

# the underpinning

## Rodrigo Valenzuela

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Los Angeles State Historic Park

As a resource for Clockshop's commissioned project, *the underpinning* by artist Rodrigo Valenzuela at Los Angeles State Historic Park, we offer this primer on some of the histories of urban planning in Los Angeles that shape our current housing crisis, in which decades of racist policies deny power to poor and working-class BIPOC communities and disconnect us from our natural environment and each other.

In Los Angeles, median rent has tipped to nearly \$3,000. According to the federal government, housing is "affordable" if it costs no more than 30% of a household's monthly income—but the typical Californian household spends more than 35% of its income on rent. Over half of Angeleno renters are rent-burdened, with one-third of renters spending 50% or more of their income each month just to stay housed. Yet while rents increase and inflation grows, wages remain stagnant. In June 2023, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority reported a 10% rise in the number of unhoused individuals in LA City—46,260 people. From February to October of that same year, landlords filed more than 66,000 evictions to forcibly displace tenants across the city.

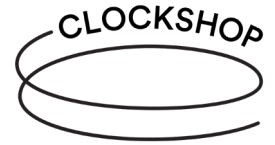
### ***How did we get here?***

Race-based housing discrimination has been a core component of Los Angeles's public policy since its founding. Intentional strategies like racial covenants and the redlining of poor and working-class BIPOC neighborhoods throughout the 20th century not only prevented members of these communities from owning homes but also determined where they could live in the first place. As a result, historically redlined areas today—places of significant renter populations—remain most vulnerable to ongoing gentrification.

As freeways were built to accommodate white flight from the urban core, low-income communities of color were targeted through land seizures, divisions, and displacement. Before Los Angeles' car culture, neighborhoods such as Northeast Los Angeles (NELA) were populated by working-class immigrants drawn to railroad employment possibilities. Once car-based urban sprawl became central to LA's identity, strategic densification and desegregation of communities declined. This was compounded by neglect of the city's public transportation system—still perceived as inefficient.

Decades later, these policies' physical and spatial consequences are intensifying. Due to NELA's proximity to industrial developments and major transit thoroughfares, residents are especially susceptible to health risks associated with environmental pollutants and contamination. On top of that, access to open, green spaces remains limited. And when public lands are revitalized, such as greening areas along the LA River, these processes typically trigger "green gentrification." This refers to a process where environmental greening can cause higher property values and rents in historically poor and working-class BIPOC neighborhoods by making them seem more "desirable" to higher-income buyers.

Right under NELA, Chinatown is home to some of the last remaining units of housing available to senior citizens on fixed incomes. The neighborhood is also the site of William Mead Homes—a public housing complex operated by the Housing Authority of the City of LA (HACLA) that serves 415 households with income levels too low to qualify for affordable housing, let alone market-rate. And Los Angeles State Historic Park continues to provide ample green space to some of the most underserved and park-poor communities in Chinatown and



Lincoln Heights. The parcel the park sits on was scheduled to become a warehouse and industrial space in the late 1990s, until neighbors organized to form the Chinatown Yards Alliance to stop the development and demand more green space in their community. The spirit of community organizing in Chinatown remains strong, where organizations like the Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA) work to address green gentrification by championing the construction of new affordable housing and advocating for public policies that prevent forced displacement.

### ***Where do we go from here?***

Across Los Angeles, tenant organizing and housing justice movements like the LA Tenants Union (LATU) continue to gain traction as rents rise rapidly and the number of evictions meant to displace longtime residents grows. Some look to social housing, which are publicly owned and mixed-income housing developments that help decommodify housing. A number of policy measures are also advancing to address this crisis, including, but not limited to: voter referendums to encourage the development of affordable housing, measures to protect current below-market-rate housing stock through subsidization, eviction defense measures like a Right to Counsel ordinance for tenants facing eviction, the provision of emergency rent relief funds for tenants dealing with debt, stronger rental control legislation including the repeal of Costa-Hawkins, and the development of land use tools like the Los Angeles River Master Revitalization Plan and the DTLA 2040 Community Plan.

### **Key Terms and Legislation**

**Community Plans** lay out the community's goals and policies, and determine the distribution of land use categories (such as residential, commercial, and industrial) to inform local zoning decisions. These zoning decisions play important roles in growing opportunities for jobs and housing, and conserving open space and natural resources.

**Costa-Hawkins** is a state-wide law that exempts single-family homes and condominiums built after 1995 from rent control, prohibits cities from establishing rent control on units constructed after 1995, and allows landlords to reset and raise rental rates once a unit is vacated by a tenant.

**Redlining** is a discriminatory lending practice in which loans are systematically denied or services restricted based on the racial demographics of a community, deemed on the map as "red".

**Racial Covenants** are restrictive clauses in a recorded document, such as a property lease or deed, prohibiting the sale and/or rental of a property to certain racial minorities.



To learn more about this project and related programs, visit the QR code.

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