


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Bringing “The Plant” to Life: Imagining Community Revitalization in the Neoliberal Era

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*On August 27, 1992, the General Motors (GM) auto plant in Van Nuys closed after a half-century serving the Northeast San Fernando Valley. Its closure undercut the livelihoods of auto workers like Raymond Álvarez and his father Ramón. Today, the father and son duo look at “The Plant,” an outdoor shopping mall, and wonder whether the In-N-Out fast-food restaurant or T-Mobile store marks where they once stood on the assembly line. The departure of the GM plant and other long-standing manufacturing firms propelled the area into economic distress as Los Angeles was reeling from another crisis, the 1992 Uprising. In the wake of these events, elected officials clamored to revitalize the city. Six years later, “revitalization” came in the form of the shopping center, The Plant. By tracing the historical trajectory of one shuttered auto plant, from factory to shopping mall, this article demonstrates how neoliberal ideology gained legitimacy over the last several decades.*

On Saturday, April 11, 1992, democratic presidential hopeful Reverend Jesse Jackson made a stump stop in Van Nuys, California. He was there to lead a rally for United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 645 autoworkers who, in August of that year, were scheduled to lose their jobs when the General Motors Van Nuys auto plant officially shut down. Jackson made the rally a campaign stop to support autoworkers as well as to denounce politicians who had betrayed the nation’s working people and done nothing to stop plant closures. “We need alternatives to plants closing, alternatives to jobs leaving. We need an alternative vision. We need a new President,” he exclaimed to an impassioned crowd.<sup>1</sup>

The author wishes to thank her advisors, Dr. Bill Deverell and Dr. George Sánchez, for their support, encouragement, and incisive feedback on successive drafts of this article. For their assistance in a determined hunt to track down archival materials related to the GM Van Nuys auto plant and its conversion into The Plant, I thank Mike Holland of the Los Angeles City Archives and Records Center and David Sigler of the Special Collections & Archives at California State University, Northridge. This article would never have come to fruition without the generosity and conviviality of the UAW Local 645 retirees, in particular, their current President George Veloz and Secretary Alex Gomez. The monthly retirement meeting of the UAW Local 645 made possible the many revelatory and candid comments that comprise the following pages. If not for the retirees’ and their spouses’ warm hospitality and garrulity, this article would never have seen the light of day. Last, I wish to thank the current Executive Editors of *Modern American History*, Darren Dochuk and Sarah B. Snyder, for their editorial assistance, as well as the Inaugural Brooke L. Blower and Sarah T. Phillips Essay Prize Committee for selecting this article as the winner of its inaugural essay competition.

<sup>1</sup>Michael Connelly, “Jackson Leads Hundreds in Jobs Rally in Van Nuys,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 12, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/jackson-leads-hundreds-jobs-rally-van-nuys/docview/1733975482/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 6, 2024). Jackson’s Van Nuys stump stop in 1992 came nearly a decade after he had first allied himself with the GM Van Nuys workforce by backing the Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open. In the mid-1980s, Jackson joined the movement to hold General Motors accountable to the community. The Campaign ensured the plant’s existence through the late 1980s but not its survival all together.

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By April 1992, Los Angeles's regional economy was in flux. A decade of plant closures and the departure of airframe-aerospace, automotive, and other high technology firms had severely undercut regional and local economies and crushed livelihoods.<sup>2</sup> Blue-collar workers feared the erosion of their middle-class incomes and the upward mobility it gave their children. At the April 11 rally, Jackson spoke directly to the concerns of autoworkers who continued to assemble cars in the face of the plant's impending shutdown. The audience cheered for him as he entreated his fellow Democratic Party candidates to "in the face of this pain ... choose partnership not polarization."

Just three weeks after Jackson demonstrated with autoworkers in Van Nuys, the city of Los Angeles erupted into what historians would later deem the Uprising. The murder of Latasha Harlins and the acquittal of four police officers in the beating of Rodney King reflected city government's neglect of South Los Angeles, especially its shifting demographics and inequalities.<sup>3</sup> Although the GM Van Nuys auto plant was miles away from the epicenter of the unrest, it fell well within the geography of the Uprising.<sup>4</sup> Besides being a target for looting and arson between April 29 and May 6, 1992, the Northeast San Fernando Valley was also the site of Rodney King's beating on March 3, 1991.<sup>5</sup> The shoulder of Foothill Boulevard, where four policemen mercilessly battered King, is a memory site that haunts the community of Lakeview Terrace to the present.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the fates of South Los Angeles and the Northeast San Fernando Valley had become intertwined long before the 1992 Uprising. Back in 1983, when GM shut down its auto plant in Southgate—plummeting the area into economic distress and driving hundreds of its African American employees to the Van Nuys plant—the two communities became linked by a shared fight against deindustrialization. With the support of the South Los Angeles community and its worker transplants, the employees at GM Van Nuys managed to stave off closure for almost a decade.<sup>7</sup> Yet by the early 1990s, the Northeast San Fernando Valley also faced ascending poverty rates and minimal government intervention.<sup>8</sup> Mere months after the 1992 Uprising, the General Motors auto plant closed for good, displacing 2,600 employees and destabilizing the plant's surrounding communities.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup>See Manuel Pastor, *State of Resistance: What California's Dizzying Descent and Remarkable Resurgence Mean for America's Future* (New York, 2018); Edward J. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London, 1989), 190–221. For more on the Plant Closures Project, see Alison Givens, "Fighting Shutdowns in Sunny California," *Labor Research Review* 1, no. 5 (1984): 1–14.

<sup>3</sup>For more on South Los Angeles's shifting demographics and local politics, see Abigail Rosas, *South Central Is My Home: Race and the Power of Community Investment in Los Angeles* (Palo Alto, CA, 2019).

<sup>4</sup>"Report of the Chief Legislative Analyst, Overview of the Ad Hoc Committee on Recovery and Revitalization Actions," 1992, folder 19, box 0825, Tom Bradley Administrative Papers, Special Collections, University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA [hereafter TBAP]. See also Stefano Bloch, *Going All City: Struggle and Survival in LA's Graffiti Subculture* (Chicago, 2019). Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja, eds., *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, CA, 1996).

<sup>5</sup>John M. Molina, "King Arrest Becomes Odd Landmark," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 21, 1993, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/king-arrest-site-becomes-odd-landmark-lake-view/docview/281943189/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 6, 2024).

<sup>6</sup>The author taught for six years at a public school in Lakeview Terrace, just a mile from the site of Rodney King's beating. From informal conversations with community members, students, and families, it is clear that the site of King's beating is one that has lingered in their minds, especially of the area's shrinking Black population, to the present.

<sup>7</sup>Eric Mann, *Taking on General Motors: A Case Study of the UAW Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open* (Los Angeles, 1987).

<sup>8</sup>Stefano Bloch, "An Autoethnographic Account of Urban Restructuring and Neighborhood Change in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley," *Cultural Geographies* 27, no. 3 (2020): 379–94.

<sup>9</sup>Hugo Martin, "GM Closure Also Hurts Merchants," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 14, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/gm-closure-also-hurts-merchants-economy-bars/docview/281917067/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 6, 2024).

Few historical studies have linked the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising with the closure of the GM Van Nuys plant only four months later.<sup>10</sup> Yet what links them in the post-1992 era is Jackson's "partnership not polarization" plea, an ethos that came to define much of Los Angeles's political economy for the remainder of the 1990s. Only the kind of partnerships Jackson summoned—multiracial coalition-building or solidarity within the democratic establishment—were not the partnerships that predominated Los Angeles's policy response in the era of 1990s deindustrialization. Rather, what emerged were what I call neo-recovery partnerships.

Neo-recovery partnerships, much like the more standard private–public partnerships (PPPs), are those in which individuals from the public sector collaborate with individuals in the private sector to fund projects (infrastructural, organizational, and institutional) that, ideally, yield efficient and beneficial outcomes for the public good and for private investors. Yet what differentiates neo-recovery partnerships from traditional PPPs is that they are designed for, and ineluctably tied to, the revitalization of deindustrialized urban areas.<sup>11</sup> Neo-recovery partnerships were based on the premise that deregulated zones of commerce, big box consumerism, and service employment would help emancipate individuals from dependency, be it tied to unionized labor or state provisions. Rather than insist that city government replenish the jobs eroded by deindustrialization or provide compensatory social programs, proponents of neo-recovery partnerships turned to private capital to replace former manufacturing plants and revitalize their surrounding communities. City officials, if at first reluctantly, eventually facilitated the conversion of industrial sites, like the former GM Van Nuys auto plant, for service sector development.<sup>12</sup> Doing so, it was thought, would restore residents' sense of community pride and deepen their belief in free enterprise.

After the General Motors auto plant shut down in August 1992, the site lay vacant for four years until Los Angeles city officials, General Motors, real estate developers, and private investors aided its rebirth as an outdoor "power center," to be called The Plant.<sup>13</sup> This neo-recovery partnership formed in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising and consolidated after the 1994 Northridge earthquake. Those two events, which city officials used to create the Los Angeles Revitalization Zone and the Earthquake Recovery Zone, respectively, allowed city government to incentivize private investors to purchase and rebuild the site into a mixed-use retail and light-industrial complex. In a relatively short span of time, the former GM auto plant had turned into a shopping mall, The Plant, legitimizing the neo-recovery partnership and assisting Southern California's shift to the service economy. The neo-recovery partnership that brought The Plant to life suggested that retail campuses signaled freedom, mobility, and access. It played

<sup>10</sup>A very important exception to this is the scholarship of cultural geographer Stefano Bloch, whose work and scholarly generosity have greatly influenced this article.

<sup>11</sup>PPPs have characterized much of U.S. governance, even during the heyday of the nation's welfare state. But the 1990s marked a definitive uptick in the popularity and ubiquity of PPPs. This article suggests that rather than seeing PPPs as an immutable force, we view them as historically constructed. Faced with the departure of heavy industry and the hemorrhaging of blue-collar labor, Los Angeles city officials turned to private investment and market ideology to "revitalize" communities like those most affected by the 1992 Uprising and those surrounding the General Motors Van Nuys auto plant. In the early 1990s in Southern California, city officials devised a new brand of PPP—the neo-recovery partnership—as the primary policy response to deindustrialization.

<sup>12</sup>The leading political proponents of the neo-recovery partnership were Los Angeles Republican Mayor Richard Riordan and Democratic Councilman Richard Alarcón. Initially, Riordan and Alarcón disagreed over what should replace the GM auto plant. There were fears, particularly from Alarcón's camp, that a retail center could not provide the job security or high wages that industrial employment had offered his constituents. But by 1997, both politicians had become brokers in the neo-recovery partnership that brought The Plant to life.

<sup>13</sup>At the turn of the twenty-first century, so-called power centers proliferated on the suburban landscape. Unlike traditional postwar malls, power centers are sprawling campuses largely composed of big box chains like Costco, Home Depot, Walmart, etc. See Bob Howard, "Holiday Retail Outlook: Big-Box Stores Set Sights on Valley," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 28, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/valley-business-holiday-retail-outlook-big-box/docview/421598018/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 6, 2024).

to what certain labor activists called the “7/11 Complex,” in which the entrepreneurial aspirations of the working class might lead individuals to identify with big business while denying their own class position.<sup>14</sup>

But neither the neo-recovery partnership behind The Plant, nor the commercial center itself, revitalized the surrounding community or freed individuals from the hardships they faced.<sup>15</sup> According to 2020 census data, 18 percent of residents living in Los Angeles District Seven, the district just north of the former auto plant, live below the federal poverty level (FPL) and 44 percent live below 200 percent of the FPL.<sup>16</sup> And in District Six, the community immediately surrounding the site, 23 percent live below the FPL and 53 percent live 200 percent below the FPL.<sup>17</sup> What The Plant did do, however, is contribute to the rise of a new working class in the San Fernando Valley, based on low-wage, non-unionized labor, and populated largely by undocumented migrants who had settled in the area after the 1986 Immigration and Reform Act.

The closure of the GM Van Nuys auto plant and its conversion into The Plant demonstrate two critical but understudied historical processes. First, they reveal how neo-recovery partnerships emerged in the wake of deindustrialization in Southern California and amidst shifting national immigration policy. Second, the site’s transformation into a retail complex reveals the gradual and highly mundane means by which neoliberalism gained hegemony in the United States.<sup>18</sup> The rise of the neoliberal order, as historian Gary Gerstle has recently termed it, materialized and became hegemonic because, in the transition from an industrial to a service economy—literally the conversion of a former auto plant into a retail campus, the neoliberal rationality became tethered to the concept of “revitalization.”<sup>19</sup>

### “It Was Like Dancing in an Open Grave”: The GM Van Nuys Plant on the Eve of Closure

By the mid-1980s, auto workers at the General Motors Auto Plant in Van Nuys felt cautiously optimistic that their plant would make it beyond the infamous decade of shutdowns. It had

<sup>14</sup>Mann, *Taking on General Motors*, 104–5.

