Power, place, and trees: urban maintenance practices in San Bernardino and Mexicali

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The right to the city extends beyond water, shelter, and space, and includes the right to participate in the urban imagination. Popular struggles for maintenance of public space and commons constitute tangible manifestations of “something different,” arising “out of what people do, feel, sense, and come to articulate as they seek meaning in their daily lives.” Geographically and culturally, Mexicali, Baja California, and San Bernardino, California, reflect Latin American and Californian social and geographical features, suspended between Jane Jacobs’s “Radiant City” and Mike Davis’s “Magical Urbanism.” They share maintenance challenges associated with arid, hot climates and environmental pollution.

1 ABSTRACT

Trees and public art are considered unambiguous assets in most contexts, but in reality, neither are ever neutral. They make a demand (for care and maintenance) and send a complex set of signals about the identity, value and role of a neighborhood, a city, or a forest. We propose to look at two locations - Mexicali, Baja California, and San Bernardino, California - with particular attention to parks and pedestrian-level streetscapes, to discuss official, hybrid (“public/private partnership”), arts-based, and unofficial maintenance practices. Both cities are in arid, hot climates, both are automobile- rather than pedestrian-oriented and unlike other cities in the region, they lack consolidated gastronomic sectors, coastal tourist zones, or “vibrant” urban life: their lack of robust marks of distinction or collective representative symbols make them “gray” destinations that struggle to establish or maintain dignified public spaces. Parks and sidewalks may provide shade and places to sit, walk, eat, socialize, and develop a sense of connection to particular natural and social environments, but in both Mexicali and San Bernardino, they are often unloved or neglected, with attention and funds diverted to top-down, sanitized, or privatized non-solutions. In response, communities may recognize opportunities to take part in the transformation of their cities, starting with reclaiming their right to public space and to a healthy environment, finding support in biophilic maintenance practices.

2 The right to the city, proposed in 1968 by Henri Lefebvre, and reclaimed more recently by urban social movements and academics like David Harvey and Don Mitchell, is a call to action to reclaim the city as a democratic, co-created space from the logic of privatization.

3 “Henri Lefebvre’s Vision.” Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution, by David Harvey, Verso.

4 Jacobs advocates for the dense human grid and against “radiant city” innovations, even parks and pedestrian zones. Davis celebrates non- or informally commercial uses of space which create social infrastructure, at odds with what sociologist George Lipsitz calls the “white spatial imaginary.” Davis connects the reactions of privileged communities (code enforcement, noise abatement, “redevelopment” and “nature preserves”) to a larger history of discrimination, marginalization, and racialized violence against Latinx and indigenous populations and language groups.

5 Both Davis and Jacobs advocate for high-density neighborhoods rich in multiple uses and open to informal and formal commercial practices such as street vending, plaza/mercado development, promenades, and outdoor festivities both public and private. Both describe a form of transformative urbanism where use enhances safety and maintenance through communal reciprocity and “eyes on the street.”

6 Mexicali is probably one of the cities with the worst air quality in the country. Although efforts have been made to address its causes since 1983, it currently has only three official monitors in operation. To fill this information gap, the Redspira citizen network supervises around 30 monitors to measure
Both are automobile- rather than pedestrian-oriented, and both struggle to establish or maintain dignified public spaces. Without irrigation and constant attention, pedestrian areas and parks readily deteriorate into unwalkable and neglected wastelands, with attention and funds diverted to punitive, sanitized, or privatized non-solutions. The urban commons in San Bernardino and Mexicali suffer from lack of security, degradation through disinvestment, and neoliberal practices that limit civic participation or fail to provide reliable maintenance. Both also include communities that claim both the right and the obligation to the city through their commitment to housing rights, collective cultural references, and the use or preservation of common spaces and resources.

