# Let's Take a Walk Down Whittier Boulevard: The Significance of the Whittier Boulevard Merchants Association as Community Builders in East Los Angeles

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By the early 1970s, the Mexican American community of East Los Angeles had begun to develop and cultivate their ethnic identity.[1] Through this process, the Chicano community started to address concerns within their neighborhood, and as a result several groups in East LA used Whittier Boulevard, as a cultural and social space to promote their own agendas and objectives. Most notably, Chicano activists asserted claim over the space during the Chicano Moratorium and the Brown Berets gained political influence by setting up a free community clinic on the street.[2] At the same time, Chicano youth cruised the Boulevard as a way to express their

[1] The term *Chicano* as it is used in this paper refers to the generation of Mexican Americans who began to use the term to express their identity. Before the Chicano Movement, the term had negative connotations. In the 1960s, Mexican American youth reclaimed the term to express their shared cultural and ethnic identity. The term also took on political meaning as this group began to cultivate a political consciousness. I use this term explicitly throughout the paper to represent this specific meaning; as such, it should not be assumed that it is interchangeable with the term Mexican American.

[2] For more on the Brown Berets, see Dionne Espinoza, "'Revolutionary Sisters:' Women's Solidarity and Collective identification Among Chicana Brown Berets in East Los Angeles 1967-1970." *Aztlán. 26, no. 1: 17-58.*

cultural identity and notoriety. However, there was and continues to be, another influence on the Boulevard that historians have not yet considered when studying this celebrated space. Using local newspapers, business memos and correspondence, advertisements, and pamphlets, this article argues that the development and influence of the Whittier Boulevard Merchants Association (WBMA) also contributed to the social space of Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles, through their efforts to encourage economic growth effectively becoming community builders. Specifically, the WBMA's determination to stimulate the local economy and thus support their own businesses, resulted in several instances where their work furthered public interests and ultimately strengthened the Boulevard both as a social space and a cultural one; a place to be and be seen.

The Merchants Association and small family owned businesses like Wenger Furniture and Appliances worked with local government to revitalize and celebrate the one-mile shopping district of Whittier Boulevard beginning in the late 1970s.[3] Their successful cleanup programs and community events, such as the annual Christmas Parade, Latino Walk of Fame, and construction of the iconic Whittier Boulevard Arch, attempted to promote their own businesses while maintaining the legacy of Whittier Boulevard and the cultural history of East LA throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Ultimately, by considering this history, the legacy of Whittier Boulevard and what it means to the people of East LA emerges, demonstrates its continued relevance to the people who walk, drive, work, and live on this colorful, culture-infused street.

In order to understand why the merchants of Whittier Boulevard were significant contributors to what is arguably the central social space of East Los Angeles, it is important to consider the historical context of this neighborhood in the 1970s.[4]

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[3] While Whittier Boulevard is a central surface street that runs through several cities, including: Commerce, Montebello, Pico Rivera, and Whittier, the shopping district that exists in East LA is one-mile in length and runs between Atlantic and Eastern Boulevards.

[4] Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 7th Ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 2011), 287. As explained in Rodolfo

As many historians have argued, by 1970, a fully realized Chicano Movement had developed across the American Southwest. The emergence of cultural nationalism, which grew out of the strong desire to denounce assimilation and instead advance a "cultural nationalist agenda," created the foundation for the Chicano movement.[5] Specifically for the Mexican community of East LA, the Chicano Movement was a response to the community's experience with police brutality and the disproportionate numbers of Chicano soldiers dying in the Vietnam War.[6] From this political and social awakening, the East LA community began to use and shape Whittier Boulevard as a prominent cultural and social space. What is most significant about the historiography of East LA is its emphasis on cultural history. Historians have looked primarily at the origins of cultural occurrences in the community, especially the Chicano Movement, and in doing so have overlooked the contributions of small business owners as actors of community building through economic sustainability.[7] The Whittier

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Acuña's *Occupied America*, the basis for the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s was inequality and moral outrage at the unfairness in the system. Compounded with this fact, was that Mexican Americans lived in communities, although not as segregated from whites than African Americans, still in separate ones from whites, like that of East Los Angeles.

[5] Bruce J Schulman, "E Pluribus Plures," *In The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 64. According to Schulman, activists began to organize, and zeroed in on issues that were directly affecting their communities, going beyond the student center movement of 1968. For Mexicans in East L.A., growing Chicano nationalism was directed at the plight of the urban Mexican community who were disillusioned by conventional politics and polices that in no way had been for their benefit.

[6] Lorena Oropeza, *Raza Si! Guerra No!* (Berkeley, US: University of California Press, 2005), 49. For Chicanos, their protests against the Vietnam War allowed them to reevaluate their place within America, and consequently become conscious of how some of their longstanding ideals about military service and their identification as American citizens were not true.

[7] While historians have studied aspects of East Los Angeles history, most notably the Chicano Movement and the cruiser culture, looking at the WBMA as influential members in the community is a new focus.

Boulevard Merchants Association was a product of the cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s and as a result played a significant role in the history of the Boulevard as a social space; as such, its conception and efforts to revitalize the neighborhood must be addressed. It was the infusion of monetary resources and their work with local government that allowed the business owners of Whittier Boulevard to make their own changes to the Boulevard. Their efforts revitalized the social space of the Boulevard in the 1980s and 1990s and their determination to continue to make progress today demonstrates their continued relevance.

