

Re: Building the Past— Cultural Heritage, Race and Postcolonial Los Angeles

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Introduction: Locating the Postcolonial

On January 6, 1995, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony announced the intent of the Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese to raze and replace the Cathedral of St. Vibiana, the existing Catholic Seat, with a new \$45 million cathedral complex.¹ The Cardinal's decision to rebuild the cathedral could have easily been seen as just another project feeding the area's current building boom.² However, amidst this activity, a debate emerged focused upon the largely forgotten cathedral that pitted the Los Angeles Conservancy (LAC) and the preservation community against the Catholic Church and its supporters in a battle over the cultural identity of the city.

Threatened with demolition, St. Vibiana's became a widely publicized topic of discussion due, in large part, to the efforts of the LAC. St. Vibiana's is one of downtown's oldest structures; the small Spanish Baroque cathedral first opened in April of 1876 and it is one of the few buildings to have endured the city's transformation from Mexican pueblo to American metropolis. Additionally, St. Vibiana's represents, for the preservation community, the first monument to Anglo-American Los Angeles: St. Vibiana's was a major component of the "Second Los Angeles"—of an early era of urbanization following California's American occupation and annexation.³ However, for the Catholic Church of the 1990s, St. Vibiana's was more of a hindrance than an asset; citing liturgical, spatial, and structural limitations, the archdiocese made plans to rebuild its cathedral to meet its contemporary needs.

While St. Vibiana's is no longer threatened with demolition—downtown developer, Tom Gilmore, recently bought the former cathedral and its adjacent buildings as a part of a \$32 million dollar project envisioned as the Old Bank District—the saga remains an interesting study in urban cultural production.⁴ In this sense, the debates surrounding St. Vibiana's involved more than simply the loss of an historic building. At stake were issues concerning the cultural heritage of the city as well as the politics of identity that were activated through such debates. This paper traces the cultural landscape surrounding St. Vibiana's in order to illustrate how questions of identity, race, and ethnicity intersect with contemporary urban revitalization processes. By engaging actors involved on both sides of the preservation debates in conversations concerning their goals, through careful readings of printed accounts concerning St. Vibiana's in both the local press and documents internal to local organizations, and through archival investigations, I have begun to unearth a history of St. Vibiana's shaped by subtle yet persistent colonial legacies now reactivated in the present. Ultimately, this (post)colonial framework illustrates the effects of cultural politics upon the contemporary urban landscape despite efforts to overcome past injustices.

Struggling to Find a Home

Ideas of home and culture often lie at the core of movements to rebuild urban spaces; in this sense, these place-based struggles involve the politics of identity and inform notions of community, identity, class, race, and gender.⁵ This is, in part, a result of the penchant for historicism introduced postmodernity; history has often become a reservoir of references in an era marked by spatial upheaval and social uncertainty.⁶ In many cases, historicism has become a form of urban crutch; the production of historical elements under the guise of cultural and urban heritage has helped to fill-in gaps left by the rapid pace of change in contemporary urban life. Here, the heritage industry, in both tourism and urban development, serves as an important tool with which to mitigate crisis. In Los Angeles, such debates also involve processes of negotiation between Self and Other initiated by American occupation in 1846. As Los Angeles entered into the later half of the 19th century, conscious efforts were made to distance the new American town from its pueblo past; this millennial unease has resurfaced as Los Angeles confronts a global era.

In this sense, the St. Vibiana's saga represents a contemporary moment in the on-going struggles between Anglo and Latino LA that have shaped notions of home and heritage in the city. Fundamentally, this struggle is evidence of the city's postcolonial condition; however, postcoloniality cannot be understood simply as a condition of having at one time been colonized by a distant metropole—it is also a condition in which persistent colonial legacies re-articulate themselves in the present. Colonial formations know few geographic boundaries and what was once seen as characteristic of the Third World is now readily found in the so-called First. This is particularly true of cities like Los Angeles—a city commonly viewed as one of the first Third World cities in the US.⁷ Given these circumstances, the task becomes one of unearthing colonial formations in the present; in this case, the St. Vibiana's story illustrates how often mundane notions of cultural heritage are tied to the politics of place.