Mexicali is the second-largest city along the Mexico-California border, located two hours east from Los Angeles/San Diego/Tijuana/Rosarito. The city grew due to its proximity to California: an early agro-industrial land speculation project, a boom during Prohibition, the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement/Bracero, and the Maquiladora Program. With the move to a service economy, Mexicali found a niche in medical tourism; unlike other cities in the state of Baja California that have consolidated gastronomic sectors and coastal tourist zones; it lacks robust marks of distinction and is gray as a destination. Many downtown buildings are vacant; occupied buildings house shelters for migrants, inexpensive restaurants, hotels and bars, a red-light zone, traditional Mexican shops and businesses (quinceañera

PM10 (particulate matter of 10 micrometers or less), and is working on a school monitoring program throughout the city. According to the PROAIRE 2011-2020 program, with a reading of the 2005 emissions inventory, transportation generated 69.8% of CO pollution, and area sources emitted 94.5% of PM10, mainly from unpaved street dust. According to the same program, Mexicali and Imperial Valley have some of the highest rates of asthma morbidity in both Mexico and the United States. The main strategies suggested to address the problem are to improve public transport, paving and reforestation.

Southern California’s air quality problems are exhaustively documented. Materials are available from federal, state, and county agencies.

7 Ann Forsyth develops a useful taxonomy of walkability. To customize her definitions to the contexts of Mexicali and San Bernardino, we would add that safety includes shelter or refuge from extreme heat and related pollution, and attention to the special needs of the physically disabled, the elderly, and children with respect to climate and automobile traffic.


8 Before the Colorado River water was as controlled as it is today, in addition to flowing into the Gulf of California and the delta's riparian ecosystem, it sometimes overflowed into the Alamo River, running from the Mexicali Valley to the Salton sink. With this in mind, a group of investors founded the California Development Company and redirected the Colorado course into the dry Alamo bed to irrigate the Imperial Valley, and consequently Mexicall Valley. During the following decades, groups of international and national settlers, mainly of Chinese origin, came to work in the nascent agribusiness. The U.S. Volstead Law caused a second demographic boom with tourism, followed by the Mexican Agricultural Labor Agreement or the Bracero Program during the 1940s, which allowed men with experience in agriculture to work in the US seasonally, and then the Border Industrialization Program, or maquiladora program in the 60s.

9 Unlike the Pacific coast metropolitan region of Baja California, Mexicali does not border on the thriving clientele of San Diego. Imperial Valley’s median household income ($44,779) contrasts with San Diego County’s ($70,588). The coast’s most affluent city, Tijuana, has a burgeoning downtown and gastronomic sector, as well as the state’s biggest medical tourism industry. Ensenada is a growing destination due to its wine region and Baja Med cuisine, and its nightclubs, beaches, and natural protected areas. Rosarito has a history as a resort town thanks to its Rosarito Beach Hotel, which catered to Hollywood celebrities of the 1920s and 30s. It now has a prosperous real estate industry, with prevailing beach-front properties for foreign retirees, and popular nightclubs, active and full during US Federal Holidays and spring break.
seamstresses, piñata makers, hat stores, etc.), some remnants of the old commercial Chinatown, and some housing.

The medical tourism industry and related government offices’ plans prioritize downtown’s urban image improvement,\textsuperscript{10} the construction of a sanitized Chinatown,\textsuperscript{11} and the creation of spaces for leisure in the urban lagoon system to enhance medical travel with shopping, outdoor sports, and cultural experiences. Although none of these projects have been completed, the developmentalist vision of the tourism sector is often at odds with the preservation of patrimonial assets, because predicted economic development is justified as more important\textsuperscript{12}. The demolition of one of the city’s representative buildings to make way for a hospital is evidence of that logic,\textsuperscript{13} as is the user-intensive proposal for the lagoon system presented by the economic development council of Mexicali (CDEM) in 2016.\textsuperscript{14} For local business owners and the city government, improving downtown’s image requires removing migrant shelters, closing the first supervised injection site in the city,\textsuperscript{15} and “cleaning up” unwanted inhabitants in streets and parks.\textsuperscript{16}

About an hour east of Los Angeles and three hours northwest of Mexicali, San Bernardino, California, is the seat of the lower 48’s largest county, and part of the Southern California urban agglomeration. Like Mexicali, San Bernardino is a gray destination, where climate, social and economic pressures, and regionally-driven planning decisions place more value on destinations than street-level community.\textsuperscript{17} Deterioration and depopulation of parks

\textsuperscript{10} Distrito Médico is located in downtown, very close to the International Border-crossing. The Tourism Development Program for Medical Tourism of the State of Baja California contained three detonating projects; one was the improvement of downtown’s urban image. And of the four projects for Mexicali in the State Tourism Program 2015-2019, one involved a commercial ChinaTown, and a second envisioned enabling the urban wetland system with recreational spaces.