The Boulevard became a cultural space for several other members within the community. These groups used the Boulevard in ways that added to the Chicano identity of East LA, and in many ways, their usage of the Boulevard led to the establishment of the Merchants Association. Chicano activist formed a free clinic to benefit the Mexican American community, and Chicano youth continued to establish their identity with the cruiser tradition. At the same time, Chicano youth accessed the Boulevard to carry on the cruiser tradition as a way to express their own identity. A shift occurred after the destruction on the Boulevard during the Chicano Moratorium in 1970, pushing LA County Sheriffs and merchants to end the tradition of cruising by the mid-1970s. These events contributed to an economic downturn near the end of decade and eventually the development of the WBMA. Given these shared connections to the Boulevard, considering activists and cruisers in the narrative of the WBMA is necessary when reflecting on their own influence on the Boulevard.

In respect to activism and its influence on the community, the Chicano movement that swept the Southwest developed out of Mexican Americans desire to confront growing social issues in their community, like improving schools and gaining access to

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Consequently, researching the WBMA has been a challenging endeavor that speaks to the possible reason why historians have yet to consider their relevance to Whittier Boulevard. The WBMA's lack of online presence has made it difficult to get into direct contact with current members, and in many cases, current members have been unreachable for comment. Adding to this silence, the closure of the Association's office on Whittier Boulevard made the ability to look through any possible archive near impossible.

comprehensive healthcare. In East LA specifically, Chicano activists empowered residents to demand change by local and state government and worked to make the community better; in doing so Chicano activists gained influence in the community.[8] The Brown Beret's establishment of the Free Barrio Clinic on Whittier Boulevard exemplifies their expanding influence. Located between Fraser Avenue and Clela Avenue, the clinic was within the famed Whittier Boulevard shopping district bordered by Eastern Avenue and Atlantic Boulevard, and became a manifestation of Chicano Activists' cultural representation on the Boulevard.

Unfortunately, the Brown Berets' clinic would not be a staple on the Boulevard for long, as the organization began to suffer from internal conflict due in large part to the organization's misogyny.[9] A more notable impact was the Chicano Moratorium march on August 29th, 1970, which defined Chicano Activism in East LA and left a lasting memory of Chicano pride, culture, and tragedy that still resonates with the city's residents today.[10]

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[8]Dolores Delgado Bernal, 1998, "Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 19 (2), 136. The East LA blowouts was a culmination of Chicano youths organizing against the LAUSD school board and the poor conditions of high schools in East LA. The blowouts are reflective of East LA youth demanding better conditions for the community; Cindy Aragon, "The Struggle for Chicano Power in Los Angeles: The Contributions of a Grassroots Activist," *Perspectives: A Journal of Historical Inquiry* 37 (2010), 4. Accessed 1 7 October, 2015. doi:http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/perspectives/vol37/37_Aragon.pdf..
It was grassroots activism in places like East Los Angeles, led by activists like Roslio Muñoz, that attempted to better the community from issues like urban renewal. Because of this work, activists gained a voice in the community that they had never experienced before.

[9] Virginia Espinoa, 2010-2012, "La Batalla Está Aquí": The Chicana/o Movement in Los Angeles" From UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research. Gloria Arellanes, (Recording Voice Interviews).

[10] The Chicano Moratorium march was a culmination of earlier protests that occurred in other California cities throughout 1970. Drawing between 20,000 and 30,000 protesters from all over the U.S., the moratorium march on August 29th, was supposed to be a demonstration

Although the march was initially peaceful, even joyful and optimistic, violence soon erupted between protesters and LA county sheriffs at Laguna Park, located just a few blocks outside of the shopping district, where the march was supposed to end.[11] While speculation about who started the altercations between Sheriffs and protesters remain, the violence nevertheless traveled down the Boulevard, with police and protesters moving into the shopping district. Within minutes a full-on riot started on the Boulevard, leaving hundreds injured, and three dead.[12] As a result of the unrest, merchants experienced broken windows, wrecked storefronts, and several fires along the street. By the time the violence was contained, the Boulevard would see several businesses beyond repair, residents questioning what had happened and why, and the beginning of an economic downturn that would be long lasting.[13]

The continued practice of Chicano youth cruising in low riders on weekend nights added to the economic troubles of the small businesses. The institution of cruising was not new to the Boulevard; Mexican American youth had long since participated

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against the Vietnam War. The planned march was to travel three miles through East LA, beginning at Belvidere Park then run along Whittier Boulevard and end at Laguna Park.
Lorena Oropeza, *Raza Si! Guerra No!* (Berkeley, US: University of California Press, 2005), 148.

[11] Patricia Borjon and Raul Ruiz, eds., "Laguna Park Why*?*" *LA RAZA Newspaper,* 5 September, 1970, 2-3.

[12] Joanne Medrano, "The Ever-Changing Legacy of Ruben Salazar: A Reflection of Remembrance in East LA" *Perspectives: A Journal of Historical Inquiry* 43 (2016), 62-81. What is often remembered about the Chicano moratorium is the death of Ruben Salazar, the famed Mexican American *LA Times* reporter, that occurred at the Silver Dollar Bar and Restaurant within the one mile stretch of the shopping district. While his legacy is multifaceted, his death during the Chicano Moratorium is most the memorable aspect of that day, in part because of the controversial nature of his death. This project about Whittier Boulevard grew out of research about the Chicano Moratorium, Salazar's death on Whittier Boulevard, and his memory in East LA.