(post)Colonial Confrontations

After a year and half of often heated exchanges between the Catholic Church and the LAC, the debates surrounding St. Vibiana's came to a head: on Saturday June 1, 1996, cranes began to dismantle the embattled cathedral's belltower and, by 1:00 PM that afternoon, the cross and cupola were laid to rest in the parking lot next to the church. This sent the LAC scrambling to halt the demolition process by securing a temporary restraining order. However, soon after the belltower incident, the Catholic Church removed all artifacts, including the St.

Vibiana's relic, from the former cathedral and reduced its services. Ultimately, the church proper was closed in May of 1996 and, soon after, the church was closed permanently.

Despite the Catholic Church's long-standing plans to demolish St. Vibiana's, the LAC refused to allow the destruction of the dormant cathedral to proceed.⁸ Again, for the LAC, to lose St. Vibiana's would be to lose a major part of the city's past—a part of “the earliest initiative of the Anglo culture in the context of the city's Spanish and Mexican heritage.”⁹ Therefore, St. Vibiana's marks, in physical form, the beginning of the process of transformation from one cultural landscape to another—from Mexican pueblo to American metropolis. The Catholic Church, however, wants a grand new cathedral with which to reassert its presence in both the physical and cultural landscapes of the city. The opposing views centered on St. Vibiana's illustrate the lingering effects of colonial operations in contemporary Los Angeles; the arguments both pro and con frame the role of the former cathedral and its replacement in terms clearly tied to the politics of identity of LA. However, in each case, the (post)colonial legacies of St. Vibiana's, the Catholic Church, and Los Angeles have failed to enter into the debate. Both sides envision their respective projects as pivotal components of the city's urban and cultural identity: for the Catholic Church, a prestigious new cathedral will bolster the image of the church and the city; for the LAC, the retention of St. Vibiana's will symbolically mark a part of the city's cultural heritage in the present.

That cultural identity is a factor in the debates surrounding St. Vibiana's is not surprising—the production of cultural identity in the contemporary city is a hallmark of the *condition of postmodernity*.¹⁰ However, the debates surrounding St. Vibiana's also illustrate how the politics of identity are deactivated through what might seem to be ordinary architectural and/or urban practices. Contrary to popular belief, Los Angeles is a city deeply tied to a particular sense of history—to a version of cultural heritage that arose following American occupation in the mid 1800s. In this sense, the city often described as having little respect for the past is actually a city in which the past has been and continues to be of vital importance: the establishment of Los Angeles as an American town required both a reconstruction of the past as well as a redistribution of historical references in order to secure and maintain colonial control. History, then, has been an important factor in the politics of identity in LA since the early days of US military occupation and, therefore, must be understood as “one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked.”¹¹

Additionally, the history of Los Angeles is the history of a space shaped by American imperial expansion. While colonialism is generally understood in terms of a European core and its subject periphery, the United States undertook a similar process of land acquisition in the 1800s. During this period, an expansionist US conquered and settled Mexican territories in ways not unlike those utilized by Western European imperial powers.

As R.W. Van Alstyne has illustrated, the United States saw itself as heir to both the Roman and the British empires as early as the 1780s; under this framework, the US was envisioned as a continental dominion whose influence would be felt throughout the Western Hemisphere.¹²

Under the guise of Manifest Destiny and spurred by a “Protestant contempt for the Latin way of life,” an assumed right to colonize the continent became a part of American identity during the 1800s.¹³ More importantly, the colonization of the North American continent required political and military coercion at the onset and social and cultural domination from the moment of implementation. Colonization, as Anne McClintock states, “involves direct territorial appropriation of another geographic political entity...and systematic interference in the capacity of the appropriated culture (itself not necessarily a homogeneous entity) to organize its dispensations of power.”¹⁴ Although differences exist between European and American modes of expansion, fundamental similarities remain. In each case, the establishment of social and political control involved the use of force, the appropriation of land, and the cultivation of specific modes of representation aimed at creating a particular cultural Other. In Los Angeles, this process began with US military occupation between 1846 and 1848 and developed later through economic, social, and political structures associated with statehood in spite of a persistent Latino presence. Following the end of the US/Mexican War in 1848, California became a US territory. In 1850, California joined the union thereby making Mexicans throughout the state living legacies of a defeated culture; Mexican communities, in both social and physical forms, came to represent that which had necessarily been conquered so that Anglo-American progress could reach its full potential. As embodiments of war and as visual reminders of impediments to Anglo-American progress, Mexicans in California (and throughout the defeated territories) faced isolation as foreigners in their former homelands. In this sense, Latin culture in California became the culture of an internally colonized people.¹⁵

