Redlining in Los Angeles: Historic Preservation and Socioeconomics

I. Introduction

Redlining was a practice carried out during the 1930s by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC). Appraisers moved throughout cities in the United States, assessing neighborhoods for their viability as an investment for financial and governmental institutions. These maps, which were only released in recent years, were based on arbitrary measures, most notably racial prejudice. Authors like Richard Rothstein have argued convincingly that such practices were a practice of *de jure* segregation in cities throughout America, which in turn led to a vicious cycle of poverty and disinvestment.

This project inspects how redlining affected Los Angeles neighborhoods in the long term. The original research questions were: 1) What effects, if any, has redlining had on historic resources and their preservation? 2) Is there a relationship between current socioeconomic status and redlining? More data and research would be necessary to make concrete conclusions about the relationship between historic resources in Los Angeles and redlining. However, this project does reveal some intriguing connections between redlining, disinvestment, and present-day social vulnerability.

This report discusses the project’s methodology, its findings, and shortcomings in the data that require further research. Several maps are inserted into the text to make it easier for the reader to follow all conclusions made from the data. Links to ArcGIS Online maps are also embedded, which animate the relationship between the Center for Disease Control’s Social Vulnerability Index and the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation maps.

II. The Context of Redlining

In his critically acclaimed book, *The Color of Law*, Richard Rothstein argues that the United States, apart from the Jim Crow south, did not only carry out *de facto* racial segregation, or segregation imposed by non-state actors. Instead, he argues that cities throughout the country also supported *de jure* segregation, or segregation carried out by legislative and bureaucratic
measures.\textsuperscript{1} The practice of redlining, which was initially intended to protect banks from foreclosures in the 1930s, embodies this theory.

The Home Owners’ Loan Corporation was a federally-backed organization which assessed urban areas’ viability for investment. The organization inspected not only issues like state of building repair and crime rates, but also racial homogeneity. The maps used for this project came with explicitly racist rationales behind their rankings, describing one area in South Los Angeles as having “low-class Italians” and a population “uniformly of poor quality.” The opposite was also true: Rothstein noted that one area in St. Louis was ranked green, or “Best”, because it had “not a single foreigner or negro.”\textsuperscript{2}

Redlining maps became more widely analyzed in the last five years, with academics and policymakers linking the discriminatory practices to present-day issues in housing, exposure to pollution, and other social ills. The Mapping Inequality series from the University of Richmond brilliantly georeferenced the HOLC maps, and included clickable regions which then link to the assessors descriptions of each area.\textsuperscript{3} The maps make evident what Nathan Connolly, an urban historian at Johns Hopkins University, describes as a “self-fulfilling prophecy.”\textsuperscript{4} Racially motivated maps allowed banks to disinvest from areas because they were seen as risky, and officials in cities across the country then pushed undesirable businesses—ranging from liquor stores to strip clubs—into already downtrodden neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{5} Unable to obtain loans to buy or repair homes, and disallowed from moving into white neighborhoods through racial covenants, African Americans were hit the hardest.

\textbf{III. Converting the HOLC Maps}

\textit{Georectifying}

The University of Richmond has publicly accessible, georeferenced redlining maps. High quality scans were laid out over base maps to provide the basis of their nation-wide analysis. I

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1} Richard Rothstein, \textit{The Color of Law}, (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), VII.
  \item \textit{Ibid}, 64
  \item University of Richmond, “Mapping Inequality,” \url{https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=5/36.721/-96.965&opacity=0.8}
  \item Rothstein, 50.
\end{itemize}
downloaded the TIF files for the Los Angeles region, which were already georectified. I then placed them over a light gray canvas basemap to provide some broader geographical context.
Sources
Mapping Inequality, University of Richmond, https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=5/36.721/-96.943&opacity=0.8
Creating Usable Polygons

The University of Richmond also carried a shapefile with the original paper map’s polygons already drawn. I was then able to color each appropriately according to its HOLC ranking: “Best” (Green), “Desirable” (Blue), “Declining” (Yellow), “Hazardous” (Red). These layers became the foundation for the rest of my analysis.
Home Owners' Loan Corporation Rankings

Sources
Polygons from:
Mapping Inequality, University of Richmond
https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/
#loc=3/36.71/-96.93&opacity=0.8

Polygons colored by Author
IV. Redlining and Historic Preservation

This project sought out what connections exist between redlining and historic preservation. Could disinvestment affect current building ages? Is there a relationship between local historic designation and redlining? Are there more historic resources in disinvested areas, which tend to have less property turnover? Shortcomings in data prevented testing of all of these questions, but some analysis was still possible.