[13] Patricia Borjon and Raul Ruiz, eds., "Laguna Park Why*?*" *LA RAZA Newspaper,* 5 September, 1970, 2-3.

in the tradition.[14] However, the downturn the Boulevard saw following the 1970 riot made cruising an even bigger nuisance for merchants who argued that cruisers filled the streets making their stores inaccessible to customers. As a 1979 *LA Times* article explained, East LA residents had long considered cruising the Boulevard as harmless fun for Chicano youth, "a relief from boredom and a senseless flirtation with death", however, the scene soon became tarnished by gang violence.[15] The film *Boulevard Nights*, released that same year, solidified this perception of Chicano youth and gang violence. The Filmmakers' utilization of real footage of Whittier Boulevard only added to the supposed realism that connected Chicano youth to crime and gangs.[16]

This rise in crime and supposed increase in gang violence resulted in sheriffs appealing to the Board of Supervisors to close

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[14] In the 1960s, it had been common for Mexican American kids to cruise with their friends, listening to new Chicano rock anthems like Thee Midniters' 1965 song, *Whittier Blvd*., which celebrated the cruiser culture. The title of this paper takes its name from the opening lyrics of Thee Midniters' song, *Whittier Blvd*. I have chosen to use this title as the song reflects the cultural legacy of East Los Angeles. While organizations like the Whittier Boulevard Merchants Association and small businesses like Wenger Furniture have also played a role in cultivating Whittier Boulevard as a social space infused with cultural meaning, it has been culturally significant events, music, and traditions that are remembered by the East LA community instead. By using these lyrics as a title along with the added subtitle, I hope to reflect my argument that the WBMA is just as important as the cultural history of East Los Angeles.

[15]Joy Horowitz, "Whittier Cruising: A Tradition Gone Sour," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File), 8 August, 1979, Accessed 29 April, 2016. LA County Sheriffs argued that an influx of non-East LA residents cruising Whittier brought heightened gangs violence and crime.
http://mimas.calstatela.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/158909493?accountid=10352.

[16] *Boulevard Nights*, Film, Directed by Michael. Pressman. (United States: Warner Bros., 1979) Online Video. In the film, two Mexican American brothers spend their nights along the Boulevard where trouble seems to follow. The film's culminates with the brothers eventually become embroiled in gang culture, suggesting that participating in cruising on Whittier Boulevard by Chicano youth resulted in such an outcome for its participants.

the Boulevard to traffic in an effort to finally bring a complete end to the low riding culture. As a sheriff described, "[the Boulevard] was a war zone….the cholos have slowly pushed most of the straight kids off the Boulevard. Ninety-nine percent of the time, they're not doing anything. But it only takes one guy on PCP to shank some guy and the war's on again."[17] Supervisors agreed with sheriffs and authorized Caltrans to close Whittier Boulevard Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings between Atlantic Boulevard and Eastern Avenue, the span of the shopping district. Consequently, the cruisers loss of access occurred as merchants on the Boulevard were beginning to address the shopping district's poor economic state. Nevertheless, the WBMA's precursors had influenced Whittier Boulevard. The time activists and cruisers spent on the Boulevard had helped to develop it into a cultural space that came to represent a shared Chicano identity, an identity merchants would later tap into for their own purposes. East Los Angeles had been the setting for several significant cultural moments for Chicanos by the late 1970s. For the Boulevard, these generation-defining experiences resulted in the Boulevard becoming a shared space of cultural importance, but also in a dramatic economic downturn for the merchants of the Boulevard.[18] Over two hundred small businesses made up the shopping corridor of Whittier. These merchants had experienced firsthand the destruction that followed the 1970 riot after the Chicano Moratorium protest.[19] Made up of a diverse array of

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[17] Joy Horowitz, "Whittier Cruising: A Tradition Gone Sour," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File), 8 August, 1979, Accessed 29 April, 2016. http://mimas.calstatela.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/158909493?accountid=10352

[18] George George, "'People Are Rediscovering Us. . . . We're Doing Quite Well.'" *Los Angeles Times*, 31 January, 1989. Accessed 1 April 1, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1989-01-31/local/me-1311_1_business- people.

[19] Matea Gold, 1999, "SPECIAL REPORT * it's Suffered a Riot and a Recession. Now there's a Major Push to . . .; Bring Back Whittier Boulevard." *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July, 1999, 1.http://search.proquest.com/docview/421569747?accountid=10352. Wenger, James. Members List. 1993. Official List of WBMA Members, East Los Angeles. While this members list is from 1993, since its

businesses including restaurants, bakeries, markets, furniture, shoe, and clothing stores, the merchants had long contended with disruptions to their establishments due to constant traffic caused by teenage cruisers.[20] Consequently, as economic conditions worsened, the merchants took a more active role in the community. In fact, it had been Boulevard merchants, fed up with rising crime and increasing deterioration of the street, who pleaded with sheriffs to close the Boulevard at night. In the end, this support from merchants had been the push needed for Sheriffs to successfully appeal to LA County supervisors, effectively ending the cruising tradition within the shopping corridor.[21]

From this initial success, a formal association developed, with the majority of Whittier Boulevard businesses collectively organizing in 1978. At the time, the intention of the Whittier Boulevard Merchants Association was to restore the image of the Boulevard, in the hopes that a redeveloped district would attract customers back.[22] As they would soon discover, the revitalization of the Boulevard would not be without its challenges. Yet, the WBMA's establishment and early revitalization projects, including the installation of the famed Whittier Boulevard Arch and an intensive cleanup program, reflect how their contributions added additional context to the cultural identity created on Whittier; making the merchants just as significant to the

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inception the majority of merchants of Whittier Boulevard's shopping district were members. The extent to how active members were remains unknown.

[20] Through the process of researching merchants on the Boulevard, their backgrounds need to be addressed. As mentioned, over two hundred businesses make up this corridor, yet the owners I was able to trace come from multicultural backgrounds, migrating as far away as the Ukraine. This is important to note when considering how the merchants accessed the Mexican American heritage of East LA residents and strategically used this history for their economic advantage.