<sup>15</sup>See Scott Garner, “Panorama City Is Slowly Shaking Off Its Post-Industrial Trauma,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/business/realstate/hot-property/la-fi-hp-neighborhood-spotlight-panorama-city-20180616-story.html> (accessed Jan. 6, 2024); Laura Barraclough, “The Rise of Homelessness in the Valley: And the Sad History of a Los Angeles Shopping Center,” *Pacific Standard*, June 14, 2017, <https://psmag.com/economics/a-picture-of-a-shopping-center-is-worth-1000-words> (accessed Apr. 14, 2023).

<sup>16</sup>County of Los Angeles Public Health. *Los Angeles City and Community Health Profiles, Los Angeles City Council District Six*, <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/ohae/docs/cchp/pdf/2018/LosAngelesCityCouncilDistrict6.pdf> (accessed May 19, 2023).

<sup>17</sup>County of Los Angeles Public Health. *Los Angeles City and Community Health Profiles, Los Angeles City Council District Seven*, <http://ph.lacounty.gov/ohae/docs/cchp/pdf/2018/LosAngelesCityCouncilDistrict7.pdf> (accessed May 19, 2023). See “San Fernando Valley Economy Report,” California State University Northridge, 2005–2006, 78, [http://www.mulhollandinstitute.org/Library/Economics/Pub\\_CSUN\\_SFV\\_Economic\\_Report\\_05-06.pdf](http://www.mulhollandinstitute.org/Library/Economics/Pub_CSUN_SFV_Economic_Report_05-06.pdf) (accessed May 19, 2023).

<sup>18</sup>See Andrew J. Diamond and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *Neoliberal Cities: The Remaking of Postwar Urban America* (New York, 2020), 5. See Thomas Adams, “New Life, New Vigor, and New Values: Privatization, Service Work, and the Rise of Neoliberal Urbanism in Postwar Southern California,” in Diamond and Sugrue eds., *Neoliberal Cities*, 49–77. Although Adams argues that the privatization of redevelopment in Los Angeles can be traced back to the immediate postwar period, I argue that the city’s rampant deindustrialization in the 1990s marked a critical reimagining of urban revitalization. Rather than adopt the earlier strategy of replacing “slums” with privatized spaces, the 1990s marked a moment in which community revitalization became the preserve of the business sector.

<sup>19</sup>I employ Wendy Brown’s conceptualization of the “neoliberal rationality,” which “transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized.” See Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York, 2015), 9–10. See also Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (Oxford, UK, 2022).

been a tumultuous few years since GM declared in 1982 that the Van Nuys plant was on the company's "danger list."<sup>20</sup> Van Nuys workers, all members of UAW Local 645, responded to the news by rallying behind the Campaign to Save GM Van Nuys (hereafter referred to as the Campaign), a union-led movement to keep the plant in operation.<sup>21</sup> The Campaign's success gave workers some confidence that they might be spared the future facing other Southern California manufacturing plants like GM Southgate, which shut down in 1983.<sup>22</sup> Most significantly, the Campaign framed the closure of the Van Nuys plant in a larger struggle for civil rights. By 1983, Latinx workers constituted over 50 percent of the workforce, Black workers 15 percent, and women and Asian and Pacific Islanders 5 percent. The Campaign and its supporters insisted that GM had not only a moral responsibility to keep the plant open but that workers could galvanize a multiracial base of support to boycott its products.<sup>23</sup> Besides being instrumental to the plant's survival, the Campaign maintained that industrial labor in the Northeast San Fernando Valley was crucial to the region's social and economic stability.

The Campaign secured the plant's existence for several years, and it remains one of the most significant, if overlooked, labor movements of the late-twentieth century. But by November 1986, after a ten-month layoff, GM announced plans to close eleven plants in Michigan, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Miraculously, Van Nuys was spared.<sup>24</sup> "It's tremendous.... It's great to have news like this," Gil Luna, a veteran auto worker, professed at the time.<sup>25</sup> Three years later, General Motors announced that the Van Nuys plant would not produce the next

<sup>20</sup>"Calif. Local Fights to Survive," *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1983, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/calif-local-fights-survive/docview/1000236547/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 6, 2024); Henry Weinstein, "At Top Speed Now, but Nothing's Forever: Community Fighting to Save Van Nuys GM Car Plant," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 5, 1983, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/at-top-speed-now-nothing-s-forever/docview/153684458/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 6, 2024).

<sup>21</sup>Mann, *Taking on General Motors*.

<sup>22</sup>The Campaign's mobilization inspired workers to believe that their plant could parry GM's threats. See Michal Goldman's documentary, *Tiger by the Tail*, Asner Edward, Goldman Michal, Mann Eric. *Tiger by the Tail. Labor Distributors; 1985*; and Henry Weinstein, "Boycott by UAW Of GM Threatened," *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1983, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/boycott-uaw-gm-threatened/docview/153455808/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024); "Calif. Local Fights to Survive," *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1983, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/calif-local-fights-survive/docview/1000236547/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024); and Henry Weinstein, "At Top Speed Now, But 'Nothing's Forever': Community Fighting to Save Van Nuys GM Car Plant," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 5, 1983, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/at-top-speed-now-nothings-forever/docview/153684458/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>23</sup>Eric Mann, interview by Julia Brown-Bernstein, Mar. 2, 2022, transcript Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>24</sup>Alan Goldstein and James Risen, "GM Will Close 11 Factories with 29,000 Auto Workers; Van Nuys Plant Is Spared," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 6, 1986, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gm-will-close-11-factories-with-29-000-auto/docview/154791875/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024). Many speculated that it was Van Nuys's adoption of the Team Concept, a production style modeled after Japanese manufacturing methods, that ensured its continued existence. Under the Team Concept, workers assembled vehicles in teams, instead of performing one repetitive task, and supposedly wielded more autonomy in production quality and labor-management relations. But many union leaders virulently critiqued Team Concept, and it proved divisive within the Local's membership. See Gregory Crouch, "On the Line in Van Nuys," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 13, 1988, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/on-line-van-nuys/docview/909148332/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024). Others argued it was the Campaign, while others pointed to the market, which had historically yielded above-average sales of Camaros and Firebirds. Regardless, workers at GM Van Nuys were elated that they continued to escape the fast-coming waves of plant closings.

<sup>25</sup>Alan Goldstein, "Nagging Fears Persist as Several Other Factories Close: GM Workers at Van Nuys Express Relief," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 7, 1986, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/nagging-fears-persist-as-several-other-factories/docview/292447073/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

generation of the Firebird and Camaro models. To cut labor and transportation costs, and to consolidate production in the Midwest, the forthcoming models would be produced at GM's new plant in Sainte-Thérèse, Quebec, Canada.<sup>26</sup> The Van Nuys plant seemed sure to close. George Veloz, a thirty-three-year veteran, recalled that a friend in management pulled him into his office: "He told me, 'come in here, and shut the door, what is said here, stays here.' I go, 'okay.' Finally he goes, 'there is no future here. Leave.' So I transferred and went to Tennessee, the Saturn plant on January 1, 1991."<sup>27</sup>

Upon hearing the news, elected officials took pains to bargain with GM. Republican County Supervisor, Michael Antonovich, planned a motion to save GM Van Nuys, stating that "a plant closure will destroy thousands of jobs in the San Fernando Valley and have a significant adverse impact on the community."<sup>28</sup> Antonovich, like other city politicians, hoped that GM would make the Van Nuys plant a flex facility, capable of producing whatever the market mandated or shifting production to electric cars.<sup>29</sup> In the late 1980s, Los Angeles city officials across the political spectrum were eager to ensure that manufacturing jobs remained in their districts. Their constituents depended on industrial labor to pay their bills, and it elevated the tax base of the district. Yet more than that, local politicians believed that production should remain near the consumer market. The prevailing ethos was still that corporations like GM had an obligation to manufacture its vehicles in the same region as one of its most profitable markets.

By 1990, it was not just automotive or aerospace firms that closed shop as defense contracts dried up. In May of that year, Oscar Mayer, a leader in the meat-packing industry, closed its Vernon plant. The decline of heavy industry terminated an "economic safety valve for thousands of residents who either could not or did not want to go to college," the historian Rodolfo Acuña lamented.<sup>30</sup> The GM Van Nuys plant had been a stalwart for thousands of workers, but it was one in a sea of factories throughout Southern California that supported a largely nonwhite, blue-collar workforce. As Acuña saw it,

At bottom, what's at stake is the kind of metropolis we want in the year 2050.... Low-paying jobs and poverty are increasing at a faster pace in Los Angeles than anywhere else in the country.... Since Latinos are among those who have most acutely experienced the impact of plant shutdowns, Latino politicians should take the lead in developing a common strategy to stop the Oscar Mayer's from moving out.<sup>31</sup>

In a city in which manufacturing was concentrated in predominantly nonwhite, working-class, and immigrant communities, it was clear that fighting to keep plants open, or at least finding commensurate employment, would be the challenge facing Los Angeles's leaders in the century's last decade. It was also, for that matter, an issue of economic and racial justice.

<sup>26</sup>Joseph B. White, "GM Indicates Glum Tidings for 5 Facilities—Plants in U.S. and Canada Could Become Victims of Capacity Reductions," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 16, 1989, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gm-indicates-glum-tidings-5-facilities/docview/135391591/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>27</sup>George Veloz, interview by Julia Brown-Bernstein, Nov. 10, 2022, transcript, Van Nuys, CA.

<sup>28</sup>James Peltz, "Antonovich Plans Motion to Save GM's Van Nuys Plant," November 14, 1989, <https://www.proquest.com/hnplatimes/docview/1146797021/B4CE6122DC424FD8PQ/1?accountid=14749&sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Rodolfo Acuña, "And Then There Were No Blue-Collar Jobs," *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1990, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/hnplatimes1/historical-newspapers/california-commentary/docview/1460287660/sem-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

January 1991 brought one of the biggest layoffs in the history of GM Van Nuys.<sup>32</sup> “We’re all depressed about it,” stated Richard Ruppert, the Local’s shop chairman. GM spokeswoman Kathy Tanner assuaged their worries: “The business plan is to convert Van Nuys to a flex plant to produce a variety of models for West Coast markets.”<sup>33</sup> A day after GM announced its Van Nuys layoff, councilmember Richard Alarcón sent a memo to Mayor Bradley reiterating that the plant manager, Barry Herr, held that the long-term goal for the plant was not closure but conversion to a flex plant.<sup>34</sup> Local politicians had faith that GM would find a way to avert closure. Either the company would update the auto plant from an assembly division to a more nimble production facility, or it would find another model for its Van Nuys workforce. Politicians reckoned that GM, too, believed that production should stay near the biggest consumer market.

Yet two months later, GM announced that it would eliminate the second shift altogether. Closure seemed a *fait accompli*. “We’re here to express our anger,” Mark Masaoka, a unit chairman and former organizer in the Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open, protested. “This is an orphan plant and we’re building an orphan model,” he continued.<sup>35</sup> Masaoka’s words resonated across the Local. As the sole remaining auto assembly plant in Southern California, the Van Nuys plant workers had little recourse. In the past, laid off or idled workers could get jobs at the nearby Lockheed plant in Burbank. But Lockheed was also downsizing its operations and moving most of its production out of California. There were few places to turn.<sup>36</sup>

By the summer of 1991, workers’ fears came true. It was Friday morning, July 19, when GM officials ushered the entire day shift into the back lot. A spokesperson from Detroit announced that the Van Nuys plant would cease operations and close permanently in August 1992. “It was like a blow to the chest,” said Johnny Nieto, a fourteen-year veteran. “It’s a shocker to say the least,” Jess Pacheco added. Rather than decompress that evening at Opies bar or Chevy Ho’s, as was custom, workers retreated to their homes to tell their spouses and children. Although the workers had a safety net—a recently signed three-year contract that guaranteed them 85 percent of their take-home pay for 36 weeks—there was no doubt that GM’s announcement sowed seeds of uncertainty and displacement. As one twenty-four-year veteran, recalled, the announcement of closure caused crises among many couples and families; separations and divorces increased.<sup>37</sup> Bruce Lee, the UAW western regional director, called the closure “a total betrayal,” while democratic representative Howard L. Berman denounced the “devastating news, not only to [the plant’s] employees but to the community at large.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup>James Peltz, “GM Will Lay Off 850 Workers at Van Nuys Plant,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 25, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/hnplatimes1/historical-newspapers/gm-will-lay-off-850-workers-at-van-nuys-plant/docview/1645733322/sem-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024). By the early 1990s, 3,000 workers staffed all assembly divisions, but surplus inventories and bloated supplies resulted in indefinite layoffs for nearly one-third of the workforce. For GM Van Nuys, Firebird and Camaro inventories were piling up such that on January 10, 1991 the Plant had a 179-day supply as opposed to the 75–100 day supply that was more typical for slow-selling winter months.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid..

