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## ► To cite this version:

Elsa Devienne. The Right to the Beach? Urban Renewal, Public Space Policing and the Definition of a Beach Public in Postwar Los Angeles, 1940s-1960s. *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, Paris : Association Française d'études américaines, 2016, pp.31–51. <hal-01640348>

HAL Id: hal-01640348

<https://hal-univ-paris10.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01640348>

Submitted on 5 Dec 2017

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# The Right to the Beach?

## Urban Renewal, Public Space Policing and the Definition of a Beach Public in Postwar Los Angeles, 1940s-1960s

Elsa DEviEnnE

*Cet article montre d'abord comment, après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, une coalition informelle rassemblant des promoteurs immobiliers et l'élite politique locale utilise des stratégies de l'ordre de la planification urbaine et du contrôle policier afin de faire des plages de la ville de Los Angeles un terrain de jeux réservé à la classe moyenne blanche. La première partie de l'article décrit les efforts des urbanistes, des ingénieurs et de l'élite politique et économique afin de mener à bien une campagne de modernisation du littoral qui entraîne notamment la destruction de lieux de loisirs jugés délabrés. Vastes, propres, et dotées d'équipements neufs, ces plages « modernes » doivent attirer touristes, résidents aisés et investisseurs. Ensuite, l'article met en évidence la manière dont la modernisation urbaine sert de justification pour mener des campagnes de harcèlement policier à l'égard des « indésirables », en particulier les homosexuels, nombreux alors à fréquenter des établissements de bains et bars de la côte, et les athlètes de « Muscle Beach », lieu d'entraînement et de performances sportives. La notion de « droit à la ville », telle que développée par Don Mitchell, est utilisée afin de montrer que cette tentative de « sauver » les plages du déclin a pour principale conséquence de restreindre le « droit à la plage » aux seuls baigneurs blancs de la classe moyenne.*

**A**t mid-twentieth century, the beaches of Los Angeles—long a key feature of the California dream, born along with the state itself—were in poor condition. In its March 1950 bulletin, the Shoreline Planning Association, an

organization dedicated to the development and protection of the California coast, reported that the region's public beaches "call[ed] up in the minds of many people an unpleasant picture [...]: over-crowded, littered up, inadequate parking, very noisy, small and unsanitary facilities, the whole nourished by smelly ramshackle hot dog stands skilled in the preparation of dubious hamburgers."<sup>1</sup> Just a year earlier, the city planning firm Madigan and Hyland had reached a similar conclusion in a report commissioned by the county of Los Angeles: "The local beaches offer the prospective visitor traffic jams, parking problems, crowded conditions, inadequate and low-grade food stands, honkey-tonk amusements and sand in the shoes."<sup>2</sup> With 30 % of the shoreline within Los Angeles County publically owned, the region offered much space to relax for the potential beachgoer,<sup>3</sup> especially compared to Eastern states where the proportion of seashore open to the general public could be as low as 3 %.<sup>4</sup> Yet, according to these reports, the city's public beaches were in such a degraded condition that they might as well have been private.

In the years following the end of the Second World War, the Los Angeles coastline became the focus of many such articles, reports, and plans lamenting the sad state of the beaches. In descriptions eerily similar to contemporaneous assessments of the crowded slums that characterized the central districts of many northern and Midwestern cities, they painted a disheartening picture of beaches needing to be "cleared" from "tenements" and "blight." But these documents also planned for and announced the future. Indeed, in the 1950s and 1960s urban planners, local business and political elites, along with engineers worked together to transform the city's public shoreline into a modern playground, cleaning up miles of dirty beaches, and destroying old piers and barracks. In other words, just like the inner-city slums of many industrial American cities, the beaches of Los Angeles experienced a rapid and intense phase of urban renewal.

While the restructuring of postwar city centers inspired urban planners to destroy the old to make space for the new, Disneyland, a new kind of family-friendly amusement park that opened in Orange County in 1955, provided the major source of inspiration for deciding what exactly

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1. "Los Angeles Plans Model Facility." *California Coast* 4:2 (March 1950): 3.

2. "Recreational Development of the Los Angeles Area Shoreline: an Engineering and Economic Report to the Mayor and the City Council, City of Los Angeles." New York, 1949, 148, Box B1380, Los Angeles City Archives (LACA).

3. General Warren T. Hannum. "California State's Beach Program," *Shore & Beach* 15: 2 (October 1947): 36.

4. This figure concerns the Massachusetts shoreline in 1950. See "State Beaches for Massachusetts," *Shore & Beach* 18:1 (April 1950): 4.

should be built on the recently bulldozed beaches. By building an amusement park that was clean, orderly, homogeneous, and devoid of any sensual or dubious recreational activities, Walt Disney redefined mainstream leisure for the suburban era. In the postwar years, advocates of beach modernization used both the principles that Disney had developed in his theme park and the precepts of urban renewal to invent a new model of public seashore amusement, one that was intended to appeal to the so-called “respectable public.” By ridding beaches of the relics of traditional working-class leisure spaces—old amusement parks, piers, and dance-halls—and by building improved beaches with family-friendly attractions and plenty of room for parking, beach modernizers hoped to keep the white middle- and upper-class families on the shore.