[21] Joy Horowitz, "Whittier Cruising: A Tradition Gone Sour," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File), 8 August, 1979, Accessed 29 April, 2016.

[22] Carol McGraw, "Rebirth of Whittier Boulevard: 65-Foot Arch Marks a Dream Come True," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 January, 1986. Accessed 1 April, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-09/local/me-14220_1_sidewalk.

overarching narrative of East Los Angeles as the legacy of Chicano activists and glorified Chicano low rider enthusiasts. The WBMA's ability to work together with local government and law enforcement set them apart from other key figures in the community. As such, it is necessary to consider the inception of the association and their initial accomplishments.

Within this developing discussion, it is important to note that gaps exist in the narrative of the WBMA. Lack of sources and current visibility of the WBMA speaks to several remaining questions about the background of the WBMA and its members. For instance, exactly who formed the WBMA remains unknown. *LA Times* articles published between 1978 and 1986 note that the WBMA grew out of a desire by merchants to improve deteriorating conditions.[23] Nearly a decade of rising gang activity and crime had brought litter, faded signs, cracked sidewalks, graffiti covered walls, and dwindling sales. Several of the merchants, who for decades had called Whittier Boulevard home, could no longer tolerate these circumstances. As Howard Barsky, a family partner in the furniture store La Popular, said in 1986, "We weren't going to give up and go away."[24] Given the history of the Barsky family, this determination wasn't surprising, and reflects the determination many merchants had to recover the Boulevard from decline.

Like many immigrant stories of the early twentieth century, John and Sonia Barsky, original owners of La Popular Furniture Store, is one of tireless sacrifice for the American Dream. Originally from the Ukraine, John Barsky had served in World War I before traveling to Mexico in 1922 with his new wife

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[23] Joy Horowitz, "Whittier Cruising: A Tradition Gone Sour," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File), 8 August, 1979, Accessed 29 April, 2016. This article is the earliest found that makes mention of the Whittier Boulevard Merchants Association. Other articles including: Sam Hall Kaplan. 1986, "Whittier Boulevard: Palmy Days Ahead?" *Los Angeles Times (Pre-1997 Fulltext)*, 20 April, 1986. Also, WBMA newsletters and pamphlets also note 1978 as year of establishment.

[24] Carol McGraw, "Rebirth of Whittier Boulevard: 65-Foot Arch Marks a Dream Come True," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 January, 1986. Accessed 1 April, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-09/local/me-14220_1_sidewalk.

Sonia. While the Barskys had worked in diamond trading before the war, in Mexico they began a successful merchant business in Chihuahua that eventually led the family to Los Angeles in 1931, searching for better financial opportunities.[25] By 1939, John and Sonia Barsky's La Popular Furniture Store opened on the Boulevard where it would remain in business until 2001. By the early 1980s, Howard, their youngest of three children, had joined the merchants association along with other local business owners.[26] Howard Barsky, like other merchants on the Boulevard, believed that restoration of the street would bring back customers that once shopped along the strip.[27] While the merchants were optimistic about their objective of revitalizing the Boulevard, the WBMA quickly realized how difficult it would be to clean up the street, but also how challenging installing landmarks could be when attempting to raise enough funds for projects.

The first issue the association had to tackle was financial backing for their redevelopment. While the WBMA planned to spend five million dollars of their own funds on projects, they quickly realized the effort was not enough to restore the shopping district. In 1982, the association appealed to state and county officials for assistance.[28] This partnership between the WBMA

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[25] Howard Barsky, "John Barsky, Sonia (Gotselig) Barsky: Early Life through Leaving Mexico (1932)," *Barsky's La Popular (blog),* March 27, 2015. Accessed 18 May, 2016. http://barsky-lapopular.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2015-03-30T20:07:00-07:00&max-results=7.

[26] Howard Barsky, "1932 to 2001 A MORE DETAILED, (close to) CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF EVENTS, From Los Angeles Start up to the Famsa Lease," *Barsky's La Popular (blog*), March 27, 2015. Accessed 18 May, 2016. http://barsky-lapopular.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2015-03-30T20:07:00-07:00&max-results=7.

[27] Al Desmadre, "Memories of a Lost Boulevard: JonSons Markets," *LA EASTSIDE (blog)*. 28 April, 2009. Accessed 3 May, 2016. http://laeastside.com/2009/04/memories-of-a-lost-Boulevard-jonsons-markets/.

[28] Carol McGraw, "Rebirth of Whittier Boulevard : 65-Foot Arch Marks a Dream Come True," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 January 9, 1986.

1 April, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-09/local/me-14220_1_sidewalk.

and LA County Supervisors, specifically Ed Edelman and then Gloria Molina, would be instrumental to the success of the association. Edelman in the 1980s and Molina in the 1990s, would work to help with these projects, and participated in WBMA events like their annual new member and honorary dinners at Steve's Steakhouse, and the annual East Los Angeles Christmas Parade.[29] During the first few years planned projects, such as the cleanup program and the installation of the Whittier Boulevard arch stalled because state and county officials could not agree on how to finance redevelopment. Finally, in 1984 under a joint agreement, the state provided $1.8 million for roadwork, and the county provided an additional $1.4 million for roads and $3.1 million in community development grants for sidewalk and building improvements.[30] Under this arrangement, the state relinquished control of the state-designated highway to the county, further compounding the authority of LA County Supervisors, and the WBMA's need to work collaboratively with the likes of Edelman and Molina.