<sup>34</sup>Richard Alarcón to Mayor Tom Bradley, undated, Frederick Schnell, General Motors, 1979–1991, folders 4–5, box 4202, TBAP.

<sup>35</sup>Patrice Apodaca, “Workers Protest Cutbacks at GM,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 29, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/workers-protest-cutbacks-at-gm/docview/1638595635/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>36</sup>Patrice Apodaca, “Workers Angry, Anxious about GM Closure Plan,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/workers-angry-anxious-about-gm-closure-plan/docview/1638709315/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>37</sup>Ronald (surname withheld), interview by Julia Brown-Bernstein, Nov. 16, 2022, Van Nuys, CA.

<sup>38</sup>James F. Peltz, “General Motors in Van Nuys to Close,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/general-motors-plant-van-nuys-close-auto-industry/docview/281466348/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

News of closure created a media maelstrom. A choir of voices emerged to editorialize the closing of the forty-five-year-old plant, and to weigh in on its replacement. Bob Baker of the *Los Angeles Times* claimed “L.A.’s Booming Auto Industry Now a Memory.”<sup>39</sup> He was right. The closure of the GM Van Nuys plant marked the end of an era. Workers watched their middle-class living evaporate and entered the industrial worker diaspora, crisscrossing the country to find work.<sup>40</sup> In light of its closure, Baker eulogized the plant’s postwar heyday:

It was a time when industrial jobs were an attainable ladder up from poverty. A time when you could carve out a middle-class existence with merely a high-school degree or less. A time when the expressions “blue collar” and “working class” carried more meaning, more purity. A time when “service sector” would have been mistaken for the military.<sup>41</sup>

The *Los Angeles Times* professed “The Need to Replenish Vanishing Jobs.”<sup>42</sup> As the editorial put it, “The death of local auto production—the decline began a decade ago—is a harsh reminder that our manufacturing jobs need to be replaced with new ones.”<sup>43</sup> The predominant view was that industrial labor should be replaced by other manufacturing jobs. There was not yet a formalized trend to turn former industrial sites into those for service or retail.

Residents also opined on what should replace the GM Van Nuys plant. Eileen Barry of Lake View Terrace, a rural community northeast of the plant, wrote,

When something such as the announced 1992 closing of the Van Nuys GM plant happens, it is our responsibility as citizens of this nation and planet to make something positive come from this potential economic disaster. Instead of looking at the plant site for a shopping mall or office buildings, consider using it to manufacture products from materials rescued from the “waste stream” not gutting our canyons.<sup>44</sup>

Barry saw her duty as a citizen to see that the Van Nuys plant be repurposed for environmental and humanitarian causes. It would not improve anyone’s quality of life, especially those in the Northeast San Fernando Valley who suffered the environmental consequences of heavy industry for decades, that the plant to be replaced by a mall or offices would be dedicated to business endeavors.

Barry’s words underwrote the sentiments of Mayor Bradley and a cohort of other democratic politicians, including Congressman Howard L. Berman and Assemblyman Richard Katz, who saw the plant’s announced closure as the last straw in an alarming exit of manufacturing firms from the area. On August 6, 1991, Bradley invited federal, state, and local politicians, economists, transportation experts, business, and labor leaders to a meeting about the GM plant closure. The meeting’s “discussion items set an agenda for the future and create[d] a unified plan to help those workers who have lost their jobs, while reversing the trend of economic erosion in the Los Angeles basin.”<sup>45</sup> After the August 8 meeting, Bradley, Berman, and Katz pleaded with

<sup>39</sup>Bob Baker, “L.A.’s Booming Auto Industry Now a Memory,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/l-s-booming-auto-industry-now-memory/docview/281392286/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>40</sup>UAW Local 645 monthly retirement meetings observed by the author, Nov. 2022–May 2023.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>“The Need to Replenish Vanishing Jobs,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/need-replenish-vanishing-jobs/docview/1639862266/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>“Other Avenues Open for GM Plant,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 9, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/other-avenues-open-gm-plant/docview/281509594/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>45</sup>Bradley, Katz, Berman Co-Host Meeting to Determine the Future of the GM Plant and to Discuss Efforts to Prevent Industrial Flight from Los Angeles, Aug. 7, 1991, Collection 293, folders 1–2, box 4775, TBAP.



the GM CEO, Robert C. Stempel, to “ensure that the General Motors Plant site remains an economically vital element of the community.”<sup>46</sup> The meeting bolstered their conviction that the Van Nuys plant was still a profitable entity: “We are not convinced that the Van Nuys Plant operation cannot continue to be economically feasible. Recognizing that more vehicles are sold in Southern California than any other region of the United States, we believe General Motors Corporation should give greater consideration to preserving the Van Nuys plant operation.”<sup>47</sup> Bradley’s letter voiced the general outlook of Los Angeles city leaders that GM Van Nuys had not only untapped profit-making potential but also a responsibility to produce its goods near its best-selling market.

Bradley and his administration organized a task force to monitor and address the ramifications of the announced shutdown.<sup>48</sup> They hoped for the plant’s persistence as an auto assembly factory but would “work collaboratively to find the most effective plant site use” if closure was irreversible. If talks failed, Bradley would create a private–public partnership to repurpose the plant as a hub of railway research and development.<sup>49</sup> It was always his goal to see that the site be devoted to industrial use. Bradley requested Stempel’s cooperation on several occasions but was ultimately disappointed by the GM CEO’s resistance to work with the city to find an alternative industrial use for the plant.<sup>50</sup> On October 23, 1991, Bradley announced his administration and the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission’s hope that the Morrison Knudsen (MK) Corporation might purchase the GM plant and convert it into a state-of-the-art assembly plant of rail cars. Unlike GM, which seemed simply to abandon the area, “[MK] made a major commitment to the Los Angeles economy.”<sup>51</sup>

Representatives from the private sector were involved in the discussions, as well as key stakeholders in the site’s future, but the priority of the Bradley administration and other democratic representatives was that the plant be used for manufacturing purposes.<sup>52</sup> By December it was clear that Bradley and his democratic allies could not persuade GM to reconsider its plans for shutdown. The politicians held a press conference to relay their discontent. “I did not find General Motors willing to reinvest back in Southern California to the extent that Southern California has been willing to invest in GM,” Assemblyman Katz bemoaned.<sup>53</sup> Los Angeles commuters had been loyal GM customers for decades and helped make its Camaros and Firebirds the company’s hottest selling models.<sup>54</sup> Democrats like Katz insisted that General Motors had a duty to hire and manufacture in the region.

<sup>46</sup>Mayor Bradley letter to GM CEO Robert Stempel, Aug. 16, 1991, folder 26, box 4760, TBAP.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Using the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Title III funds, the Bradley administration initiated a series of programs for displaced workers to assist with retraining and job replacement. Although these programs were intended to aid workers, the JTPA has had a mixed legacy. Scholars have argued that the JTPA contributed to the infusion of market ideology into the administration of social policy. See Dan Nuckols, “Public/Private Partnerships as Implementing Strategy: The Job Training Partnership Act,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 24, no. 2 (June 1990): 645–51; and Thomas R. Bailey, “Market Forces and Private Sector Processes in Government Policy: The Job Training Partnership Act,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 7, no. 2 (1988): 300–15.

<sup>49</sup>“Work Together or Flop Together: Recent Economic Blows Show the Need for a Public/Private Partnership,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 9, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/work-together-flop-recent-economic-blows-show/docview/281501685/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>50</sup>Mayor Bradley letter to GM CEO Robert Stempel, Aug. 19, 1991, folder 27, box 4760, TBAP.

<sup>51</sup>“Bradley Announces Major Corporation Actively Pursuing Building a Rail Car Construction Plant at the General Motors Facility,” Oct. 23, 1991, folder 1, box 4933, TBAP.

<sup>52</sup>Michael Stremfel, “Ideas Abound for the Redevelopment of GM Plant,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, Aug. 5, 1991, [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A11155024/ITBC?u=usocal\\_main&sid=bookmark-ITBC&xid=93c771ad](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A11155024/ITBC?u=usocal_main&sid=bookmark-ITBC&xid=93c771ad) (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>53</sup>Frank Clifford, “GM Stands Fast on Van Nuys Closure,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 18, 1991.

<sup>54</sup>Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (St. Paul, MN, 2014); Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Berkeley, CA, 1991).

For Katz, the scheduled closure of one of his district's longest running and most productive manufacturing firms presented an important political opportunity. In 1990, he announced a possible 1993 mayoral run, and in November 1992, he was up for re-election. A successful bid to keep the GM Van Nuys plant open—and stand up for the blue-collar workers who lived in his working-class district—would shore up his popularity. It was no wonder that Katz “made no attempt to conceal his bitterness about [GM’s] decision” at the December 17 press conference.<sup>55</sup> But Katz had detractors like Ernest Dyna of Agoura Hills who decried his seeming opportunism:

When it comes to a healthy California economy and the preservation of manufacturing jobs, our politicians are a day late and a dollar short. Typical is the sobbing of Assemblyman Richard Katz over the closure of the General Motors Van Nuys Plant, scheduled in 1992. Where was Katz in 1989, when GM was looking for help and direction as it planned its facility usage in a changing market? County Supervisor Mike Antonovich made contacts with GM’s Detroit leaders and received tentative commitments to look at electric car production as a possibility. While Richard Katz was planning gas-tax increases, and bond proposals (more taxes) for rapid transit and other schemes, other states were luring GM away with incentives and protections against runaway regulation.<sup>56</sup>

Dyna’s invective spoke for an emergent political polemic: What had caused, and who was really to blame, for the flight of industry from the city? For constituents like Dyna, moderate democrats like Richard Katz failed by not incentivizing corporations like GM to stay or by not maintaining a more pro-business stance. Environmental regulations and high taxes drove industry away and left areas like Panorama City in a state of social and economic distress. Dyna’s words reverberated for the remainder of the decade, as politicians from across the political spectrum clamored to fill the void left by heavy industry and to “revitalize” the communities left reeling from its absence.

Urban studies scholar Joel Kotkin indicted the city’s “psychological deindustrialization,” a process by which “business and political elites lose their fundamental faith in their community’s ability to compete successfully in the global economy.”<sup>57</sup> Yet based on their memorandum, task force, and public statements, neither Bradley nor his leading officials fell prey to “psychological deindustrialization.” They maintained that Los Angeles County was still a hub of industrial productivity and attempted to forestall the area’s economic erosion. Whether it was willful blindness or political maneuvering, the Bradley administration did not accept industrial flight as a predestined outcome of economic restructuring. There were still options and steps to take to ensure the continued existence of high-paying manufacturing jobs.

Some, including Kotkin, were less convinced that the retention of heavy manufacturing was worth aspiring for. At question, rather, was how the city might rebound from the era’s irreversible economic shifts and how its residents would re-emerge in the post-Fordist era.<sup>58</sup> Kotkin directed his critique toward those who “largely devalue market capitalism as a way out of the economic malaise.” As he wrote,

<sup>55</sup>“Ideas Abound.”

<sup>56</sup>Ernest Dyna, “Too Little, Too Late on GM Plant,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 24, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gm-stands-fast-on-van-nuys-closure/docview/1638529535/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>57</sup>Joel Kotkin, “Catching the Next Wave,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 11, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/catching-next-wave/docview/1641996375/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 8, 2024).

<sup>58</sup>Indeed, the flurry of comments reflected less of a concern for enticing industrial giants to stay and more a preoccupation with what would replace them and how.

No degree of revived class consciousness or government subsidy, for instance, will bring back the high-paying unionized factory jobs at Van Nuys.... Nor will the agenda of the emerging “progressive” factions or the much-talked-about coalition of “people of color” likely spark any reindustrialization. For one thing, many associated with this effort have little but contempt for even the basic principles of capitalism.<sup>59</sup>

Kotkin endorsed a vision for Los Angeles that embraced revitalization through ethnic-owned businesses, entertainment, international trade, tourism, and high-technology electronics. He argued for growth in the garment and textile industries, which, he said, “should continue to expand, fostered by a steady influx of labor, skills, and capital from overseas.”<sup>60</sup> Kotkin’s response to the city’s shifting economy did not address how the city might support its new “working class,” including many recently settled undocumented migrants filling the city’s service sector. Kotkin’s words underscored the neo-recovery partnership that would eventually create The Plant and the grafting of neoliberal ideology to community revitalization.