\textsuperscript{11} The ChinaTown project is a touristic and commercial venue adjacent to the border port of entry that contemplates around seven acres of shops, chinese restaurants, health services, a hotel, museum, casino, and chinese school. It’s been contemplated to create around three thousand jobs, with an expected investment of 60 million dollars. The architectural project, developed by Grupo Heer, includes a pagoda-like pedestrian bridge and other oriental references inserted into a red- and silver-cladded alucobond structure. It’s location is in Río Nuevo, adjacent to downtown’s old chinatown, La Chinesca.

\textsuperscript{12} See Lugares o flujos centrales: los centros históricos urbanos, by Fernando Carrión, p.11

\textsuperscript{13} In 2016, the malting building in the patrimonial complex of Cervecería Mexicali was demolished after a series of conflicts for its preservation. A group of neighbors aligned with the interest of the plot’s new owners, advocating for its demolition based on the inconveniences brought by the building’s occupation by homeless people.

\textsuperscript{14} Environmental preservationist members of Brigadas Ecológicas Salvemos Las Lagunas oppose the project proposed by CDEM for the wetland system, deeming it too user-intensive because it includes the installation of a series of vaguely defined recreation parks, infrastructure for adventure sports, an event park, camping site, parking lot, etc.

\textsuperscript{15} \url{https://www.lavozdelafrontera.com.mx/local/clausura-ayuntamiento-picadero-seguro-2713290.html}

\textsuperscript{16} Local business owners have supported the removal of homeless people on recurring occasions, a population that as Paulina Sanchez observes in Parque del Mariachi, tends to be homogenized, instanced when deported immigrants, displaced people, indigents, drug-dependents, mentally-ill, alcoholic, and in-transit-migrants are all referred to by the same pejorative word of tecolín.

\textsuperscript{17} A useful example is the disposition in 2013 of the decommissioned space shuttle Endeavour. Several communities in South Los Angeles County agreed to allow the California Science Center to cut down 400 street trees in order to move the shuttle from LAX to Exposition Park. Sacrificing the trees and the many small-scale benefits of their shade would allow the citizens to benefit from the experience of visiting the shuttle in a park to which they must drive or take public transit, but which also has large trees, grass, and other amenities. Again, the Science Center agreed to “mitigate,” and
and streets has significantly limited the key maintenance element of ordinary human presence.

San Bernardino declared bankruptcy following the 2008 recession, but its decline began much earlier, following the closure of a large Air Force base, the eclipse of rail for cargo and passenger transport, high incarceration rates and general defunding of mental health and social welfare programs beginning in the 1980s. Rates of poverty vary depending on the reporting agency, but the region in general suffers from social deprivation and over-or under-employment. The city spends 72 percent of its general fund on police and fire salaries and pensions, and during critical periods relied on innovation and large-scale projects such as a 44-acre destination park, haphazardly conceived public transit hubs, a now-deserted downtown mall, and a now-discarded redevelopment proposal to bulldoze much of the near north side of downtown where many low-income people live, and many businesses that cater to or employ them are located. They also rely on volunteers, grants, and “public/private” partnerships for short-term fixes to parks, programming, and maintenance. Employment and economic activity are focused on court and government functions, hospitals, education/social services, and a growing warehouse industry that provides mainly part-time and contingent work. Following a bad fiscal report from 2018-19, the city will need to lay off more workers, cut wages, and possibly re-enter bankruptcy. Parks suffered in particular: the standard for municipalities is one maintenance worker per ten acres; in 2007, San Bernardino had one worker per 16 acres, and by 2013 had dropped to one per 60 acres. Important functions are often contracted to private companies, with mixed results.

Resource scarcity and poor planning resulted in neglect of pedestrian and other non-motorized use of public spaces in both cities. In dangerously hot climates, such uses require not only access (walkways, paths, and curb cuts) but also security and refuge from climate, filth, noise, and violence. In such spaces, trees and public art enhance walkability, providing shade, a sense of belonging, and an invitation to participate in urban life. They represent a demand for design, care, and maintenance, and send a complex set of signals based on history, geography, and climate. replaced the trees with smaller plantings. San Bernardino has a dedicated parks and recreation staff who program intensively, especially during the summer, and their culminating event is always a long bus ride to a theme park, usually Disneyland.