With these new funds the WBMA began their revitalization programs, envisioning Whittier Boulevard's return to its glory days, and possibly redevelop as a "main street" style shopping district, similar to Old Town Pasadena and Sierra Madre's shopping strips. As Howard Barsky described it, "At one time, [Whittier Boulevard] was like the Wilshire Boulevard of the Latino community."[31] With that in mind, the WBMA worked with Barrios Planners, to construct its first landmark, the Whittier Boulevard Arch. A non-profit design firm founded in 1970,

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[29] "Honorary Dinner of Supervisor Ed Edelman," Belvedere Citizen (Belvedere, Los Angeles), 27 March, 1991.
James Wenger, "Former President of the WBMA," Interview by author. 1 0 May, 2016.

[30] Carol McGraw, "Rebirth of Whittier Boulevard: 65-Foot Arch Marks a Dream Come True," *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 1986. Accessed 1 April, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-09/local/me-14220_1_sidewalk.

[31] Matea Gold, 1999, "SPECIAL REPORT * it's Suffered a Riot and a Recession. Now there's a Major Push to . . .; Bring Back Whittier Boulevard," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 5 July, 1999, 1.http://search.proquest.com/docview/421569747?accountid=10352.

Barrios Planners' continuing mission is to provide design and planning services to the "underserved needs" of the Eastern Los Angeles region. Barrios Planners were not only influential to the development of the Arch landmark, but their work in East LA




***Image 1: Whittier Boulevard Arch. 2016. Photograph by author.***

continues today, and includes the development of healthcare facilities, schools, and recently the Metro Gold Line eastside extension project.[32] Two years after the initial commission, the Arch, named, "El Arco", a 65-foot rising Spanish-colonial inspired structure that towers over the Boulevard at the center of the shopping corridor, was dedicated on January 18th, 1986, where it still stands today.[33] Seen as an example that Whittier Boulevard's shopping district was back in business, its presence on the Boulevard is like nothing else on the street.[34] Dominating and unwavering, the Whittier Boulevard Arch is now a celebrated monument in East Los Angeles. Consequently, its place on the Boulevard speaks to the influence of the merchants. In recent years, the arch received a paint touchup as part of another facelift

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[32] "About Us." Barrio Planners. Accessed 2 2 May, 2016. http://www.barrioplanners.com/?page_id=2303.

[33] Carol McGraw, "Rebirth of Whittier Boulevard: 65-Foot Arch Marks a Dream Come True," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 January, 1986. Accessed 1 April, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-09/local/me-14220_1_sidewalk.

[34] Marisela Norte, 2004, "Best MTA Bus Line: The Number 18, Yes, Let's Take a Trip Down Whittier Boulevard." American Quarterly 56 (3), 506-510. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068230.

project, and its residence on the Boulevard has become just as memorable as any other cultural symbol in East LA.

After the installation of the arch, the WBMA partnered with Barrios Planners and LA County, to complete an extensive cleanup program. To achieve this revitalization project, the association first reached out to its members to understand their concerns and address what they hoped to achieve. In 1989, an outside research company completed a survey of the Boulevard to determine the best way to utilize funds allotted to fixing up the street. Initial participation was minimal at best, attesting to a major disadvantage the association had contended with throughout its existence.[35] While the merchants of the WBMA had good intentions for their association and the state of the Boulevard, they were and remain business people first, with employees and family who depended on them. Often, participation in revitalization programs, events, meetings and appeals to county supervisors come second to maintaining their personal stores.

Nevertheless, by late 1989 a fully realized cleanup program began.[36] The WBMA asked merchants on the Boulevard to cleanup storefront facades, pick up litter in front of businesses, and paint over graffiti on walls. Consideration for customer safety was also a part of the beautification program, with the WBMA asking merchants to maintain back parking lots and possibly hiring security guards.[37] The WBMA provided merchants with the necessary supplies to maintain these new guidelines. The success of the cleanup program was immediate. Businesses saw an increase in sales and it seemed that people were returning to Whittier Boulevard.[38] Given this success and the statement made

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[35] Economics Research Associates, "RE: Whittier Boulevard Merchants Survey," Memorandum to Whittier Boulevard Merchants Association, County of Los Angeles Regional Planning Department, and County of Los Angeles Development Comission. 13 February, 1989.

[36] "Success of Clean Up Program," James Wenger to Martin L. Murphy, 27 January, 1994. East Los Angeles, California.

[37]"Safety Program," James Wenger to Merchants, Northside from Arizona to Kern, 24 December, 1990. East Los Angeles, California.

[38] George Ramos, "'People Are Rediscovering Us. . . . We're Doing Quite Well,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 31 January, 1989. Accessed 1 April, 2016.

by the construction of El Arco, the late 1980s and early 1990s reflect the WBMA's height of influence. While the WBMA achieved their initial objective to draw customers back into their shops, their influence over Whittier Boulevard as a social space was more substantial. Another reflection of their significance was the WBMA's ability to engage with the community and celebrate its cultural and historical past.

From its inception, the WBMA has always recognized that Mexican Americans make up the majority of their demographic clientele.[39] To engage with the Chicano community of East Los Angeles, the WBMA sponsored the annual East LA Christmas Parade that encouraged participation from East Los Angeles schools, organizations, and clubs.[40] Over the course of 35 years, the Christmas Parade garnered thousands of people to the Boulevard, such as notable Grand Marshals, politicians, marching bands, floats, and performers participated in the tradition. By highlighting the shopping district each year, the annual Christmas Parade demonstrated the success the WBMA achieved in claiming the Boulevard and furthermore, their tremendous effort to help build the growing community they themselves were a part of.[41] Subsequently, the creation of the Latino Walk of Fame in the early 1990s is another meaningful example of how the WBMA worked with county officials to provide a landmark to the community that celebrated its cultural past. It was through these community engagement projects that the WBMA became valued community

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http://articles.latimes.com/1989-01-31/local/me-1311_1_business-people.