### **Blythe Street and the Restructuring-Generated Crisis in the Northeast San Fernando Valley**

GM’s planned closure of the Van Nuys plant came amidst a climate of economic malaise and an “increasingly negative image of the city in the national and local media.”<sup>61</sup> But no image was as pernicious as that painted by the local media and residents who denounced the blight surrounding the GM plant, especially Blythe Street. By the early 1990s, Blythe Street, a two-block residential neighborhood that ran perpendicular to Van Nuys Boulevard and the GM plant, had become a symbol of all that besieged the Northeast Valley—and by extension the city of Los Angeles—in the era of economic restructuring: “Police call Blythe a ‘supermarket’ for drug dealers. Local public health officials say it is a ‘hotbed’ for communicable diseases. Although some of the area’s apartment buildings are well-maintained, most are run-down and a few appear to be little more than dank dungeons....”<sup>62</sup>

Blythe Street was also the wellspring of the Blythe Street Locos, a gang founded in the 1980s that the media and police surveilled constantly. As one reporter described it:

If you want to get a look at the troubles bedeviling Los Angeles—the recession and gangs—this isn’t a bad place to start.... Blythe is one of those streets packed with low-rent apartments, a place where some people hang laundry to dry on a chain link fence and the occasional sofa sits abandoned at curbside. The Latino neighborhood is a mix of working poor, people on welfare and gang members.<sup>63</sup>

Disparaging and racialized portrayals of Blythe Street had saturated the pages of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Valley Daily News* for decades.<sup>64</sup> Even before the announced closure of the

<sup>59</sup>Kotkin’s comments also reveal the extent to which neoliberal economic restructuring was a racial project, designed to reify existing social hierarchies in the post-Fordist era.

<sup>60</sup>Kotkin, “Catching the Next Wave.”

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Stephanie Chavez, “Crime, Disease Plague Blythe Street: Open Drug Sales and Unsanitary Conditions Are Rampant in Van Nuys Barrio,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 24, 1985, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/crime-disease-plague-blythe-street/docview/154431030/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>63</sup>Scott Harris, “Wheels of Change Turning at Plant Site,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 6, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/wheels-change-turning-at-plant-site/docview/2047285764/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>64</sup>Jocelyn Stewart, “Apartment Building Is a Rare Refuge from Street’s Mayhem,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 24, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/apartment-building-is-rare-refuge-street-s-mayhem/docview/281702810/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

General Motors plant, Blythe Street had been the target of high-scale law enforcement, including Operation Cul-De-Sac, which involved placing barricades on street ends to deter drug trafficking.<sup>65</sup> Such contemptuous depictions of the street's residents, primarily recently settled migrants, reinforced the "Latino Threat Narrative" circulating throughout Los Angeles in the early 1990s.<sup>66</sup>

The impending closure of the General Motors plant exasperated public fears. It led one resident to call for a jail to be put in its place: "We in the West Valley know that the Van Nuys General Motors Plant is in a very high crime and dope-infested area—the perfect place to build a prison. That's where most of the crime in our Valley is, so why not house the criminals in their own area?"<sup>67</sup> Besides its abject racism, the op-ed bolstered the narrative that prisons were the remedy to deindustrialization and mass incarceration the solution to poverty.<sup>68</sup> Such a process was already afoot in other deindustrializing suburbs of Los Angeles like Lynwood, where Lockheed, which once operated and employed in the thousands, would eventually be replaced by the Lynwood Regional Justice Center.<sup>69</sup> No authority seemed to entertain the suggestion, but there were calls from community members and city officials that at least a portion of the auto plant's site be dedicated to law enforcement.<sup>70</sup>

Blythe Street typified to the public what was at risk for the community when the plant closed. Without the plant to draw workers and business, the surrounding area seemed vulnerable to even greater decline. The fate of Blythe Street, and the city's response to it in the post-1992 era, became entwined with the overall revitalization of the community and the redevelopment of the GM auto plant. Racialized and criminal depictions of Blythe Street, its residents, and its struggles obscured decades of municipal divestment in the Northeast San Fernando Valley. Perhaps Blythe Street was beset by unlawful activity, but its residents deserved far more than barricades and perpetual police surveillance. What they needed, however, was up for debate in much the same way that the public soon deliberated over its response to areas most impacted by the Los Angeles Uprising, just a year later.

### The LARZ: The Los Angeles Uprising from the Perspective of Panorama City

Given how the media skewed its coverage of the events spanning April 29–May 4, 1992, few people have a clear sense of how the Uprising impacted areas outside of South Los Angeles. The Northeast Valley, especially the immediate community surrounding the GM Van Nuys plant, was within the overall geography of the Uprising. During those six days, the

<sup>65</sup>Richard Lee Colvin, "Police to Seek Broad Powers Against Panorama City Gang," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 10, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/police-seek-broad-powers-against-panorama-city/docview/281799930/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); John Johnson, "Barricades Make a Dead End for Crime," *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 9, 1990, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/barricades-make-dead-end-crime/docview/1467014369/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024). In addition, from May 1987–July 1989, a special narcotics task force of thirteen uniformed officers from police divisions throughout the San Fernando Valley surveilled Blythe Street in search of drug dealers. See Tracey Kaplan, "Private Fund Offered to Fight Crime," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 11, 1989, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/private-fund-offered-fight-crime/docview/280803693/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

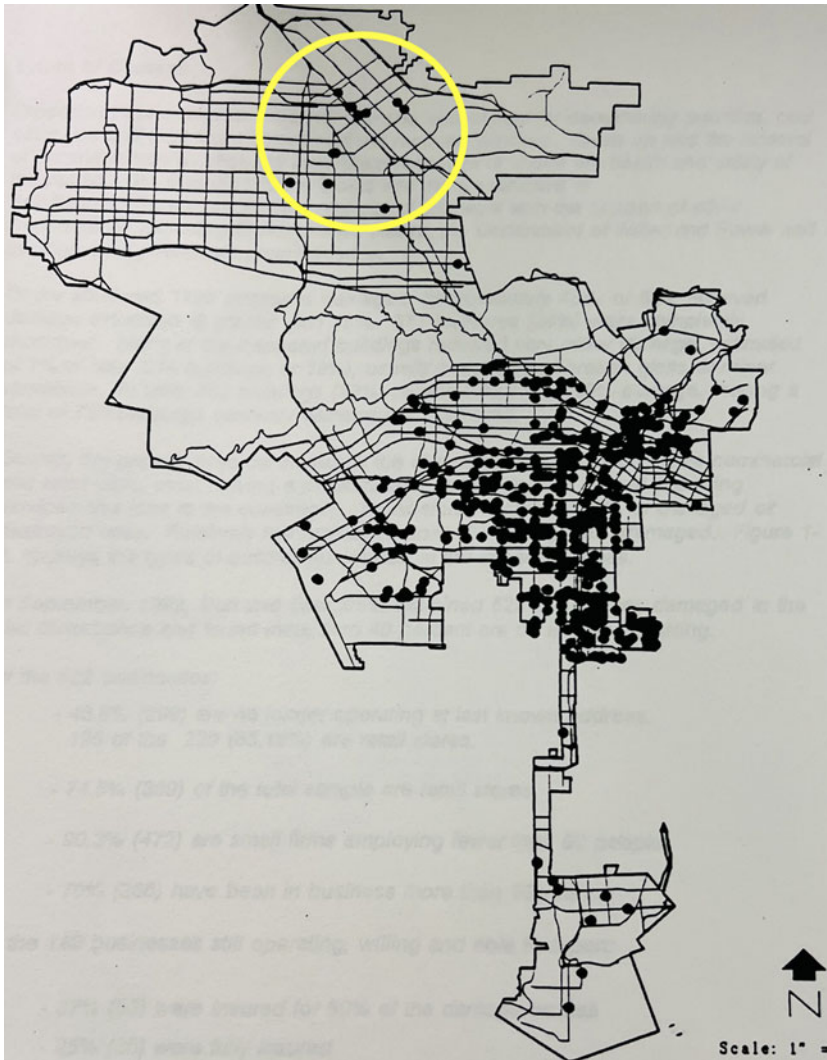
<sup>66</sup>Leo R. Chavez, *Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Palo Alto, CA, 2008).

<sup>67</sup>Joseph F. Barcarella, "Other Avenues Open for GM Plant," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 9, 1991, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/other-avenues-open-gm-plant/docview/281509594/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>68</sup>See Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA 2007).

<sup>69</sup>Michael Z. Dean, "From Lockheed to Lockdown in Lynwood: Unemployment and the Resurgence of California's Carceral State" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2022).

<sup>70</sup>Hugo Martin, "GM Project Raises Crime, Traffic Concerns," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 7, 1996.



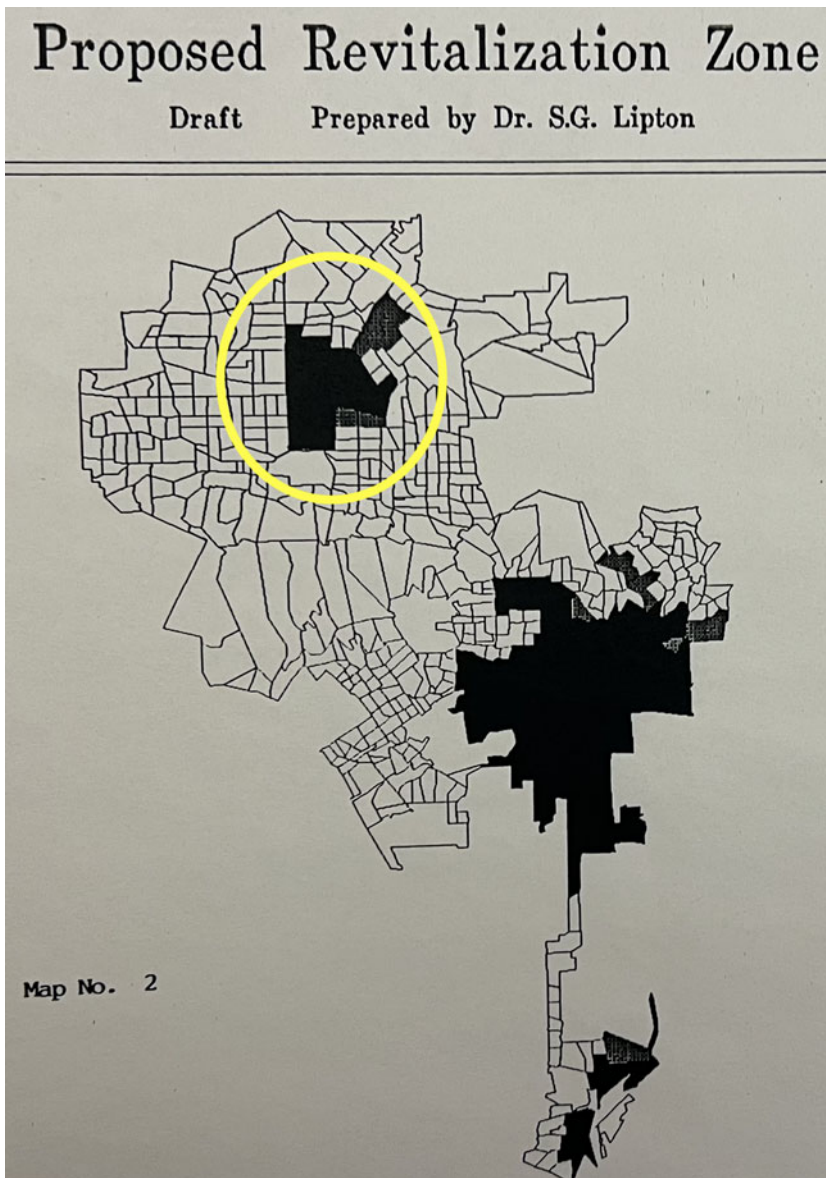
**Figure 1.** A map of the damaged building sites. The circle marks the area surrounding the GM auto plant. “Reports of the Ad Hoc Committee on Recovery and Revitalization,” *Tom Bradley Administrative Papers*, folders 18, box 825, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA.

neighborhood of Panorama City became a locus of looting and arson. In his vivid auto-ethnographic account of economic restructuring in the Northeast Valley, cultural geographer Stefano Bloch observed how during the days of the Uprising,

The National Guard surrounded the Panorama Mall even as our local convenience stores burned to the ground after being emptied of their bags of chips, cases of beer, and bootleg CDs. The symbolism of that line of guards suggested that the mall was the only thing worth saving in our neighborhood, although most of us rarely shopped there. The smoke from the fires filled our apartment and burned our eyes as news helicopters circled overhead with a constant deafening roar.<sup>71</sup>

Bloch’s recollections convey the priority given to retail spaces like the Panorama Mall. The National Guard’s flanking of the commercial center, a relic of its postwar identity as a white

<sup>71</sup>Bloch, “An Autoethnographic Account,” 386.



**Figure 2.** A map of the proposed revitalization zones. The circle marks the area surrounding the GM auto plant. “Reports of the Ad Hoc Committee on Recovery and Revitalization,” Tom Bradley Administrative Papers, folder 19, box 825, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA.

suburban enclave, demonstrated to young residents that the spaces popularized by locals (liquor and convenience stores in particular) were disposable property. By contrast, commercial institutions were structures to protect. The premium placed on the Panorama Mall during the Uprising presaged the civic outlook of the post-1992 era. It was as if the Panorama Mall was a fortress of community empowerment paving the way for revitalization in the neoliberal era.