18 Depending on measurements; the U.S. Census puts the official number at 30 percent. Household income, adjusted for inflation, dropped from $55,000 in 1970 to $37,440 in 2013, well below regional averages: $60-70,000 for California, and $50-60,000 countywide.http://graphics.latimes.com/san-bernardino/
19 The state estimates that a “living wage” in Southern California at about $74,000 for a family of four, and only four in ten jobs in the San Bernardino region pay half that.https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-inland-empire-jobs-20181128-story.html
20 Extreme heat affects children, the disabled, the elderly, and the low income, who are all advised to seek air-conditioned spaces, avoid exertion, take cool baths, and stay hydrated. Such advice, while sound, ignores reality: people may not be able to afford air conditioning or the subsequent electric bill, may have inadequate bathing facilities or access to drinking water, and may face mobility issues or actually live in vehicles or on the street. The latter issue, especially, relates to our argument.
21 Southern California’s three iconic tree species - the palm, the orange, and the eucalyptus - are non-native species that have troubled relationships with their landscape. Neither the palm nor the orange provides significant shade - one is decorative and the other developed for agriculture. While more useful for shade, the eucalyptus originated under a regime of bio-engineering to forest California with an unviable cash crop, ultimately nicknamed “the gasoline tree,” and prone to burn in a place that is
Government and conservation organizations increasingly point to trees and shade as an important public health and social infrastructure element, especially as the climate heats.22 Economically stressed cities are vulnerable to what journalist Sam Bloch describes as “shade inequality,”23 and heat-related illnesses vary based on microclimate.24 In the U.S., estimates show that African-American residents are 52 percent more likely to live in blocks that suffer from elevated temperatures due to lack of tree cover or extensive paving.25 Non-automobile uses compete fiercely for space in automobile-dominated cities - it is not unusual to see a wheelchair user resort to the street because the sidewalk is obstructed by fire hydrants, utility poles, bus shelters, trash receptacles (or trash) and trees - or cages or cut-out planters where trees used to grow. Tree roots buckle sidewalks, increasing the safety hazard, and “sidewalk friendly” varieties such as crape myrtle (Lagerstroemia spp.) are shrubby, short, and slow-growing. Even where mature trees exist, they may be the wrong kind (brittle/inflammable eucalyptus, for example), they may die, or become a liability if surrounding amenities deteriorate.26 27

Mexicali has paid more attention to native and adaptive trees recently, possibly due to growing concern with the city’s bad air quality, and the media presence of several citizen groups with ecological (or sustainability/green) agendas.28 Almost 40 percent of the city’s population was born in other places, so it is frequent to see trees appropriate to landscape increasingly nervous about fire. See Jared Farmer, Trees in Paradise New York: WW Norton, 2013. There are valuable native trees, but climate stresses and pests make them vulnerable. Southern California’s native oaks are prone to a fungal disease, “Sudden Oak Death,” and endemic sycamore, cottonwood, aspen, and pine are stressed by pests and dropping water tables. California law protects trees unevenly: A Sonoma County couple was recently fined more than a half million dollars for transplanting (and ultimately killing) three mature oaks from a conservation easement on their property to the landscaped area closer to their house, but municipalities, utility companies, and private organizations regularly kill, remove, or neglect trees with no consequences.22 https://www.fastcompany.com/40474204/cities-should-think-about-trees-as-public-health-infrastructure 23 https://placesjournal.org/article/shade-an-urban-design-mandate/ 24 https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/20160825_PHA_Report_Final.pdf Information on heat-related urban deaths based on microclimate are from the 2003 European heat wave, where each 1-degree celsius increase in temperature resulted in a 21-percent increase in predicted death rates. 25 https://www.citylab.com/equity/2013/05/inequality-urban-tree-cover/5604/