But in order to attract this specific social group—the “respectable” public—beaches also had to be more tightly controlled and policed. While the region’s beaches had historically been places of relative freedom (at least for white Angelenos) compared to other public spaces, they became more strictly regulated after the Second World War. In the context of the expansion of the suburbs and the domestic revival of the 1950s, public urban space stirred up strong feelings of fear and anxiety.<sup>5</sup> In order to maintain the “proper” public on the beaches, any beachgoer labeled as “undesirable” had to go. On the beach, where semi-naked bodies are in close proximity to one another, the police defined the “undesirables” based on gender and sexual norms. Starting in the mid-1950s, gay men and lesbians, as well as male and female athletes, whose bodies or choices of activity challenged traditional gender expectations, were the object of surveillance and harassment by the police.

This paper will analyze how, in the postwar period, the combination of urban renewal techniques and increased policing dramatically transformed the Los Angeles coastline and limited the “right to the beach” to the white middle-class family. Using Don Mitchell’s discussion of French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s idea of “the right to the city,” I will look at the ways in which the local urban elite produced, through design and surveillance, a seemingly public beach, which only served the needs of a specific group. In the past fifteen years, many scholars have investigated the politics of exclusion that have shaped and reshaped leisure spaces in contemporary American cities. In particular, the history of beach and

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5. Historian Elaine Tyler May has described how the Cold War on the Homefront generated a “domestic revival,” which contributed to lowering the age of marriage and increasing birthrates, and promoted the home as a “bastion of safety in an insecure world.” In contrast, public space became associated with threats coming from a variety of enemies, including anybody who did not conform to social and sexual norms. (May 9).

swimming-pool segregation has generated important scholarship, which has underlined the centrality of leisure in the history of the civil rights movement (Wiltse; Wolcott, 2012; Kahrl). More recently, studies focusing on Eastern coastal regions have shown how wealthy shoreline homeowners have managed throughout the twentieth century to prevent federal and state government officials from opening “their” private beaches to the general public and how their tactics, which involved building fortifications on the shores, exacerbated the ecological fragility of the coastline.(Schlichting; Kahrl) My paper contributes to this discussion but departs from existing studies by focusing on the sometimes more covert role played by planning and policing in the exclusion of certain groups from urban recreational spaces. Indeed, in contrast to the violence that erupted when black beachgoers attempted to desegregate beaches, amusement parks, and swimming pools in Chicago, Buffalo, or Biloxi, the ways in which the Los Angeles beach public was filtered remained essentially invisible (Patterson Smith; Wolcott, 2006; Fisher) More specifically, I will show how the combination of beach planning and policing in postwar Los Angeles contributed to the construction of the beach as an exclusive space for the white middle-class nuclear family. This process was crucial in determining the fate of the city’s beaches: without extensive planning and policing, many famous urban beaches opened to the public (such as Coney Island or Atlantic City), stopped attracting the middle and upper classes, and were commonly viewed as dwindling attractions in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Yet by “saving” the public beaches of Los Angeles from urban decline, the men and women behind these initiatives also managed to exclude many Angelenos from the shores.

## Urban Renewal on the Beach

Urban renewal corresponds to a two-decade period in postwar urban planning, when planners and political elites took on the task of remaking the industrial cities of America into rational and car-friendly metropolises. Starting in 1949 with the Housing Act, which authorized federally subsidized slum clearance and urban redevelopment, and ending in the early 1970s, when critics of big government and large-scale planning multiplied, this period saw the destruction of entire neighborhoods and their rapid replacement by gleaming office towers, highways, stadiums, and high-rise apartment buildings.

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6. On the decline of urban beaches and urban amusements in the postwar era, see John K. Walton and Gary Cross. *The Playful Crowd* (2005); Mark Allan Herlihy. “Leisure, Space, and Collective Memory” (2000); Bryant Simon. *Boardwalk of Dreams* (2006).

Recent studies have increased and complicated our understanding of this period (Zipp; Klemek; Avila & Rose; Wakeman), but historians have so far largely neglected the impact of these processes outside of inner-city areas. By focusing on efforts to modernize Los Angeles beaches between the late 1940s and the 1960s, my intention is to expand the traditional vision of postwar urban renewal and its impact on everyday life in American cities. In many ways, urban renewal on the beach followed the same precepts and sequence as its equivalent in the city. First, the vocabulary used to describe the shoreline was comparable to the discourses adopted by urban modernization advocates: as with the slums of the inner-city, beaches in Los Angeles were accused of being dirty, blighted, congested, and chaotic. As early as 1941, a reporter for the *LA Daily News* in charge of assessing the state of the city's coastline compared the beaches to "seaside eyesores."<sup>7</sup> Experts agreed: according to the Chief of the State Division of beaches and parks in 1948, the state's shoreline was "a sorry mess"<sup>8</sup> that needed great improvements. Moreover, like in the city proper, the problems facing urban beaches included lack of hygiene, the presence of dilapidated buildings on the sand, over-crowdedness, and barriers to accessibility. In a final echo of the situation of inner-city slums, the city's solution was to destroy the old to make room for the new: on "glamorous Santa Monica beach," planners hoped to clear out the "tenement style facilities" that stood alongside the lavish homes of Hollywood movie stars in order to build "shelters, promenades, play apparatus, picnic tables and stoves."<sup>9</sup>

The different phases of beach modernization also mirrored what happened in the rest of the city. Whereas beach associations had been formed as early as the 1930s in order to improve the region's shoreline, real efforts and funding came only in the late 1940s. The Second World War initiated a particularly prolific period of shoreline planning with California emerging as the leading state in that domain. Between 1944 and 1946, six different plans were produced, drawing up the future of the California coastline, among which five proposals were specifically dedicated to Los Angeles. In 1946, a master plan for the beaches of the metropolitan region was approved and, a few years later, the county hired the urban planning firm Madigan and Hyland to write a report on the plan's feasibility.<sup>10</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, most of

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7. *Daily News LA*, July 28, 1941, 3.