Although news coverage of the 1992 Uprising glossed over areas like Panorama City, local and state politicians were aware that the damage extended beyond South Los Angeles (Figure 1). With Rebuild L.A., a Bradley initiative to leverage private funds to rebuild South Los Angeles, already afoot, democratic Assemblywoman Marguerite Archie-Hudson of the

state's 48th district introduced AB38X, a measure to create the Los Angeles Revitalization Zone (LARZ). LARZ was a five-year, place-based community economic development program designed to give tax breaks to businesses "that rebuild their facilities and create jobs for residents who live in the riot-torn neighborhoods."<sup>72</sup> Policy makers pursued a policy response that "focused on economic development and community self-determination through community development and small-business enterprises."<sup>73</sup>

In early September, 1992 the LARZ bill cleared the Assembly 27 to 2, leading State Senator Charles Calderon (D-Whittier) to call AB38X "the only major bill to come out of the Legislature to attempt to rebuild the community."<sup>74</sup> The bill stipulated that eligible areas were those with a zip code or a census tract that contained two or more damaged structures, that included an area zoned either commercial or industrial, and either contained or was adjacent to census tract(s) that qualify as a High Density Unemployment Area (HDUA) (Figure 2).<sup>75</sup> Tax incentives in the LARZ would include income tax credit for hiring construction workers who live in the zone and sales tax credit for the purchase of building materials to replace or repair damaged structures. In addition, banks and other lending institutions would receive a tax break on the net interest income from debt payments.<sup>76</sup>

Although the LARZ emerged in the wake of the 1992 Uprising, its provenance lay in the place-based development programs that had proliferated in the United States since the 1980s. Policies to reduce and eliminate urban poverty have been a feature of U.S. policy stretching back to the rise of industrial capitalism. But it was not until the early 1970s when British urban planner Peter Hall introduced the term "enterprise zone" as a mechanism to stimulate growth in low-income neighborhoods. Enterprise zones operated by guaranteeing low taxes and eradicating governmental interference for businesses in geographically designated areas.<sup>77</sup> They migrated to the United States in the early 1980s when Representatives Jack Kemp (R-NY) and Robert Garcia (D-NY) sponsored the Urban Development and Enterprise Act.<sup>78</sup> Throughout the 1980s, many states, including California, experimented with enterprise zones in order to generate private sector investment in economically distressed areas.<sup>79</sup> Yet in the aftermath of the 1992 Uprising, Los Angeles policy makers backed the LARZ, as many had the city's other enterprise zones, pinning faith on the private sector to ignite redevelopment and promote community repair.<sup>80</sup> At the time, John Bryant, chairman and founder of Operation Hope,

<sup>72</sup>Jerry Gillam, "Senate OKs Bill to Create Riot Revitalization Zone," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 12, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/senate-oks-bill-create-riot-revitalization-zone/docview/1729686766/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>73</sup>James H. Spencer and Paul Ong, "An Analysis of the Los Angeles Revitalization Zone: Are Place-Based Investment Strategies Effective Under Moderate Economic Conditions?" *Economic Development Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (Nov. 2004): 368–83, here 370.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>"Reports of the Ad Hoc Committee on Recovery and Revitalization," folders 18–20, box 825, TBAP.

<sup>76</sup>Spencer and Ong, "An Analysis of the Los Angeles Revitalization Zone."

<sup>77</sup>Stuart M. Butler, "Enterprise Zones: Pioneering the Inner City," *Economic Development Tools* (1981): 25–41.

<sup>78</sup>See Lily Geismer, *Left Behind: The Democrats' Failed Attempt to Solve Inequality* (New York, 2022), 143–69; Don Hirasuna and Joel Michael, Minnesota House of Representatives, *Enterprise Zones: A Review of the Economic Theory and Empirical Evidence Policy Brief*, Jan. 2005; <https://www.house.mn.gov/hrd/pubs/entzones.pdf> (accessed May 12, 2023); Jill Zuckman, "Enterprise Zone Alchemy: '90s-Style Urban Renewal: In Washington, Policy Makers Debate Whether the Idea Works, How Many Areas to Target and Which Incentives to Use," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 50 (1992): 2354–7; and Theodore R. Carter III, "Job Creation and Urban Renewal in the 1980s: The Kemp-Garcia Urban Jobs and Enterprise Zone Bill," *St. Louis University Public Law Forum* 3 (1983): 177–98.

<sup>79</sup>To date, the results of enterprise zones continue to be mixed. See Spencer and Ong, "An Analysis of the Los Angeles Revitalization Zone"; and A. H. Peters and P. S. Fisher, "State Enterprise Zones Programs: Have They Worked?" *Upjohn Institute*, Jan. 1, 2002, [https://research.upjohn.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1057&context=up\\_press&mc\\_cid=70f649e2da&mc\\_eid=UNIQID](https://research.upjohn.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1057&context=up_press&mc_cid=70f649e2da&mc_eid=UNIQID) (accessed May 12, 2023).

<sup>80</sup>"Reports of the Ad Hoc Committee on Recovery and Revitalization," folders 18–20, box 825, TBAP.

summarized the general mindset: “The inner city isn’t going to be rebuilt and revitalized without the financial community.”<sup>81</sup>

The LARZ rolled out throughout the remainder of 1992 and lasted five years. Its inclusion of the area surrounding the GM auto plant generated far less media attention than its expansion into areas scarcely, if at all, impacted by the unrest.<sup>82</sup> As it turned out, the LARZ became a controversial (and largely denounced) piece of legislation. Upon hearing that the LARZ was providing tax breaks to businesses in some of the most affluent areas of Long Beach, Assemblywoman Archie-Hudson proclaimed, “This is not what was supposed to happen.”<sup>83</sup> Although the LARZ proved controversial, it set a precedent for the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), which sought to revitalize poor and low income areas by incentivizing the business sector to redevelop abandoned land. Indeed, the LARZ coverage of Panorama City served a role in the replacement of the GM auto plant site. It inspired the area’s representatives, especially Richard Alarcón and Los Angeles Mayor, Richard Riordan, who both took office in 1993, to not only see tax-break zones as integral components of revitalization but to see them as evidence of “recovery” for residents in Los Angeles.

### “There Will be a Hole in the Valley Larger Than Hell”: The Closure of GM Van Nuys

In the weeks following the Uprising, city officials and Mayor Bradley focused on providing assistance to areas affected by the events. Meanwhile, auto workers at the General Motors auto plant in Van Nuys labored through their last summer on the assembly line.

The switches went on and the work began. Things clanged and banged and slammed, and welding torches sent huge showers of sparks into the air ... conveyor belts jerked with a hissss (sic) of steam, and fire walls and fenders ... rock and rap music from dueling radios clashed in the oily air, creating yet a second level of dissonance that became a surreal Salvador Dali world translated abruptly into sound.<sup>84</sup>

By May, some workers had retired. Others capitalized on a contract signed in 1990 between GM and the UAW that guaranteed workers’ 100 percent of their take home pay through 1993 provided they enroll in retraining programs at different educational institutions throughout the area. Auto workers signed up for classes at community colleges and vocational schools.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>81</sup>Kara Glover, “Revitalization Zone Plan Wins Lukewarm Reception,” *Los Angeles Business Journal* 15, no. 4 (1993): 6.

<sup>82</sup>Tina Griego, “Zone of Contention: Critics Blast Tax Incentives for Areas Untouched by Riots,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 11, 1993, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/zone-contention-critics-blast-tax-incentives/docview/282129133/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); Jill Levoy, “Tax Breaks’ Success in Riot-Torn Zone Unclear,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 18, 1995, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/tax-breaks-success-riot-torn-zone-unclear/docview/2030709457/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>83</sup>Griego, “Zone of Contention.”

<sup>84</sup>Al Martinez, “It’s Almost Time to Turn Out the Lights at the GM Plant in Van Nuys,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 18, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/s-almost-time-turn-out-lights-at-gm-plant-van/docview/1723953071/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>85</sup>Jeff Schnauffer, “Ex-GM Workers Flock to Classes,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 29, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/community-colleges-ex-gm-workers-flock-classes/docview/281794951/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024). Yet a plan was also in place for workers after the plant closed in August. Workers would be eligible for two educational opportunities, namely 2,800 hours of classes under a tuition assistance program at regionally accredited four-year colleges and universities, community colleges, or vocational training schools, or 1,800 hours of job-related courses that would be taught *inside the plant* by LAUSD contracted Adult and Occupational Teachers. David Rees, “Laid-Off Van Nuys Workers Crowd Classes as GM Pays for Retraining,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 30, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/laid-off-van-nuys-workers-crowd-classes-as-gm/docview/233612608/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).





**Figure 3.** Photo of the GM Van Nuys Auto Plant Memory book, distributed to employees on the plant's last day in operation. "Van Nuys Plant 8000 Van Nuys Blvd 91409" Facebook Group.

Besides investing in retraining programs, auto workers showed up to the plant with a mix of grief, denial, and fury.<sup>86</sup> *Los Angeles Times* reporter, Al Martinez, whose son-in-law was set to lose his job, rued: "There'll be a hole in the Valley larger than hell."<sup>87</sup> Workers felt a deep sense of betrayal. "It ain't right," said one twenty-eight-year veteran: "The work's going to Canada, Mexico, and the South because GM can get it done cheaper." Workers had their own interpretations of GM's decision to close their plant, but few denied that global economic restructuring had made U.S. automobile production a dying craft.<sup>88</sup> "We will become the early casualties of Bush's proposed North American Free Trade Agreement," asserted three of the original

<sup>86</sup>Al Martinez, "It's Almost Time to Turn Out the Lights," *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1992 (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); Author participant observation with UAW Local 645 workers at monthly retiree meetings Sept. 2022–Apr. 2023.

<sup>87</sup>Martinez, "It's Almost Time to Turn Out the Lights".

<sup>88</sup>Many workers reasoned that GM had closed the plant because of increasing environmental hazards in the surrounding areas. Neighbors complained incessantly about the paint fumes and pollution. Some workers believed this, and a class-action lawsuit brought against GM, were the main reasons the company pulled out of Van Nuys. See Myron Levin, "Air District to File Civil Suit Over Odors at GM Plant," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 23, 1986, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-08-23-me-15872-story.html>; Myron Levin, "Officials Aid Neighborhood Fight Against Fumes at GM," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 22, 1985, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-09-22-me-18168-story.html> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024)



Figure 4. Photo of workers lined up to see the last Camaro roll off the line. "Van Nuys Plant 8000 Van Nuys Blvd 91409" Facebook Group.



Figure 5. Memory book photo of the Soft Trim department. "Van Nuys Plant 8000 Van Nuys Blvd 91409" Facebook Group.

organizers of the Campaign to Keep Van Nuys Open.<sup>89</sup> Manuel Olimpio, a fifteen-year veteran, complained: “They gave us a medallion and a barbeque picnic. We don’t need that. We need a job.”<sup>90</sup> Cheaper labor costs, deregulation, and international competition put employees out of work. Of that, they were sure. “We’re all in our 40s. What are we going to do?” asked Joan Ochoa, a fifteen-year veteran.<sup>91</sup> Chris Dorval, a veteran worker’s answer? “Anything and probably everything.” Physical traces of workers’ resentment materialized: Cigarette butts and beer bottles were tossed into unfinished cars, and there was an unusually high rate of absenteeism.

Soon August 27, the date of closure, arrived. At work that day, employees held back tears as they exchanged hugs and addresses. Juanita Washington, a twenty-two-year veteran, said she had been crying all day. “I’m losing all of my friends. They are like your family.”<sup>92</sup> The plant manager distributed memory books resembling yearbooks and featuring classroom-style photos of each assembly department (Figure 3). Workers lined up to see the final Camaro roll off the line. For Maria Negrete, a seventeen-year veteran, it was not until that moment that she realized it was the end. Hundreds of workers signed the last Camaro, which bore a sign on its back bumper reading, “The heartbeat of America stops here.”<sup>93</sup> The closure of the last automobile assembly plant west of the Rockies symbolized the collapse of U.S. industrial dominance, a wrenching rupture with the West’s past (Figure 4).

For Jim Ealy, a twenty-one-year GM veteran, the Van Nuys plant closure was his second time walking away from friends and colleagues. He had been a transplant from Southgate. Back in 1983, Ealy had the option to continue working for GM in his hometown and seized it.<sup>94</sup> The closure of GM Van Nuys, however, put him and so many others who had yet to complete thirty years (the amount of time needed for retirement) in the position of taking a buyout, relocating to another state, or opting into retraining programs until the UAW-GM contract ended in 1993. Greg Joseph, also a Southgate transplant, tried his luck by driving to the Wichita Falls, Texas, GM plant, hoping to get off the lengthy waitlist there. Lois Booker, also from Southgate, simply worried about her Van Nuys colleagues. After the Southgate plant’s closure, she lost a friend to suicide and watched the dissolution of many friends’ marriages.

