s accusations of racism, Heikkila failed to realize that even if the issue were truly only about development, the impact of a density moratorium would still be the same. It would still restrict the ability of more newcomers to move in, and the vast majority those newcomers, as Hsieh rightly pointed out, were Asian. Moreover, seeing that the buildup of racial tensions in the area was one of Heikkila’s primary motivators for setting up the panel in the first place, it would also be unrealistic to suggest that the public policies being generated in such a tense and hostile atmosphere is free of the tinge of racial discord, even if they are similar to ones being generated in places that lack racial tension. In fact, Heikkila himself understood how the conflict over development could descend into open bigotry, and that was arguably going on in Monterey Park at this time (Fong, Horton, and Saito, incidentally, all conducted their research in Monterey Park during a period when the conflict had become particularly racialized and ugly). Indeed, increasingly hostile actors in Monterey Park like the councilmember and English-only proponent Barry Hatch had caused the conflict in the city to take on an increasingly racial lens, and shifted focus from issues of development, as discussed earlier, to issues like foreign language signage.
As Judy Chu, then-school board member and now the United States Representative for the area, said to Hatch and his allies on the Monterey Park city council:

“We are becoming known as a model for racial strife... For that, you are responsible.”

During the nadir of the strife in the city, protests downright began to resemble episodes from the Civil Rights movement, with protesters holding signs with slogans like “racist resolution is not the solution” and singing “We Shall Overcome.”

The two may not have realized this in the midst of the combative mood of the “harmony” panel gone wrong, but the points Heikkila and Hsieh made, once synthesized, almost perfectly captures how each of the two axes of conflict, development and race, shaped the San Gabriel Valley’s transformation. Race is an indispensable element of the story of the San Gabriel Valley, one which has indelibly colored the area’s history and molded its transformation. However, beyond the area’s unique demographics, the conflicts the San Gabriel Valley have witnessed were also centered around perennial and quintessentially American issues: zoning, development, and land use; it was here that the true epicenter of those conflicts have always lied, and it was along these issues that battle lines were drawn during the area’s transformation. This is reminiscent to Li’s work in that she was the first to make the invaluable observation that this population is not as different from a generic American middle class than one might imagine. This study build on the rich body of literature on the San Gabriel Valley that has come before it, but extends Li’s understanding regarding the socioeconomic conditions of the San Gabriel Valley as being broadly American to the area’s developmental patterns, as well in order to offer a more

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165 Ibid.; and Arax, “Nation's 1st Suburban Chinatown.”
complete understanding of the area’s growth, transformation, and ensuing conflict. In the following pages, I will argue that while the San Gabriel Valley does indeed have a unique demography and demographic history that is indispensable to its identity and formation, it is far more important than a mere curiosity for demographers; rather, the development patterns found in the San Gabriel Valley should not be seen as a *sui generis* case, but as both parallel and are predictive of broader trends in development and America as a whole.
The Real Americans:
Immigrant Capital and the Bargaining for the Privilege of America

“In some parts of the country it does seem like the America we know and love doesn’t exist anymore. Massive demographic changes have been foisted upon the American people. And they’re changes that none of us ever voted for and most of us don’t like.”

