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The City of Oil & Water

The Rise and Fall of an American Landscape

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April 10, 2006

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The history of the American landscape revolves around an academic mnemonic of symbolic cities, each representing an era, a trend, a hope, or a failure: Manhattan, Detroit, Levittown, Radburn, Tyson's Corner, and on and on. The ultimate collection of these meanings becomes a catechism for history, a call-and-response reaction to a decade or a theme. These names conjure up specific reactions because they have been flattened into caricatures of urban analysis, each confined to its separate space of the canonical timeline. The solution to this entrenched framework lies in developing new channels of study in city-laboratories, specific sites that represent multiple eras of the American experience at a manageable scale. Few cities can claim an uninterrupted history of progress from City Beautiful to post-suburban; fewer still have consistently matched the rapidity and totality of national urban change. Despite the homogenizing forces of the late 20th Century, some cities retain this historical past; one, perhaps the only, is Huntington Beach, California. In its history, the city reads like an encyclopedia of American urban development; from small agricultural hinterland through industrialization, suburbanization, urban unrest and renewal, and exurban growth. While this is the specific story of Huntington Beach, it may as well be the story of all American cities in the 20th Century.

Unlike many city studies or suburban critiques, the history of Huntington Beach resists being about the decline and fall of the American landscape, either by misdirected capital or environmental despoilment. Using the most basic measures of a city's success, Huntington Beach continues to excel in attracting new residents, educating children, providing jobs, policing the streets, and moving traffic; in other words, all the activities expected of a modern American city. But this success, like that of so many American

cities, comes with a binary counterpart, a sacrifice to the economic engines that sustain our collective standard of living. For Huntington Beach, this was a surrender of the urban realm to the forces of homogenization, expansion, and place-destruction. The terms *place* and *space* are often used interchangeably; here, though, a *place* is a location that acquires an intrinsic social meaning beyond that of its function while a *space* is an anywhere, an analogous representation of a repetitious landscape.¹ Just as architecture has a vernacular of style, places form a social vernacular, a localized series of relationships from which a sense of civic meaning, of belonging, is derived.² Though the Census may look at Huntington Beach and see a successful city, a historical lens uncovers a Huntington Beach that has forfeited its particular sense of place, its urban meaning, in order to better construct the spaces offered by the larger power structures of American society. In doing so, the city – like mass communities in general - gained material wealth but lost the engine of civic society. The tool that dismantled this engine was suburbanization, yet it was not wielded by Los Angeles, or Washington DC, or even Wall St.; the creation of a mass suburbia, and the ultimate destruction of Huntington Beach’s places, relied not just on national frameworks but on multiple levels of localized implementation. In doing so, the city (as a totality of actions pursued by its individuals) replaced a landscape of meaning with a materially-successful civic wasteland.

In 1897, as the great era of ranchos slowly came to a close in Southern California, Col. Robert J. Northam acquired 17,000 acres of the Huntington Beach Mesa from the

¹ Timothy Beatley, *Native to Nowhere* (Washington DC: Island Press, 2004), 3.

² Take restaurants, for example. A McDonald’s is a space of consumption, where transactions occur with almost no social interaction. A corner diner, with a similar menu and price range, is a place because of the social frameworks governing the relationship of clerk and customer. You might be recognized as a regular at the diner, but the memory of your purchases is erased immediately at the fast food counter.

drought-devastated Stearns Rancho Company and proceeded to till the verdant soil with barley and alfalfa.³ The area then had but a single name, Shell Beach, and only the most rudimentary access by railroad, leaving the mesa virtually isolated from the world at high tide.⁴ While Col. Northam saw the intrinsic value of the peat marshes surrounding the mesa, an area later known as Gospel Swamp, others began to appreciate the value of the mesa itself. Two men, Philip Stanton and Col. H.S. Finley, looked at the landscape and developed a vision for a town called Pacific City, a Victorian beach resort with pleasure piers, a boardwalk, and other ideals imported from the then-popular Atlantic City model.⁵ A new era of communication and transportation technology had opened the Los Angeles region to the forces of industrial capital, unleashing massive land speculation in the rural fringe of the expanding metropolis.⁶ Hoping to take advantage of these transitions, the two men purchased 1,500 acres of land from Northam in 1901.

The syndicate formed by Finley and Stanton, the West Coast Land and Water Company, laid out a forty acre Pacific City and, despite their best efforts, watched as their dream died high on the Huntington Beach Mesa.⁷ Lacking the transportation infrastructure necessary to sustain a resort town, the city could not fulfill the potential of its geography. Finley and Stanton, who sold his share in the city in 1902, had succeeded

³ Carolyn Bailey, "Huntington Beach History," in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 2

⁴ Thomas Talbert, ed., *The Historical Volume and Reference Works*, (Whittier: Historical Publishers, 1963), 215

⁵ Carolyn Bailey, "Huntington Beach History," in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 2

⁶ William Friedrichs, *Henry Huntington and the Creation of Southern California* (Columbus: Ohio State Uni. Press, 1992), 58

⁷ Carolyn Bailey, "Huntington Beach History," in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 2

in building a modest farming community with perhaps forty homesteads; an achievement, but by no means the surf playground of the West.⁸

Even so, the speculators of the West Coast Land Company held Stanton's and Finley's enthusiasm for the site; all the town needed was access to the booming urban market of Los Angeles. The ever expanding transportation network of Southern California was dominated by one man, Henry E. Huntington, an industrial titan, local robber-baron, and operator of the Pacific Electric intra-urban railways known as the Red Car Lines. Since Huntington had made a fortune in land speculation tied to the expansion of his railways and not in the railway operations themselves, J.V. Vickers, the head of West Coast Land, approached Huntington with a deal: Huntington would extend the Red Cars from Long Beach to Pacific City in exchange for free right-of-way along the ocean, one-twelfth of all subdivided land lots, one-fifth interest in all bluff property, and a block of stock in the new land partnership.⁹ This new partnership, Vickers offered, would be the Huntington Beach Company, and the city would be renamed Huntington Beach. Not surprisingly, Henry Huntington accepted. On a bright July Fourth, 1904, a massive crowd toasted the arrival of the first Pacific Electric cars into Huntington Beach as hundreds flocked to one of fifty-two real estate agents arranged around the celebration.¹⁰

Despite being based, at least initially, in agricultural production, the city was not an organic manifestation of the landscape, nor was it particularly bounded by its local geographic features. With the idea of Pacific City, Stanton and Finley placed the city within a specific temporal and spatial realm that took from nature its essential

⁸ Claudine Burnett, *From Barley Fields to Oil Town* (Huntington Beach: Burnett Historical Tours, 1995), 3.

⁹ Carolyn Bailey, "Huntington Beach History," in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 2

¹⁰ *Ibid* 2

characteristics and transfigured them into speculative products related directly to the moment's culture. Through the concept of Pacific City and later Huntington Beach, the constant landscape of the ocean became an experience, a view, which could be packaged and sold according to larger social frameworks. On a national level, this ability by capitalism to turn raw land into a socio-economic resource would drive the growth of suburban cities as physical manifestations of cultural goals, where the idea of the landscape became more valuable than the spatial products themselves.

In order to develop the city, the Huntington Beach Company had to create a legible built form for investors, visitors, and residents to understand within their limited cultural perception of what a city should be. By providing this legibility, as well as essential services, the Company would reap economic rewards by making their community feel less speculative and more entrenched in the prevailing needs of possible residents. To this end, the Huntington Beach Company invested heavily, both in infrastructure to service the needs of the local population and in projects, like the first pier, which created a visual basis for an imagined geography. With the infusion of capital from Henry Huntington, his eponymous company offered a remarkable level of service for the era: an electric plant, telephone system, water system, city dump, cemetery, and twenty miles of curbs and gutters for a town that had, at most, six hundred people.¹¹ Still believing in the Pacific City ideal, J.V. Vickers spearheaded the introduction of amenities not usually found in small-town development: a long wooden pier, a seaside pavilion, and

¹¹ "Condensation of Interview, Bud Higgins, April 8, 1973, Huntington Beach, Ca." in California State University, Fullerton Oral History Program, *Huntington Beach: an oral history* (Fullerton: Oral History Program, 1981)

hundreds of trees.¹² These flourishes show that, for certain elements in the Huntington Beach Company, the city was not just an economic speculation but a forum for community development.

In striking a balance between the support of home lots and the architecture of vacation tourism, Huntington Beach created a split personality between the physical construction of the city and the constant desire to actualize the local mythology of the beach resort town. The ocean, the natural form that defined the city, became the center of this tension between the need to invest in the necessity of residents and the need to advertise the city to the visitors arriving with the Red Cars. “Pacific City,” though entrenched in the civic mind as early as 1904, remained an El Dorado, an unattainable goal of the city’s natural environment. Thus, the developers of Huntington Beach were caught in a historic transition of urban planning between the city-building practices of the 19th Century American hinterland – based on railroad concessions and home lot amenities - and the construction of a virtual economy (like tourism) as part of an organizing metropolitan region. These tensions formed the basis of the city’s subconscious, one directly driven by Huntington Beach’s unique place in the world.

Despite the rhetoric of Pacific City, the physical shape of Huntington Beach rejected the contemporary planning of the City Beautiful movement, instead existing as a manifestation of a speculative environment based in transportation infrastructure; a concept, it should be noted, not unlike our modern definition of sprawl.¹³ The original city plan of Huntington Beach, the basis for sixty years of development, began as a simple and monotonous series of blocks stretching along the highest part of the mesa

¹² Thomas Talbert, ed., *The Historical Volume and Reference Works*, (Whittier: Historical Publishers, 1963), 217

¹³ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 61

facing the ocean.¹⁴ (Figures 1 & 2) Each block had three hundred feet of ocean frontage, with four hundred feet of lots stretching back from Ocean Avenue along which the Red Cars ran. Bisecting each of the waterfront blocks were T-shaped alleys, dividing the one set of lots that faced the water from the rest which faced the side streets. The rest of the blocks, which numbered about fifty in all, each had a single alley running perpendicular to the ocean. A commercial road, Main Street, ran from the railroad spur through the city, ultimately emptying onto the wooden pleasure pier.¹⁵

In basic form, this plan could have existed anywhere in industrial America, from Pennsylvania coal towns to Atlantic City. Placing rectilinear blocks into a gridiron street pattern allowed developers to minimize turn-around time and capital expenses while maximizing the use of the land for economic means. Outside of making money, the goals of city plans like Huntington Beach's, or any other city built around railroad concessions, were severely limited; besides the waterfront pavilion and pier, no other civic buildings could be found in the city. In this, we see the conflicted hand of J.V. Vickers, a man with an appreciation for City Beautiful but an inability to transfer this interest to the landscape. A city without parks, schools, and the civic institutions of democracy would be anathema to the strict social engineering of the City Beautiful movement yet this is the physical structure of Huntington Beach in 1904.

The question then becomes how this repetitious plan, with only the most tenuous relationship to a local vernacular and handcuffed by its own lack of municipal structures, develops an intricate civic engine and sense of place. Though the plan lacked in visual excitement and sophistication, it succeeded in knitting together a typically disparate

¹⁴ Esther Cramer, ed., *A Hundred Years of Yesterdays*. (Santa Ana: Orange County Centennial, Inc., 1988), 116

¹⁵ SH Finley & Co. "Map of Huntington Beach" (Huntington Beach: SH Finley & Co. 1904)

population of agricultural workers into a dense semi-urban fabric. Demographically, in an era before the automobile, the sheer number of lots offered in Huntington Beach represented a fantastic leap in density for a community that was, to a large degree, still an agricultural hinterland. But more important than pure density, the formation of a city identity grew from an inherent clash between the image of the city as a vacation spot and the reality of its residents' economic situation. Vickers, in his failed attempt to forge a copy of the Victorian seaside resort, nevertheless created a powerful image for the residents to rally around as an ethereal symbol of the city.

The pier, the most aggressive of the structures built by the Company, served as a constant visual reminder of the city's place in relation to the region and to itself. The life of the city revolved around the corner of Main St. and Ocean Ave.; not only could the pier be seen by the arriving Red Car passengers, but it was an omnipresent visual cue to the businesses of Main St., the local economic and social engine.¹⁶ This physical form translated into social expression: the July 4th Parade, begun as a real estate dog-and-pony show, continues on as the ultimate expression of the city's life, an event filled with the various civic groups of the city forever marching down Main to the sea above the pier.¹⁷ So though the dominant form of the city could have been anywhere in America, the economic flourishes related to Pacific City built a powerful connection between the city and its geography which, in turn, transferred to the residents a sense of localized character. This connection between the social structures of extractive economies like agriculture and the deep-seated belief in Huntington Beach's resort life formed the framework of the city's urbanism for the next half-century.