Jose Casas who had retired from the plant the year before, arrived with his mariachi band to play a Mexican folk song often heard at funerals and farewell parties.<sup>95</sup> Lingering in the parking lot, workers shared memories. Abigail Martin, for example, recalled how she was the first female employee to become pregnant while working on the line and named her son Chevy Jr. Virginia Miramontes, the first female assembly line worker, picked a rose from the bushes that adorned the front entrance of the plant: “The rose feels sad because they’ve been neglected in the same sense they’re neglecting us.” Miramontes continued, “Some of us couldn’t say goodbye to each other because we had lumps in our throats ... I’ve left a part of me here” (Figure 5).<sup>96</sup> Other workers had a slightly more sanguine outlook. In the “Fender Bender,”

<sup>89</sup>Mark Masaoka, Jake Flukers, and Pete Beltran, “The Tragedy of GM Closing,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 6, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/tragedy-gm-closing/docview/281787198/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>90</sup>Patrice Apodaca, “End of the Road for GM’s Van Nuys Plant,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 28, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/end-road-gm-s-van-nuys-plant/docview/1731594696/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>91</sup>Lisa Pope, “Final Day Arrives at GM Plant,” *Valley Daily News*, Aug. 27, 1992, page 24.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.

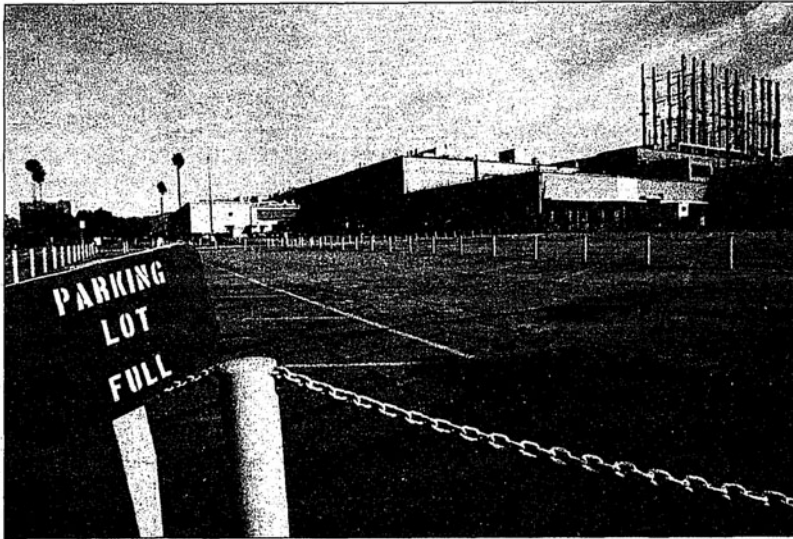
<sup>93</sup>See Andrew Warren and Tim Moore, “When Camaros and Firebirds Roamed the San Fernando Valley,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 25, 2022, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/op-ed-when-camaros-firebirds-roamed-san-fernando/docview/2706109074/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>94</sup>Lisa Pope, “Grim Goodbyes at GM,” *Valley Daily News*, August 27, 1992, page 1 (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.; Apodaca, “End of the Road for GM’s Van Nuys Plant.”

<sup>96</sup>Terri Vermuelen, “Final Car Rolls Off GM’s Last SoCal Assembly Line,” *United Press International*, Aug. 28, 1992, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1992/08/28/Final-car-rolls-off-GMs-last-SoCal-assembly-line/1005714974400/>.

Los Angeles Times **V A L L E Y**  
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**White Elephant**  
**Why nobody wants GM's empty Van Nuys plant. PAGE 4**

**BANKRUPTCY**  
 Vidcom comes to an inelegant and messy end. **PAGE 3**

**LEMON LAW**  
 A small Glendale legal firm takes on GM and wins. **PAGE 10**

Figure 6. The front page of the *Los Angeles Times* labeling the abandoned GM auto plant the city's "White Elephant." A framed photo of the article adorns the walls of the Woodland Hills office of real estate developer Dan Selleck, whose firm, Selleck Properties, eventually purchased and developed the auto plant into the commercial powerhouse the Plant. Dan Selleck text message to author.

the Local 645's newsletter, Monica from the second shift implored her "Brothers and Sisters [to] ... hold your heads high and although this is the end of the line, Be strong, think positive, new beginnings are here. It's time to move on with our families and friends. Let's keep our friendships together, don't ever let that end! For we are family you and I."<sup>97</sup>

Even though closure brought uncertainty, workers had some security thanks to the 1990 UAW-GM contract. The local establishments that depended on the plant's workforce for business, however, were less fortunate. City officials understood that every manufacturing job rippled out to create new jobs in the community. As Benjamin Reznik, the chairman of the Valley Industry and Commerce Association explained, "The closure of the GM plant is devastating for the area because each manufacturing job creates several other jobs for suppliers and service

<sup>97</sup>Fender Bender newsletter, "The End of the Line," Van Nuys Plant, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1283960911739108&set=g.485272624890829> (accessed May 8, 2023).

oriented businesses.”<sup>98</sup> Yet no individual or agency gave much consideration to the bars, liquor stores, pizza joints, or restaurants facing economic hardship once the plant shut down. The owners of the Trophy Room bar, Ray and Pearl Foster, felt the plant’s closure in a myriad of ways. Besides the loss of revenue was the loss of friendships and community: “When you’ve been around for 26 years, it’s more of a friendship loss than a business loss,” Ray exclaimed.<sup>99</sup> In the weeks after the plant closed, Opies bar owner, Flower Nguyen, an entrepreneur of Vietnamese descent, experienced a 50- to 75-percent drop in sales. More than that, she missed her friends. Shop owners like the Fosters and Nguyen had weathered the plant’s historic layoffs. But the workers had always come back. Small businesses had witnessed an older generation retire, but then came their children. The plant’s closure was definitive.

Besides enduring the emotional fallout of the plant’s shutdown, small business owners contended with an increasingly deserted area. Ever since GM put the Van Nuys plant on the “danger list,” the surrounding business corridors deteriorated. Plant closure expedited the area’s economic downturn by reducing real estate values and increasing retail vacancies. Residents of Panorama City, especially the Blythe Street community, experienced the plant closure as a form of imprisonment. First, the plant had a chain link fence enclosing its 100-acre lot. Charred wood and debris from the Uprising still scattered the neighborhood. And then, worst of all, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) encaged the entire Blythe Street community by placing concrete barriers at the east end of the street leading to the plant.<sup>100</sup> The physical injunction closed off “the neighborhood to the growing drug trade, the solicitation of prostitution, and drive by shootings. Residents had to enter and exit the neighborhood across the street from the No Trespassing sign in front of the plant’s entrance.” Evictions abounded. A year after the plant closed, the city attorney ordered a civil gang injunction against hundreds of Blythe Street residents, effectively barring them from the area to which they lay claim, renaming it as a “safe zone,” and driving gangs further north, deeper into the Panorama City/Pacoima border.<sup>101</sup>

The area’s business establishment called for private investment and a pro-business response to the plant’s closure. Richard L. Paley, executive vice president of the United Chambers of Commerce of the San Fernando Valley, insisted, “We need to have our city council promote business not negate business.”<sup>102</sup> Paley’s words reflected the outlook of California Governor, Pete Wilson, who believed that both Los Angeles and the state must rebound “business-by-business, job-by-job.”<sup>103</sup> Fortunately, the LARZ had just cleared the California Senate. And though there was still no plan for the shuttered GM plant, it appeared that conditions might conspire to make the site ripe for private sector intervention. The one hundred acres of land fell within the LARZ, but several years passed before developers took advantage of tax incentives to implement any kind of redevelopment. In the meantime, Assemblyman Richard Katz proposed the first potential replacement for the plant. Katz’s plan was a PPP to convert the auto plant into a Department of Transportation research and

<sup>98</sup>Hugo Martin, “GM Closure Also Hurts Merchants,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept.14, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gm-closure-also-hurts-merchants/docview/1723292803/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>99</sup>Ibid.

<sup>100</sup>See Paul Hoffman and Mark Silverstein, “Safe Streets Don’t Require Lifting Rights,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 11, 1993; “False Premise, False Promise: The Blythe Street Gang Injunction and Its Aftermath,” *A Report by the ACLU Foundation of Southern California*, May 1997, <https://www.scribd.com/document/99227764/False-Premise-False-Promise> (accessed May 8, 2023).

<sup>101</sup>Bloch, *Going All City*, 121.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

<sup>103</sup>Carla Rivera, “Wilson Says Restaurant is Example of Rebuilding,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 14, 1993, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/wilson-says-restaurant-is-example-rebuilding/docview/1831778845/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

development center to help private firms produce high speed-rail lines and clean-air vehicles and to develop other advanced forms of urban transit.<sup>104</sup>

By April 1993, Katz's idea had gone nowhere, and General Motors reported that there had been no specific offers on the site. The press predicted that the plant was likely to become "one of the biggest industrial real estate white elephants Los Angeles has seen" (Figure 6).<sup>105</sup> The abandoned auto plant caught the attention of real estate developer Dan Selleck, of Selleck Properties, a private Woodland Hills-based real estate brokerage that Dan, his father, and his brother, the actor Tom Selleck, opened.<sup>106</sup>

### The City's "White Elephant": The Plant Nobody Wanted

Born and raised in Van Nuys, Dan Selleck grew up knowing dozens of neighbors who worked at the GM plant. As a boy, he took field trips through the plant's body shop and was scared of all the wires, guns, and sounds inside. In 1994, when Dan saw the site bordered up and abandoned, he pondered how he might help. Yet the odds were firmly against Selleck, and any other party for that matter, who expressed interest in the shuttered plant. Other deindustrialized suburbs of Los Angeles, namely the City of Commerce, Pico Rivera, and Southgate, had attempted to redevelop areas once inhabited by heavy industry, but had little success regenerating the kind of jobs the closed manufacturing firms had provided. On the one hand, there was the city of Southgate, which had purchased the ninety-acre site GM plant for \$12 million in 1985 and sold it to a private developer. But by 1992, only two parcels boasted buildings. Developers believed it would take another five years to complete the entire redevelopment. (The Southgate plant's slow and long death and its paltry replacement helped create the conditions that resulted in the Uprising.) On the other hand, there was the City of Commerce, which had lost the Chrysler Plant, as well as the Firestone Tire & Rubber and Uniroyal plants. That city struggled until the private developer Trammell Crow converted the former industrial sector into a massive retail center called the Citadel.<sup>107</sup> The Citadel generated jobs, but, as Ira Gwin the city's Director of Community Development put it, "We've lost a lot our good-paying blue-collar workers and they've been replaced by quite a bit of office, retail, and low-paying, non-union warehouse workers."<sup>108</sup> With the Citadel in mind as a model, real estate developers in the San Fernando Valley envisioned a retail complex or distribution center for the GM plant replacement.

A year and a half after closure, the one-hundred acre site still lay shuttered without any redevelopment prospects in the pipeline.<sup>109</sup> Local politicians and GM remained hopeful that a manufacturing firm would purchase the site while real estate brokers pushed for its conversion into a retail center. Councilman Richard Alarcón voiced concern: "We could swing some kind of retail operation in the near future. But we probably would lose in the long run."<sup>110</sup> He worried

<sup>104</sup>Hugo Martin, "Closed GM Plant May Be Research Site," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 4, 1993, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/closed-gm-plant-may-be-research-site/docview/1831960131/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>105</sup>Patrice Apodaca, "Site of Old GM plant Is Facing a Rocky Road," *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 27, 1993, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/site-old-gm-plant-is-facing-rocky-road/docview/1831819378/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>106</sup>Dan Selleck, interview by Julia Brown-Bernstein, Mar. 6, 2023, transcript, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>107</sup>"The Citadel to Rise at Former Tire Plant," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 22, 1987, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/citadel-rise-at-former-tire-plant/docview/810310851/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); Leon Whiteson, "Citadel of Commerce," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 1, 1991.

<sup>108</sup>Patrice Apodaca, "Van Nuys Faces Tough Road in Finding a Buyer for GM Plant," *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 28, 1993, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/citadel-commerce/docview/1638584712/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>109</sup>Ibid.