*Historic Preservation Overlay Zones and Redlining*

One tool neighborhoods can leverage to protect their historic resources is the Historic Preservation Overlay Zone (HPOZ). The program was adopted by City Council in 1979, and protects areas from inappropriate alterations, while funneling preservation expertise into designated neighborhoods. The following map illustrates how HPOZs in central Los Angeles compare to redlining maps from the 1930s. Data on HPOZs from the City of Los Angeles is shown as hollow polygons on top of the redlining maps. The view extent excludes most of the San Fernando Valley, which was not inspected by the HOLC, and large parts of southern Los Angeles, which holds only two HPOZs near the Port of Los Angeles.

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6 City of Los Angeles, “About the HPOZ Program,” [https://preservation.lacity.org/hpoz/homepage/about-hpoz-program](https://preservation.lacity.org/hpoz/homepage/about-hpoz-program)
Historic Preservation Overlay Zones and Redlining

Sources

Polygons:
Mapping Inequality, University of Richmond
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#loc=3/36.71/-96.93&opacity=0.8

Polygons colored by Author

HPOZ data: City of Los Angeles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
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<td>Historic Preservation Overlay Zones</td>
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<td>Best</td>
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The results appear to be inconclusive. This is likely due to the many factors that go into HPOZ designation beyond simply having old buildings. The “integrity” of historic resources must be in a suitable state to deem the area worthy of designation. Moreover, the political capital needed to collect signatures and organize a community to seek designation is not always available in disinvested neighborhoods. HPOZs can also be leveraged by moneyed groups as another tool to aid their fight for NIMBYism, as some angry letter writers argued to Councilman Ryu in 2017 over the designation of Miracle Mile. In short, the process is not strictly a socioeconomic issue, but a highly political one.

*Historic-Cultural Monuments and Redlining*

Historic resources can also be designated locally as Historic-Cultural Monuments (HCMs) that contribute to local, regional, or national history. Los Angeles has over 1,000 HCMs throughout the City. Inspecting their relationship to redlining produced the map on the following page.

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^7 City of Los Angeles Online Docs, [http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2015/15-0183-S1_pc_a_2-22-17.pdf](http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2015/15-0183-S1_pc_a_2-22-17.pdf)
Redlining and the Distribution of Historic-Cultural Monuments

Sources

Polygons:
Mapping Inequality, University of Richmond
https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/
#loc=3/36.71/-96.93&opacity=0.8

Polygons colored by Author

HCM data from City of Los Angeles

Historic Cultural Monuments

- Best
- Desirable
- Declining
- Hazardous
The data which came from the City involved both points as well as polygons, which designated larger properties, such as Griffith Observatory. I found the information easier to process after converting all features in the layer to points. I then used the spatial join tool to count how many HCM points were in each redlining map layer (“Hazardous”, “Declining”, etc.). After using the “summarize statistics” tool in each of the attribute tables, I created the following chart in Excel.

![Number of Historic Cultural Monuments by HOLC Rating](image)

Again, the results are not particularly telling. While 57% of the HCMs are associated with “Hazardous” or “Declining” zones, that is only slightly more than half. Moreover, the even split between 14% for “Best” and 17% for “Hazardous” undercuts two theories: that having less investment would harm an area’s ability to hold historic resources recognizable by the City, or that higher socioeconomic status would create more HCMs, as well as the political capital needed to push for their designation.

There are some arguments that can be made, however, about the distribution of the monuments spatially. There is an obvious concentration of HCMs in the center of the city, particularly in Downtown Los Angeles. This makes sense, as it is the City’s oldest region. There are also some concentrations near the Port of Los Angeles, which are in historically “Hazardous” zones. This could indicate that historic use may influence designation—in this case, port infrastructure and commerce—more than the socioeconomic status of those who reside there.
V. Redlining and Social Vulnerability

The final relationship this project inspects is that between redlining and social vulnerability. Social vulnerability is defined by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as “the resilience of communities when confronted by external stresses on human health, stresses such as natural or human-caused disasters, or disease outbreaks.”\(^8\) This is an important metric in climate resilience planning and policymaking, as well as resource allocation.

The CDC’s Social Vulnerability Index is a score from zero to one which considers the following themes: socioeconomic status; household composition & disability; minority status & language; and housing & transportation. This project only mapped scores for socioeconomic status. By census tract, this theme inspects what percent of the population is below the poverty line, if they are unemployed, their income, and whether or not they have a high school diploma. The higher the vulnerability, the closer to “1” the census tract scores.

I downloaded both the census tract shapefiles and the necessary data from the CDC. I then removed all entries outside of Los Angeles County. After inspecting the data to find the theme I was seeking, I produced the following map using a color ramp, with the darkest purple being higher values.