8. *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1948, 14.

9. *Daily News LA*, July 30, 1941, 3.

10. "Report on the Revised Master Plan of Shoreline Development." County of Los Angeles, 1946, Southern Regional Library Facilities, UCLA; "Recreational Development of the Los Angeles Area Shoreline: An Engineering and Economic Report to the Mayor and the City Council, City of Los Angeles," New York, 1949, 148, Box B1380, LACA.

**NOT CONEY ISLAND - BUT SANTA MONICA ON A HOT SUNDAY**

This section of Santa Monica beach is known as "Rendezvous Point" and is especially popular with teenagers. All the facilities that should be present to care for a crowd of the size—swimming, parking areas, sanitary facilities, bathhouses, sport and playhouse structures—were sadly deficient. Better than all the work in Webster, the photograph proves that beach development in Los Angeles County, at this time, is an immediate, pressing problem. —Pacific Press Photo

**Delegates Will Vote**

(Continued from Page 1)

One legislator from a shoreville county, long a friend of the beach program, put it this way: "Funds for beach development just could not be obtained at this season, but even if the financial situation had been better, many of the more representative inland sections would not have voted the money unless and until they were satisfied that certain changes would be made in the administration of the park program. Beach development will come when we work with them to perfect an overall park program."

Arrangements are now being made to have a presidential representative from an inland county speak at the annual convention in Monterey for the purpose of acquainting shorevillers with their point of view and to suggest ways and means whereby success can be achieved by working together.

**A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT**

(Continued from Page 2)

private hands. The State Beach and Park Commission is doing a splendid job on the present program of acquisition. Little by little the choice areas, all duly listed in the State master plan as first priority, are being added to the public domain. The point I am trying to make is that we must not be limited in this program of acquisition by considerations of sandy beach, of swimming and sun bathing, of places for picnics by day and camp fires by night. On the contrary, we must enlarge our conception of recreation, and of beach acquisition and development, to include a great variety of activities. We must realize that fishing, surf-boarding, yachting, nature study, camping, collecting of shells, mushrooms, and all forms of marine and aquatic life, together with travelling and merely observing, all come under the head of recreation, and are therefore equally entitled to consideration in planning any well-rounded and well-balanced program of recreation for all the children of all the people.

*California Coast* 3:3 (August 1949): 3. © Doheny Memorial Library, University of Southern California.

This picture, entitled "Not Coney Island—but Santa Monica on a Hot Sunday," was published in the official newsletter of the Shoreline Planning Association, an organization dedicated to the preservation and development of the California's shoreline in August 1949. The comparison with Coney Island—the Eastern beach famous for its large crowds—and the photograph showing teeming crowds of teenagers huddled together on Santa Monica Beach were meant to alert the state's inhabitants and officials to the dire situation of the beaches in the postwar period. As the caption explained, this particular section of Santa Monica Beach, where teenagers liked to gather, was representative of the many deficiencies of the region's beaches (lack of modern facilities, crowdedness, etc.). Picturing semi-naked teenagers in close proximity, at a moment when juvenile delinquency was a hot topic among parents and politicians, was also strategic: by using this photograph, the association alluded to the fact that dirty and crowded beaches contributed to pre-marital sex and delinquent behaviors in general.

the proposals contained in the report were implemented. Yet, by the end of the 1960s beach modernization efforts—just like their equivalents in the inner-city neighborhoods—had died down, falling prey to critics denouncing the construction of rows of Miami-type high-rise buildings on the coast and the displacement of thousands of residents, most of them too poor to relocate anywhere near the beach.

A final similarity between the shore and the city is that the coalition behind beach modernization resembled the group behind urban redevelopment: city officials, planners, politicians, and business leaders were all pushing for beach improvements<sup>11</sup>. In the city and on the beach, the goal was to lure wealthy city-dwellers and investments to Los Angeles during an age of metropolitan competition for capital. By developing modern beaches along the coast, beach modernization advocates hoped to establish Los Angeles' status as a world-class city where both work and leisure could be pursued. Moreover, in the context of the expansion of the suburbs and the decline of the downtown neighborhoods, the objective was to make sure that the beach communities would remain attractive to upper- and middle-class white suburbanites.

While the vocabulary, the chronology, and the goals of beach modernization were quite similar to that of urban redevelopment, the actual unfolding of these visions differed. The beaches, being partially of “natural” origin, had to undergo specific changes in order to be suitable sites for modernization and construction. First, for beaches to be attractive in the postwar era, they had to be clean. In Los Angeles, this meant that the issue of water and sand pollution had to be solved. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the decrepit sewage treatment plant located at Hyperion did not properly treat the city's wastewater. Raw sewage was dumped directly into the sea at Hyperion beach before contaminating the entire bay. In 1942, a state report stated that intestinal diseases were known to be three times as frequent in proportion to the population in the adjoining shore area as they were elsewhere in the state.<sup>12</sup> The following year, quarantine was established on 10 miles of the city's coastline, including the popular Venice beaches. While Angelenos had bathed for decades in questionably clean water, this situation had to be fixed if officials wanted middle-class visitors to continue frequenting the shore. In the decade following the war, Americans had become increasingly concerned with hygiene and cleanliness. As women left their

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11. In its composition, the beach modernization group resembled the “pro-growth coalitions” described by John Mellonkopf. According to him, these coalitions, which found their origins in Democratic politics, united public and private interests behind government programs (in this case the 1949 Housing Act, which allowed cities to obtain federal funding for urban renewal projects). Mellonkopf argues that these coalitions were instrumental in bringing about the dramatic transformations of postwar American cities (Mollenkopf).