¹⁶ Thomas Talbert, ed., *The Historical Volume and Reference Works*, (Whittier: Historical Publishers, 1963), 214

¹⁷ Rob Kling, ed., *Postsuburban California*. (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1991), 171

With its infrastructure built and its plan laid out, Huntington Beach stood at the edge of a great century of expansion. And, for a brief period in 1905, a real estate boom seemed to suggest the dreams of Finley and Stanton were not misguided. Though individual investors made quick money trading property in this environment, few set up permanent residency, preferring instead to trade land from afar.¹⁸ This, in turn, stymied efforts to elevate the city from speculative property to full-fledged community. After a year of massive profits, when investors “realized it had been a false boom with no solid commodity or industry to sponsor it,” the bubble burst.¹⁹ After the dust settled, Huntington Beach tried to establish itself as a “prosperous town in the regular routine way.”²⁰ The Huntington Beach Company, financially devastated but not destroyed by the events of 1905, lost money at an alarming rate for many years. In 1909, as a means of taking pressure off the beleaguered company so it could focus on selling land rather than running a city, Huntington Beach incorporated in order to acquire the public works from the Company.²¹

For the next decade or so, life in Huntington Beach changed little. Growth occurred gradually, almost glacially, to the confusion of the city’s residents. Multiple accounts speak of the city as an “enigma” remarking that “they could not see why it did not grow as much as [they] had hoped.”²² Even the addition of a new railroad link along the Southern Pacific line to Santa Ana brought only limited interest from outside

¹⁸ “Huntington Beach Result of Dream Newspaperman Had,” *Orange County Register*, 8 March 1923.

¹⁹ Ibid 3

²⁰ Ibid 3

²¹ “Condensation of Interview, Bud Higgins, April 8, 1973, Huntington Beach, Ca.” in California State University, Fullerton Oral History Program, *Huntington Beach: an oral history* (Fullerton: Oral History Program, 1981)

²² Claudine Burnett, *From Barley Fields to Oil Town* (Huntington Beach: Burnett Historical Tours, 1995), 10

investors.²³ Through it all, the consistent dream in the city psyche for an ocean-focused community remained, as evident in the original city seal, consecrated as the first act of the city council in 1909. (Figure 3) There is no image of the city, or even a building or symbol of progress. Instead, we find a view from the Huntington Beach Mesa out over the ocean, with Santa Catalina Island providing the backdrop for a rolling breaker.²⁴ In this we see the emblem of a city divided. On one hand, economically, Huntington Beach would follow the slow expansion of other agricultural towns in Orange County, leaning heavily on the small employment opportunities related to the extraction of wealth from Gospel Swamp. On the other, the residents shared a collective belief in the city's unique destiny to fulfill its geographic potential. This confidence translated to confusion as the forces of development never seemed to arrive, either on the Southern Pacific or from over the horizon, beyond Santa Catalina. Fifteen years of urban planning had succeeded in forming the basis of a social vernacular, one balanced between the physical landscape of the city and the ideology of the beach, but few other tangible rewards. In 1910, the population of Huntington Beach stood at only 815.²⁵

Eight slow years later, faced with the possibility of bankruptcy, the Huntington Beach Company held a one-day auction of various parcels of land throughout the city as a means of generating quick cash.²⁶ Two encyclopedia salesmen purchased seven five-acre tracts, eventually dividing the land into a total of 420 parcels - some only twenty-

²³ Esther Cramer, ed., *A Hundred Years of Yesterdays*. (Santa Ana: Orange County Centennial, Inc., 1988), 118

²⁴ City of Huntington Beach. "City Sea" (Huntington Beach: City Ordinances, 1909)

²⁵ "Huntington Beach Result of Dream Newspaperman Had," *Orange County Register*, 8 March 1923..

²⁶ Patti Bauer, "1973 History of Huntington Beach" in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 2

five square feet – to act as giveaways for their books.²⁷ This land, located on steep hillsides and in ravines, was utterly worthless.²⁸ Nevertheless, the encyclopedia salesmen sold every plot of land, the Huntington Beach Company continued on, and some very lucky families would soon be millionaires, if not better educated. For, thousands of feet underneath the Encyclopedia Lots, lay billions of dollars in oil waiting to be tapped by an industrializing America. No one at the time could imagine its presence or conceive of the immense changes this resource would bring to Huntington Beach. At the end of 1919, the city moved into the Roaring Twenties as a sleepy town of 1,687 residents.²⁹

In retrospect, oil should not have been so surprising a find to the people of Huntington Beach. By the mid-1910s, oil wells were a major feature of Los Angeles' skyline, as massive discoveries in the hills west of downtown and at Signal Hill in Long Beach led to wildcat booms in those areas.³⁰ Just as the railroads had opened Southern California's agricultural opportunities to the world markets, the vast fields of oil formed the basis of the industrialization of the region, creating the transition from organized hinterland centered at Los Angeles to a polycentric city stretching down the coast.

Though based on a liquid commodity, the industry of oil constructed powerful architectural statements on the landscape; issuing through form bold proclamations of progress. For a small town like Huntington Beach, the windmills, barns, and silos of the older agricultural regime were pushed aside by derricks, pumps, and tanks, the new machinery of industrialization. Towering over the countryside, these structures formed a

²⁷ "Huntington Beach Result of Dream Newspaperman Had," *Orange County Register*, 8 March 1923..

²⁸ Patti Bauer, "1973 History of Huntington Beach" in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 2

²⁹ "Huntington Beach Result of Dream Newspaperman Had," *Orange County Register*, 8 March 1923.

³⁰ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place*. (Cambridge: MIT Press 1997), 124

new skyline, one which served as a constant visual reminder of the influence of oil on the city. Less obvious, but nevertheless an imposition by oil wealth, were the great civic institutions built with the rewards of wildcatting: schools, hospitals, gyms, and fraternal halls brought into creation through industry's influence. The cumulative effect of the imposition of these new frameworks on preexisting communities like Huntington Beach forged a powerful local urbanism and sense of place.

On November 6, 1920, Standard Oil began drilling Bolsa Chica #1, the first oil well in an area known as Summit Hill.³¹ A deal struck in late 1919 allowed Standard Oil, which had good reason to suspect the petroleum fields of Long Beach extended to the south, to lease 500 acres of otherwise disused land from the Huntington Beach Company for exploration. An earlier test well, Huntington #1, had hit oil sands in March, producing an uninspiring 100 barrels.³² But on that autumn day, at a depth of 3,455 feet, Standard's drill broke through into the great pool beneath the city, unleashing a massive gusher that roared out of the hole with four million cubic feet of natural gas and three thousand barrels of oil.³³ Two days later, on the evening of the sixteenth, the well went wild, blowing its derrick to bits, sending thousands of gallons of oil high into the night sky with a roar that could be heard fifteen miles away.³⁴ A steady rain of fine oil droplets fell over the city, killing Vickers' trees and making many townsfolk sick with the pungent odor of petroleum. When the well was brought under control, almost 20,000 barrels pumped out of Bolsa Chica #1 each day, making it by far the most valuable single well in

³¹ Thomas Talbert, ed., *The Historical Volume and Reference Works*, (Whittier: Historical Publishers, 1963), 220

³² Claudine Burnett, *From Barley Fields to Oil Town* (Huntington Beach: Burnett Historical Tours, 1995), 12

³³ Patti Bauer, "1973 History of Huntington Beach" in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 2

³⁴ Claudine Burnett, *From Barley Fields to Oil Town* (Huntington Beach: Burnett Historical Tours, 1995), 12

America.³⁵ The Oil Age had come to Huntington Beach and the city's second boom was on.

Even before the oil from Bolsa Chica could be washed into the ocean, Huntington Beach tripled in population, as a rapid influx of industrial workers from the East filled hastily-built shantytowns and shacks on the outskirts of town.³⁶ Hundreds of individual operators formed drilling companies, leasing whatever land in "Reservoir Hill" could be had, sometimes settling for single city lots, all hoping to tap into the seemingly limitless supply of wealth underground. Oil stocks flooded the market as investors' exuberance for profit knew no end.³⁷ Within five years, Huntington Beach's 407 wells produced over nineteen million barrels of oil, making it the sixth largest field in the United States and the richest deposit by area in the world.³⁸

With the infrastructure of oil confined to Reservoir Hill, the industrial landscape existed in isolation from the downtown of minor merchants and agricultural producers. But the derricks' presence on the horizon and the arrival of Pacific Coast Highway in 1925 signaled the transition of Huntington Beach's built environment away from the extractive process of farming towards the extractive processes of industrial capital. Riding this trend, the Huntington Beach Company began trading blocks of stock with Standard Oil until, by the later parts of the 1920s, the two corporations became one and the same.³⁹ While few residents seriously debated the merits of having an oil company as

³⁵ Ibid 12

³⁶ *Discovery Well Park Dedication – May 24, 2002* (Huntington Beach: City of Huntington Beach, 2002), 7

³⁷ Thomas Talbert, ed., *The Historical Volume and Reference Works*, (Whittier: Historical Publishers, 1963), 222

³⁸ California State Division of Oil and Gas. *Chart: Huntington Beach Oil Production*. (Sacramento: State Publication, 1958.)

³⁹ Patti Bauer, "1973 History of Huntington Beach" in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 3

the main stakeholder in town, the physical impact of this merger came almost immediately. In 1926, at the urging of unknown parties widely assumed to be Standard Oil, speculators and residents pressured the City Council into opening the Town Lot Field for drilling.⁴⁰

As its name implies, the Town Lot Field flowed underneath the original grid of Huntington Beach out into the ocean, thus representing a greater threat to the physical and social architecture of downtown. Stretching from 23rd Street at the northern edge of the city all the way to 8th Street and tapering off within four blocks of Main St, the Town Lot Field would bring industry to the heart of Huntington Beach, violently integrating the economic infrastructure of oil into the agricultural forms of the past.⁴¹ (Figure 4) By allowing oil exploration, the residents of the city embraced the industrial mindset of creative destruction, one that saw the homes and business on the surface of the Mesa as an impediment to the wealth below. In the weeks after the 1926 City Council decision, the capitalistic forces of oil physically dismantled or destroyed dozens of homes above the Town Lot Field, remorselessly removing some of the oldest and grandest structures in the city.⁴² The profits of oil, even then, were simply too great for nostalgia.

The lack of opposition to this destruction shows how Huntington Beach had, as early as 1926, accepted the logic of industrialism as a necessary part of city life. The rapid population growth of 1920, consisting almost entirely of oil workers, weakened the resolve of the agrarian population to tightly regulate the physical form of place, of

⁴⁰ Barbara Milkovich, "A Brief History of Huntington Beach" in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 51

⁴¹ *Discovery Well Park Dedication – May 24, 2002* (Huntington Beach: City of Huntington Beach, 2002), 7

⁴² "Condensation of Interview, Bud Higgins, April 8, 1973, Huntington Beach, Ca." in California State University, Fullerton Oral History Program, *Huntington Beach: an oral history* (Fullerton: Oral History Program, 1981)

rootedness and history, seen in the structures of the Town Lot Field. Oil's economic prominence, as backed by demographic pressure, led Huntington Beach into a new recognition of itself as an industrial landscape, one that was defined – fiscally, socially, visually, and psychologically – by the ever-present derrick.

The year 1926 then marks the moment when Huntington Beach sacrifices its agricultural roots and fully embraces a new city mythology based around the paradoxical combination of ocean playground and oil titan. As a tacit recognition of oil's role in sustaining the city, the residents of Huntington Beach altered the symbols of civic pride to fit this new industrial mind-set. Huntington Beach High School, built with oil profits in the 1920s, made its mascot the Oiler, a brawny overall-clad wrench-wielding worker, as a direct reflection of the oil derricks pumping away around town.⁴³ On the sacred corner of Main St. and Ocean Ave., the city built two tremendous arches of crisscrossing steel lattice that met high above the intersection. In the detail work on the trusses of the arch, we see a likeness of the oil derricks dominating the northern half of town, written in steel on the most important corner in the city. Hanging from this structure, oriented to face drivers on Pacific Coast Highway, a beautiful Art Deco sign proclaimed “HUNTINGTON BEACH”; words writ large at the pier.⁴⁴ In this way, the city made itself proud of industrialization by forming a new system of semiotics to replace the antiquated agricultural life rapidly being displaced, literally, by drilling.