Erasure, Preservation, and the American City

Beginning with the US military occupation of the Mexican pueblo of La Reina de Los Angeles in 1846, LA's Latin past was consciously erased through the imposition of an American architectural and urban fabric. Popular architectural styles, such as Greek Revival, Romanesque, and the Victorian, were reproduced in Los Angeles as a means of recreating recognizable images of home for the incoming American settlers. This transformation in architectural languages involved the suppression of the local vernacular adobe construction—in some cases, by literally masking an adobe structure behind the facade a more typical American design.¹⁶ Therefore, the general preference for “American vernacular styles” over any “native architectural influences” facilitated the emergence of a Los Angeles not unlike the mid-western cities from which many immigrants came.¹⁷

This urban reconstruction was coupled with an anti-Catholic



Fig. 1: The Cathedral of St. Vibiana circa 1880 (reprinted courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA).

and anti-immigrant (read: non-Anglo) stance that divided the city between Protestant ideals and Catholic-Latino social life. Prior to American occupation, social life in the pueblo revolved around the small central plaza and its adobe church, collective known as La Placita. Here, religion provided a cultural frame for everyday life and helped to unify the community.¹⁸ However, Catholicism was viewed by (the largely) Protestant Anglo settlers as a threat to American ideals. Pressure from such anti-Catholic sentiment pushed the local church to downplay its foreignness. This meant two things for Latino Catholics in Los Angeles: firstly, that the local church would attempt to accommodate Anglo migrants by shifting its focus away from its original Latino public; secondly, the church would discourage the more traditional, folk inspired religious practices of the Mexican community. Catholicism and its Latino public, in this sense, represented cultural impediments to Anglo achievement. Therefore, the pueblo and La Placita came to represent the past that Los Angeles desperately sought to cover up. As such undesirable spaces, both the plaza and the small adobe church could hardly serve as the focus for a new American city. Ultimately, the efforts to transform the cultural landscape of Los Angeles culminated in the construction of a new cathedral, the Cathedral of St. Vibiana, rendered in a style representative of the American ideals and tastes.

With the move to the new cathedral, located in an area of development southwest of the former pueblo center and within the recently extended town grid, a cultural shift took form in the physical landscape. By refocusing the cultural terrain of the city around the new cathedral, Los Angeles and the Catholic Church marked the beginning of a dual-city structure. The former pueblo area would remain as a center for the area's unwanted activities, while the newly established grid of streets allowed for the dispersion of social and physical forms and set the stage for American growth in the region. The Catholic Church, by acknowledging the dominant social order, helped to express the growing

social distance between the city's social groups. The combination of the construction of the St. Vibiana's and the prohibition upon Latino public religiosity helped to establish not only segregated parishes but also to create "two mutually exclusive cultural entities"—Anglo and Latino LA.¹⁹

By the 1890s, the old pueblo plaza had taken on, among other things, the function of a wholesale vegetable and fruit market. Additionally, as an undesirable area, the plaza district got little in the way of public investment and, therefore, had fallen into disrepair. The resurrection of the Plaza district came only after its Mexican character could be sufficiently muted through the imposition of a carefully crafted nostalgic myth. Fueled by the romance of Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona*, commercial interests and civic boosters concocted a romanticized version of Spanish local heritage that proved to be a boon to local real estate sales and to tourism. Related efforts to encourage Anglo migration and tourism resulted in the creation of La Fiesta de Los Angeles by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce—a continuation of former pueblo events first held in 1875. At their height during the 1880s and 1890s, Native Americans were displayed in scenes not unlike those found in the ethnographic settings of 19th century World Expositions.²¹ The old pueblo center and its adobe church were also involved in this civic spectacle: Olvera Street, a former alley and the current site of the oldest remaining adobe structure in the city, became the site for the ritual reenactment of the military occupation of Los Angeles. In this sense, La Fiesta provided the Anglo community with the opportunity to both rewrite local spatial history while simultaneously re-inscribing the new dominant order through symbolic spatial practice—a process that endured well into the 1930's.