\(^8\) Center for Disease Control, accessed April 17, 2019, [https://svi.cdc.gov/factsheet.html](https://svi.cdc.gov/factsheet.html)
Social Vulnerability Index in Los Angeles

Social Vulnerability Index
(0-1, 1 being most vulnerable)

Sources
Center for Disease Control
This view extent was selected because it relates closely to the area that the HOLC maps covered. Both East and South Los Angeles have higher ratings of social vulnerability than areas along the coast. The higher rankings near the port should also be noted.

I found the swipe tool to be a useful method for illustrating the relationship between redlining and social vulnerability. Unfortunately, ArcMap does not allow for exporting a map with swipe capabilities, so I uploaded both the social vulnerability and redlining maps to ArcGIS Online. Four maps were created, one for each HOLC ranking. Viewers can swipe horizontally through the City of Los Angeles to see how social vulnerability and redlining are connected. I also added an address search tool, to allow viewers to see where a particular address may sit in these two connected layers.

The results of this map were the most striking of the entire project. Most of the “Hazardous”, red polygons end up in darker purple regions, indicating a correlation between historical disinvestment and higher rates of social vulnerability. Anomalies like Redondo Beach and Santa Monica indicate that some neighborhoods did bounce back from how they were categorized in the 1930s. This could be due to the high value of real estate near the coast, but it is always challenging to pinpoint the manifold reasons that cause spatial change over time.
The “Declining” rankings also offered compelling results. Most of these polygons match with dark or mildly dark purple shades on the Social Vulnerability Index layer. “Desirable” has more mixed results, with some blue polygons ending up in the heart of Los Angeles’ most vulnerable communities. “Best” rankings tended to remain in the lighter areas, particularly for wealthier areas in west Los Angeles, like Beverly Hills and Palos Verdes.

VI. Conclusions and Shortcomings in Data

Redlining and Historic Preservation

Both social vulnerability and a community’s relationship with historic preservation are extremely intricate topics. While the adage, “correlation does not indicate causation” is useful, it is particularly meaningful here. To truly test how disinvestment relates to historic resources, an analysis on building age by community would have to be conducted. This would also have to involve a “boots on the ground survey”, which inspected each of the buildings, because age does not automatically create historic significance.

The relationship between local designation tools like Historic Preservation Overlay Zones or Historic-Cultural Monuments and redlining is one steeped in politics and power. A more robust project would account for the political capital necessary to organize an HPOZ campaign, as well as the power dynamics behind a community pushing for its own recognition from a large bureaucracy. Not every community has the time, energy, or trust in the government to engage in this process. Designating a monument can be equally laborious and politically charged. Further research should also parse out under which criteria monuments are designated, which can vary from architectural to social significance, or association with an important figure.

Another factor to consider is the polycentric net of the Los Angeles Basin. The Home Owners’ Loan Corporation maps push into Glendale, West Hollywood, Santa Monica, Inglewood, and West Covina. Preservation planning in each of these incorporated areas should be included in future research. With each city having its own designation tools, as well as varying levels of concern for historic resources, this analysis could become cumbersome, but it is necessary to build an understanding of how the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation affected historic resources on a broad scale.
Social Vulnerability and Redlining

Activist Ta-Nehisi Coates discussed the long term effects of redlining in his famous piece for *The Atlantic*, “The Case for Reparations.” Redlining—which was not officially outlawed until 1968—excluded black families from the millions of dollars in tax breaks and low-interest mortgages that flowed “from tax coffers into segregated white neighborhoods.” Studies today show that for every dollar a white family owns, a black family owns just five cents. Homeownership is one of the key ways for middle class Americans to accrue wealth, but black families were excluded from this vehicle for decades.

This shows in maps that compare social vulnerability to the HOLC rankings. To be clear, this relationship is not the only important one: issues of transportation, pollution, jobs and job access, deindustrialization, and crime interweave to create the fabric that is societal struggle. But, the swipe maps make a captivating case for how deep the connection between history and the present day runs.

Future research projects could tackle the ambiguity that I have left here by adding in the factors mentioned above alongside redlining maps. How might transportation access or commute time relate to the practice of redlining? Homeownership rates? Property values and median income? What do these relationships look like in other redlined urban areas across the country, like Chicago?

In some ways, the inequitable spatial distribution of wealth in Los Angeles is so evident that it has been reduced to stereotypes: the rich walk Rodeo Drive, while gang members fight in the communities of South Los Angeles. But more analyses like this project might pull back the curtain, so to speak, and interrogate how these imbalances have developed. In the HOLC maps we find a tool that can help us undermine the notions that communities are timeless and static, and that poverty is always an unfortunate accident, unrelated to poor urban policy.

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Bibliography


City of Los Angeles, “About the HPOZ Program,” https://preservation.lacity.org/hpoz/homepage/about-hpoz-program


University of Richmond, “Mapping Inequality,” https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=5/36.721/-96.965&opacity=0.8