— Laura Ingraham, far-right pundit

On some level, the American-ness of the transformation of the San Gabriel Valley should not be surprising, because Americaness — and specifically, the privileges that white America has been able to enjoy through (racially exclusive) suburbia — were precisely what the new Asian residents, many of whom were immigrants, sought to be able to enjoy like their white counterparts. The fact that Asian Americans were moving from urban Chinatowns to suburban communities is not only significant as a matter of geography, because suburbia is more than just another place: a half-century of public policy has firmly entrenched the absolute financial advantage of suburbia at the expense of inner cities while also maintaining their racial exclusivity. So, by spreading from Chinatown into the San Gabriel Valley, Asian American settlement is crossing far more than just the city line between Los Angeles and Monterey Park and Alhambra, they are also crossing invisible lines of race and privilege that have been entrenched for the better part of the 20th century. In this sense, the Asian community as fundamentally different from previous minority populations in American history, Asian and otherwise (although not necessarily so from other contemporary minority populations).
The San Gabriel Valley’s Asian influx sharply contradicts earlier trends of minority settlement — ghettoization of minorities — and instead represents a wholly opposite trend of minorities actively acceding to positions and literal places of privilege. In fact, this movement was especially groundbreaking that it represents the reversal of the previously-understood balance of economic power with regards to both the newcomers’ race and their immigration status. In this particular situation, many of those moving in were not only wealthier than the existing white residents, some were first-generation immigrants who had come to the US with substantial money. This phenomenon was, if not historically unprecedented, certainly against the popular conception of how immigrants to America have historically been described in narratives. Even as the words of “The New Colossus” continue to ring true for many who enter the US, increasingly, immigrants are no longer all just “tired”, “poor”, “homeless,” or “tempest-tost” anymore.

One of the most important aspects of this privilege to Asian Americans has been the area’s excellent public schools. For example, when Asian American Association for Arcadia — the first-ever Asian American political organization in the San Gabriel Valley — formed in 1985, its first order of business was none other than to endorse candidates for the upcoming school

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167 “The New Colossus” is a 1883 poem by Emma Lazarus, which is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty, and has symbolic importance when it comes to the issue of American immigration. The relevant section reads, as inscribed:

“... Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”
board elections.\textsuperscript{168} Indeed, the quality of the school districts in the San Gabriel Valley have been a huge draw for the newcomers, and especially so for communities like San Marino and Arcadia, whose schools are considered some of the best in the state.\textsuperscript{169} And, of course, the quality of the San Gabriel Valley’s schools is no fluke or coincidence: it is just another facet of the same systems of racialized privilege in suburbia that we have addressed.

And, more generally, that was true of the entire range of privileges that Asian Americans sought in the San Gabriel Valley: while each individual’s desires may differ in the particulars, what the newcomers sought was fundamentally still suburban. Superficially, this is reflected by the fact that the fears of some residents that Monterey Park was going to become a “concrete jungle” or get “50-story buildings... like New York or Hong Kong” ultimately proved to be unfounded;\textsuperscript{170} the San Gabriel Valley may have become denser, but it is still car-oriented, not particularly walkable and, for the most part, lacks quality public transit. But, more substantively, whether it be good schools or nice housing, what Asian Americans ultimately wanted was arguably the same perks that public policy has enshrined in suburbia, and represented the same desire to “upgrade” from the inner city to the suburb that had driven the latter’s growth to begin with. As Charles Wong, a Chinese American sociology professor at California State University, Los Angeles put it at the time:

\textit{“Monterey Park... represents a new plateau in the experience of Chinese in America. It represents power and prestige. The first generation no longer has to bust its butt in the...”}

\textsuperscript{170} Quoted from Arax, “Asian Influx Alters Life in Suburbia;” and Estepa, “Monterey Park ‘Harmony’ Panel Turns Into Debate,” respectively.
urban ghetto. They are affluent and well educated and can immediately skip that step by moving to Monterey Park.”

In other words, the newcomers did not come to dismantle the suburban privilege that whites have built — they came to suburbia to join that privilege.

In this context, white opposition in the San Gabriel Valley can be interpreted one of two ways. The first interpretation is that the white residents simply did not want these newcomers to join suburbia on account of their race. This would be true to Hsieh’s interpretation: that regardless of whatever other policy or aesthetic preferences the existing residents may have, they are fundamentally racist at their core and do not want their almost all-white community to be anything but. Indeed, the foreign language signage issue was just the most prominent example of a litany of incidents where white residents have overreacted to unremarkable phenomena that happen to also be associated with the arrival of Asian Americans, such as accusing everything from karaoke clubs to Asian-owned bridal shops of being fronts for nefarious crime.