26 The story of the “Pioneer Magnolia” is emblematic of San Bernardino’s conflicted history with trees. In 1989, the magnolia was threatened by development, and the community rallied to fundraise and move the tree to San Bernardino’s largest public amenity, the 44-acre Seccombe Lake Park, accompanied by a parade and extensive media attention. Two years later, the Pioneer Magnolia was dead, either from neglect or because it is simply very difficult to successfully transplant a tree of that size. 27 California law protects mature trees, but developers are permitted to transplant or otherwise “mitigate” the loss; in the 1990s, a San Bernardino developer moved more than 500 protected oaks, and a few years later, two thirds had died or were in poor health. Many mature trees on public and private property became “zombies” after the most recent drought, unchanged in appearance but with damaged root systems or other weaknesses that will lead to their eventual removal as hazards. Volunteers, municipal workers and foresters report difficulty keeping both mature trees and seedlings alive in Southern California, due to drought, fire, insect infestation, increased temperatures and smaller snow-packs, and injudicious pruning, especially by utilities crews charged with keeping lines clear and preventing wildfires. 28 Sonoran Institute, Pro Natura Noroeste, Salvemos las Lagunas, Redspira, Biomac, Visión Pública, MXLiBiCi.
imaginaries of warm climates, like guamuchiles, avocado and mango trees. In medium and higher income neighborhoods, the selection of vegetation tends to imitate Southern California’s palm trees and green lawns. Trees planted on sidewalks are often incompatible with pedestrians; common examples are Yucateco (Ficus microcarpa) and Olivo Negro (Bucida buceras). The first is a tropical shade tree whose grown roots break pavement, the second a tropical tree often ornamentally shaped in forms that give no shade.

Denahí Valdez, a young mobility activist and urbanist, coordinates a series of actions to prompt the preservation and use of sidewalks with a call for urban forestation and communal gathering. The Japanese practice of hanami is an annual celebration of native trees and commons, centered on the short-lived observation of blooming cherry blossoms. Washanami is a pun on the Japanese word meaning flower viewing, given by the border Mexicanism or adaptation of the English to watch: wachar or washar. The project came about after ten years of mobility activism and four years of investigating and working on the area with a group of citizens first gathered by Minoru Kiyota, architect, cultural promoter, and third generation Japanese-Mexican downtown business owner. What Mexicali will watch is also a locally adapted version of hanami. Instead of cherry blossom, the event will celebrate the yellow flower of Palo Verde trees, a native species to the Colorado Desert whose flowers and seeds were used as food by indigenous desert nations: the Tohono O’Odham, Mohave, Cucapá, Pima, Cahuilla and Yuma.

The planted Palo Verde trees that will stimulate washanami were introduced to Álvaro Obregón avenue in Mexicali, a street leading from the heart of downtown to the old Government Palace. The project was coordinated by Denahí, and implemented with a group of diverse backgrounds, including students, and teachers from the state’s public university architecture school—under the umbrella of LaBici. For three months, the group organized to review the area, map businesses, talk to neighbors, learn about the Palo Verde tree, find partners, and crowd-fund. On April 28, sidewalks were ready with holes to plant the trees in and a street-wide event was hosted to plant and present the community with related activities. Denahí rents an office space on the same street, and assembles participants and neighbors to partake in irrigation, including medical facilities and their hired gardeners. Reclaiming local tree species and the act of walking critiques the current design practices of the spreading medical district, which include reducing sidewalks to accommodate parking.

In barrio Pueblo Nuevo, specifically in Colonia Santa Clara, Proyecto Calle 13 leads a community-based initiative to maintain the street and its surroundings with artistic

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29 Denisse Zamudio draws the figure from the 2010 INEGI Census, and the processes of social representation related to vegetation in the city in her study: Social representations and urban space transformation in an arid city: Mexicali, Mexico

30 Mexico City celebrates its own washanami when jacarandas bloom every spring over the cityscape; outcome of an ornamental landscape project suggested by Tatsugoro Matsumoto, a first wave Japanese-Mexican immigrant that held a tree nursery for jacarandas around the same time that Mexicali was consolidating as a city during its first decades. Coincidentally, it was during Álvaro Obregón’s presidency when Matsumoto suggested planting jacarandas instead of cherry blossoms in Mexico City, due to the tree’s adaptation to climate conditions. The planted Palo Verde trees that will expectantly stimulate washanami were introduced to Álvaro Obregón avenue in Mexicali, first known as Avenida 5 de Mayo and renamed after Mexican president Obregón, since it was during his presidency that the second section of the city expanded from the east of downtown.