La Fiesta itself was intended to rival Mardi Gras without the overt connections to Catholicism. Rather, the event served to deploy an idealized European/Spanish myth as its representational strategy—a strategy intended to carefully control the production of civic identity in Los Angeles. The recreation of a

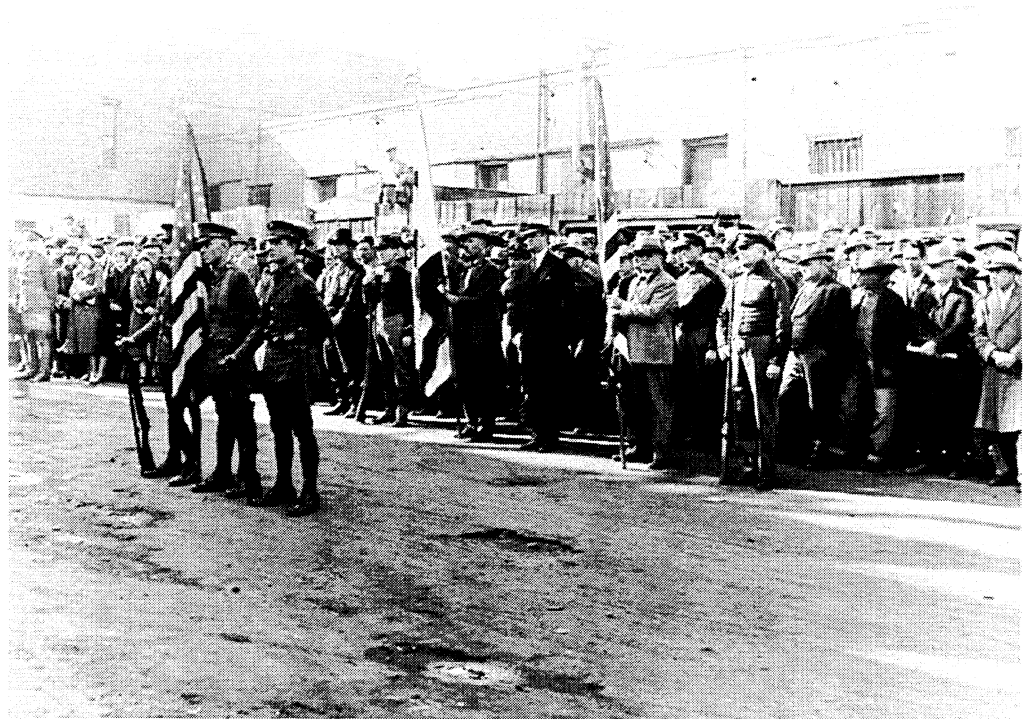


Fig. 2: Scene from ceremonies commemorating the 1846 US take-over of Los Angeles at the Avila Adobe on Olvera Street during the 1936 Fiesta de Los Angeles (courtesy of the Security Pacific Collection/Los Angeles Public Library).

Spanish colonial lineage had two inter-related benefits: firstly, Spanish imagery alluded to a European heritage sufficiently different from that of the British colonial experience while maintaining a certain sense of security in common geographic ties; secondly, the resurrection of an idealized Spanish era helped to suppress the region's Mexican past and present. Additionally, La Fiesta allowed its Anglo organizers to enact a mythological Spanish legacy through a form of cultural cross-dressing that bestowed upon the Fiesta organizers and participants an aura of old world nobility.²⁰ The combination of both physical and cultural erasure performed by the newly arrived Anglo community in Los Angeles created a landscape for the town that both marginalized the Mexican community and established the pattern by which cultural others would be address in years to come.

Negotiating Nostalgia and the Postcolonial Present

In their current forms, preservationist strategies have vested the cultural importance of St. Vibiana's in a narrowly defined sense of public memory. Erasure, or the removal of physical places, threatened to eliminate a part of the city's cultural past—the erasure of St. Vibiana's from the city's landscape threatened to contribute to the historical vacuum in downtown. However, the cultural politics involving St. Vibiana's represent postcolonial links already under erasure—a point lost on the majority of architects and preservationists in LA. In the eyes of many within the local architectural community, St. Vibiana's Cathedral should be save not because it is an important architectural work but because it represents a significant cultural dimension of the city's development—as the following statements illustrate:²²

Architect 1: “If in a hundred years they made a list (of architecturally important buildings), this church would have a hard time making it—poorly built, poorly executed, badly remod-

eled; none-the-less, when it was built it could hold a third of the population and for that reason it should have a presence of in the city.”

Architect 2: “It is not a great building but also not a bad building. Many of us feel that it is worth preserving because it gives the city a sense of time. If you continue to erase the past, history gets selected.”