The second interpretation has to do with the fact that the privileges of suburbia are deeply entrenched in the place, rather than the people that happen to be living in the place at any given time. The privileges that the existing white residents enjoy are only as secure as their hold on their suburban property and community. Historically, the dual-edged sword of de jure racial restrictions and de facto exclusion based on socioeconomic status had given white suburbanites a hold on their communities that was simultaneously firm and effortless. However, once both of those lines of defense melted away, first with the Civil Rights movement and then with the

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171 Arax, “Nation’s 1st Suburban Chinatown.”
arrival of the wealthy newcomers, the white residents suddenly realized that their supposedly entrenched privilege was not secure or guaranteed at all. What happened in the San Gabriel Valley, therefore, can also been seen as a reaction to this sudden realization of the precarity of the privileges of suburbia that existing residents had assumed to be firmly and exclusively theirs. As the great Mike Davis puts it,

“Slow growth... is about homeowner control of land use and... the defense of household equity and residential privilege.”

It is difficult to ascertain which of these possibilities is closer to the truth or, for that matter, whether the truth lies in a combination of both. It could be said that the latter interpretation would arguably be more charitable to the existing white residents. But, on some level, a sociological construction of the motivations behind the impulse of exclusion is not necessary because, in many ways, it does not produce a tangible difference in results, especially from the perspective of the newcomers personally subjected to the resulting hostility, which extended far beyond anti-development policies and the racialized language used to debate and promote them. There were random attacks and accostations of Asian Americans in the streets, sometimes even on minors. There was rampant and endemic vandalism that extended far beyond the Sho Kosugi house, including anti-Asian messages telling victims to get out of the country, and other racist graffiti like swastikas.

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173 Davis, *City of Quartz*, 159-60.
175 Ibid
In one instance, a San Marino realty office with two small Chinese characters on its sign had that sign vandalized five times in just three months.\(^{176}\) In schoolsensions between Asian and white students at school was palpable, and fights broke out constantly.\(^{177}\) In at least one instance, the racial animosity was so severe that Asian Americans had to self-censor their political opinions in fear of retribution. Shortly after its slew of victories against cities in the area to force the repeal of their signage ordinances in 1990 and 1991, APALC had intended for Arcadia to be the next target.\(^{178}\) However, Arcadia’s Asian Americans refused, and the top reason cited was their fear of racialized retaliation.\(^{179}\) At this time, Arcadia’s racial climate had arguably reached its nadir: at least seven hate crimes were reported in Arcadia alone within little more than a year, two of which were incidents of crosses being burnt on the lawns of Asian Americans.\(^{180}\) So, at the most basic level, Arcadia’s Asian Americans feared that to fight the law would also mean to incur more hate crimes — more vandalism, more fights in school, more threats to their safety. In such an atmosphere, it is plain to see why investigating the mechanics and motives of the white residents’ support of anti-development policies is at best only one part of the overall narrative, and that the narrative of development cannot fully account for the antipathy and hurt that the newcomers experienced.


\(^{178}\) Chang, “Challenge to Arcadia Sign Law Rebuffed.”

\(^{179}\) Ibid., and Chang, “Anti-Asian Hate Crimes Rise.”

\(^{180}\) Chang, “Challenge to Arcadia Sign Law Rebuffed.”
Gentrification by Any Other Name:
What an Asian American Suburb Says About the Future of Housing in America

“All this changing’s got a name and
I don't claim to know it.” — Linying, Singaporean singer-songwriter

Towards the end of Heikkila’s failed panel, Frederic Hsieh delivered an angry rebuke to the San Gabriel Valley’s anti-development politics:

“You're taking away rights. What about liberty for those who own property and justice for them? … This is a free society. I should be able to do what I want with my property. My situation is like that of being the last person on a plane. You are already on and want to keep me out so that you have more room, but I’ve bought my ticket and have my rights like everybody else. People in the slow-growth movement say that they’re not racist and that their restrictions apply to everyone, but the everyone just happens to be Chinese.”