31 http://naeb.brit.org/uses/search/?string=Parkinsonia+microphylla

32 Facultad de Arquitectura y Diseño, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Baja California.

33 Barrio Pueblo Nuevo is a common designation for a number of neighborhoods located on the western bank of Río Nuevo, including colonia Loma Linda, Orizaba, Pueblo Nuevo, Revolución and Santa Clara. It grew steadily as a working class neighborhood, also referred to as Tercera Sección.
interventions. The project was founded by a group of neighbors led by Thomas Gin, who grew up in calle 13, or calle Tepic, worked several years in Los Angeles, and returned to address the state of neglect of his own neighborhood and street. He started a mosaic-art workshop in his garage, inviting friends, family, and neighbors to use that technique to cover street potholes, neighborhood walls and sidewalks. After a couple of years, the group reclaimed an abandoned house, repaired it, and turned it into La Joyita, a community arts and crafts center that has hosted different workshops and events, enabling collaborations between the community, other organizations, neighborhood schools, local dance groups, and visiting artists. Calle 13 has seen a series of public cultural events along the street, as well as cleaning brigades and recovery of discarded materials, including a section of the old border fence that turned into La Joyita’s fence and façade.

On the southmost part of the city, Rodrigo Ortega Aviles facilitates another citizen-led effort focused on the city’s lagoon system. Laguna Mexico, Laguna Campestre, and Laguna Xochimilco belong to the remnant Colorado River delta wetland system, declared a Ramsar site for its international significance as a natural habitat, especially for bird life. Around 2014, the newly founded group Salvemos las Lagunas procured funds to install an ecological trail on the shore of Laguna Mexico and organized cleaning brigades to pick up tons of trash and used tires. As funds ran out, so did the impetus of the group. And although he did not belong to the founding organization, Rodrigo resumed its operation in 2017 in coordination with his mother, Patricia Aviles.

Restoring the lagoons, including treatment of water polluted by debris and sewage, has been included in the political agenda for several state and municipal government campaigns. The current state administration financed education and surveillance actions to prevent continuing pollution by close neighbors, and future funding is expected but not yet in place. Their new executive leaders ran on the left-wing platform of MORENA, whose founder also won the 2018 national election. MORENA’s foundational rhetoric is inclusion, with no one left behind and no room for discrimination. The city's next mayor, Marina del Pilar Ávila, announced both the rescue of the lagoons and downtown as her major projects, committing to move government offices to La Chinesca and working closely with business owners to address their concerns with unwanted population.

At the height of the foreclosure crisis, activist groups formed and developed a parallel structure to maintain San Bernardino’s threatened urban commons, including a two-year

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34 The Urban Lagoons are part of the Ramsar site No. 1822, belonging to the System of Remaining Wetlands of the Colorado River Delta. According to the 2012 project: “Diagnosis and Restoration of Ramsar Wetlands of Baja California”, along with the estuarine zone, the urban lagoons are the most threatened objects of the river Delta.

35 Along with numerous volunteers, Brigadas Ecológicas Salvemos las Lagunas has organized cleaning brigades every other weekend, planted and taken care of close to one-hundred fifty native trees; mostly mesquite (Prosopis glandulosa), palo verde (Parkinsonia aculeate), some black willow (Salix goodingii) and Fremont cottonwood (Populus fremontii).

36 Additionally, preliminary and executive projects were financed, together totaling more than 12 million pesos transferred from the state business trust (FIDEM) to the local economic development council (CDEM).
project to improve Seccombe Lake Park with murals and other enhancements and develop a community arts center at an abandoned building. One grassroots activist entity, San Bernardino Generation NOW, struggled to find support from the city for the mural project. Group member Michael Segura said they were stymied after the city moved them and their equipment from a secure building to a utility shed and moved a homeless center into their old space. All their tools were stolen, and the group came to the conclusion that the city was taking advantage of activist volunteer networks to provide routine maintenance while excluding them from meaningful participation and support. A volunteer crew cannot organize large-scale repair, security, vermin control, and daily trash removal, let alone manage a 44-acre homeless encampment.

In June of 2019, San Bernardino announced that it will apply for an $8.5 million grant specifically for Seccombe Lake Park, its number-one funding priority. Restoration options include irrigation, landscaping, restroom repair, and perimeter security fencing. The challenge the city has framed is to create a fortified enclave, much as they have done with the well-maintained sports fields immediately to the north of the park, which are already fenced and locked unless an organized and permitted group is using them. During the “listening tour” by the Orange County grant-development firm hired by the city, Generation NOW made and posted a video where they did an on-the-spot interview and asked the consultants about their methodology for developing public input. Though rough and relatively unedited, the video communicated to the city and the consultants that they are accountable to and observed by an active and invested group of people apart from the usual media and government entities. San Bernardino Generation NOW regularly posts

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37 At 44 acres, this is San Bernardino’s largest park. It was originally developed on the site of a small wetland and lake. The irrigation necessary to keep the landscaping alive has been torn out, hardscaping is broken, restrooms closed. Ground squirrels have taken over the open areas, and the Santa Ana winds blow trash into the artificial lakes. Local activists point out that the very name reflects the mixed and uneasy history of San Bernardino - Mayor William Seccombe (1873-1971) fought against desegregation efforts in the 1940s and is remembered with little fondness by San Bernardino’s Latinx/Chicanx community in particular.