<sup>110</sup>Russ Britt, "Still No takers for Local Plant Site," *Valley Daily News*, Oct. 10, 1993, 3.

about the impact retail would have on other businesses, not to mention that commercial development would funnel thousands into low-paying non-unionized labor.<sup>111</sup> As a freshman councilmember, Alarcón brought new energy and a bevy of young staff members to confront the challenges facing the 7th district. Yet he also hoped that the Pacoima Enterprise Zone and the LARZ—which no city official from the San Fernando Valley had yet to leverage in earnest for revitalization purposes—would finally trigger economic recovery.<sup>112</sup> District Seven had the lowest annual household income in the Valley and the highest number of multi-unit family housing. Alarcón looked to tax-incentivized development programs as at least one, if not the main, catalyst for community revitalization.<sup>113</sup> As Jim Lites of the state Assembly Taxation and Revenue Committee put it, “Everyone wants a zone, it’s the ‘in’ thing.”<sup>114</sup>

And then, the Valley shook. At 4:31 am on January 17, 1994, residents of the San Fernando Valley—and the entire Los Angeles County—were suddenly jostled out of sleep by a 6.7-magnitude earthquake. The damage wreaked by the 1994 Northridge earthquake was unfathomable for even those most inured to the region’s shifting plates. It caused over fifty-seven fatalities, over \$20 billion in damages, and over \$40 billion in economic loss.<sup>115</sup> Official response to the earthquake, not all that dissimilar from the 1992 Uprising, revealed how vital private sector assistance had become within the city’s “ecology of fear” and its vision of social policy, or “disaster capitalism” as some put it.<sup>116</sup> On July 12, 1994, the L.A. City Council approved a plan to include the former GM plant site in its “Northridge Quake Recovery Zone.” The recovery zone granted the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) latitude to use property taxes from recovery areas to bankroll bond measures for public improvements and provide loans to quake victims.<sup>117</sup>

Additionally, any recovery zone, CRA-backed redevelopment project would utilize tax increment financing (TIFs).<sup>118</sup> TIFs performed two critical functions. First, they allowed for redevelopment projects to be funded through speculative future tax revenues. In other words, redevelopment projects could use the promise of future profits to pay for the project. Second, TIFs incentivized “municipalities toward private, commercial development rather than public, residential development.”<sup>119</sup> Placing the former GM site within the earthquake recovery zone—and, therefore, available for CRA, tax-increment-financed projects—made the site much more attractive to private developers who watched as GM struggled to sell its shuttered Van Nuys plant.

Yet given the CRA’s controversial history in the city, several critics railed against how much power the recovery zone would vest in the agency. Beyond the repercussions of TIFs, some feared that the recovery proposal would permit redevelopment officials to use eminent domain

<sup>111</sup>Russ Britt, “Sale to City Is Only One Option,” *Valley Daily News*, Mar. 10, 1994.

<sup>112</sup>Hugo Martin, “Alarcón Brings New Vigor to 7<sup>th</sup> District,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 25, 1993.

<sup>113</sup>“Alarcón Hopeful on Post-GM Jobs,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1994, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/alarcon-hopeful-on-post-gm-jobs-deals-not-done/docview/1973868875/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>114</sup>Jill Levoy, “Tax Breaks’ Success in Riot-Torn Zone Unclear,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 1995, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/tax-breaks-success-riot-torn-zone-unclear/docview/2030709457/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

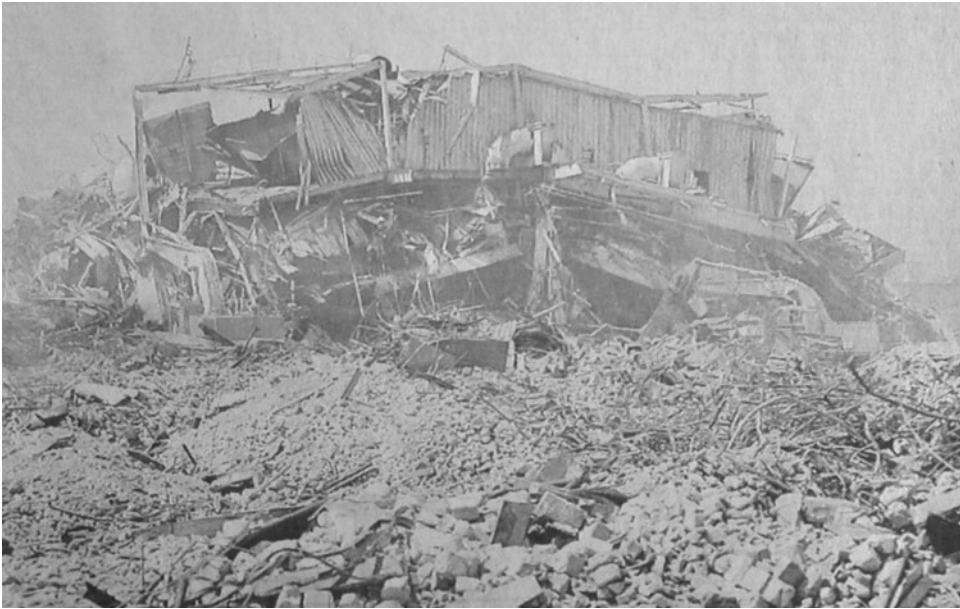
<sup>115</sup>California Department of Conservation, “Northridge Earthquake, January 17, 1994,” <https://www.conservation.ca.gov/cgs/earthquakes/northridge> (accessed May 20, 2023).

<sup>116</sup>Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York, 2022).

<sup>117</sup>A. Leonard Smith to Gary Mendoza, Nov. 20, 1996, box 764738, Executive Office of Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa Collection, Los Angeles City Archives and Records Center, Los Angeles, CA [hereafter Villaraigosa Collection].

<sup>118</sup>Tax increment financing (TIF) began in the postwar period through the passage of Proposition 18. But by the 1990s, it had become one of the most popular means to fund urban redevelopment. See Adams, “New Life, New Vigor, and New Values.”

<sup>119</sup>Adams, “New Life, New Vigor, and New Values,” 58.



**Figure 7.** Photo of the demolished auto plant from the *Valley Daily News*. “Van Nuys Plant 8000 Van Nuys Blvd 91409” Facebook Group.

powers to condemn homes and businesses. As one critic put it, “When you recover, you don’t recover by taking everybody’s homes and businesses away.”<sup>120</sup> The statement illustrated the crux of L.A.’s approach to 1990s deindustrialization and social unrest. What exactly did it mean “to recover”? Did recovery mean redevelopment through an influx of private dollars into impoverished communities and of service-oriented businesses that paid meager wages, but at least provided jobs? It seemed that few politicians questioned recovery in the non-economic sense. To what extent was recovery an effective endeavor? If industrial jobs were not coming back, then how could revitalization still provide residents a sense of belonging (as the GM plant had for its employees and local business owners), as well as stable, livable wages for the area’s residents?

In the summer of 1994, GM finally reported receiving several offers for the site. One of those offers came from the city of Los Angeles itself, which offered to purchase the site via a nonprofit in exchange for a series of tax breaks. GM held out for a higher bidder but lowered the asking price from \$50 to \$30 million.<sup>121</sup> With both the LARZ and the Recovery Zone in place, the GM site was more appealing to private developers.<sup>122</sup> Dan Selleck saw his opening. For the site, he envisioned a mixed-use, part commercial, part light industrial complex. The large, boxy parcel of land seemed destined for the increasingly popular “power center” of big box chains like Home Depot or OfficeMax. The population density of the Panorama City community was

<sup>120</sup>Hugo Martin, “GM Plant Tabbed for ‘Recovery Area’ Plan,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1994, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gm-plant-tabbed-recovery-area-plan/docview/1973934854/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>121</sup>“Alarcón Hopeful on Post-GM Jobs, But Deal’s Not Done in a Day,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1994, page 5; Patrice Apodaca, “Asking Price for GM Plant Drops,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1994, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/asking-price-gm-plant-drops/docview/1973967472/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>122</sup>Ron Galperin, “Special Zones Offer Firms Tax Breaks and Other Incentives,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 30, 1994, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/special-zones-offer-firms-tax-breaks-other/docview/1984310154/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).





**Figure 8.** The “power center,” The Plant. The only remnant of its history as an auto plant can be seen in the Mall marquee, styled in the image of a car insignia. Photo by Julia Brown-Bernstein, November 10, 2022, Los Angeles, CA.

also appealing.<sup>123</sup> Dan recognized an amenable climate for private redevelopment. GM had done its due diligence by clearing contaminated soil and mitigating any environmental hazards.<sup>124</sup> The city of Los Angeles, especially under Republican Mayor Richard Riordan, was eager for GM to sell the property and offered to expedite the process by ensuring that permitting and zoning would not stall in City Hall. At the time, Rocky Delgadillo, an aide to Mayor Riordan, stated, “We want something to happen there as soon as possible.”<sup>125</sup> By May 1995,

<sup>123</sup>See Sam Enriquez, “Quintessential Suburb Is No More,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1992, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/quintessential-suburb-is-no-more/docview/1731582705/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); John Schwada, “The ’80s: Urbanization, Latinization, Traffic, Slow Growth, The Arts,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 31, 1989, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/80s/docview/1150318109/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>124</sup>Selleck interview.

<sup>125</sup>Henry Chu, “Abandoned GM Plant in Van Nuys May Be Developed,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1995, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/abandoned-gm-plant-van-nuys-may-be-developed/docview/2021885400/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

rumors swirled that the sale of the GM plant was “imminent.”<sup>126</sup> By June, the deal was “close.” By February 1996, it was done.<sup>127</sup> Dan Selleck’s firm, Selleck Properties, would develop the commercial side with retail stores and a multiplex movie theater. Voit Cos, a private developer responsible for the Woodland Hills Warner Center, would take on the industrial element. The city would fund the construction of a new police substation, also to be housed on the parcel, while GM would retain around twenty-seven acres for a vehicle emissions testing center. All parties were content with the project, and as Dan Selleck later reflected, “Everyone was coming from the right place.”<sup>128</sup>

Just as residents, journalists, and public intellectuals surfaced to editorialize the closure of the GM auto plant, the announcement of its replacement invited a whole new round of social commentary from dailies like the *Los Angeles Times*:

For years, the General Motors plant in Panorama City symbolized a community full of optimism and opportunity. When the plant shut down in 1992, after years of scaling back production and workers, the vacant complex turned quickly to a symbol of a community on the skids. But the Van Nuys Boulevard site may yet again serve as an engine of revival.<sup>129</sup>

If the closure of the auto plant had marked the “death” of the San Fernando Valley’s manufacturing economy, the commercial center signified “new life.”<sup>130</sup> The commercial center offered “a reason for neighbors to believe,” a “boost for a depressed community,” and a “shot in the arm.”<sup>131</sup> Indeed, developers claimed that the commercial center would create at least 2,000 new jobs in the “economically beleaguered area,” while the police substation would reduce “crime.”<sup>132</sup> Mayor Riordan stated that the “GM site will send a message of recovery.”<sup>133</sup>

<sup>126</sup>Henry Chu, “Sale of Shuttered GM Plant in Van Nuys Reportedly Imminent,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1995, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/sale-shuttered-gm-plant-van-nuys-reportedly/docview/2021885218/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>127</sup>Hugo Martin and Henry Chu, “Deal Is ‘Close’ on GM Plant, Official Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1995, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/deal-is-close-on-gm-plant-official-says/docview/2030580410/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); Hugo Martin, “Project Means New Future for GM Site,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 6, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/project-means-new-future-gm-site/docview/2047316185/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); Rick Orlov, “Deal Reached on Developing GM Property,” *Valley Daily News*, Feb. 6, 1996, 1.

<sup>128</sup>Selleck interview.

<sup>129</sup>“There’s Life After GM,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 18, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/there-s-life-after-gm/docview/2047736631/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>130</sup>“New Life for a Dead Factory,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 8, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-life-dead-factory/docview/2044260344/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>131</sup>Scott Harris, “Wheels of Change at the Plant Site,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 6, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/wheels-change-turning-at-plant-site/docview/2047285764/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); Efrain Hernandez Jr., “Reaction: Hesitant since Details are Pending, Business Owners, Neighbors Nevertheless Think Deal Will Benefit Area” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 6, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/reaction-hesitant-since-details-are-pending/docview/2047315256/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); “There’s Life After GM”; “A Happy Ending at GM Site,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 8, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/happy-ending-at-gm-site/docview/2047713212/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>132</sup>Hugo Martin, “Alarcon Could Get Campaign Mileage Out of GM Site,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 9, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/alarcon-could-get-campaign-mileage-out-gm-site/docview/2044276277/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>133</sup>Hugo Martin, “Center at Ex-GM Site on Course,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 2, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/center-at-ex-gm-site-on-course/docview/2044214590/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

Local residents agreed. As Greg Gagnon stated, “It’s better than having open land sitting there.... Any new businesses in Panorama City should help. At least it opens new jobs ... hopefully.”<sup>134</sup> Small business owners, who had lost substantial profits when the plant closed, like El Taco Loco owners Antonio and Hermina Ramirez, were optimistic that the commercial development would bring back some percentage of their proceeds.

Yet as much as social commentary emphasized the retail complex’s economic potential—and supported the proposed police substation—many critics also noted that the “tenants won’t be creating any high paying jobs.”<sup>135</sup> The commercial development would generate jobs for residents, first through construction and then through retail, but neither would bring the job security, retirement benefits, or high wages that unionized industrial labor had brought the auto plant workers decades before. In response, Alarcón and the center’s developers highlighted its light industrial component, a slight concession to the demands of labor advocates who knew that commercial development could never fully replace what they had lost.