We have already explored the substance of this argument. But, that aside, the tone of the statement is also interesting. Specifically, it is quite noteworthy just how, frankly, capitalist Hsieh’s statement here sounded. Especially, the phrase “liberty… and justice… for those who

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181 Emphases mine. The portion before the ellipses is quoted from Estepa, “Monterey Park ‘Harmony’ Panel Turns Into Debate;” the portion after is quoted from Horton, The Politics of Diversity, 91; Horton actually does not specify where this remark was uttered: his citation for the quote only notes that it was made “in a forum on development. Monterey Park, 1987”; see ibid., 249. This is consistent with the timing and location of Heikkila’s panel, and the tone and the content of what Hsieh is saying suggests that these quotes were part of the same original statement.
own property” sounds like it could almost be from an SNL parody of a hard-right, pro-market politician. To be sure, this is not exactly surprising: after all, Hsieh, as a multi-millionaire real estate developer and businessman, is a capitalist by definition. However, if this is the case, then what distinguishes Hsieh from the archetypal greedy developer using his financial clout to fight against residents? And, by extension, what makes the story of the San Gabriel Valley different from the archetypal story of the triumph of the visions of the developer over the wishes of an unwilling community — the same story that poor neighborhoods undergoing gentrification around the country have experienced?

These parallels were by no means lost to the opposition against Hsieh and the developments that the area was undergoing. One resident leader, for example, said:

“The underlying philosophical question is, who owns a city? The town belongs to the people who live here.”182

This kind cooptation of fairly unsubtly leftist rhetoric in a movement populated by mostly conservatives and registered Republicans, and punctuated by bouts of nativism and bigotry is undeniably strange. Any kind of association drawn between what happened in the San Gabriel Valley with the experiences or rhetoric of anti-gentrification struggles seems jarring, because the area before the arrival of Asian Americans — an overwhelmingly white series of middle- to upper-middle class suburbs is not at all what comes to mind when the word gentrification is brought up. Instead, we think of neighborhoods in Oakland, a city that has lost almost half of its Black population since 1990 due to soaring rents and displacement, brought by the arrival of

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affluent gentrifiers causing a bleaching of the city’s rich culture and history.\textsuperscript{183} Or, we think of stories of people like the 100-year-old San Francisco woman in poor health dying shortly after she was evicted from the apartment where she has lived and paid rent for more than a half-century, all because the building’s owners wanted converted it into condos.\textsuperscript{184}

The common thread behind these kinds of situations that we label as “gentrification” tends to connote is the coercive nature of displacement. Whether it be on the macro level of entire disadvantaged communities or the micro level of the individual vulnerable tenant, the unifying common narrative that qualifies a person or community as a victim of gentrification — at least the way the word is used in popular culture — is that they were \textit{forced} out by a group that is less vulnerable and less powerless than they are. In other words, they were victims who did not have full agency in determining their fate by virtue of their socioeconomic marginality: ultimately, they fell to actors — like developers — who are motivated by profit and who, to put it bluntly, \textit{had more money than them}.

In the San Gabriel Valley, we see some similar elements: there are certainly developers motivated by profit and are more capitalized than the existing residents. However, the fact that developers happened to have more money does not mean that the existing residents were in any way poor. It would be difficult and even somewhat ridiculous to make the claim that the longtime residents — middle-class white suburbanites — were in any way marginalized or lacked agency, because they clearly did not. The hegemonic place that affluent white suburbanites has had in the American political structure aside, there is also the more practical matter that, for the vast


majority of these residents who were homeowners, the decision to leave would have been a purely voluntary one. In other words, if a white homeowner in the San Gabriel Valley had wanted to stay put, there was absolutely nothing that could have coerced them to do so against their wishes. In this respect, these residents were clearly distinct from how we imagine the victims of gentrification.