[39] Economics Research Associates, Community Business Revitalization Program Plan Report. Los Angeles, 1990. The ERA's report provides detailed information about the economic state of Whittier Boulevard, including its key demographic. The report also discussed the major issues the merchants were facing at the time, and recommendations that extended beyond the work of the WBMA to better meet the needs of businesses.

[40] Participant List For 1989 Christmas Parade, November 1989. Raw data. Whittier Boulevard, East Los Angeles.

[41] Christmas Raffle, "Venga!" Advertisement Filer. 1990. The WBMA promoted their businesses at the parade through the use of advertisement filers that encouraged parade goers to also shop.

builders, and further solidified their significance to East Los Angeles history.

As James Wenger, current manager of his family's store Wenger Furniture and Appliances recalls, ensuring the East Los Angeles Christmas Parade ran smoothly each year was no easy feat.[42] Wenger, who has worked at Wenger Furniture and Appliances since 1970, and who was President of the WBMA in the early 1990s, saved memorabilia from the many parades he participated in, including photos and flyers from his tenure as president. Like La Popular Furniture, Wenger Furniture and Appliances has been a staple of Whittier Boulevard since 1947, when James' grandfather Moses, uncles, and father Martin opened the store.[43] One of the last remaining furniture stores on the Boulevard and now the longest operating, Wenger Furniture And Appliances is reminiscent of an era long past, where the owner of a store is present daily and knows his customers by first name. Wenger's participation in the WBMA began as a member and then president, who assisted with several programs already discussed.



***Image 2: 1990 ELA Christmas Parade Grand Marshall Edward James Olmos. From left to right: Sherman Block, Gloria Molina, Unknown, Lucille Roybal-Allard, Edward Roybal, Edward James Olmos, James Wenger, Unknown. Photograph courtesy of James Wenger.***

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[42] James Wenger, "Former President of the WBMA," Interview by author, 10 May, 2016.

[43] James Wenger, "Unpublished Family History," Unknown date.




***Image 3: Walk of Fame Plaques. 2011 . Courtesy Latino Walk of Fame Facebook Page.***

The first Christmas Parade took place in December of 1974, however when the WBMA began sponsoring the event remains unknown.[44] Sometime over the course of the early 1980s, as the parade became a staple for East Los Angeles, the WBMA, along with the East Los Angeles Jaycees took over as co-sponsors. The parade route started on Eastern Avenue and Whittier and went directly through the shopping corridor before it turned on Atlantic Boulevard and ended on 6th Street.[45] As the parade became more widely known, not only did participating groups grow in number, up to 130 by 1994, but notable celebrities also participated as Grand Marshals.[46] This growth in popularity is a testament to how hard the WBMA and Jaycees, a youth engagement organization, worked with local government, sheriffs, and performers to host the event each year.

In 1983 when famed Dodgers player Fernando Valenzuela served as Grand Marshal not only did the crowd surge to more than 250,000 on the Boulevard, but Mayor Tom Bradley

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[44] Sam Allen, "No Christmas Parade for East L.A.; Group Can't Afford to Put on Event," *L.A. Now*, 17 November, 2010. Accessed 3 May, 2016. http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2010/11/east-la-christmas- parade-cancelled-by-money-woes.html.

[45] "Map of East Los Angeles Parade Route," 1990. Handout Filer.

[46] "Plenty of Parades Highlight Outlook for Southland's Sunday." Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File), 28 November, 1982, Accessed 29 April, 2016, .http://mimas.calstatela.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/153320259?accountid=10352.

and Assemblymen Richard Allatorre and Art Torres participated in the parade as well.[47] Likewise, the 1990 parade which included actor Edward James Olmos as Grand Marshall, also saw the inclusion of Sheriff Sherman Block, Supervisor Gloria Molina, and Representatives Lucille Roybal-Allard and Edward Roybal. The inclusion of these politicians represents how successful the parade was at engaging with the residents of East Los Angeles. The parade was a chance not only for merchants to draw people to the shopping district, but also for government officials to interact with the community. [48] This was further compounded by the fact that the parade was televised by local Spanish station K-MEX, reflecting how the parade and by extension, the WBMA, understood the community of East Los Angeles and its Mexican heritage.

The WBMA's effort to complete the Latino Walk of Fame in the 1990s emphasizes how their work has celebrated the Latino voice of East Los Angeles. In June of 1995, the WBMA announced their vision for the Latino Walk of Fame. Advertised as, "the first public area in California that was solely devoted to honoring Latino leaders", the association planned to use the 320 plaques that had already been embedded in the sidewalks during the revitalization phase as markers for the honorees.[49] The WBMA completed the first 20 plaques in 1997 with the intention that more would be finalized each year. Among the first honorees of the landmark were renowned activist Cesar Chavez, local boxer Oscar De La Hoya, and Jaime Escalante, who gained recognition when

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[47] Ronald, L. Soble, "250,000 Attend East L.A. Celebration," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-Current File), 23 November, 1981, Accessed 29 April, 2016. http://mimas.calstatela.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/152963554?accountid=10352

[48] James Rainey, "East L.A. Fantasy Parade Takes On Political Luster," *Los Angeles Times*. November 26, 1990. Accessed 3 May, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1990-11-26/local/me-3902_1_east-los- angeles-latino.