The physical experience of an oil drilling community is, thanks to safety and environmental progress, largely lost to history in America. But throughout the industrial period in Huntington Beach, the omnipresence of the derrick, refinery, and tank defined a

⁴³ Visit to Huntington Beach High School, Nov. 19, 2005. (<http://www.hboilers.com/directions.asp>)

⁴⁴ Chris Epting. *Huntington Beach, California* (Los Angeles: Arcadia Publishing, 2001)

generation or more of residents' lives, even if they had no stake in the Town Lot Field or Standard Oil. Ultimately, this constant visual reminder of oil helped fashion a sense of community beyond that of economic necessity through the repetition of sensory cues. Foremost of all, the derrick dominated the landscape of the city, rivaling even the pier in importance. (Figures 5 & 6) Stretching from the ocean in a crescent around downtown, the great clusters of derricks stood like an industrial forest, obvious landmarks towering over the landscape. At a time when the tallest structure in the city stood at three stories, each derrick could rise to 150 feet with densities of twenty-five wells per acre.⁴⁵ Visually, the looming presence of oil only heightened the architectural divide between the optimism laid out in the agricultural period and the ambitions of an expanding system. In replacing an area designed for homes, the wells formed themselves into a new sort of community, a neighborhood of architectural units conforming to an urban plan. Though oil wells had taken over the west side of town, the wells themselves had to conform to the Vickers grid - even if all the residents had been displaced by the drilling. The net effect of this is a literal integration of oil into the city's civic fabric, one that allows for the harsh juxtaposition of oil and water that defines the city in this era.

But still photographs and maps cannot do justice to the complete sensory excitement of wildcat drilling. A lack of safety laws, not to mention the rush of industry, led to massive explosions and fires among the oil derricks.⁴⁶ Fires would burn out of control for days, consuming blocks of wells, and causing 150 feet of timber structure to collapse into the street or shoot flaming tongues into the air, lighting the night sky.⁴⁷ The

⁴⁵ *Discovery Well Park Dedication – May 24, 2002* (Huntington Beach: City of Huntington Beach, 2002), 7

⁴⁶ *Ibid* 10

⁴⁷ *Ibid* 10

smell of oil and steam mingled with the salt air, and the dirt roads out of town all were slicked with the residue of gushers and blowouts.⁴⁸ But most importantly, and fondly remembered, was the noise; the ever-present cacophony of progress. The quiet sounds of surf and agriculture were replaced by the sawing of timber, the hammering of beams, steam boilers producing power, the clang of metal pipe, the explosive rush of a blowout, and – at all times – the hum of refineries processing oil into useable products.⁴⁹ This sound, this humming, could be remembered as the ultimate sound of success; residents reminisce of their childhoods “[growing] up in the forest of tall black oil wooden derricks that lulled many to sleep at night. Memories, oh sweet memories.”⁵⁰ The sights and sounds and smells of major industrial work occurred within blocks, even hundreds of feet, of the residential core, the commercial center, the schools, churches, and playgrounds of Huntington Beach. It is no wonder then that the image of Huntington Beach during this period becomes so ingrained in the psyches of the city’s residents, collectively forging a civic identity around this shared experience. This mutual memory forms the basis of the dense urban life of the city in the decades following the 1920 boom.

Though the wells of the Town Lot Field conformed to the original city grid, the massive influx of oil workers forced the expansion of the built environment beyond its agrarian limit. The ultimate form of this growth, just like the construction of the massive infrastructure that fueled it, developed its own layer of civic meaning and excitement, one that is analogous with dozens of other cities’ eras of urbanism. Though the oil industry

⁴⁸ Ibid 10

⁴⁹ *Discovery Well Park Dedication – May 24, 2002* (Huntington Beach: City of Huntington Beach, 2002), 9

⁵⁰ Ibid 8

remained essentially extractive, the built world of 1920s and 1930s Huntington Beach used many of the same designs, both physically and socially, as manufacturing neighborhoods in dense Eastern and Middle-Western metropolises.

The city plan, as seen in 1925, shows the profound growth consistent with a tripling of the agricultural era population.⁵¹ (Figure 7) The new map of Huntington Beach shows a conflicted city, one that has initially tried to expand back from the ocean in the original style to Palm Ave., while also sprawling due north along the railroad tracks.⁵² Not surprisingly, the extension of the city grid oriented towards the ocean represented a much more settled class of resident, including some displaced by the opening of the Town Lot Field.⁵³ The majority of oil workers lived on the east side of town, in poorly constructed apartments in hastily built workers housing blocks running parallel to that great symbol of industrial progress, the railroad spur.⁵⁴

Even the nomenclature of the city reflected the difference between these two halves. The new streets of the grid – Acacia, Orange, and Palm – represented a natural growth from Ocean, Walnut, Olive, and Pecan as symbolic of an agricultural nostalgia. Someone even planted Mexican blue palms all along Palm, trying in some way to recreate a sense of the past and a direct connection with the land.⁵⁵ The streets of the oil workers, while lacking in refinements, nevertheless pointed to a sense of transience. Beginning with Atlanta and ending with Yorktown, this new grid named off – in alphabetical order – cities near and far, as if to build a map of migration to Huntington

⁵¹ E.M. Billings. “City of Huntington Beach” (Huntington Beach: Office of the City Engineer, 1925.)

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Claudine Burnett, *From Barley Fields to Oil Town* (Huntington Beach: Burnett Historical Tours, 1995), 14

⁵⁴ E.M. Billings. “City of Huntington Beach” (Huntington Beach: Office of the City Engineer, 1925.)

⁵⁵ These palms still stand, and are a quite lovely addition to the street scene.

Beach. All the towns listed, from Baltimore to Elmira to Memphis to Quincy and so on, were part of the great industrial belt stretching from the Northeast through the Great Lakes region and out to smaller industrial centers in the South and Great Plains.⁵⁶ This development was not part of some sort of themed suburban community but was a natural reflection of the backgrounds of these blocks' residents. Ultimately, this difference in naming style reflects the competition between the original pastoral vision offered in the Vickers grid and the economic and demographic realities that were driving the city forward.

The physical divider between these two forms of the city was also the symbolic path of Huntington Beach; Main St., anchored at one end by the pier and on the other by a cluster of refineries outside of town.⁵⁷ The wedge-shaped district formed between the intersection of the industrial cardinal grid and the strand-centric Vickers plan became the center of the civic life of Huntington Beach, as the city government placed its great municipal monuments in this symbolic no-man's-land. The funding and execution of these buildings reveals much about the economic and representative duality of Oil Era Huntington Beach. Though fueled by the profits of oil drilling, the architecture of the city relied on an idealistic rejection of industrialism, preferring a democratic vocabulary to metaphorically join the halves of the city together.

The funding for Huntington Beach's great boom in civic construction came, naturally, from the tremendous wealth generated by the city's oil fields. Huntington Beach, as part of the larger structure of California's arcane mineral rights laws, received

⁵⁶ Security-First National Bank of Los Angeles. "Huntington Beach" (Huntington Beach: Security-First National Bank, 1942)

⁵⁷ Ibid

tremendous returns on the acres of oil land leased to various drilling companies.⁵⁸ This ready cash, and the influx of population following the boom, allowed the city to actualize through architecture some of the dreams of civic grandeur held since the Pacific City days. For example, the high school of the city, once housed in the abandoned meeting house of a Methodist camp at the edge of town, moved into a massive Spanish Revival campus on Main St. in 1926.⁵⁹ The sheer size and opulence offered by this building speaks to the enormous wealth of Huntington Beach and its relative position within the surrounding countryside. Students came from the developing communities of Seal Beach, Westminster, Smeltzer, and Fountain Valley to Huntington Beach High School, fundamentally cementing the city as the nexus of its hinterland.⁶⁰ For a city of five thousand residents, the school seems almost excessive in its architectural flourishes: an auditorium for three hundred, a hundred-foot clock tower, green setback, and a Mission-style indoor pool.⁶¹ (Figure 8) The money for this project in particular is easy to trace; all ten acres of the old high school site were leased to drillers of Union Oil Company in 1922, more than funding the construction of the new campus.⁶² Less obvious that these monumental constructions, oil revenue even influenced the quality of instruction inside the city's classrooms, as oil wells located on school property made it possible to hire

⁵⁸ "The city that rolls with the punches," *Discoveries Magazine* Houston, TX.: Burmah Oil & Gas Company. Jan/Feb 1976 V3 #1, 12

⁵⁹ *Discovery Well Park Dedication – May 24, 2002* (Huntington Beach: City of Huntington Beach, 2002), 6

⁶⁰ "The city that rolls with the punches," *Discoveries Magazine* Houston, TX.: Burmah Oil & Gas Company. Jan/Feb 1976 V3 #1, 11

⁶¹ *Discovery Well Park Dedication – May 24, 2002* (Huntington Beach: City of Huntington Beach, 2002), 35

⁶² Claudine Burnett, *From Barley Fields to Oil Town* (Huntington Beach: Burnett Historical Tours, 1995), 14

better teachers than other cities in the region.⁶³ By the late 1920s, Huntington Beach schools were among the best in the nation, all thanks to the local impact of industrial capital.⁶⁴ In effect, Huntington Beach was creating its own centering force, organizing the northwest corner of Orange County around itself through institutions like Huntington Beach High School. The architecture, while over-the-top relative to the city, nevertheless represented the way in which local government tried to turn economic growth into a community symbol and a regional ambition.

Farther down Main St. from the high school, Huntington Beach built a civic center at a strategic section of the city, where the industrial streets encroached on the original plan enough to force Main St. to dogleg west, clipping a corner off the carefully laid-out grid. The original centerpiece of this area was a Carnegie Library, built in 1913 by the architects Tuttle & Hopkins in a Classical Revival style.⁶⁵ (Figure 9) Taking its cues from this building, a source of great pride, the City Hall, Memorial Hall, and fire station all followed a similar architectural vocabulary, one related to ideals of democracy and agrarian platitudes more than the apparent meaning found in the backdrop of burning oil wells and clanging machinery.⁶⁶ All three of these new structures were either built or expanded using the profits of industrial progress, yet, situated on the fault between the old and new city, none wanted to embrace the symbols of modernity. The dream, the ideals of the community, still resided in a pre-industrial lexis of simplicity; consequently, these structures were constructed as temples of civic identity. Positioned in the center of

⁶³ "The city that rolls with the punches," *Discoveries Magazine* Houston, TX.: Burmah Oil & Gas Company. Jan/Feb 1976 V3 #1, 11

⁶⁴ Ibid 11

⁶⁵ Theodore Jones, *Carnegie Libraries Across America: A Public Legacy*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997.)

⁶⁶ Thomas Talbert, ed., *The Historical Volume and Reference Works*, (Whittier: Historical Publishers, 1963), 227

Huntington Beach, this mass of buildings strove to be a new Acropolis, simultaneously part of and separate from the city swirling about it. Thus, the architectural style found in this early civic center speaks to the classical ambitions, and modern rejections, that formed the built environment of power in Huntington Beach.

As part of this great civic expansion, Huntington Beach also began a lengthy process of reclaiming the natural world from the forces of capitalism. Just as City Hall was a manifestation of democratic ideals, the creation of parks and other spaces helped bridge the divide between the resort ambitions of a disappearing agricultural society and the foreign invasion of the industrial landscape. The first tentative step towards a naturalization of Huntington Beach occurred in the early 1920s with the construction of Farquhar Park, the city's first, located - once again - on a strip of land between the Main St. grid and the railroad tracks.⁶⁷ Even with this monument, the beach remained the ultimate unclaimed prize in the city's attempt to harness the power of industrialization towards civic goals. Since 1921, when Huntington Beach's residents tried to pass a bond to purchase the beach from the Huntington Beach Company, Tom Talbert and other city fathers had negotiated a transfer of the strand around Main St. for more lucrative whipstock wells in the north.⁶⁸ In 1931, after a flurry of lawsuits and threats, a deal was reached, giving Huntington Beach control of its most meaningful feature. The city, flushed with success, used more oil money to build an open air bowl seating 4,000 next to the pier to symbolize the community's ownership of the ocean.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ E.M. Billings. "City of Huntington Beach" (Huntington Beach: Office of the City Engineer, 1925.)

⁶⁸ Thomas Talbert, ed., *The Historical Volume and Reference Works*, (Whittier: Historical Publishers, 1963), 226

⁶⁹ Ibid 226

The tenacity with which Tom Talbert, and later the entire city government, fought for the beach shows the steady reassertion of the resort-dream of Vickers back into the mindset of the city. In order for Huntington Beach to function as a civic entity, the beach had to be won back from the clutches of industry and put to use fulfilling a vague destiny from another era. The entire project of civic construction at this period, from the high school to City Hall to the Pavalon amphitheater, was a means of ossifying and protecting the social vernacular's belief in the ultimate future of the city in tourism and the ocean. Though the money flowed into the city's coffers from beneath the ground, the final form of Huntington Beach's expenditures reflected a commitment to the past as a tool for coping with the changes brought to the landscape by industrialization. Arrayed around the fractured geography built in the days following the oil boom, these structures served as a buffer between the unknown and transient populations working the fields and the established residencies, businesses, and hopes of the older downtown. While the civic monuments offered a community asset to all, the programming of the projects speaks to the tenuous trust forged along Main St. between the new and old forms of meaning in the city.