However, when the politics of identity are added into the description of the former cathedral, a more complicated subject emerges:

Architect 3: “I haven't heard that history. I am sure its perceptions have changed over time...I am not sure about the perception of segregation. This was the first cathedral in the city so I find it hard to believe.”

Preservationist 1: “Anglo culture took over at a time when the city was trying to become American; when you look at immigration patterns, the people who came to this country...they wanted to become Americans.”

Overall, the history of segregation and cultural intolerance associated with St. Vibiana's Cathedral sits uneasily within the framework of importance established by the preservation efforts. For some, segregation and the church are not easily reconciled making a history that incorporates such issues difficult to believe; in this sense, the church is often expected to be a great leveler of differences. However, such an idealized space conflicts with the realities of American society past and present—a society in which religious choice has been constrained by “linguistic, ethnic, racial, and class barriers.”²³ For others, assimilation provides the model by which racial tensions are melted away in favor of collective desires; the city and its inhabitants be-

came “American” because they wanted to—the classic immigrant’s story serves to recast racial tensions within a broad American history and to place St. Vibiana’s within a depoliticized spatial history.

By overlooking the politics of identity tied to St. Vibiana’s past, the efforts to resurrect St. Vibiana’s have already begun the process of erasure that saving the building is intended to help prevent. However, the preservation community in Los Angeles is not alone in this; the preservation movement in California is made up of “history minded individuals and groups...seeking to protect sites commemorating the European discovery and settlement of the Golden State.”²⁴ In the end, the frame of reference chosen by the LAC and its supporters mirrors that of the preservation community at large and has fixed St. Vibiana’s cultural value in a particular point within the development of American Los Angeles. Such a stance tends to induce processes of erasure and of selective historical reconstruction in spite of attempts to avoid those very processes.

Such a stance also fails to take into account the cultural politics that gave rise to the need for a new cathedral in the first place and limits the potential range of urban meanings available to the city. That these efforts come at a time of increased xenophobia and racial tensions within California is telling: Los Angeles is an important immigration point and an important cultural battleground. Los Angeles is also rapidly becoming a post-minority city; Latino groups will soon form the largest cultural entity within a diverse cultural landscape in both the city and the state.²⁵ In this sense, to frame St. Vibiana’s as a monument to the collective memory and urban achievements of Anglo-American Los Angeles alone is to attempt to reassert a dominant cultural framework in an era of increasing challenges from marginalized groups.

Ultimately, the efforts to revitalize St. Vibiana’s have reactivated the logic of imperialism that underscores the cultural landscape of Los Angeles. It is in the early moments of St. Vibiana’s history that the city’s present social divisions were put into place. In this sense, the “politics of identity—however they may be defined around gender or race or neighborhood—are an inescapable and important aspect of dealing with the urban built environment, from the perspectives of public policy, urban preservation, and urban design.”²⁶ Cultural heritage and preservation movements often (inadvertently) employ processes that veil questions of race and ethnicity behind notions of historical significance and architectural loss. It is through such processes that notions of Self and Other are unevenly placed within the public realm. In the struggle to define the image of contemporary multiethnic cities, the divisions between a variety of competing cultural constituencies must be addressed if architecture, preservation, and urbanism are to be made accountable to a diverse public.

The new life offered to St. Vibiana’s as a part of the Old Bank District development project could be a point of departure for Los Angeles as it attempts to deal with its heterogeneous cultural landscape. As Dolores Hayden has pointed out, urban cul-

tural history is a contested terrain but one that has the potential to nurture a subtle yet powerfully inclusive sense of place.²⁷ Hayden’s ideas are mirrored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s own mandate to establish a greater degree of diversity within the preservation movement.²⁸ St. Vibiana’s offers a chance to re-imagine a past era of cultural struggle through the lens of contemporary Los Angeles. If remembered as the material evidence of a shift in the city’s cultural and physical development, St. Vibiana’s could become a site that begins to reconnect the social divide it once helped produce. St. Vibiana’s did not and does not currently live in isolation; this is a site intricately bound to the cultural politics of the city. The struggles leading up to the construction of the former cathedral and the related social history that followed, must be brought into the process of re-building St. Vibiana’s for future use. This could take a number of forms: St. Vibiana’s site could include open spaces upon which the complex history of the city could be brought out for public discussion; or, St. Vibiana’s could be connected to its predecessor, the Old Plaza Church, through the development of a cultural heritage trail along which changes in urban character from one era to another could be seen as well as significant sites of struggle could be located. In each case, difference, identity, and the politics of place would help to shape both physical and social space. St. Vibiana’s is not simply a testament to American Los Angeles; it also addresses the diversity of histories that make up most American cities today. The power of such a site lies not in a singular sense of cultural heritage but, rather, in a shared, albeit uneven, cultural past and present. If preservation is to address a heterogeneous public, then the collective memory of the city, including the cultural politics that have shaped that memory over time, must be a part of the process.