Meanwhile, plans continued in “first gear” at the GM site. The neo-recovery partnership between Riordan’s administration, Selleck Properties, Voit Cos, and General Motors ensured that no part of the renovation got bogged down in red tape. Tractors razed the plant in 1997. Recalling the sight of demolition, former auto worker Alex Gomez said he cried. The rubble just got to him (Figure 7).<sup>136</sup>

Although razing the site was the first step, there were not sufficient funds from private developers, nor the requisite infrastructure, to construct a mixed commercial/industrial power center. The neo-recovery partnership then turned to the federal Economic Development Agency (EDA) for help. In addition to the \$9,158,123 allocated by the city, the partnership requested \$4,000,000 of Earthquake Assistance funds from the EDA.<sup>137</sup> The EDA funds would be used to construct four lanes of traffic to enter and exit the center with ease; to improve grading, sewage, storm drains, and water; and to run underground power conduits.<sup>138</sup> In its grant proposal, the city of Los Angeles reinforced the narrative that retail development was tantamount to community empowerment and recovery: “The GM project is critical to the revitalization efforts of the San Fernando Valley. The proposed project will benefit the Northeast San Fernando revitalization efforts through the attraction of permanent business.... The project is symbolic in its message to the San Fernando Valley business community due to the retention and creation of 2,000 highly sustainable jobs.”<sup>139</sup> The underlying message of the grant proposal was that the in-progress commercial center was “critical” to the community’s revitalization. Revitalization was thus tied to the attraction and permanence of private business. The narrative had changed since Bradley’s days when community pride meant that children aspired for manufacturing jobs *in their communities*, or when companies produced goods close to their biggest markets. As a spokesperson for the Voit company put it, “I think that particular part of the Valley have heard enough about the downers, whether it’s the earthquake, the riots, or plant closings ... this is an example of our faith in this community.”<sup>140</sup> To be sure, retail created jobs. But South Los Angeles in the aftermath of the Uprising illustrated the limits of private sector investment. Rebuild L.A., Mayor Bradley’s five-year plan to harness private funds for community repair in South Los Angeles, had been a categorical disappointment, because, as one journalist put

<sup>134</sup>Hernandez, “Deal.”

<sup>135</sup>Ibid.

<sup>136</sup>Alex Gomez, interview by Julia Brown-Bernstein, September 27, 2022, transcript, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>137</sup>“U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration Correspondence,” box 764738, Villaraigosa Collection.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid.

<sup>140</sup>Patrice Apodaca, “Developers at Home with GM Sites Risks,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 12, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/developers-at-home-with-gm-site-s-risks/docview/2047967080/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

it, “Rebuild L.A. was trickle-down economics in a non-profit.”<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, once GM had finished cleaning the site, tenants like Home Depot, Babies “R” Us, Ross Dress for Less, Party City, and Mann Multiplex Theater started to lease at the site (Figure 8).<sup>142</sup> New “sustainable jobs” to revitalize the community could be found at big box stores or a multiplex movie theater.

### The Plant Comes to Life

On September 28, 1998, the first store, Party City, opened at The Plant.<sup>143</sup> Those involved in the center’s development praised it as a site of “replanted hopes.”<sup>144</sup> It proved what was possible when a municipality partnered with private investors to revitalize a deindustrialized community sorely in need of resources. Yet the irony of The Plant as a replacement for the GM plant was not lost on former auto workers. For instance, Nelson Belanger, a thirty-year GM veteran who had earned \$20 an hour while on the assembly line, came out of retirement to take a job at Home Depot making about \$8 hourly.<sup>145</sup> There was no denying that “revitalization” did not mean commensurate employment or economic security. But a job was a job.

The Plant catered to the needs of younger generations of Valley residents who utilized it for ordinary retail purposes. As one reporter put it, “Today, some of the young parents roaming the aisles of Home Depot or Babies ‘R’ Us at the former site of the GM factory know nothing of the dreary days after the plant closed in 1992, taking 2,600 jobs with it.”<sup>146</sup> In the early days of The Plant, the press emphasized its low crime rates (even though the police substation never materialized) and its community feel as a “popular destination” for families. Teenagers and young adults patronized The Plant for its arcade and multiplex theater. Dean Mortelli, born and raised in Van Nuys, went to The Plant in the summer of 1999 to see the film *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*.<sup>147</sup> He had heard that The Plant was once the site of the famed GM auto plant, but that history seemed “ancient” by the end of the 1990s. Indeed, over the course of just a decade, the Northeast Valley’s local economy scarcely bore physical traces of its industrial past.

But the question remained: did The Plant, with its 300,000 square feet of retail/shopping center space, 520,000 of light industrial space, and 3,700-seat movie theater *revitalize* the area? What, in the end, did revitalization mean in the neoliberal era? Richard Alarcón and Dan Selleck were proud of what they accomplished through the neo-recovery partnership that brought The Plant to fruition. For liberals like Alarcón, Selleck, and even Joel Kotkin, who had envisaged the San Fernando Valley’s shift to the service economy, there was no

<sup>141</sup>See Elizabeth Hinton, *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion* (New York, 2021); Melissa Chadburn, “The Destructive Force of Rebuild L.A.,” *Curbed LA*, Apr. 27, 2017, <https://la.curbed.com/2017/4/27/15442350/1992-los-angeles-riots-rebuild-la> (accessed May 19, 2023).

<sup>142</sup>Hugo Martin, “Mann to Build Theaters on Former GM Site in Van Nuys,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 4, 1996, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/mann-build-theaters-on-former-gm-site-van-nuys/docview/2047991605/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); Darrell Satzman, “6 Retailers Agree to Join Valley Project,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 15, 1997, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/6-retailers-agree-join-valley-project/docview/2110338186/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024); Hugo Martin, “GM Project Gets into High Gear,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1997, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gm-project-gets-into-high-gear/docview/2100866461/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>143</sup>Jill Levoy, “First Store Opens on Former Site of GM Plant,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 25, 1998, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/1st-store-opens-on-former-site-gm-plant/docview/2112143005/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>144</sup>Sue Fox, “Replanted Hopes,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 27, 1999, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/replanted-hopes/docview/2136492009/se-2?accountid=14749> (accessed Jan. 10, 2024).

<sup>145</sup>Ibid.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid.

<sup>147</sup>Dean Mortelli, interview by Julia Brown-Bernstein, Nov. 19, 2022, transcript, Los Angeles, CA.

way to return to the region's postwar manufacturing dominance. The neo-recovery partnership had decoupled the imperative that goods be produced where they were sold. Community revitalization meant service employment, and there were things far worse than that. Yet for long-term residents of Panorama City, The Plant was a site that nobody who actually lived in the area used: "What are we going to do," one local asked poignantly: "sit at the California Pizza Kitchen, or whatever is there, and pretend like we're living our best life?"<sup>148</sup>

## Conclusion

The conversion of the GM auto plant to the commercial power center The Plant may be a parable. It speaks to the recent history of hundreds of deindustrializing areas in the throes of the late twentieth century's "next shift."<sup>149</sup> As the historian Gabriel Winant has forcefully demonstrated in his account of late-twentieth-century Pittsburgh, the collapse of industrial employment in the rustbelt progressed in lockstep with the rise of the region's low-wage, and practically invisible, care economy and its workers. The privatized welfare benefit system wrangled out of the New Deal Order inbuilt the structures that have spawned a healthcare system staffed by low-income women of color. At first blush, the sectoral transformation that undergirded the GM auto plant's conversion into The Plant mirrors the "shift" Winant vividly depicts. The groundwork for the rise of a largely immigrant-driven service economy in the suburban San Fernando Valley had already been laid by the postwar "consumers' republic," access to which Reutherite unionism had purportedly guaranteed the auto plant's workforce.<sup>150</sup> It had also been facilitated, moreover, by postwar immigration reform—both the 1965 and 1986 immigration acts—which increased the population of undocumented immigrants who soon filled the area's low-wage labor force.<sup>151</sup>

Yet deeper analysis of the forces that brought The Plant to life, and which assisted the region's shift from an industrial to a service economy, reflects something more akin to the ethos of "cheap" that historian Bryant Simon brings to bear in his retelling of the horrific 1991 fire at the Imperial Foods poultry factory in Hamlet, North Carolina.<sup>152</sup> In that case, the neoliberal imperative of cheap labor and cheap goods, not to mention corporate greed, led to the death of twenty-five factory workers and exposed the sheer depravity of late American capitalism and the toll it inflicts on workers, predominantly those of color.

The neo-recovery partnership that brought The Plant to life was, arguably, not motivated by the same rapacity that led to the incineration of the Imperial Foods poultry plant. Certainly those involved seemed to believe that The Plant was a creative, largely beneficial antidote to the area's downward-spiraling economy. But historical vantage reveals that The Plant, with its shortage of labor protections and economic mobility, was community revitalization "on the cheap." Rather than revitalize the area by expanding the social citizenship of industrial workers, their families, and a growing low-income and immigrant population, the neo-recovery partnership that brought The Plant to life promulgated a brand of community revitalization in the Northeast San Fernando Valley that deepened the pockets of private investors, while further impoverishing the area's working-class inhabitants. It is this model of community revitalization

<sup>148</sup>Stefano Bloch, interview by Julia Brown-Bernstein, Mar. 8, 2023, notes, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>149</sup>Gabriel Winant, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America* (Cambridge, MA, 2021). While Winant focuses on the rise of the care economy in Pittsburgh, this article explores another model, the rise of the service economy, in a region heavily impacted by immigration policy in the 1990s.

<sup>150</sup>Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003).

<sup>151</sup>See Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ, 2004); and Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

<sup>152</sup>Bryant Simon, *The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, and Cheap Lives* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020).

that appears to have swept across deindustrializing urban regions such as the San Fernando Valley—those that were not once dominated by one main industry, like steel in Pittsburgh, but rather by a plethora of industries including aerospace and automotive firms.

Unlike in Winant's chronicle of Pittsburgh's "next shift," those who filled the ranks of the Northeast San Fernando Valley's burgeoning service economy were not necessarily the wives of the displaced auto workers, African American women, or Afro-Caribbean immigrants, though they certainly included many Latinx immigrant women. Rather, those who joined the payrolls of The Plant's Home Depot, Babies "R" Us, or its multiplex theater were former workers themselves or, more commonly, their children.<sup>153</sup> If employment at the GM auto plant in Van Nuys was a form of generational wealth, and cultural capital, that parents passed down to their children, The Plant helped curtail the upward mobility of the area's largely nonwhite population. Children of former industrial workers would increasingly have to look outside of their community for career advancement and economic opportunity. For a generation of Northeast Valley residents, community revitalization meant leaving, not staying, in their community to find jobs that might proffer the relative stability their parents enjoyed as workers at GM Van Nuys. Reflecting on the transformation of many of the area's former manufacturing plants into sprawling shopping centers, Ernesto Ayala, a life-long Pacoima resident, exclaimed, "How is that a gift to our community?"<sup>154</sup>

Driving past The Plant today, all that remains of its automotive past is a marquee styled in the fashion of a car insignia, as if to say that The Plant was the auto plant's "natural" successor. The Plant's glimmering marquee obscures the fact that its existence was the result of strategic and calculated, if also historically contingent, decisions made by ordinary people. And yet, the lessons are in the details. Historians have often critiqued the study of neoliberalism as abstraction. Or, as the historian Julia Ott contends, "We should not treat neoliberalism as if it possessed a pre-determined historical trajectory or an essential nature."<sup>155</sup> If we are to understand the "forces and circumstances on the ground that legitimated [neoliberalism] and made it popularly appealing," then we cannot ignore sites like the former GM auto plant in Van Nuys. The neoliberal order did not solely emerge from the pockets of billionaires, financial institutions, or think tanks. The non-elite history of neoliberalism, and how local politicians, and their constituents, gradually succumbed to its dominance, is, perhaps, our best vista into how neoliberal ideology gained hegemony in the United States. The story of how one highly productive auto plant turned into a standard fare commercial center becomes emblematic of the broader dynamics of neoliberalism and the manifold processes that conspire to give it legitimacy.

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<sup>153</sup> "Current and Projected Employee Data, OfficeMax, 7872 Van Nuys Blvd.," Oct. 22, 1999, box 764738, Villaraigosa Collection; "Current and Projected Employee Data, Hometown Buffet, 7868 Van Nuys Blvd.," Dec. 1, 1999, box 764738, Villaraigosa Collection; "Current and Projected Employee Data, Babies "R" Us, 7886 Van Nuys Blvd.," Dec. 18, 1991, box 764738, Villaraigosa Collection; "Current and Projected Employee Data, Home Depot, 7870 Van Nuys Blvd.," undated, Villaraigosa Collection.

<sup>154</sup> Ernesto Ayala, interview by Julia Brown-Bernstein, Oct. 1, 2023, transcript, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>155</sup> Sugrue and Diamond, *Neoliberal Cities*, 5.