12. “A Sanitary Survey of Sewage Pollution of the Surf and Beaches of Santa Monica Bay,” 1942, Box A826. File 14669, ACLA.



war-industry jobs—often under societal pressure—they found themselves in large suburban houses with modern electrical appliances that were supposed to help them in their daily chores. Yet this is precisely in that period that new standards of cleanliness were elaborated both as a means to justify the suburban gender binary, which relied on women’s presence at home, and to support consumer spending. Indeed, according to historian Suellen Hoy, the American “culture of cleanliness” reached its peak in the 1950s (Hoy 151). As a response to these needs, the beach modernization program included the construction of a brand new sewage disposal plant at Hyperion Beach in 1950, allowing the quarantine to be lifted.<sup>13</sup>

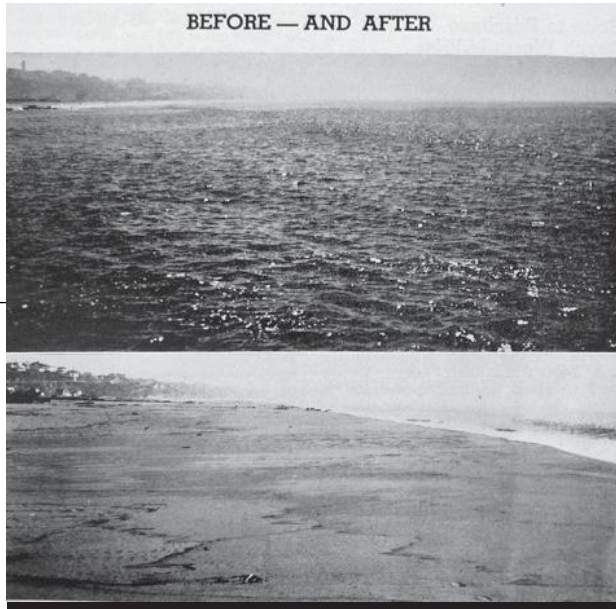
But the beaches could not remain clean if they were crowded. Moreover, crowded beaches, like the ones photographer Robert Weegee had captured in his famous Coney Island photographs, were associated with a working-class form of leisure that had lost its appeal after the war. The 1950s white middle-class family expected a semblance of intimacy, even on a public beach. The modernization supporters responded to that problem by devising and carrying out a vast artificial sand nourishment project on the coast. As early as the 1930s, engineers had developed sand nourishment techniques to rebuild eroded beaches. Yet when Los Angeles engineers envisioned a huge ocean fill of 56,000,000 cubic yards of sand extracted from nearby dunes, many doubted this could be done. After a first successful experiment conducted during the war, when trucked-sand was deposited on the beach, several sand nourishment operations followed in the 1950s, resulting in the vast enlargement of the city’s beaches. By the early 1960s, some beaches had been widened up to three times their original sizes.<sup>14</sup>

The third step of the modernization program saw the destruction of the deteriorating amusement piers, sideshows, restaurants, nickelodeons, and dance-halls that had been built at the beginning of the century to attract tourists to the coast. Seashore amusement piers had once symbolized modernity and liberation from the strictures of Victorian culture: in the 1950s they became associated with grime, dirt, deviant sexuality, and implicitly with working-class youth and minority Angelenos (Kasson; Peiss). Films of that period reinforced and reflected that connection: Los Angeles piers were painted as the favorite hangouts of criminals, con artists, and racially ambiguous seductresses. One of the first scenes of the movie *Mildred Pierce* (M. Curtiz, 1945) was shot on a pier where shady bars and sideshows lit up the dark night. This is where Mildred comes to contemplate death. Later in

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13. *Western City*, April 1950, 28.

14. “Historical Changes in the Beaches of Los Angeles County: Malaga Cove to Topanga Canyon: 1935-1990,” Department of Beaches and Harbors, County of Los Angeles, 1992, Santa Monica Public Library.



*California Coast* 5:2 (July 1948): 3. © Doheny Memorial Library, University of Southern California.

These two pictures entitled “Before and After” were published in *California Coast*, the official newsletter of the Shoreline Planning Association. The juxtaposition of these two images—one showing ocean water, the other a broad sandy beach—and the description indicating that both were taken at the same place but nine months apart were meant to showcase the striking enlargement of the beaches that was taking place all over the region. In the postwar period, engineers specialized in coastal constructions developed innovative techniques to create or enlarge beaches. These two photographs were taken at Playa Del Rey, a popular Los Angeles beach that was dramatically enlarged in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

the movie, this is also where her daughter degrades herself by performing in a dive bar in front of an inebriated male audience. In *T-Men* (A. Mann, 1947), another Los Angeles-based film noir of that period, the investigation of a counterfeiting ring leads the main character on the Ocean Park pier into a gambling joint where a Mexican waitress attempts to seduce him. In *Quicksand* (I. Pichel, 1950), *femme fatale* Vera takes Dan, a young automobile mechanic, to Joyland, a Santa Monica Pier penny arcade, where they meet the owner, a seedy character. Later in the movie, Dan, with Vera’s encouragements, attempts to break into Joyland and steal the owner’s car. In the popular culture of the 1940s and 1950s, the piers and beach

sideshows were the favorite haunt of “undesirable” characters. For the beach modernization coalition, those had to go.