In the end, the great explosion of urbanism in Huntington Beach cannot be exemplified by architecture or experienced in the built form. Instead, urbanism, and its attendant sense of place, could only be found in the social constructions of the residents themselves; the clubs, events, and day-to-day interactions that defined life in Huntington Beach for more than a quarter century. While this time in American history is largely defined by the dense civic life of American culture, Huntington Beach carried its own extra burden, a weight of expectations for the future based on the ideals of the past. Even

as the landscape became more and more industrialized, the focus of the city as a function of social relations remained based around the ocean and the pier. In this way, the symbolism of the present, as seen in the high school's Oiler, was like a façade on a building; ornamentation that created a sense of experiential form but could never be the foundation of Huntington Beach.

Nevertheless, the city built a place-meaning, a vernacular, around the clashing ideologies of industry and leisure that met on the blocks of lower Main St. Just as Huntington Beach had to incorporate physical and symbolic transitions, the city also sustained two wildly different frameworks of social interactions; one based on the demographics of oil, the other on the long-running sense of community formed in the agricultural days. This side, the more genteel side, expressed itself in the various clubs, pageants, and organizations emblematic of a participatory city. In the 1920s, Huntington Beach experienced a boom in local chapters of national organizations, with a new Lions Club, American Legion, women's auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic, Elks, Masons, Order of Eastern Star, Rebekahs, and any number of others springing up in a community of just a few thousand people.⁷⁰ Religious groups, a cornerstone of the city's ideology of leisure since its Victorian inception, were active as well. The means by which these organizations expressed themselves could be as simple as a weekly meeting, or as complex as a soap box derby or a grunion run fish fry. The highlight of them all, of course, was the city's Fourth of July Parade, long claimed to be the largest such parade west of the Mississippi.⁷¹ On this day, the various groups of the city marched down Main

⁷⁰ Thomas Talbert, ed., *The Historical Volume and Reference Works*, (Whittier: Historical Publishers, 1963), 232

⁷¹ Huntington Beach Conference & Visitors Bureau. "Huntington Beach California" (Los Angeles: Striker Media Group. 2006), 67

St., past the sites of symbolic power like City Hall or the high school, ending on the pier in a triumphal procession that was half Mardi Gras, half polemic for the city's rural past. The floats and marchers, parading on a day already loaded with symbolic associations, constructed a framework of small-town urbanism centered on rejecting the supposedly corrupting influence of industrialization.⁷² In this way, the annual parade reasserted the older traditions of Huntington Beach on a monumental scale; a social reflection of the civic buildings it passed.

But do not mistake the Fourth of July Parade as a battle against the landscape of industrialization. Instead, the social clubs wandering down Main St. were implicitly attacking the other social side of town, the wild boomtown Huntington Beach that coexisted with the marchers' more refined urbanism. The discovery of oil, while beneficial to the city as a whole, nevertheless brought a massive population of roughneck workers into downtown practically overnight. Being mostly transient single men who risked death eight hours at a time, Main St. quickly developed a thriving business in liquor, women, and violence to cater to the needs of the industrial worker. When Buddy Wilson, grandfather of the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson, found work in the oil fields in the late 1920s, he felt compelled to leave his young wife and family behind in Los Angeles, saying "Huntington Beach was simply no place to raise a child."⁷³ At night, Main St. turned into a notorious den of sin, with open prostitution and drinking flouting the law and the quiet society that used the street during the day. Fights and stabbings were

⁷² Chris Epting, *Huntington Beach, California* (Los Angeles: Arcadia Publishing, 2001)

⁷³ Timothy White, *The Nearest Faraway Place*. (New York: Henry Holt and Comp. 1994), 42

common occurrences, and a worker rising early enough might find severed fingers – or worse – washed ashore on the morning tide.⁷⁴

At the same time though, the city respected its two sides as necessary components to progress. The Wilson children, on one of their few visits to the city, encountered some young prostitutes relaxing openly on the beach beneath the pier, unencumbered by a fear of the police.⁷⁵ During Christmastime, oil derricks could be dressed up by civic groups as giant pine trees, complete with tinsel, ribbons, and a Santa Claus animated by the well's machinery.⁷⁶ (Figure 10) Unlike some cities divided along racial or ethnic lines, the citizens of Huntington Beach simply had two conflicting populations confined in one space of interaction. The battles - and there were battles - between the oil workers and the other residents were implicit struggles over place rather than actual physical fights between power players.

The duality of the social life of Huntington Beach existed for years as a tenuous acceptance of industrial oil's economic engine by the followers of Vickers' resort dream. While the two worlds were wildly different in function and framework, they shared Main St. as the place of symbolic expression of collective beliefs, be they Christian temperance or drunken bar fights. (Figure 11) This density of social life found on Main St., and in the city in general, heightened the distinction of Huntington Beach as a place separate from others in relation to itself, a place of local meaning. Though seemingly fractured by their differences, the two sides of the city – nostalgic and economic, settled and transient, upstanding and degenerate – were forced to interact in physical spaces and, in so doing,

⁷⁴ Ibid 42

⁷⁵ Timothy White, *The Nearest Faraway Place*. (New York: Henry Holt and Comp. 1994), 42

⁷⁶ *Discovery Well Park Dedication – May 24, 2002* (Huntington Beach: City of Huntington Beach, 2002), 34

felt a need to mold the city through individual participation. When this system breaks down, and residents are allowed to geographically differentiate themselves on a much grander scale, the urbanism that seemed so vibrant collapses. Isolated from the battles of location, the fundamental need to change civic life, to be part of a social engine, withers away from disuse. Suburbia would kill urban Huntington Beach, swallowing the city in a geography of material wealth and social stagnation.

Through the mid-1950s, oil served as an insulator for Huntington Beach against the movement of its larger region, helping the city avoid the Great Depression and the turmoil of World War Two. The industrialized landscape of the city only continued to grow, through several more oil booms, eventually reaching its zenith with the construction of the Southern California Edison power plant, a 250-foot smokestack monument towering over the beach.⁷⁷ The end of Red Car service, maligned as “the quiet monotony of [the] clickety clack,” meant Huntington Beach was once again isolated from the Los Angeles region but for a two-lane highway.⁷⁸ Yet, by the mid-1950s, after thirty years of a local urbanism fueled by oil, change would come swiftly to the landscape of Huntington Beach; change driven not by local resources but by inescapable forces of social and economic transition.

The suburbanization of Huntington Beach began with a stack of paper, a report concerning the future of the city’s oil supply prepared hundreds of miles away in Palo Alto.⁷⁹ A 1955 Stanford Research Institute study predicted oil “would become a declining economic factor” in Huntington Beach, even if the total number of wells

⁷⁷ Huntington Beach Chamber of Commerce, “Aerial Photo: Highway 39 & PCH 5.10-57” (Huntington Beach: Chamber of Commerce 1957)

⁷⁸ *Discovery Well Park Dedication – May 24, 2002* (Huntington Beach: City of Huntington Beach, 2002), 6

⁷⁹ Marie Cole, ed., *The Golden Promise*. (Santa Ana: Windsor Publications. 1986), 357

increased between 1950 and 1960.⁸⁰ For the first time since 1920, the layer of oil that had protected civic life from the new realities of post-war America showed a weakness to larger national trends. The leaders of the Huntington Beach Company and City Hall both recognized that in order to avoid marginalization in the emerging megalopolis of Los Angeles, the city had to respond to these demographic and economic forces on their own terms. For these leaders, Huntington Beach had two resources that could be readily transformed into growth; the geographic anchor of the ocean and vast tracts of empty farmland. The subsequent choice of the city to adopt suburbia as its dominant form, taken as an economic decision alone, brought tremendous wealth to the city, more than making up for the decline in oil revenue. But unlike the downtown architecture, which would continue on indefinitely, the social vernacular of Main St. forged in the days following the oil boom and ossified by the civic projects of the 1930s could not survive the multiple levels of change suburbanization meant to the landscape. Simply, the new social sphere of the city did not relate to any intrinsic meaning of place but instead relied on isolating economic aesthetics devoid of connection to a sense of community.

The first physical changes to the landscape of the city came slowly from the inland real estate market, but their rapid success would lead to ever more complicated responses by local power. In the mid-1950s, Orange County represented the future of suburban living, as cheap land brought new housing and business opportunities to the formerly rural area. As the demographic wave from Los Angeles began to break around the county, agricultural land rose in value at a tremendous pace far outstripping the worth

⁸⁰ California State Division of Oil and Gas. *Chart: Huntington Beach Oil Production*. (Sacramento: State Publication, 1958.)

of the farmers' products.⁸¹ At a certain price, the economics of real estate forced a tipping point where farmers had no more incentive to continue farming and sold their land. In this way, the original base of the city's economy eroded away, parcel by parcel. Taking its cues from the size of the land it purchased, in 1955 the Shields Company built the city's first subdivision as a mile long, half-mile wide swath of single-family detached homes south of Edinger Street, a scale unheard of in the city.⁸² This development – its scale, shape, and social constructions - marked the first salvo in a larger battle for the physical landscape of Huntington Beach, a suburban conquest built around the creation of a fully-functioning economic community designed in opposition to the places of downtown.

In an attempt to gain control of the processes swirling about them, City Hall sought to expand its political influence over the unincorporated sections of northern Orange County. As more and more farmers sold out to real estate developers, the remaining men, as one contemporary noted, “knew what was coming and asked to be annexed to Huntington Beach.”⁸³ For the first half-century of existence, Huntington Beach held the same city limits, roughly 3.57 square miles, representing the limits of the geographic mesa.⁸⁴ By the mid-1950s, this physical boundary, which had long forced the redevelopment rather than the expansion of the Town Lot area, broke down under the pressures of rising land values. And, indeed, in 1957, the city absorbed two huge areas

⁸¹ “Condensation of Interview, Bud Higgins, April 8, 1973, Huntington Beach, Ca.” in California State University, Fullerton Oral History Program, *Huntington Beach: an oral history* (Fullerton: Oral History Program, 1981)

⁸² “Condensation of Interview, Bud Higgins, April 8, 1973, Huntington Beach, Ca.” in California State University, Fullerton Oral History Program, *Huntington Beach: an oral history* (Fullerton: Oral History Program, 1981)

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ City of Huntington Beach. “Annexed Areas” (Huntington Beach: City of Huntington Beach, 1964)

totaling 20 square miles to the north and the east.⁸⁵ (Figure 12) This land, and the other twenty-five annexes that would occur over the following years, would form the next distinct section of the city, one based entirely on the sudden social transition from agriculture to mass housing.

Though suburbia is often thought of as some sort of organic menace, in Huntington Beach we see a more accurate picture of the rise of mass housing, one with an interplay between the community and the developer. Rather than be a passive agent, the Huntington Beach Company actively helped make more land in the city available for development by pursuing a strategy of industrial reclamation. Just like farmlands, at a certain point in the near future of the early 1960s, oil wells would reach an economic tipping point that even the powerful interests of Standard Oil and the Huntington Beach Company could not ignore. Consequently, beginning in 1957, the Huntington Beach Company turned its attention away from oil exploration and back to its original purpose, land speculation. This new philosophy brought the first great change to the landscape of Huntington Beach; a physical reorganization of the visual world that had defined the city. In order to clear out tracts of land for development, the Huntington Beach Company dismantled derricks, buried pipes, and relegated functioning drilling to walled ‘islands’ scattered about the city.⁸⁶ The derricks’ reorganization into hidden zones, though surely more pleasant, destroyed the visual order of the city by replacing the universal experiences of the industrial landscape with private residential space; a space that had no interest in replicating oil’s ability to forge community. The disappearance of oil from the

⁸⁵ Patti Bauer, “1973 History of Huntington Beach” in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 4

⁸⁶ Patti Bauer, “1973 History of Huntington Beach” in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 357

city's skyline allowed the imposition of broad national frameworks, like suburbia, to claim territory once decidedly localized. With the death of the oil derrick, capitalism had formed its own tabula rasa, a landscape completely divorced from history.

The slow disintegration of oil's prominence on the visual landscape was just the first in a series of events that replaced the urbanism of Huntington Beach with a mass suburban world. In between the downtown era of the 1950s and the city of today, suburbia recast the economic, transportational, commercial, and residential architectures of Huntington Beach into generic and concrete forms devoid of local meaning. By redefining the physical shape of the city, the social and civic understandings of Huntington Beach were forever altered by the expansion of suburbia's footprint on the landscape. Like many cities, the suburban style developments of the 1960s co-opted the centering forces that had enriched the development of downtown for their own economic purposes on the rural fringe.