[49] Whittier Boulevard Merchants Association, Whittier Boulevard Merchant Association Latino Walk of Fame. East Los Angeles, 1995; "Latino Walk of Fame Planned on Eastside," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 May, 1997. Accessed 1 April, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1997-05-07/local/me-56375_1_walk-fame-latino.

his trials as a math teacher at Garfield High School were portrayed in the 1987 film, *Stand and Deliver*. Keeping with the close ties the WBMA had established with local government, Edward Roybal also was an initial honoree.[50] Based on this inaugural group the WBMA were strategic in regards to selections. By including celebrated local and uncontroversial honorees who would appeal to East LA residents, the WBMA was attempting to foster a wholesome monument easily accepted into the cultural space of Whittier Boulevard. Subsequent plaques honoring notable and distinguished Mexican musicians Antonio Aguilar and José José also speak to this intended purpose.

Both the East Los Angeles Christmas Parade and Latino Walk of Fame are examples of how the WBMA incorporated the culture of its community and built traditions that were just as impactful to the Boulevard as the Chicano activists and cruisers before them. The parade became an institution, its inclusion of high profile celebrities and politicians, as well as participation from local high schools and organizations every year, making its legacy one that encouraged family- friendly and safe entertainment. Likewise, the inception of the Latino Walk of Fame was not only a smart business decision by the WBMA, but exemplifies how the WBMA encouraged Chicano heritage as Chicano groups had done before them. These achievements become even more illuminating when considering the current state of the Boulevard and the battles the WBMA has recently faced.

In 2010, the Whittier Boulevard Merchants Association canceled the annual Christmas Parade, effectively ending a 35-year tradition.[51] According to a WBMA spokesman, the economic

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[50] "Cesar Chavez Honored on Latino Walk of Fame," *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 1997. Accessed 22 April, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1997/aug/01/local/me-18456. "Latino Walk of Fame Gives Math Teacher Place in Sun," *Los Angeles Times,* 16 April, 1998. Accessed 22 April, 2016. http://articles.latimes.com/1998/apr/16/local/me-39830.

[51] "East LA Christmas Parade May Be A Thing of the Past," Eastern Group Publications/EGPNews. 14 November, 2010. Accessed 3 May, 2016. http://egpnews.com/2012/12/eastlachristmasparademaybeathingofthepast/. EGPNews are owners of a collection of local newspapers,

recession had hit the Boulevard and its merchants the same as everywhere else in the community, and the association could not gather enough funds to cover the $25,000 needed to pay sheriffs to work the parade. They were also unable to convince county supervisors to assist them with funding.[52] The end of the parade is indicative of the challenges the WBMA has faced in recent years. A shortage of personal funds and lack of assistance from once supportive county supervisors has resulted in the WBMA losing its prominence on the Boulevard. Moreover, inadequate involvement from current members and leadership has created even greater strife. However, this seeming loss of presence does not mean the WBMA is still not making an impact on East LA. In recent years, at a slow yet persistent pace, the merchants of Whittier Boulevard are still attempting to bring about meaningful progress. This progress resulted in cosmetic upgrades made to the street, the reopening of the 710 freeway ramps off Whittier, and the recent opening of the Nike community store. Ultimately, these instances of relevance highlight the continued need of the WBMA and the possible future of East Los Angeles.

By the early 2000s, Whittier Boulevard was no longer the main shopping district for Latinos in East LA. Suburbanization and the influx of malls and major retail chains in cities like Commerce, Montebello, and Monterey Park had left many of the small mom and pop stores that made up the Whittier Boulevard shopping district behind.[53] Around the same time, the WBMA office on the Boulevard closed as well. While the association still

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including: City Terrace Comet, Boyle Heights Beat, Belvidere Citizen, Eastside Sun, Commerce Comet, and Monterey Park Comet. Its online news articles are also shared in print by these papers.

[52] James Wenger, "Former President of the WBMA," Interview by author. 10 May, 2016.

[53] Matea Gold, 1999, "SPECIAL REPORT * it's Suffered a Riot and a Recession. Now there's a Major Push to . . .; Bring Back Whittier Boulevard," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July, 1999, 1.http://search.proquest.com/docview/421569747?accountid=10352. Economics Research Associates. Community Business Revitalization Program Plan Report. Los Angeles, 1990. The report mentions how the merchants of the Boulevard were facing competition from other shopping strips and malls. This competition continued to grow with the development of online shopping in the 2000s.

existed, several of its leading members who had spearheaded the successful projects of the 1980s and 1990s were no longer active. Howard Barsky's La Popular had closed and James Wenger had taken a step back from the association as his family grew.[54] In later years, the 2009 economic recession did not help matters. However, in recent years a surge in activity shows signs of another comeback for the shopping corridor. In 2011, LA County implemented a $2.1 million Whittier Boulevard Streetscape Project based on the urging of the WBMA. Meant to revitalize the shopping district that had not seen improvements since the original beautification program of the late 1980s, the project brought new palm trees, decorative street lighting, bus shelters, benches, and bike racks to the Boulevard.[55] To lure customers into the shopping district during the construction, the WBMA instituted a weekly construction sale. Although the Boulevard needed these improvements, these cosmetic corrections did not address the underlining issue of economic sustainability that had been facing the merchants for years.

The merchants of Whittier Boulevard contended with large corporations for years. The corridor has always been comprised of small family owned business, and lack of economic planning and available resources from the county did nothing to support the merchants, resulting in little financial growth. [56] Further complicating matters, the freeway on-ramps to the 710 between Olympic and Whittier Boulevards were closed in 2013. Although the shopping district's close proximity to the 710 had always been economically beneficial, the closure inconvenienced both commuters and potential shoppers. Seeing how the closure was affecting Whittier Boulevard, James Wenger on behalf of his business and the rest of Whittier Boulevard reached out to local

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[54] James Wenger, "Former President of the WBMA," Interview by author. 10 May, 2016.