But, this also raises a more fundamental question of how we conceptualize gentrification to begin with. The word “gentrification” was first coined in 1964 by sociologist Ruth Glass in reference to wealthier newcomers displacing working-class residents and upgrading the housing stock in the London neighborhood of Islington. Since then, the term has had an amazing amount of diffusion into the popular lexicon, evolving from just another piece of obscure academic jargon into a buzzword seemingly on the tip of everyone’s tongue. However, during this diffusion, the meaning of the word has not remained constant, to the point where it is often necessary to clarify what exactly one means by the word gentrification. With that in mind, one fairly standard definition lists the following components of gentrification:

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1. The displacement of lower income residents from their neighborhoods.
2. The upgrading of housing stock in the neighborhood.
3. The changed character of the neighborhood.
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This particular definition is interesting because the San Gabriel Valley fits two of these three criteria. And, as discussed earlier, while the white residents were by no means “low-income” per

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se, their wealth was dwarfed by the massive inflow of capital that funded the area’s spectacular transformation, and if one were to play devil’s advocate, an argument could be made that they could, in fact, be considered “lower income residents” when compared against that capital inflow.188

This train of thought, then, leads right back to the incongruous notion that started it in the first place: that what happened in the San Gabriel Valley could arguably be called “gentrification” under a technical, academic definition of the word. Of course, I am sure that few people would feel comfortable calling what has happened in the San Gabriel Valley “gentrification”; and, at minimum, it is agreeable that it would be deeply unhelpful to force the term on a case study where the label is more misleading than instructive. In other words, why call something by a name that can only be accepted as an ironic reference to the non-descriptiveness of that very name? The point being, semantics is not the battle to be fought here. Perhaps the more relevant question rests in why we do not have a word for when something like what happened to the San Gabriel Valley happens — that is, when an affluent neighborhood experiences massive changes to its physical and social character.

And the short answer is that, frankly, this kind of thing does not tend to happen because, usually, wealthy neighborhoods win their fights. Usually, the kinds of “slow-growth” movements that the San Gabriel Valley saw work, and manage to stop the kinds of development,

188 It must be noted that such an argument, specifically relying on a specific interpretation of the term “lower income residents”, was not the intention of Kennedy and Leonard; they write: “We are most concerned about involuntary displacement, that is, the displacement of those “original” residents who would prefer to stay in their neighborhood, but because of non-just-cause evictions, rapidly rising rents or increases in their property tax bills, cannot afford to do so;” quoted from ibid., 5. However, it should also be noted that they did not actually reject outright the validity of such an argument, and displacement as a result of a sense of cultural loss or alienation is well-documented. See for example, in the case of Black residents in Washington, D.C., Derek Hyra, “The Back-to-the-City Movement: Neighbourhood Redevelopment and Processes of Political and Cultural Displacement,” Urban Studies 52, no. 10 (2014): 1766-68.
construction, and transformation that the area witnessed. And, one can even see this trend within the San Gabriel Valley itself in that, even as other cities densified, San Marino was able to mount a successful defense against density and maintain its character, and this can be attributed in no small part to its existing wealth, which allowed for the kind of exclusivity that in turn allowed for a unified political coalition that is strong and stable enough to maintain the status quo. So, it could be said that San Marino is the only city in the area where NIMBYism actually won. The rest of the San Gabriel Valley, however, was transformed in an apparent defeat for slow-growth advocates, something that is fairly atypical, especially for the time.

Yet, this paradoxically also makes the San Gabriel Valley the exception that proves the rule, because it shows just how much money can do to completely sway the balance of power in the fight over development. The one trait that the existing white residents did share with poor residents of a gentrifying neighborhood is that the newcomers have more money than them; and, as the dust began to settle, it turned out that that was the one thing that mattered. The Asian newcomers — even savvy developers like Fred Hsieh — were disadvantaged at first: they were new, lacked connections, were comparatively inexperienced and underrepresented with regards to local politics, and suffered from bigoted attitudes towards them. Yet, that ended up mattering very little in the grand scheme of things because the forces of the market, backed up by the enormity of the scale of capital, proved to be too overwhelming. The circumstances that led to the San Gabriel Valley’s transformation represented a rare perfect storm where a huge amount of capital, both local and transnational, was funneled into a relatively small, peripheral, and hence unsuspecting area.