In order to tap into the exploding wealth of the post-war economy, Huntington Beach (as prescribed in the Stanford Report) had to abandon the extractive economies of the past in favor of the emerging industries of the Cold War. In the case of the Los Angeles Basin, this meant latching onto the aerospace developments then expanding outward from West L.A. along the freeway system towards Orange County.⁸⁷ The huge number of Federal dollars earmarked for the Space Race pushed these companies to constantly build new facilities which, in turn, employed thousands of workers. When this push reached Huntington Beach, vast tracts of land on the northern section of town were redeveloped as the Douglas Space Systems Center, a colossal series of structures

⁸⁷ Tony Cohan, "Changing Tides" *Westways Magazine*, July 1993, 38

representing 10,000 jobs and an investment of \$75 million.⁸⁸ Though this brought tremendous economic possibilities to the city, the social meaning of the Douglas plant further eroded the connection between the physical and civic architectures of the city. As many towns across America would discover, the necessity of that plant being located in a specific location is non-existent. Though cities like Seattle and St. Louis saw the effects only when factories closed, the aerospace industry in Huntington Beach displaced the unity of workplace and home community that had defined the urbanism of the oil era. In this way, the localism of oil and soil (which were immovable) could never be replicated by a factory, no matter how large, that moved within the frameworks of global capital.

The demographic pressure put on the city by the Douglas plant can be seen in the enormous surge in the population of Huntington Beach between 1960 and 1970. As one of the fastest growing cities in America, the city expanded from a population of around 11,000 at the beginning of the decade to 110,000 by the end.⁸⁹ Though the city had seen tremendous booms in the past, the composition of residents lured by the promise of white-collar work varied significantly from the oil workers of the 1920s. Most importantly, the boom-town leathernecks had a strong sense of transience symptomatic of the extractive labor frameworks, a wanderlust linked to the search for steady employment. The 1960s suburbanite, on the other hand, came loaded with aesthetic, gendered, and social expectations for the built environment, hopes driven by a sense of job security and a need to be part of the consumer economy.⁹⁰ Thus the construction of the Douglas plant, though a purely economic venture for the city, signaled a tremendous

⁸⁸ The Daily Pilot. "Your Community and You" (Huntington Beach: The Daily Pilot 1965), 3

⁸⁹ Patti Bauer, "1973 History of Huntington Beach" in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 4

⁹⁰ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 225

upheaval in the town's social world. By luring a vast number of a specific class of worker to Huntington Beach, the factory implicitly set the tone of the city's urban form with its laborers' narrow conceptions of the shape of modern life.

Two annexations on the northern edge of town in May 1958, though historically minor, brought vast changes to Huntington Beach by forcing the city to construct a new relationship between itself and the larger region. These two parcels gave the city access to the newly-proposed route of the 405 Freeway, an infrastructural project that essentially created modern Orange County, allowing developers to tap into the residential markets of Southern California.⁹¹ While this marked the first reconnection of the city to the Los Angeles Basin following the collapse of the Red Car lines, the ability to move freely within the larger region fundamentally eroded the importance of place, of the localization of goods and services, and the necessity of place-based community. In a map of Huntington Beach from 1965, we see a geography torn between the modernity of the freeway and the confined growth of the old downtown.⁹² (Figure 13) The original grid is not only dwarfed by the scale of the suburban tracts clustered around the freeway but remains completely isolated from these areas of growth by a ring of undeveloped land. The economics of real estate, seen through the tipping points of each small farm's development, ultimately has a much greater role in shaping the physical forms of the city than the pure geographic opportunities which had constructed the downtown. Thus in this map we see the beginnings of the postmodern landscape of fragmented living, where the automobile has destroyed the ability of localized communities to be dependent on their own amenities for social and economic relationships.

⁹¹ City of Huntington Beach. "Annexed Areas" (Huntington Beach: City of Huntington Beach, 1964)

⁹² The Daily Pilot. "Your Community and You" (Huntington Beach: The Daily Pilot 1965), 49

The ability to access the freeway regionalized more than just the workforce; consumers, now able to diversify their purchases, felt little need to remain confined to their local neighborhoods. In Huntington Beach, the explosion of growth at the edges of the city limits, though only a mile or two from Main St., drove commercial development based around the automobility of Orange County's population. In doing so, this retail transition sapped the strength from the place-based section of town and placed it in control of the corporations able to afford spaces of consumption at the fringe. Most clearly, Huntington Beach announced this suburbanization of shopping with its own indoor mall, Huntington Center, built within sight of an uncompleted freeway off-ramp in 1965.⁹³ Filled with marquee stores like The Broadway, Montgomery Ward, and JC Penny, the mall made no attempt to define a context beyond its own name. The incongruity of building an air-conditioned mall in Southern California only speaks to the intense desire by the developers to invoke the generic national aesthetics of capitalism rather than the specific needs of a local population.⁹⁴ But within the framework of mass suburbia, and its attendant mass consumerism, the products and services offered at Huntington Center satisfied the population by offering a sanitized Main St. experience within the controlled environment of the mall setting. Driven by the ability of corporate capitalism to market itself to specific segments of the population, mass suburbia became intrinsically linked to the mass consumption built into the architecture of spaces like Huntington Center. Main St., constructed in relation to a by-gone era, simply could not

⁹³ The Daily Pilot. "Your Community and You" (Huntington Beach: The Daily Pilot 1965), 3
⁹⁴ Ibid 3

attract enough people to keep itself respectable. By the late 1970s, bereft of capital, downtown had declined into a blighted ghetto, home to more gangs than businesses.⁹⁵

Mirroring commerce's flight from downtown, the structures of local government similarly 'suburbanized' in the late 1970s to massive public projects on the outer fringe of Huntington Beach. City Hall and the main library moved in the early 1970s to stark Modernist buildings designed by noted architects Richard and Dion Neutra.⁹⁶ (Figure 14) These new structures, both in architectural form and urban design, distanced themselves from the community, replacing the democratic ideals of their predecessors with the bold and ahistorical statements of the concrete facade, the parking lot, and the tinted window. Though slight touches of the past remained - most notably at City Hall, where an oil well pumps to this day - at the end of this process, all the main structures of political, economic, and symbolic power in the city lay outside of the original core in new, unrecognizable, architectural forms.

By eroding the physical and economic foundations of the city, the forces of suburbanization effectively destroyed the basis of the industrial mindset, the civic identity of place, which had defined Huntington Beach since the mid-1920s. In its wake, the city filled this vacuum with a mutated form of the original dream of Pacific City, developing a symbolism for this newest iteration of Huntington Beach: Surf City USA, a belief that the city is some sort of surfing paradise, a small laid-back beach town. Just as the landscape turned itself away from history, so too was the 'Oiler' replaced by the surf culture fad then sweeping the nation, a craze driven by highly charged class-based ideals of

⁹⁵ Kem Nunn, *Tapping the Source*. (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows Books, 2000), 36

⁹⁶ Alicia Wentworth. *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*. (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—)

consumption and leisure.⁹⁷ From 1959 until 1973, at the same time of the city's tremendous suburban growth, Huntington Beach sponsored the United States Surfing Championships, a televised event that served to associate the activity of surfing with Huntington Beach, even if the city only had one surf shop on Main St.⁹⁸⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the cultural meaning of surfing - of an endless summer of youth and comfort - transferred easily and legibly as the way Huntington Beach both sold and defined itself to the suburban world being created around downtown.

On a graphic level, the transition can be seen in the new city logo adopted in 1968. The pastoral vision offered in 1909 has been replaced by abstract expressions of suburban comfort, suburban play, and – in a bizarre twist – the atomic menace of industry.¹⁰⁰ (Figure 15) The question then is why a city would replace a historic and localized seal with an interchangeable grouping of images, two of which (the sailboat and surfer) are essentially encapsulated by the original's rolling breaker. Just as surfing became the slogan for the city, this new logo served as an advertising tool, a means of communicating the ideals of the city in the most generic terms possible. Though a small transition, the new version of the city seal represented the degree to which Huntington Beach reformed its image to cater to the mass suburban influences then altering the physical and social landscape.

Though the symbolic basis of Huntington Beach to this day, the concept of Surf City USA cannot be considered a development of localism in the same way oil defined the identity of its particular era. On the surface, both would seem the product of a

⁹⁷ Tony Cohan, "Changing Tides" *Westways Magazine*, July 1993, 41

⁹⁸ The Daily Pilot. "Your Community and You" (Huntington Beach: The Daily Pilot 1965), 52

⁹⁹ Barbara Milkovich, "A Brief History of Huntington Beach" in *City of Huntington Beach Miscellaneous Historical Data*, ed. Alicia Wentworth (Huntington Beach: The City, 19—), 52

¹⁰⁰ John Casado, "Huntington Beach City Logo" Huntington Beach: City Ordinance, 1968

geography, be it underground pools or southern swells, that developed a socio-spatial product; just as oil gave birth to downtown urbanism, so too did surfing beget suburbia's fantasy. The difference comes from the direction of implementation within the city and its relationship to a specific locality. The industry of oil nurtured a sense of place by allowing the residents of Huntington Beach to define a civic identity for themselves within its form. In its myopic search for capital, the industrial landscape refused to dictate meaning to the residents of the city, instead acting as a framework for social discourse. The 'Oiler,' is an organic choice made by the community as their own representation to the world, an icon shaped by a consensual experience. Surf City USA, no matter how entrenched in the city's mindset, comes from an imported set of cultural norms imposed on the landscape and on the civic sphere. If the 'Oiler' is an ideal for the community by the community, then Surf City USA is a brand, a pre-packaged slogan of social meanings that one 'buys' into by becoming a resident of Huntington Beach. In this way, the oft-condemned suburban consumerism extends beyond physical products into the very foundation of community by making the purchase of a home and the adoption of a civic identity one monetary transaction. This fundamental separation between each era's mythology explains why, on ideological terms alone, the intense localism of the downtown era could not possibly transfer to the mass suburban consumerist world of the 1960s.

Yet, the symbolic ideal of Huntington Beach existed only as a slave to the physical transformations of the city itself. Like any brand, the powerful mythology of Surf City USA relied on a consumer to accept its values; values typified not in libraries, defense plants, or shopping malls but in the vast residential landscape of Huntington

Beach. Operating without regard to history, to the promotion of civic identity, or even to its own rhetoric, the suburban housing of the 1960s formed a hypocritical cityscape based on individual isolation and consumption. It is an architecture of nowhere, repetitious spaces for living built around the false idolatry of surf leisure. With this design as the dominant expression of the era, the complex civic engine - the sense of place that brought meaning to Huntington Beach - was fully defeated by the forces of suburbanization.

The actual scale of development alone is astounding. In order to accommodate the 100,000 new residents of the city, Huntington Beach covered an area four times the size of the downtown with residential neighborhoods, each one built around the dimensions of the survey grid originally used for agricultural real estate.¹⁰¹ Consequently, each block is beyond human-scale, with an endless number of half-mile sections forcing the use of automobiles to navigate the landscape.¹⁰² Yet perhaps the most striking aspect of these residential designs is how each development interacts with the city. Unlike many other suburban forms, including Levittown, Huntington Beach's tracts are encircled with eight-foot cinderblock walls, forming a strict partition between the homes and the outside world.¹⁰³ Whereas the downtown's plan relegates residential traffic to back alleys, these suburban blocks create a strict hierarchy of streets between the large main arteries and the smaller cul-de-sacs and lanes of each development. (Figure 16) The ultimate result of the scale, the fortification, and the plan of suburbia is a psychological barrier towards street-life, where even if walking is an option, the architecture seemingly discourages it. By compelling the use of the automobile, the possibility of each block developing the social

¹⁰¹ Thomas Bros. "Huntington Beach" Anaheim: Thomas Bros. Map Co. 1965

¹⁰² City of Huntington Beach. "Zoning Map: 1978" Huntington Beach: Office of Planning, 1979

¹⁰³ Ibid

interactions necessary for place-making (as found on a vibrant streetscape) are limited by design. (Figure 17)

Within the walls of suburbia's blocks, the repetitive implementation of mass housing further denied the ability of community to form. By building to a specific set of dimensions, the real estate developers ensured a homogeneous population would fill the suburban fringe. While downtown's neighborhoods were equally divided along class lines, the sheer scale of suburbia – combined with the automobile – precluded the social mixing that had once occurred on Main St. Isolation rules the physical form of these homes; not only is the entire block walled off, each individual property is delineated with a concrete fence.¹⁰⁴ (Figure 18) Even the homes nearest the beach refuse to surrender privacy, preferring to face other houses than the source of 'Surf City USA.' The homes themselves are typical designs of the era, 'sitcom suburbia,' with ascribed values, routines, and class identifications.¹⁰⁵ It is through these generic assertions, imported like the population, that Huntington Beach's mass suburbia becomes a city like every other. Even the nomenclature of mass housing confirms both the desired lifestyle of the suburbanite and the placelessness of its values.(Figure 19) Tracts were themed, as had been done at Levittown, with streets named after fish, European capitals, nonsense Hawaiian words, famous warships, or any other group of similar words.¹⁰⁶ Not one used concepts related to Huntington Beach's history.¹⁰⁷ Ultimately, the mythology of Surf City

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 147

¹⁰⁶ City of Huntington Beach. "Zoning Map: 1978" Huntington Beach: Office of Planning, 1979

¹⁰⁷ In fact, no completed development has used a name related to the city's history since at least 1957. The recent gated communities prefer names like "St. Augustine" and "The Peninsula." A new retail complex set to open in 2007 called Pacific City is a start. As for accuracy, my tract is named 'Franciscan Fountains by the Sea,' which at least earns credit for having three lies in five words.