[55] Castillo, Gloria, "Whittier Blvd. Braces for Construction," Eastern Group Publications/EGPNews. 19 May, 2011. Accessed 3 May, 2016. http://egpnews.com/2011/05/whittier-blvd-braces-for-construction/.

[56] Economics Research Associates, Community Business Revitalization Program Plan Report, Los Angeles, 1990.

officials on the matter.[57] Appealing to the offices of Assemblyman Jimmy Gomez, State Senator Kevin De Leon, and County Supervisor Gloria Molina, Wenger became frustrated with their continual response that the ramps were not within their respective jurisdictions, and instead a Caltrans issue. After nearly three years of little to no change, in early 2016, Wenger created a petition to have the ramps reopened. Collecting signatures from 250 residents and business owners, Wenger threatened a lawsuit if the ramps continued to remain closed.[58] Within days of speaking directly to the Caltrans project manager, the ramps reopened.



***Image 4: Nike Store on Whittier Boulevard. 2015. Photograph from Nike Website.***

This victory of persistence speaks to why so many of the small businesses on the Boulevard remain open; so many owners have not given up on improving conditions on the Boulevard to assist their own businesses. While the WBMA had never been able to entice big retail chains to move to the Boulevard, recently one company recognized the profitability of developing in the area. In late 2015, Nike opened a community store on Whittier, prominently taking over nearly a block of space that was close to El Arco.[59] While the impact of the Nike store on the Boulevard is

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[57] James Wenger, "Former President of the WBMA," Interview by author. 10 May, 2016

[58] James Wenger, “Petition to Reopen the 710 Freeway,” January 2016.

[59] "Nike East Los Opens on Whittier Boulevard," Boyle Heights Beat, 16 October, 2015. Accessed 30 April, 2016. http://www.boyleheightsbeat.com/nike-east-los-opens-on-whittier-Boulevard-12129;

still undetermined, presumably its establishment could produce more foot traffic in the shopping district, and the prospect for other major companies to expand into the area. This new potential has spurred the WBMA to reevaluate their own capabilities to better suit the needs of East LA and once again become a community resource.[60] To what extent the WBMA will once again be visible on the Boulevard is yet to be determined.

The WBMA has yet to create a clear plan for the future, but given these recent accomplishments for the shopping district, possibilities remain. What is apparent is the need for either a strengthened WBMA to reemerge or a new organization to develop and make their own claim to the Boulevard. The WBMA's once strong influence on the Boulevard is no longer as visible and merchants still face the same problems of competition as they did nearly 30 years ago. If the Boulevard is to find a balance between its glorified past and a promising future that ensures its charm and linkage to Chicano culture, there needs to once again exist an advocate for the merchants who remain.

Based on the new information uncovered from the development of this paper, one thing is certain, further research on the Whittier Boulevard Merchants Association is necessary. While historians' discussion of the history of Whittier Boulevard and East Los Angeles has focused on the riveting and dynamic experiences of Chicano activists and cruisers, there has always been another leading group on the Boulevard. By appealing to local government and working within the constructs of the law, the WBMA created not only landmarks and traditions but also a safer and cleaner environment. In fact, given the longevity of the WBMA in comparison to the relatively short time activists and cruisers achieved influence on this social space, the successes, shortcomings, and continued efforts of the WBMA have had a greater impact on the East Los Angeles community. This conclusion speaks to the notion that small businesses and

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"Nike's New East Los Community Store Ignites Sport and Local Engagement," Nike News. 15 October, 2015. Accessed 30 April, 2016. http://news.nike.com/news/nike-s-new-east-los-community-store- ignites-sport-and-local-engagement.

[60] James Wenger, "RE: Questions About the WBMA," E-mail to Author. 27 May, 2016.

merchant associations like the WBMA are also community builders whose history is worth exploring.

While the future of the merchants who still operate on the Boulevard remains uncertain, it is clear that Whittier Boulevard would not be the space it is today, one that celebrates its Chicano heritage and at the same time encourages development, if it had not been for the WBMA. Given the current state of the Boulevard, the merchants and the association are still in need of a viable plan to reengage with East LA residents if they want to gain back relevancy and customers. Although this is not an impossible endeavor, the WBMA could certainly benefit from revisiting its own past. Transforming the Boulevard into a "main street" space, or drawing in bigger chains are all possible avenues the WBMA can explore in the near future. The WBMA can also consider offering transparency of their earlier work on the Boulevard in an effort to promote their significance to East Los Angeles. Due to the gaps that remain within their narrative, further study could potentially disclose other facets of their relevance, more connections between the association and the community, and other important members that participated in its success. One positive highlight as of late is the return of the Christmas Parade in November of 2016, which included a street fair within the shopping district.[61] Regardless of what the future holds, the achievements that the WBMA accomplished during its peak is enough reason for this association to be recognized by the thousands of people who travel down the Boulevard each day and who peer up to catch a glimpse at El Arco; a monument reminding everyone who passes under it that they are in East Los Angeles, walking within a community of many narratives and Whittier Boulevard is still here.

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[61] "COMMUNITY CALENDAR: East L.A. Christmas Parade returns," *Wave Newspapers*, 23 November, 2016. Accessed 21 February, 2017. http://wavenewspapers.com/community-calendar-east-l-a-christmas-parade-returns/.