By destroying amusements that had long been the favorite part of the beach experience for working-class visitors and the youth, the “beach lobby” was directly affecting the kind of public that patronized the coastline. In 1950, the Shoreline Planning Association proudly proclaimed: “Gone are the flimsy wooden bathhouses, the grimy hot-dog stands which saturated the air with the characteristic odor of very stale grease and the inadequate sanitary facilities.”<sup>15</sup> The systematic mention of the dirty food stands and their associated stench evinces the classist dimension of the modernization efforts: the goal was to get rid of the working-class elements of the beach in order to appeal to middle-class tastes.

These newly-widened, empty beaches allowed the planners to go through with the next step of their plan: adapting the coastline to the postwar suburbanite values of cleanliness, privacy, and respectability. Indeed, in the 1950s and 1960s, a growing share of American families benefited from the booming economy and gained access to a middle-class suburban lifestyle that used to be reserved to a privileged few. These socio-economic transformations not only had consequences on the nation’s urban landscape—with the onset of the so-called “white flight from the inner-cities to the suburbs—but also on cultural values, with a renewed emphasis on family entertainment, traditional gender roles, and homeownership. Beach modernizers thus hoped that building modern accommodations and family-friendly recreational spaces on the sand would prevent the white middle class from “fleeing” the beaches as they had “fled” the inner-city districts. In doing so, planners were taking their cues from the new model of leisure that had emerged in 1955 in Orange County: Disneyland.<sup>16</sup> The famous amusement park was imagined as the exact opposite of the beach amusement parks built in reference to Coney Island at the beginning of the century. Walt Disney had specifically refused to locate his park at the beach, fearing that people might show up in their bathing suits. Moreover, the general atmosphere of the beach parks did not fit in with his vision. In contrast to the mixed crowds that lingered around sexualized sideshows and gambled in the dark corners of the ocean piers, Disneyland presented “a controlled landscape that orchestrated the movement and vision of park visitors” (Avila 106). The park was dedicated to the middle-class family and every amusement had to reflect the family-friendly values upheld by Walt Disney. There was no place

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15. *California Coast* 4:2 (May 1950): 2.

16. On Disneyland and “disneyfication,” see Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power* (1991); Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park* (1992); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight* (2004).

for dubious beach attractions that promised to “reveal the secrets of sex.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, to make sure that the park would remain inaccessible to carless people (teenagers in particular) Disneyland was built far away from the city and public transportation. Finally, in contrast to the amusement piers, which contained disparate shows with differing prices and styles, Disneyland was self-contained: a single price was paid for the entry into the park, where everything, from the color scheme to the friendly and well-kempt employees, was standardized.

The region’s planners transformed the coastline according to these precepts. With the mass adoption of the automobile in the 1930s and the construction of express freeways in the 1940s and 1950s, urban planners felt an urgent need to turn the beach into an automobile-friendly space. In 1950, the city of Los Angeles built parking spaces for 1,000 cars on the artificially-widened beach.<sup>18</sup> In 1966, a new express freeway opened that allowed Angelenos to reach the beach from downtown in a just a few minutes.<sup>19</sup> Accommodations were also built to make the trip to the beach more convenient for visitors who came from faraway suburbs and did not want to drive back in their dripping bathing suits: public toilets, showers, bathhouses and brand-new lifeguard headquarters mushroomed along the coast. The buildings were not only functional, they were also meant to be beautiful: according to the SPA Bulletin, a recently-inaugurated modernist building at Will Rogers Beach exemplified “the latest trend in modern beach design.”<sup>20</sup>

Beach planners also made sure to replace the old amusements parks and dance-halls with “family-friendly” attractions. Pacific Ocean Park (nicknamed “POP”), an amusement park inaugurated in 1958, is a good example of that trend. In the late 1950s, the city of Santa Monica decided that the “dwindling carnival-like attractions”<sup>21</sup> of Ocean Park Pier had run their course. Nostalgic throngs visiting the old pier were not sufficient to sustain the old rides and games. While the pier was preserved, the sideshows gave way to modern attractions. With its ocean theme, POP pretended to be “nothing like Disneyland” but in reality was a very close copy, with similar attractions and a comparable target public: the white middle-class family. Just like Disneyland’s racialized landscape of leisure, with attractions such as “Frontierland” featuring colorfully-dressed “savages,” POP’s most famous rides used stereotypes of non-white cultures to appeal to a white audience

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17. See photograph reproduced in Avila (112).

18. *California Coast* 4: 4 (August 1950): 4.

19. Paula A. Scott, *Santa Monica: a History on the Edge* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004) 132.

20. *California Coast* 4:2 (May 1950): 3.

21. *LA Examiner*, January 10, 1957.



*California Coast* 2:4 (May 1950): 2.

© Doheny Memorial Library, University of Southern California.