USA is just rhetoric, neither borne out on the individual structures nor the overall form of the city it was supposed to serve.

The physical architecture's effect on the social life of the city can be seen in the relative dearth of civic fauna, the institutions that gave so much meaning to the downtown era of the 1920s. While a social sphere exists, the induced isolation of the suburban population eliminated the battles over physical space that moved residents towards localism in the first place. Ensnared behind their cinderblock walls, driving from space to space, suburban residents simply lack the unorganized interactions of meaningful city life. Because of this, individuals cannot see the need to affect change, to conceive of the city as a common whole, or to sustain a civic engine. Despite the constant affirmation of Surf City USA, of a localized return to a by-gone era of leisure, through the actual landscape of Huntington Beach we see a hollow city, a neutered social world.

While isolation and homogenization define the suburban landscape, these are just symptoms of a fundamental change in the class structure of America. Looking at suburbia as the product of the white-collar class' frustration at the disappearing prospects of social advancement, we can begin to appreciate consumerism - and its product, suburbia - as an echo of a class awareness, rather than an end unto itself. Since the late 1930s, the jobs of low-level office workers had been slowly Taylorized, routinized by war, and compartmentalized by the corporate culture of 1950s America.¹⁰⁸ At the end of this process, the occupations of the petite bourgeoisie had been transformed into Information Age wage-labor, analogous to the position of blue-collar workers in its prospects for true advancement. The middle class, unable to fulfill the intrinsic desire of upward mobility through the workplace, embraced the mass suburban world as a space to demonstrate,

¹⁰⁸

William Whyte. *The Organization Man*. (New York: Simon & Schuster. 1956.), 172

through their accumulation of goods, a false façade of social capital to its fellow residents. In this way, the suburban neighborhoods of Huntington Beach can never form a cohesive community, even if the architecture of the area only selects individuals with a similar socioeconomic ethos. Wrenched apart by a self-competitive class identity, Huntington Beach lacks the cohesion necessary for place formation, denied by the lifestyle of capital chosen by its own middle-class residents. Thus, the success of Huntington Beach as a place of tremendous wealth masks the social consequences of its suburban decision.

From the early 1970s until 1986, the physical and social arrangement of Huntington Beach changed little. While suburbia's basis in asset-maximization precluded large-scale turnover in property, the original downtown slipped further and further into disrepair. The hypocrisy of the situation, that a city selling itself as a leisurely surf Mecca to its suburban residents ignored the plight of its main surfing area, was lost in the steady growth of the city's position as a safe, clean, efficient part of the larger urban fabric of Southern California.

In the decades before the city's urban renewal, two different social frameworks existed within Huntington Beach in complete isolation from each other. On one hand, the final physical product of suburbanization held thousands of Douglas engineers, each ascribing in some way to the Surf City USA mentality, accumulating money in capital goods and investments. In the downtown core, ignored by the progress of the 1950s, economic stagnation gave way to urban decay. No longer the symbolic artery of the city, Main St. was ceded to the Chicano gangs, neo-Nazis, surf punks, bikers, and other

disreputable characters.¹⁰⁹ The civic life of the urban era had mutated into this intense form of localism, one based on ‘turf’ and ‘respect’ more than community and social capital. And though unseemly, this new urbanism held onto a vitality unseen in the suburban communities; the Golden Bear, an iconic jazz club on PCH continued on, as did a thriving punk rock scene centered on Main St.¹¹⁰ The social isolation between the downtown and the intra-city suburbs led to distrust, as neither side could comprehend the other’s interpretation of the meaning of Huntington Beach. One resident noted “old town is like another country,” as suburbanites spoke of downtown as if it were “on another planet.”¹¹¹ Without a reason to interact, or for either group to pressure the other to change, each social system sustained itself in mutual separation until the events of 1986, the year urbanism ended in the city of Huntington Beach.

After decades of isolation, the tenuous balance between the two social frameworks of Huntington Beach fell apart on a bright afternoon, September 1, 1986. Though a packed crowd enjoyed the final day of the surf championships from the beach, up on the street, an unruly mob of teenagers, gang members, and drunks – angered that police officers had forced a woman to stop flashing the crowd - went on a rampage around Main St., rioting for hours, burning four police cars, driving life guard vehicles into the flames, throwing bottles and anything they could get their hands on.¹¹² (Figure 20) The Huntington Beach Police needed over a hundred officers to disperse the crowd estimated at 5,000 rioters.¹¹³ The image of thousands of youths chanting “Anarchy!

¹⁰⁹ Kem Nunn, *Tapping the Source*. (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows Books, 2000), 36

¹¹⁰ Robert Keating. “Slam Dancing in a Fast City” *Penthouse Magazine* June 1986

¹¹¹ “The city that rolls with the punches,” *Discoveries Magazine* Houston, TX.: Burmah Oil & Gas Company. Jan/Feb 1976 V3 #1, 11

¹¹² “Surfers Riot in Southern California” *New York Times*, 2 September 1986, A15.

¹¹³ *Ibid* A15

Anarchy!” broadcast around the world on television, forever stained the civic identity of suburban Huntington Beach. No longer could the downtown be ignored behind the false construction of the surf paradise for the Douglas engineer.

Like many cities in the late 1960s, urban unrest forced the hand of the power structures of Huntington Beach, compelling a renewal effort centered on recasting downtown in suburbia’s image. Unlike Watts or the Bronx, the symbolic meaning of the physical location of the rioting – the pier at Main St. and Pacific Coast Highway – had an added significance to the suburban mindset. Here was the center of Surf City USA under attack, the news footage of unrest violating the manicured image of leisure so carefully built into the psyche of the city. But through this darkest period in Huntington Beach’s history, the suburban powers of City Hall and the real estate industry saw an opportunity to actualize the ephemeral downtown of their minds, to build a model of a location, Surf City USA, that never existed. Essentially, the men and women in charge of redevelopment decided that in order to save the downtown, it would have to be razed. In doing so, the pieces of the past that had defined the city as a real place, as a social construction with local meaning, fell for a final time to capitalist forces that could find no value in keeping the structures. So, in the early 1990s, the wrecking ball brought down the Golden Bear, owners shuttered the punk clubs, and Main St. became an outdoor tourist mall, a gaudy stucco commercial strip selling a Disney-version of a surf city.¹¹⁴ (Figure 21) Ironically, with the reformation of Main St., suburbia successfully demolished the last vestiges of urbanism, only to replace it with an ersatz echo of an invented past.

¹¹⁴ Huntington Beach Conference & Visitors Bureau. “Huntington Beach California” Los Angeles: Striker Media Group. 2006, 27

And so the city of Huntington Beach marches into the future, content in the comforts of its suburban reality, proud of its surfing heritage, believing that the architectural world of today is the final validation of geography. The anti-history of ‘Surf City USA’ – a phrase, it should be noted, copyrighted by the city – has lasted long enough to become a history unto itself, a widely-recognized symbol of civic pride. The tragedy of Huntington Beach’s landscape is not found in a particular form or act, but in the cumulative arc of development from agriculture to urban renewal. The meaning of Huntington Beach, as a place worth investing in as a citizen rather than as a consumer, has long been lost to the forces of suburbanization, lost in the generic messages of an imported world. Though far from perfect, the urbanism of the downtown era at least held the possibility of change, of vibrant interactions rooted in a communal place. The suburban landscape, intertwined with the accumulation of capital, is a self-perpetuating form, one that - by architecture alone – has obliterated the ability of Huntington Beach to reinvent itself, to adapt, or to attempt new ideas. For all its success, the victory of the city is a Pyrrhic win, devoid of meaning to a cityscape that can no longer stand for anything. Community, a term usually preceded in Huntington Beach by the word ‘gated,’ is a measure of success we cannot easily measure, yet its absence is abundantly clear.

The hopeful message of Huntington Beach is that we cannot, as a society, accept the architectural mistakes of the past as inevitable pieces of our future. The myth of a suburban nation relies on all Americans agreeing that this is an end, and not a beginning, of the forces that shape our built world, our neighborhoods, and our homes. We could continue using land and resources to construct ever more elaborate iterations of analogous spaces for living or we can reject the architecture of homogeneity, isolation,

and fear in favor of a new American city, an urbanism of togetherness, spontaneity, and, above all else, a sense of place. These feelings give meaning to our lives; we, as Americans, should never have been so willing to relinquish them in the first place.

Total Words: 12,400.

The Bibliographic Essay

Growing up in Huntington Beach, every so often a real estate agent would leave a free calendar on my doorstep as a cheap promotion. Inside, representing each of the twelve months, were photos of Huntington Beach from the past, photos I later learned were largely stolen from a popular book by Chris Epting. Even so, the tremendous gulf between the images on my calendar and the world I knew seemed so large, the vibrant downtown so remote from the suburban sameness I saw as my day-to-day environment, that I often wondered what led my hometown from Point A to Point B. The physical environment often had anomalies - oil wells in the City Hall parking lot, the toxic waste

dump across from my high school, or the gas-burning power plant towering over the beach – that did not conform to the only image of the city I knew, that of Surf City USA.

One of my biggest challenges in writing a treatment of Huntington Beach was balancing a sense of scale between individual anecdotes, the macro-level arc of the city's development, and the influence of national (even global) scale frameworks. I have often been dissatisfied by how other authors address this problem in the works I read for this paper, even in books I enjoy and with authors I respect. It seems as though, whether intentioned or not, most academic urban histories fall into two categories: humongous national-scale tomes or narrow hyper-localization. The national surveys of city development construct social environments with sweeping historical forces beyond the control of individual communities. Cities become organic manifestations of political, religious, or economic wills which are inescapable, immovable, and (more often than not) for the worse of everything and everyone. While this type of book is useful, as Dolores Hayden's work is, people do not live like this, buffeted by the whims of legislation, capital, or aesthetic forces. Most people are local, understanding only the things around them, and thus most swayed by local changes in opinion. The gap I try to fill in Prof. Hayden's work, and others like it, is to show the localized implementation of the national frameworks, and its effects on the population. Using this as a goal, I was forced to use the secondary literature as a tool to engage my sources from Huntington Beach, to tease out the larger story from my myopic sources.

This is not to say localism creates a more cohesive story; the other extreme in urban history, hyper-localism, so narrowly focuses its analytical lens as to lose sight of any trend, force, or movement outside the city limits. When I went to the Huntington

Beach Public Library to view the city's historical documents, the librarians brought me a thick file folder filled with the strangest collection of old-timey ephemera: postcards, histories of the city's fire department, newspaper clippings without documentation, more real estate calendars. The memory of sorting through this mish-mash gave me pause as I wrote later, reminding me that anecdotes and history are two very separate things. Local historians love throwing in cutesy "way-back-when" moments into their work as a means of connecting with the audience. The first time this tactic popped up, I was amused. After reading dozens of similarly written accounts, I grew tired of the tone. Just writing about local character, steeped in nostalgia's sepia gaze, would be a pointless academic exercise, one destined for the Huntington Beach Public Library local history folder.

Working in the field of local history carries with it specific challenges to doing academic work, most notably the difficulty in separating fact from fiction, from what people want to believe about their city and what really is true. Huntington Beach, as I hope I have shown, went through such profound and radical changes of meaning that even the most fastidious author can – and often do - fall victim to printing 'the party line,' sanitizing the past to better fit the present. Many of the sources I use, especially the self-published local histories, walk a fine line between objectivity and subjectivity, saying as much in the history these authors leave out as they do with what is on the page. The way these authors avoided, out of distrust or misunderstanding, the bigger and more difficult questions is not only indicative of their non-critical perspective but of their audiences expectations. Not everything always went well for Huntington Beach, and the more histories I read that ignored the city's problems, the more I resolved to highlight these issues in my work.

Perhaps these issues in local history are unavoidable; when writing about your hometown, the praise or the vitriol held by your own memories cannot help but seep onto the page. As much as I would have liked to use the more personal first-person documents, especially the Huntington Beach Times newspaper, the disorganization at the Public Library forced me to make do with objective maps and the imperfect recollections of biased historians. If I had been able to show how individual residents of the city made choices that affected the built environment, I would be a much more content historian. Sadly, the sources necessary to do this may not exist, may be dead, or may be so difficultly arranged as to make research a monumental task.