NOTES:

- 1 At the time of this writing, the price tag on the new cathedral has ballooned to over 163 million dollars; for an account of the cardinal’s announcement, see: Larry Gordon, “Archdiocese Plans a New \$45 Million L.A. Cathedral,” *Los Angeles Times* 7 January 1995: A1.
- 2 No less than eleven major projects ranging in budget from \$22 million to \$357 million and totaling over \$2 billion in investments will have opened their doors by the year 2001 in the central city alone; see: Jon Regardie, “The \$2 Billion Village,” *Los Angeles Downtown News* 9 Nov. 1998: 9.
- 3 Elizabeth Moule and Stephanos Polyzoïdes, Architect’s Statement, “Latino Museum of History, Art, and Culture,” *A Reuse Study for the Cathedral of St. Vibiana*, ed. Jeffrey M. Chusid (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Architectural Guild Press, 1997) 39.
- 4 See: Ken Bernstein, “Cathedral of St. Vibiana’s Purchased—and Saved!” *Los Angeles Conservancy News* 21 (1999) 1,6.
- 5 See: Jane M. Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (London: Routledge, 1996); Michael Keith and Malcolm Cross, eds., *Racism, the City, and the State* (London: Routledge, 1993).

- 6 See: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989).
- 7 See: Raymond Rocco, "The Theoretical Construction of the 'Other' in Postmodernist Thought: Latinos in the New Urban Political Economy," *Cultural Studies* 4.3 (1990): 321-330.
- 8 Efforts to replace St. Vibiana's were put into play as early as 1904; see: Thomas R. Vreeland, *The Cathedral of St. Vibiana: A History and Appraisal*, unpublished report (Los Angeles, May 1, 1996).
- 9 Moule and Polyzoides 39.
- 10 See: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989).
- 11 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972) 7.
- 12 See: R.W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960).
- 13 Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream 1850-1915* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973) 16.
- 14 Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term Post-colonialism," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 295.
- 15 See: McClintock, "The Angel of Progress;" see also: Edward Murguía, *Assimilation, Colonialism, and the Mexican American People* (Austin: U of Texas, 1975).
- 16 See: Merry Ovnick, *Los Angeles: The End of the Rainbow* (Los Angeles: Balcony, 1994).
- 17 William K. Olden quoted in *Southern California and its Architecture* [Los Angeles, n.p. (c. 1930)] 2. Huntington Library, San Mario, CA: Rare Books Stack, Photo Album 182.
- 18 See: Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio: A Social History* (Berkeley: U of California P 1979).
- 19 Antonio Rios-Bustamante and Pedro Castillo, *An Illustrated History of Mexican Los Angeles, 1781-1985* (Los Angeles: U of California, Chicano Studies Research Center, 1986) 105.
- 20 See: Gail Ching-Liang Low, "White Skins/Black Masks: The Pleasures and Politics of Imperialism," *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*, eds., Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993) 241-266.
- 21 See: *Official Program Souvenir: La Fiesta de Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: R.W. Paidman, 1987) 24. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA: Rare Books Stack.
- 22 The following comments were collected as a part of a study of focusing upon the role of the politics of identity in the debates surrounding St. Vibiana's and its replacement, the Cathedral of Our Lady of Angels.
- 23 Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 135.
- 24 Nadine Ishitani Hata, *The Historic Preservation Movement in California 1940-1976* (California Department of Parks and Recreation, Office of Historic Preservation, 1992) v.
- 25 Harold Brackman and Steve P. Erie, "The Once and Future Majority: Latino Politics in Los Angeles," *The California-Mexico Connection*, edited by Abraham F. Lowenthal and Katrina Burgess (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993) 196.
- 26 Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes and Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) 7.
- 27 See: Hayden, *The Power of Place*.
- 28 See: *Cultural and Ethnic Diversity in Historic Preservation*, Information Series Number 65 (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1992).