This drawing of a building to be built on Will Rogers Beach, a public beach located north of Los Angeles, was published in *California Coast* in May 1950. With its cubic shape and minimalist design, the building, typical of the 1950s modernist aesthetics, stood in sharp contrast with the old-fashioned beach restaurants and amusement concessions that were built at the beginning of the twentieth century. This type of modern beach buildings was conceived to appeal to the tastes of the middle class. In contrast, the “grimy hot-dog stands” of the past were associated with a working-class form of leisure. By destroying the latter to make room for the former, urban planners hoped to keep the middle and upper classes on the beach.

fascinated by the exotic “Other” (Avila 132-143). By introducing the “Pay-One-Price” single entry-ticket in 1960, POP management also adopted Disneyland’s crowd-filtering strategies.<sup>22</sup> Finally, P.O.P. was clean, orderly, and, crucially, it was closely supervised by park attendants in uniform.

### Beach Policing in the Atomic Age

Indeed, beach supervision was another crucial development in the postwar transformation of the Los Angeles coastline. Combined with urban renewal techniques that dramatically transformed the beach landscape,

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22. *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 1960, J3.

increased policing contributed to the redefinition of the beach public based on race, class, and—more crucially—gender performance and sexuality. The ideal beach public, according to city officials and the business community, was defined as white. Beach policing in Los Angeles, however, did not specifically target racial minorities. Due to a long history of racial segregation and violence on the sand and the sheer distance between the coastline and most black neighborhoods, the Los Angeles beaches of the 1950s and 1960s were virtually all-white spaces. During this period, the policing of beach visitors was thus not specifically focused on racial minorities but instead on the beachgoers who defied the dominant social and sexual norms. Specifically, the police scrutinized the gay men and lesbians who socialized in beach bathhouses and the “Muscle Beach” bodybuilders who worked out on the sands. In the Cold War era, as historian Elaine Tyler May has explained, any deviation from the norms of appropriate sexual and familial behavior was perceived as a challenge to social order and national security (Tyler May). On the beach, homosexuals and bodybuilders represented a double threat: a social threat—they undermined public decorum and decency—and an economic threat—their presence could affect local real estate value. These threats were linked: if homeowners in communities like Santa Monica or Venice wanted to see real estate values rise, they had to minimize their reputation as a site for Los Angeles bohemia. As a consequence, homosexuals and bodybuilders became the target of several beach policing measures.

Homosexual men and women had gathered on the shores for decades in order to meet potential sexual partners. They became more visible in the postwar era with the opening of several gay bars and restaurants in the old-fashioned bathhouses that the middle-class public had stopped patronizing as they grew comfortable with coming to the beach in their bathing suits or changing in their cars (Faderman & Timmons). Starting in the 1950s, the Santa Monica police was regularly called upon in local newspapers to address the “vice conditions” that existed on the beaches.<sup>23</sup> In 1955 and 1956, two recently-elected city council members, an ordained minister and a lawyer, who had won their seats by campaigning on morality issues, orchestrated a “clean-up” crusade specifically targeting the beach. The first in a long series of anti-gay raids was conducted on a Saturday afternoon of December 1955, when the Santa Monica police and the Los Angeles vice squad stormed an Ocean Park bathhouse and arrested 11 men under the charge of “lewd conduct.” Shortly after the raid, the city manager revoked the business license of the bathhouse. But closing is was

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23. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, April 5, 1955, 1; *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, April 2, 1955, 1; *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 5, 1955, 1.

not enough. To make sure that the so-called “sex deviates” would not return, it was suggested that the bathhouse be razed.<sup>24</sup>

This proposal underlines the fact that the beach policing efforts were directly linked with the beach modernization program. When, a year later, another bathhouse was scheduled for destruction following a vice-squad raid, Santa Monica’s chief of Police declared that razing the building “w[ould] do much to rid the city of unwelcome sex deviates and other undesirables.”<sup>25</sup> But according to Santa Monica’s city manager, the bathhouse’s destruction “ha[d] been contemplated for over a year as part of the beach master plan.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the decision served both the goals of the moral crusade *and* the precepts adopted by urban planners. In the days following the second bathhouse raid, it was also suggested to throw more light on the Santa Monica pier’s piling and understructure in order to get rid of the “dark corners” where homosexuals were accused of congregating. In both cases, the measures would enhance the beach, “modernize” it, as well as prevent homosexuals from coming to the shores. For their proponents, the conflation of the two programs was logical. Indeed, the beach modernization coalition overlapped with the beach policing advocates: city officials and the mainstream business community supported both endeavors. For them, the voted-upon measures would kill two birds with one stone. The targeting of homosexuals—through anti-gay raids and the eventual destruction of the bathhouses—is one example, among many, of the ways in which beach policing measures collided and reinforced beach modernization efforts. The closing of “Muscle Beach” is another one.

“Muscle Beach” was a section of the Santa Monica beach where acrobats and athletes had gathered since the 1930s.<sup>27</sup> By the 1940s, Muscle Beach had reached national fame drawing packed crowds who watched the acrobatics, body-building contests, and weight-lifting competitions held on the beach stage. Yet in the 1950s the performers started attracting criticism directed at both their bodies and lifestyles, which were seen as atypical. To be sure, Muscle Beach athletes, especially the female and male bodybuilders, boasted unconventional physiques and challenged traditional gender stereotypes. In the newspapers, they were described as “feminine men and masculine women,”<sup>28</sup> and this was not a compliment. Moreover, Muscle Beach habitués were perceived as

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24. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 4, 1955, 1.

25. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 4, 1956, 1.

26. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 4, 1956, 1.

27. The “Muscle Beach” gym area was originally called the “Santa Monica Beach Playground” and was founded in 1934 by the Work Progress Administration to relieve unemployment (see *Evening Outlook*, July 16, 1940, 5). The name changed to “Muscle Beach” around the late 1930s-early 1940s.

28. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 18, 1958, 4.

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“drifters” or lazy “beach bums” who did not conform to the dominant model of the male breadwinner and the female homemaker. The exhibition of these new ideals and values did not sit well with the city’s authorities. Throughout the 1950s, Santa Monica’s conservative citizens, led by councilwoman Alys Drobnick, fought a sustained battle against the muscle shows. But Muscle Beach was popular with the public: Drobnick and her supporters could not fight it only on moral grounds. While they persisted in accusing the performers of being “exhibitionists,” they also couched their complaints in terms taken from the beach modernizers’ handbook: they accused the site of not being sufficiently supervised and of lacking proper equipment.<sup>29</sup> According to Leonard Bright, the Santa Monica recreation director and an ardent Muscle Beach opponent, the site had to be destroyed and rebuilt in order to foster more “public participation” and less showmanship.<sup>30</sup> In the late 1950s, the area was included in the redevelopment program of Santa Monica’s beaches. Yet it was unclear whether the popular Muscle Beach would ever be closed and, if so, when.

In December 1958, the police arrested five Muscle Beach habitués following police investigation of reports by two young African American runaway girls of 12 and 14.<sup>31</sup> Four of the bodybuilders were accused of sexual misconduct and another man was jailed on misdemeanor charges involving the possession of photographs of male nudity. The press did not explicitly comment on the girls’ race but the taboo of interracial sexual relations in Cold War America, even in a city such as Los Angeles where no laws barred interracial marriages, represented an additional cause of concern for city officials who wanted to preserve Santa Monica’s reputation as a safe destination for middle-class white families. The 1958 “sex scandal,” as it was quickly dubbed by the local press, presented the anti-Muscle Beach coalition with the perfect opportunity to stigmatize Muscle Beach as an unsafe area that should not be present on the beach. Even though the incident had not taken place on the beach—according to the victims’ testimonies the crimes had taken place at a beach-front apartment and a Pico Boulevard motel—and though it incriminated only a handful of the Muscle Beach regulars, Drobnick and her allies accused Muscle Beach performers of being child molesters who were partaking in “sex orgies.”<sup>32</sup> Their strategy worked: a few days after the arrest, the City Council decided to close the area. It was later filled with dirt to prevent any attempt to restore it and the city declared that a parking lot would be built on the site. Later, it was announced that an “improved Muscle Beach” would be

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29. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 11, 1958, 1.

30. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, August 18, 1957, 15.

31. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 10, 1958, 1.

32. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 11, 1958, 1.



opened several hundred feet to the south of the existing weightlifting platform, effectively shifting the locus of control over the beach from the bodybuilders to the city.

Muscle Beach regulars protested the closing of their gym. Many wrote letters to the local newspapers to protest their characterization as “undesirable characters.” One letter claimed that Muscle Beach participants included “doctors, lawyers, police officers, actors, etc.”<sup>33</sup> Some of them even blamed the “‘homo’ carnival that prance[d] along ‘Santa Monica promenade’”<sup>34</sup> for tarnishing their reputation and demanded more policing around the platform. But the area remained closed. In the words of Santa Monica’s police chief, Muscle Beach had created a “terrific sex deviate problem”<sup>35</sup> on the beach, attracting homosexuals and child predators. Muscle Beach’s demise was therefore part of the larger moral crusade fought against any beachgoer who did not conform to the prevalent sexual and gender norms. While gay men and lesbians were more specifically targeted by these measures, they also affected all the performers who, by their choice of clothing or of athletic activity, had threatened the status quo. For the anti-Muscle Beach coalition, women who lifted weights and men who wore tight bathing suits while showing off their muscles had no place on the sands. According to an anti-Muscle Beach petition signed in 1959 by several concerned citizens, the beaches were deemed reserved “for the recreational use of healthy-minded young people, families with children and older citizens.”<sup>36</sup> The “proper” beach public could not be more clearly defined. According to this vision, the beach was the exclusive recreational territory of the nuclear family and the elderly.

The construction of the “new” muscle beach gym area confirmed the city’s intentions regarding the type of public it wished to attract. The recreation commission recommended the opening of a “family-style outdoor gym area,” “under strict municipal supervision.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed at the “new” Muscle Beach that opened in August 1959, three supervisors were on duty and, as underlined by Leonard Bright, they had the power to make arrests.<sup>38</sup> In order to discourage any form of “exhibitionism,” the gym area did not include a platform. Moreover, the new Muscle Beach, which basically resembled a children’s playground, differed from the older one in its strict segregation of children’s and adults’ equipment. In other words, the new site fulfilled the main goal of

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33. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 16, 1958, 4.

34. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 16, 1958, 4.

35. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 17, 1958, 1.

36. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, June 12, 1959, 1.

37. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 17, 1958 ; *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, December 11, 1958, 1.

38. *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, August 10, 1959, 11.



Photographs commissioned by the *Los Angeles Daily News*, Los Angeles Daily News Negatives, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California at Los Angeles.