No American community exists, has existed, or will exist in isolation from larger influence; by not putting my city in context, I would do a disservice to the worth of my work and the reality of urban change. Thus we, as historians, must bridge the gap between nation and neighborhood to show the fullest complexity of city history, one that relies on multiple scales of development to explain and interpret our inherited urban form. Huntington Beach, as a series of realities and lies etched on the landscape, has been a White Whale, a mysterious bit of truth lurking in the surf, waiting to be discovered.

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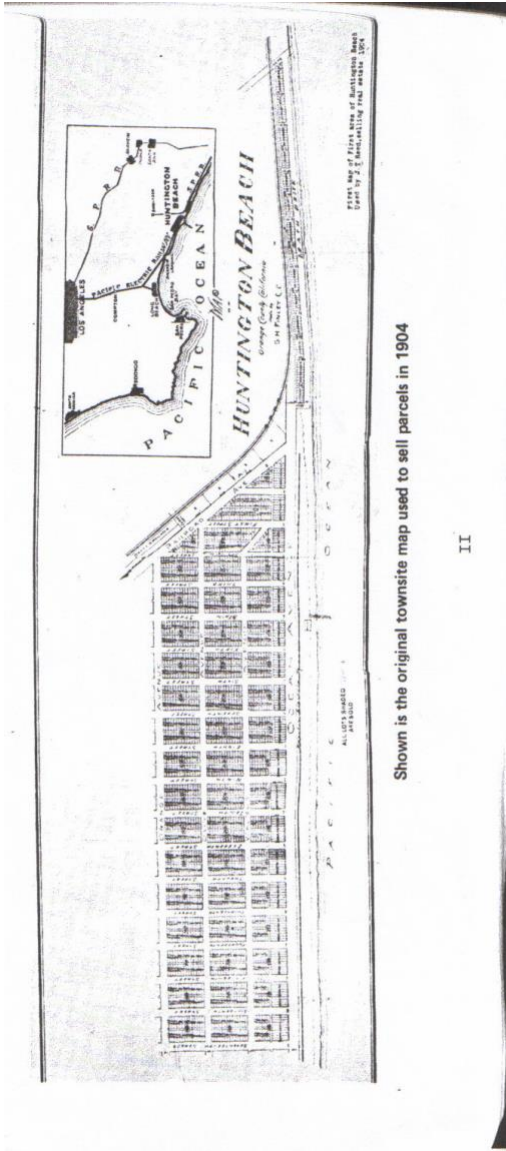


Figure One



Figure Two



Figure Three

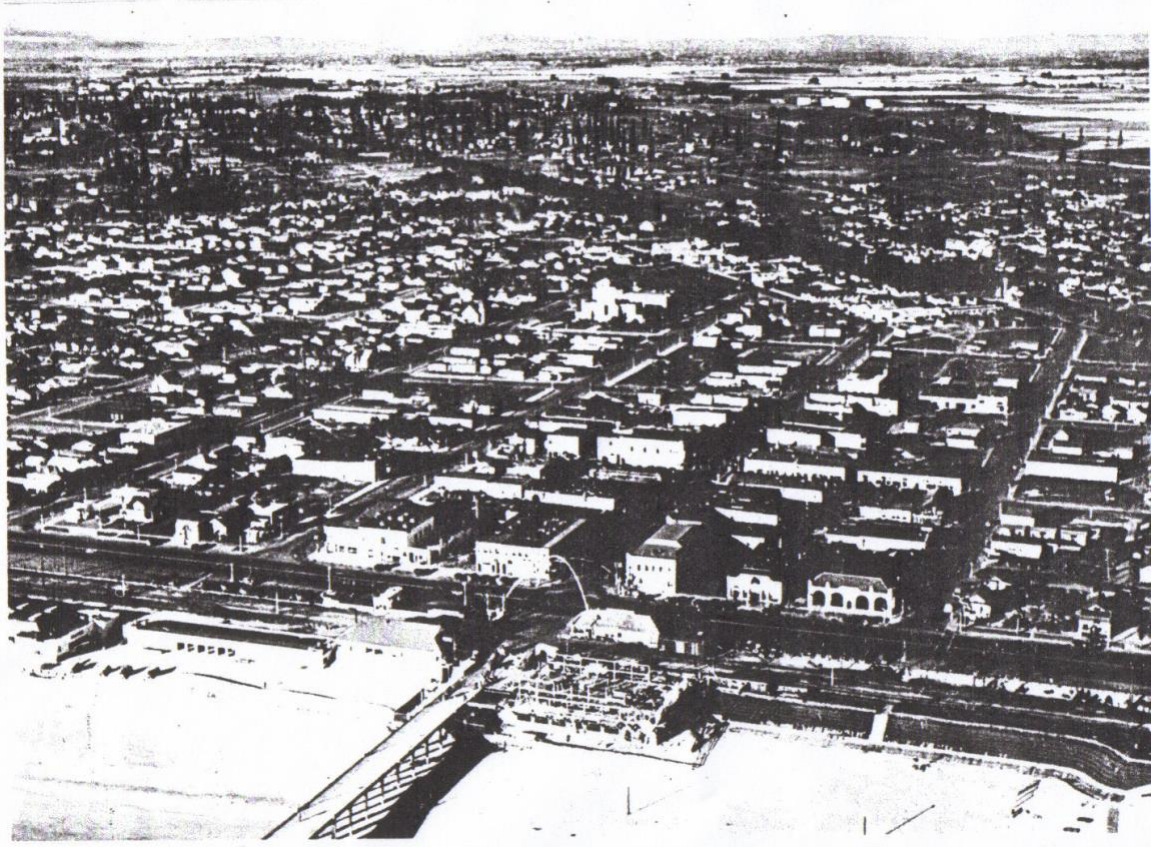


Figure Four



Huntington Beach oil field, 1929. Highway 101 in foreground.

Figure Five



Section of beach in Huntington Beach during oil boom. Photo shows area northwest of pier in 1929-1930