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The San Gabriel Valley’s story has tremendous implications for what is to come all over America because the same developments in housing that have been happening here for decades are happening all over America. The perfect storm that the San Gabriel Valley saw may have heavily accelerated the process of change here, but this is arguably where the particularities of the area ends. The denser and bigger developments that the San Gabriel Valley has seen are not part of some particular Asian American taste; rather, they are, as dictated by the forces of economics, the future of housing in America everywhere. And the sooner people recognize this fact, rather than remain in denial and pretend like their neighborhoods could stay the same as they did in the 1950s forever, the sooner they could start actually contending with the implications of such a future.

The unfortunate implication is that the kind of bitter political conflict over development that enveloped the San Gabriel Valley (and continues to flare up in smaller outbursts today) will (and has become) more and more commonplace. As we have seen, these conflicts will not necessarily become racialized as they did in the San Gabriel Valley. To that end, we can only speculate as to whether the conflict in the San Gabriel Valley would have manifested differently had it been purely a battle over development, without being overcast by the ugly spectre of bigotry. Yet, the very fact that the conflict did devolve into such is, in some ways, a sombre indicator of just how contentious and acrimonious battles over development can get. So, as the pressure for more development in America’s cities and neighborhoods intensifies, it is likely that instances of heated conflict over development such as what was seen in the San Gabriel Valley will continue to break out all over the country. On a higher level, these localized conflicts represent, as we have seen, a more fundamental set of questions regarding place and living that
this country needs to eventually face and attempt to adjudicate: these are questions over, for example, what level of control should neighbors have on what is built on a particular lot, what kind of density is most appropriate for Americans to live in, and so on. In other words, these questions are contentious parts of our local politics precisely because they are not truly local, but represent a much wider front of contention between millions all over the country over an issue that is becoming increasingly more pressing. And, indeed, we are already seeing the conflict begin to filter up from the local to the state level, such as California imposing state control on local permitting processes from cities that do not build enough housing, or Oregon attempting to ban single-family zoning altogether.\textsuperscript{190}

However, with these developments also comes the prospect of a hopeful future — if, that is, the lessons from the San Gabriel Valley could be learned. First, of course, the San Gabriel Valley has shown the the importance of anticipating the backlash that might accompany development, especially on such a large scale. This kind of prescience might be helpful in mitigating conflict rather than allowing them to fester or — worse yet, be exploited and turned into inflammatory bigotry from politicians and civic leaders. However, on a less obvious level, it is also important to recognize that even if development in general is inevitable, the specific developments and patterns of development that the San Gabriel Valley saw were far from ideal. Cities around the country could do without ugly slot homes or bulky houses that fill up the lots. And, if the lessons from places like the San Gabriel Valley could be learned, and if cities could act proactively and with foresight in anticipating growth and development, they could make sure that the developments that do get built are more functional and aesthetically pleasing. The San

Gabriel Valley grew and densified, but it arguably did not *urbanize* — or, at least, it would be weird to suggest it has, because the area’s new structures are still decidedly suburban. Their floor plans continue to be dominated by large amounts of parking while considerations like walkability take a back seat, and transit options remain largely underdeveloped. Put more bluntly, there are no shortage of places in the San Gabriel Valley that are downright dysfunctional when it comes to their urban design, and this does not have to be the case elsewhere in the country. Denver, for example, proved that local governments could take — albeit belated — action to make developments better by mandating apartments be built in styles other than the dreaded slot home: just as dense, but more aesthetically pleasing and more conducive to urbanity. With more foresight and the right local policies that promote good development rather than unrealistically shun *all* development, the organic growth that the San Gabriel Valley experienced (and many other places around the country will experience) could be channeled into something even greater than what it ended up becoming.
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