On this photograph, a young child is hoisted to the top of a human pyramid at Muscle Beach (1947). Acrobats, both young and old, were very popular with the crowds. Moreover, because they did not challenge the dominant gender and bodily norms, they did not attract the harsh criticism that targeted male and female bodybuilders. Yet the acrobats were also chased from the beach following the 1958 “sex scandal” that resulted in Muscle Beach’s closing. Indeed the informal atmosphere of Muscle Beach and its lack of supervision did not fit the vision of the modern beach developed by local officials and urban planners. With its unruly and intergenerational crowds huddled around a decrepit wooden platform, Muscle beach belonged to the past.

the anti-Muscle Beach coalition: it would prevent the informal organization of muscle shows while ensuring that a respectable “family atmosphere” would reign on the beach.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, the beach modernization program contributed to the destruction of the infamous muscle Beach “community” that had emerged with the shows. By razing the decrepit apartments and hotels along the beach where many of the stalwarts used to live, the city was not only improving the beaches: it was ensuring that the athletes would not return. Beach modernization once more served the goals of beach policing, while police surveillance of the beaches cleared the way for the modernizers’ plans.

<sup>39</sup>. *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1959, WS1; *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, August 10, 11

While these measures did deter the athletes from coming back to Santa Monica, most of them found their way back to the shore. But this time, they chose a different beach: Venice. In the 1950s, the neighborhood had turned into “the ‘third’ beat community” (Maynard 13), attracting hundreds of artists and dropouts who sought cheap rents and the sea breeze. Although less famous than Greenwich Village in New York and North Beach in San Francisco, the declining resort had a reputation as a Bohemian paradise where it was possible to live a counterculture lifestyle. This was no surprise, then, that the Muscle Beach athletes chose Venice as their new home. Venice already had its own weight-lifting platform, which had been inaugurated in 1950 during the height of the beach modernization era. But it had remained under the shadow of its famous predecessor in Santa Monica. In the 1960s, however, the Venice weight-lifting pit developed its own following thanks, in large part, to the influx of Muscle Beach refugees. By the 1970s, Arnold Schwarzenegger’s multiple bodybuilding titles and his first movie success in *Pumping Iron* (G. Butler and R. Fiore, 1977) had drawn attention to the gym area where he had started his training as a young Austrian immigrant. Described as a “debauched Disneyland” by a journalist, “Muscle Beach Venice,” as it had been renamed by the habitués, fit in well with the neighborhood. As the region’s “last poor beach,” Venice was the final rampart on the coast where hippies, streets musicians, and peddlers were welcomed.<sup>40</sup> Everywhere else on Los Angeles’s shoreline, urban renewal and increased policing had done their job: the so-called “undesirables” were nowhere to be seen.

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By the early 1960s, Los Angeles finally had the beaches it deserved as a modern coastal metropolis: clean, wide, and equipped with modern facilities. More crucially, by “cleaning up” the beaches, both literally—when they destroyed the hot-dog stands and amusement concessions that had long been the favorite part of the beach experience for working-class visitors—and figuratively—when they conducted anti-gay raids and closed down Muscle Beach—the members of the beach modernization coalition and the advocates of beach policing cleared the way for those they perceived as deserving of publicly-funded recreational spaces: middle- and upper-class white families and, to some extent, the elderly. While the city’s public beaches remained opened to everybody, at least in theory, they were imagined, planned for, and adapted to this specific public in mind.

The strategies deployed by urban planners, business elites and local politicians did work: unlike Coney Island and Atlantic City, the beaches of Los Angeles remained attractive to the white middle class. But there were

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40. *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1981, OC-C1; *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1967, B20.

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also many setbacks: as mentioned above, Venice Beach remained a favorite haunt for “everything that [wa]s perceived as wrong or weird in Southern California”<sup>41</sup>. Gay men and lesbians, as described in John Rechy’s semi-autobiographical novel *City of Night* (1963), did come back to Santa Monica, some of them in plain view<sup>42</sup>. Moreover, the 1970s brought new obstacles for the proponents of beach modernization and policing. In Santa Monica, a grassroots campaign was carried out in 1973 in order to save the municipal pier from its scheduled destruction. According to many, it was precisely because the pier “lured a deliciously rich cross section of people and characters”<sup>43</sup> that it had to be preserved. The pier remained intact. Meanwhile, in the years following the 1965 immigration reform, the ethnic and racial diversity of the beach public dramatically expanded, challenging the informal segregation that had persisted for decades. In 1972, Santa Monica lifeguards mournfully compared the beach to a “melting-pot at the end of a freeway” (Edgerton 51). By the mid-1970s, the consensus that had brought together urban planners, businessmen, and local officials on what should be built on the beach and who should have access to it started to crack. The influx of Latino and Asian immigrants in the city, the rising number of critics condemning urban renewal and advocating for the need to preserve historic buildings, and the growing assertiveness of gay men and women in public spaces are some of the forces that challenged the status quo. But the collapse of the coalition that reigned over the coastline from the 1940s until the late 1960s did not put an end to the tensions and debates concerning who has “the right to the beach.” New strategies of exclusion have appeared while traditional methods used to filter the crowd persist. Most recently, owners of private beach houses in Malibu have used fake “no parking” signs to prevent the general public from coming to the shore. The “right to the beach” in Los Angeles was, and remains, contested. While Angelenos need to be vigilant to prevent the rampant privatization of their public beaches by coastline homeowners, they should also be aware—as this article has demonstrated—that the ways in which a beach is planned, developed, and policed has a major impact on who will come to, and feel comfortable on, the sand.

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41. *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1981, OC-C1.

42. See in particular his description of Crystal Beach, the gay stretch of the beach in Santa Monica. John Rechy, *City of Night* (Rechy 211-230).

43. *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1973, F1.

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