38 Public-sector jobs are major benefits to the community; many of the important civic institutions in town, such as libraries and youth recreation and senior centers, are staffed and fiercely protected by long-time employees and directors who have deep ties to communities and are often the main breadwinners in their families, while the city’s elected officials and upper-level administration are viewed as corrupt insiders or careerist outsiders stuffing their wallets and resumes at the expense of the taxpayer.

39 At a Parks Commission meeting on July 18, 2019, city staff reported that a consultant collated more than 100 responses, with “walking path with exercise equipment” and “playground equipment” as the two top priorities. At least two commissioners at the meeting emphasized exclusionary fencing as major priorities.

40 A recent study challenges the idea that excluding unhoused people from parks will increase safety or the perception of safety. Homeless people, vendors, and organized activities are all correlated positively with perceptions that a park is safe. The presence of construction and intoxicated persons are negatively correlated. San Bernardino’s extreme deprivation and social isolation may not align with the study, however. Although some of the homeless residents of Seccombe Lake were “cool and down to help,” as Michael Segura put it, he did indicate that the population on the whole suffered too acutely from physical and mental illness to take meaningful part in passive or active park maintenance. His crews regularly found used syringes and other indications of intoxication in the playground area. Seccombe Lake’s demographics, size and location may make it anomalous compared to the smaller Los Angeles parks in the study.

41 Generation NOW conducted a survey of the park three years prior, with more than 200 respondents, many of whom listed wildlife (ground squirrels, fish and waterfowl specifically) as the first word that came to mind when they thought about the park.
photographs and other documentation of the now-obliterated murals as part of their “Mural Monday” series. They and other organizations have promoted changes in local and state law to decriminalize street vending, and the initiatives were successful in 2019. The city’s farmer’s market shut down in 2018, but a volunteer group has revived a street food event on Saturday nights.

In Mexicali, popular maintenance empowers an active creative community; in San Bernardino it also reveals the city’s failure to fulfill its obligations. There is a tricky balance to strike between romanticizing popular maintenance, safeguarding projects from cooptation or exploitation, and protecting working-class maintenance employees who may be sidelined both by austerity and by cynical reliance on “volunteer” or “grassroots” initiatives. Advocates for public initiatives in both cities must contend with the conservative and cautious resistance of city officials and influential business interests, and with larger social threats.¹⁴² It is fundamental for citizen-led initiatives of public space maintenance to be critical of their own initiatives: even desirable civic improvements may accelerate gentrification and restrict use of public space.

The Mexican border theorist Sayak Valencia⁴³ characterizes living human bodies as part of the biopolitical reality, counter to the necropolitics of meters-out or victims of criminal violence, inmates in jails, prisons, and “detention facilities”, or people so burdened by privation and/or obligations that they have no disposable income or time for leisure or civic engagement. They are also counter to the sanitized fantasy of the white spatial imaginary that would fence or zone most human activity out of the public sphere, or characterize ordinary public space as too dangerous for ordinary people. If the presence of human beings is, as the research shows, an actual maintenance asset, tactics that populate the streets will result in the general economic and cultural empowerment of individuals, cities and neighborhoods.

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¹⁴² In July of 2019, for example, the Trump administration announced that it would initiate immigration “roundups” of people with deportation orders, part of ongoing verbal and actual menaces to immigrant communities. Trump’s rhetoric echoes that of Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who a decade earlier besieged Guadalupe, Arizona, with checkpoints and helicopters, famously remarking, “If they’re afraid to go to church, that’s good.” The functional effect of threatened indignity would be difficult to document - how many parties were cancelled, how many street vendors stayed home, and how many paseos did not take place - but many people, both undocumented and otherwise, report that they altered their behavior in some way.