Figure Six

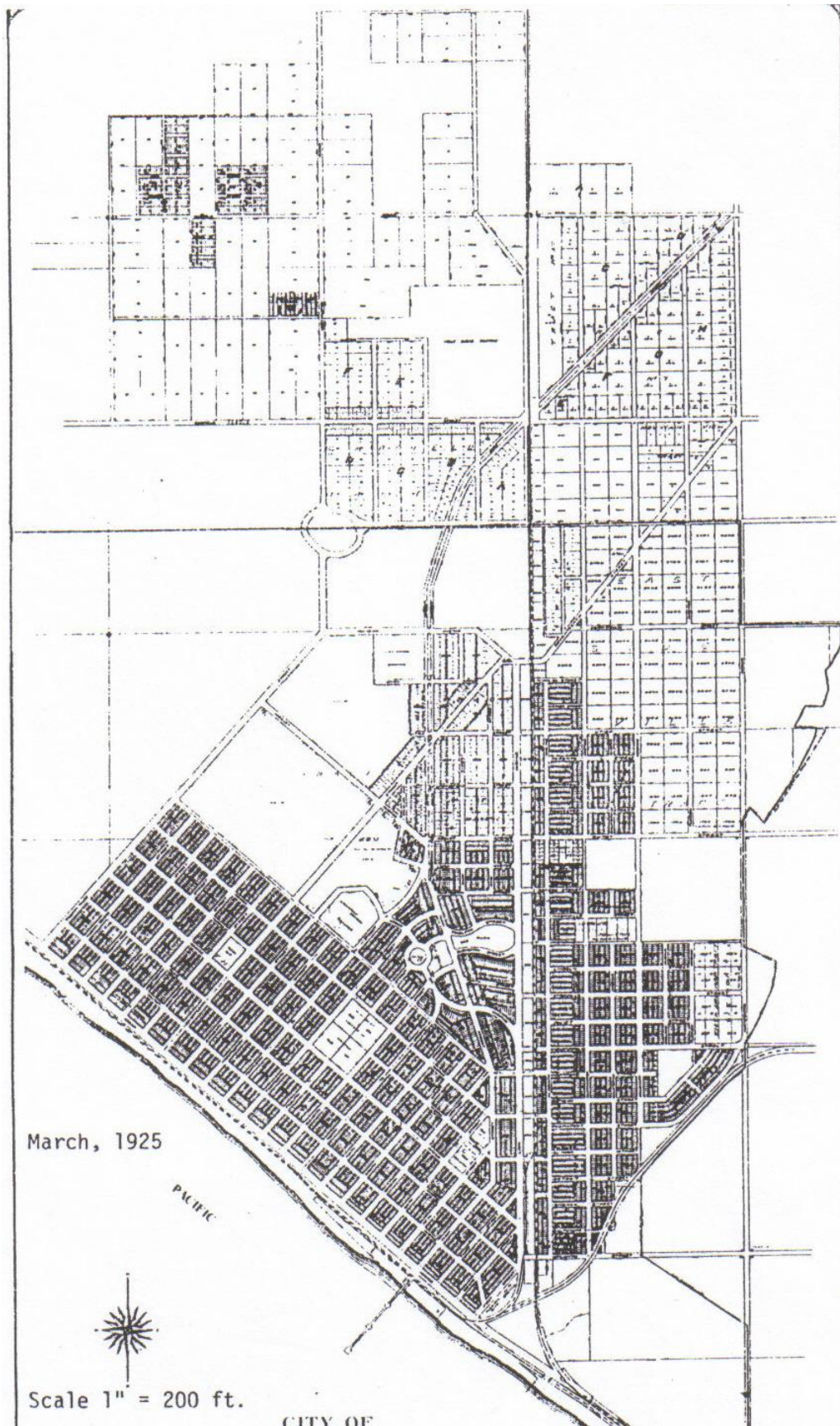


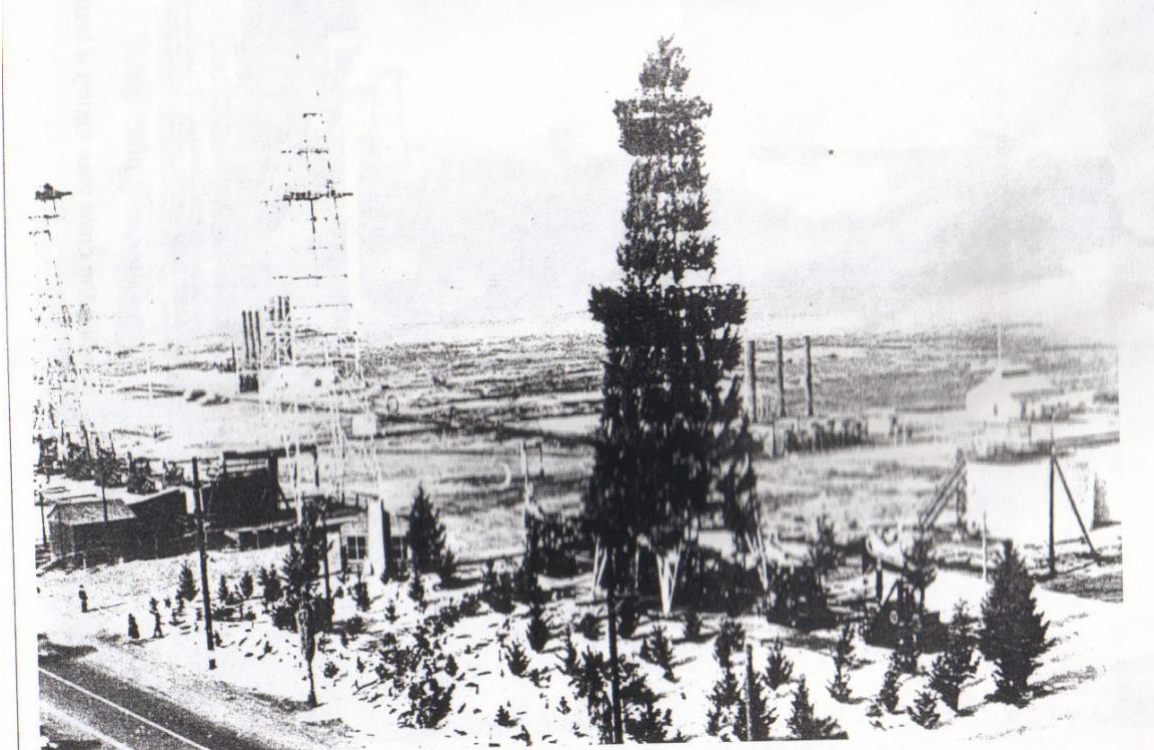
Figure 7



Figure Eight



Figure Nine



Figures 10 and 11

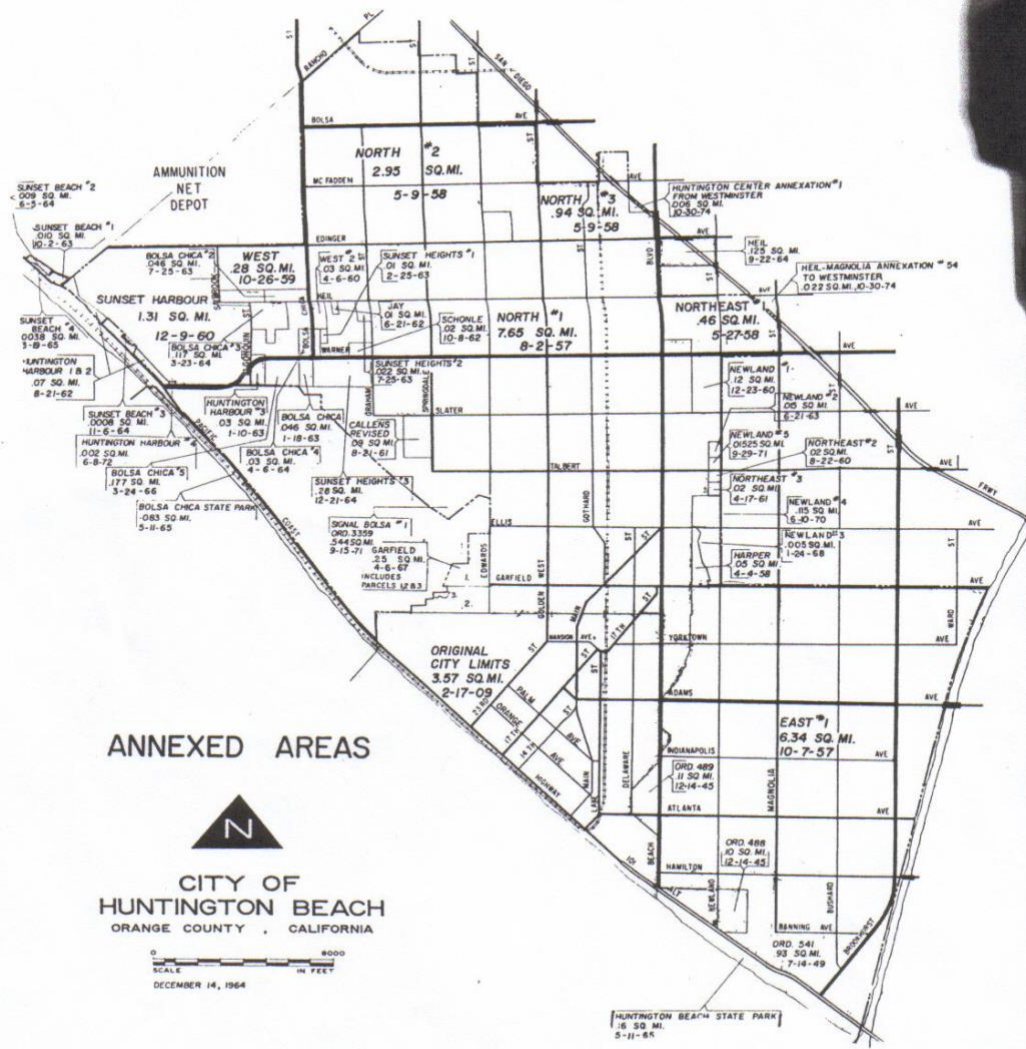


Figure 12

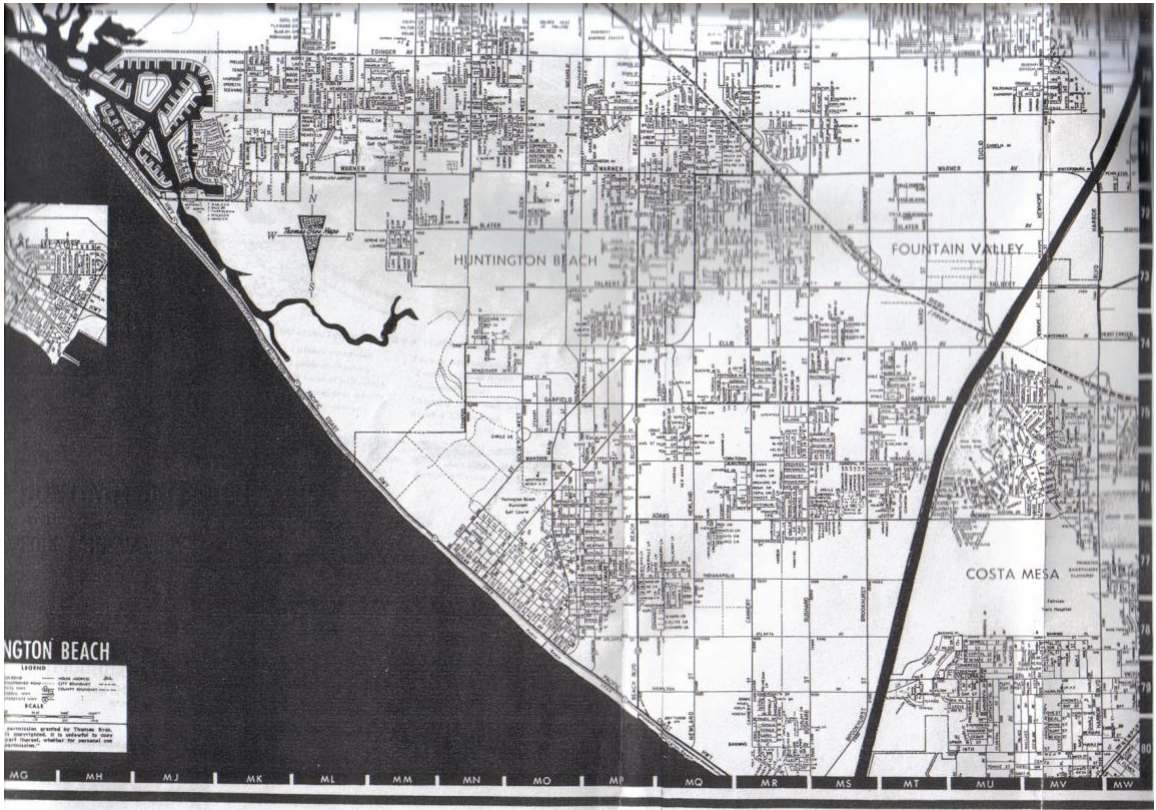


Figure 13

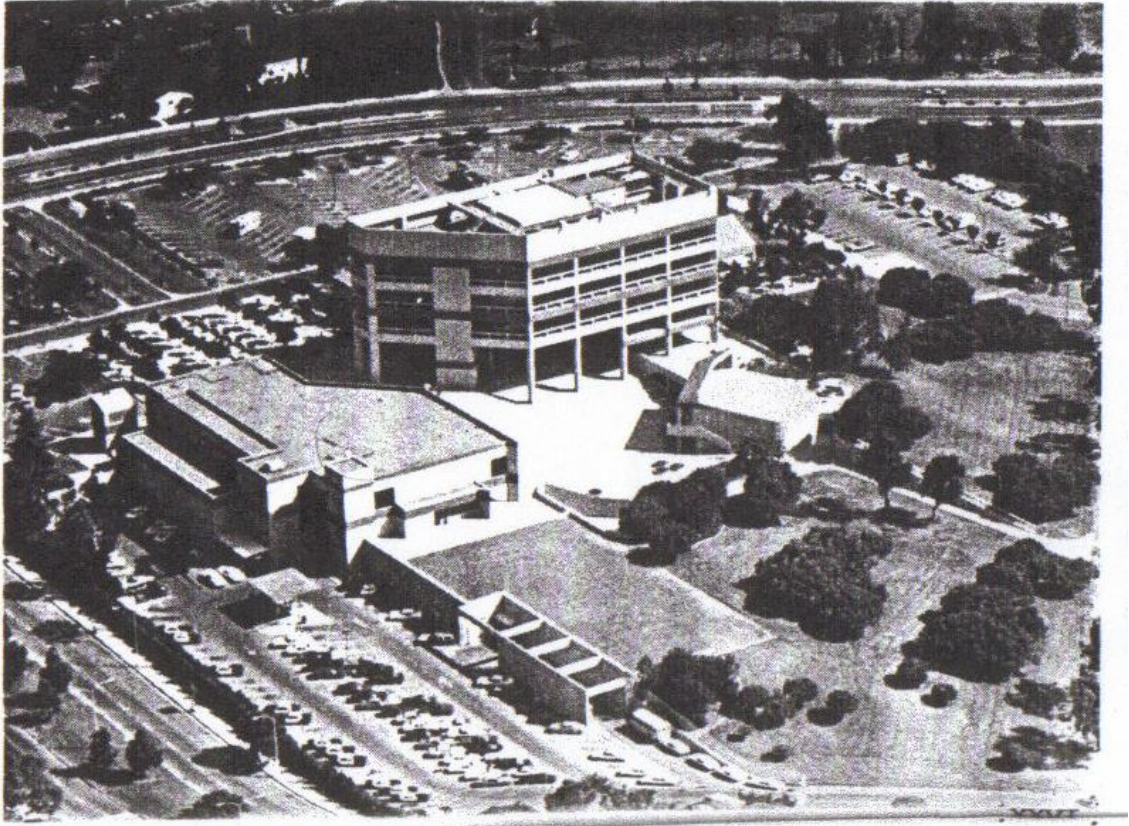


Figure 14



Figure 15

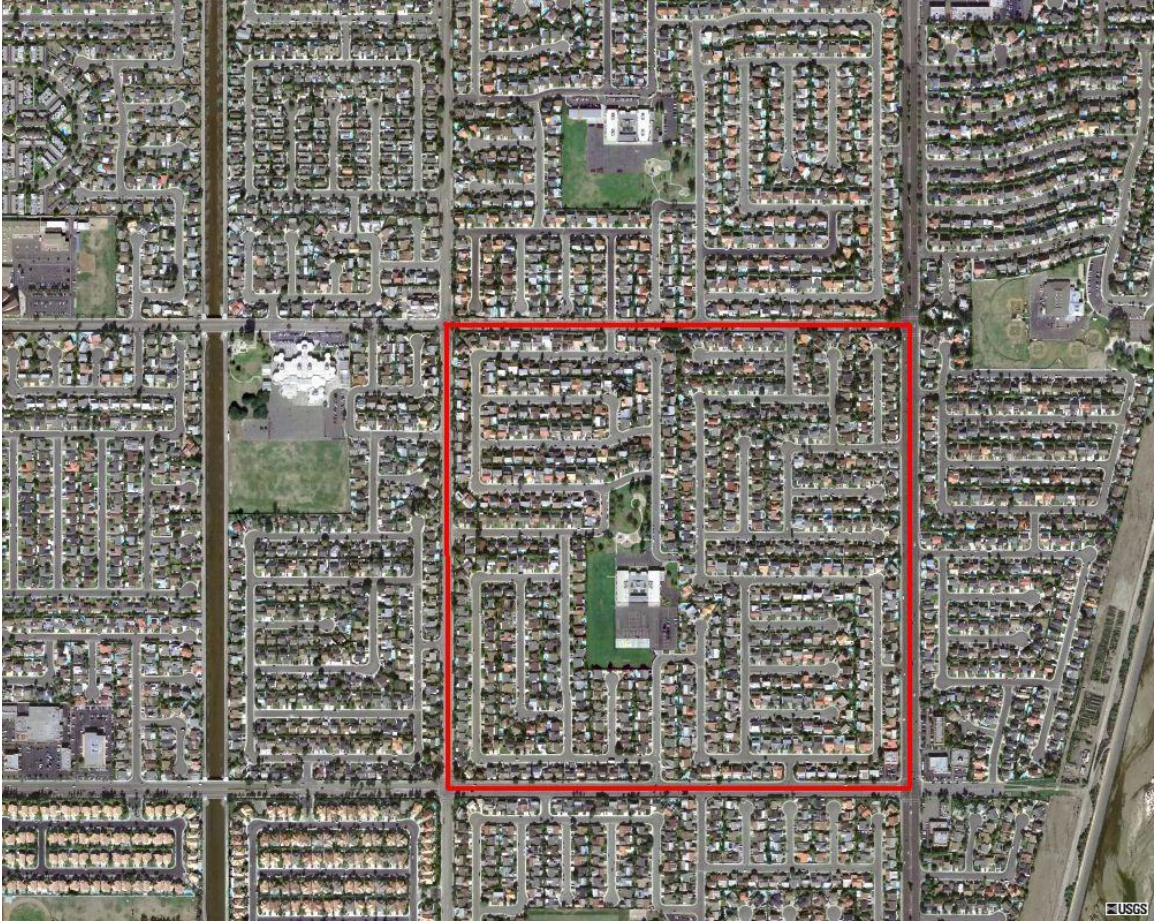


Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21

