

Ecology of Cool focuses on the devastating consequences and disproportional impact of our current Global Health Crises on People of Color and low-income communities in Los Angeles.

Pandemics and other crises often expose and expand the pre-existing flaws and defects in society and show which groups our society it finds important and who it often chooses to ignore.

Global Warming is widening the already extremely grim gap between rich and poor. People in low-income neighborhoods, cities, countries and continents have been exposed not only to higher levels of air pollution, soil toxins, polluted water, flood risk and extreme weather but also to higher temperatures in their unprotected streets and residential environments throughout history.

American cities are experiencing increasingly unbearable summers due to climate change. We see excruciating temperatures and an increasing intensity, duration and frequency of heat waves. However, in Los Angeles, as in most American cities with massive income inequalities, this heat is not evenly distributed. Low-income and primarily Black and Latinx neighborhoods become much warmer than the surrounding richer neighborhoods due to an 'urban heat island' effect.

Systematic inequity was created and embedded in America since its colonization and kept in place for the benefit the few. Allowing and sustaining a socioeconomic structures of suppression so much so that every crisis (financial, health, environmental and the combinations thereof) can be used against low-income, marginalized and criminalized populations who will, defenseless and unprotected, carry much of the burden. Consequently feeling its effects to a point of collapse, often resulting in the destruction of entire neighborhoods and its population for profit (Disaster Capitalism).

This project takes place in the physical space of communities in Downtown and East and South LA and speaks to Angelinos devastated by a collusion of current crises, Income-Inequality, Global Warming, Systemic Racism and (not unrelated to the former three) the Pandemic.

It is clear that the economic consequences of a health crisis are profound and that - as in many crises - it will have disproportionately severe consequences for the most vulnerable among us. Stacked upon each other, they are increasingly taking the lives and livelihoods of people.

We will describe historical, recurring and contemporary racial- and discriminating policies and highlight the need for direct action and environmental justice as the temperatures on the streets are souring and the pandemic is raging through our, often-unhoused, communities. We will talk about sustainable community and self-governing, what it means and what we can do to make the change.

Trees

Los Angeles approach to shady trees is convoluted and a class issue; its dense foliage is used for better air quality, cooling streets, outdoor activities and privacy and protection of the homes of the rich and privileged. Contrarily, shady trees are seen as an obstruction to surveillance, a treat to safety and invitation to crime in low-income neighborhoods.

The destruction of urban foliage here is a component of a long-term strategy. Part of the absence of shady trees is due to a misleading policy and racially motivated perception of security to this day. A perception fueled by the idea that trees are a good place to hide criminal- and illegal activities. Because trees prevent the view from a helicopter and obstruct the view from a

surveillance camera, shadow trees are cut down in areas of high surveillance and police presence, where shade is seen as a magnet for illegal activities.

In 2000 the Los Angeles Police Department began installing security cameras in 'higher crime areas'. Cooling disappeared instantly. Officially, the city does not have a policy of removing shade for surveillance purposes, but it happens in minority neighborhoods: courtyards of the housing projects are treeless and when a new surveillance camera is installed in a public park, the mature canopy around it disappears.

Historical and prevailing political systems, sustained by wealth, preserve these ideas. And in predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods, Downtown, East and South Los Angeles, shade is therefore mostly absent.

The absence access to public parks and of shady trees forces unhoused people to find shelter near and under freeways and make their homes in industrial areas where levels of toxicity can be deadly. A lack of trees is leaving the poor exposed. It is poisoning them.

Segregation

Racial segregation and discrimination against minorities and minority communities predated the notorious policy of *redlining*. These policies, and the discouragement of quality investment in these neighborhoods, have imposed decades of economic and health disparities on the communities. Resulting in today's economic-, environmental- and health inequalities. Inequalities that are spiraling in times of crisis, like the Pandemic.

Freeways in LA were primarily planned through these "Hazardous" and "Undesirable" neighborhoods. Tearing communities apart, disempowering its population and quickly heating the surfaces. Industries were encouraged to settle here. Land was cheap. The use cheaper building materials that absorb heat, increasing land surface temperatures by as much as 13F. Which is insanely dangerous in the event of a heat wave.

Without infrastructures that provide cooling during the day, lower-income neighborhoods become suffocating hot in the day and remain hot at night because the heat, absorbed by impervious surfaces (highways, dense building structures, industries, and heat absorbing cheaper building materials), is escaping back into the air at night.

Air pollution is a global crisis. High concentrations of harmful gases and particles in our atmosphere negatively affect the health of humans, animals and plants. It also causes temperatures even further to rise.

Trees absorb these toxic chemicals, effectively filtering these chemicals from the air. Trees also mitigate the greenhouse gas effect by trapping heat, reduce ground-level ozone levels and release life-giving oxygen.

Los Angeles Public Housing Projects are build strategically along the freeways and near toxic ground. *Jordan Downs* in South LA an example of this, a 700 united housing project with no natural shade situated along the 105 Freeway. It is among the top 10 percent of California neighborhoods most affected by air pollution, poverty and proximity to toxic cleanup sites. *

Public Schools where young people spent a big chunk of their time to learn, play and grow are sitting next to toxic sites or leaning over freeways. Children in low-income neighborhoods are facing increasingly greater problems and future health issues, while the kids of the rich are driven in air-conditioned cars to the lush, green playgrounds of their private schools, far from the density and toxicity of the city.

The lack of recreational space in dense neighborhoods and Public Housing Projects are another major health problem.

Angelenos higher up the income ladder rarely enter these neighborhoods. They can move through the city on the freeways far above the streets in air-conditioned cars, leaving the buses, sidewalks and public spaces mainly the area of the poor.

The forces of global warming and widening gap in income inequality are boiling to the surface where environmental racism lays bare.

The focus of Ecology of Cool is on people: their lives, the impact on their communities, historical policies, reimagining community, reformative ideas, actions and environmental justice.

* <https://la.curbed.com/2017/7/14/15746194/jordan-downs-redevelopment-contamination-retail-center>

A selection of work has been published in Places Journal, Berkeley 2019.
<https://placesjournal.org/article/shade-an-urban-design-mandate/>