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An Urban Planner on the Ground in South Central Los Angeles

January 30, 2018 By Jonathan P. Bell

Community sign for East Rancho Dominguez, formerly known as East Compton. Photo: Jonathan P. Bell

1.

I wear a blue County jacket and dark pants, denim or Dickies, when I'm out doing zoning enforcement inspections. This isn't a regulation uniform. I don't *have to* wear it. I'm an

urban planner, not a cop.

My department supplies the jacket, polo shirts, and a baseball cap with the County seal and department name emblazoned. When we show up to someone's place asking to inspect, the gear helps people see we're legit.

Years back, before the bosses funded the gear, our men and women wore business attire in the field. I loathed that visage. It made us look like real estate agents, or some flunky sent from the property management company to collect. I also hated climbing over backyard trash piles in polished dress shoes. It all seemed incongruous to the job. So I pushed for official apparel provided on the department's dime. The bosses said OK, then assigned me to get it done. We turned it into a MAPP Goal deliverable; management got credit. The department issued the first set of County polos in 2007, and they replenish us every couple years.

After 11 years on the job, nearly all of which working in unincorporated South Central L.A., I wear the County gear damn near every workday, even when I'm stuck pushing paper in the office. The County gear differentiates me from a traditional desk-bound planner. It's a matter of optics as much as it is mindset. Wearing the County gear tells the public, and reminds me, that I'm out there too on those streets.

Represent.

2.

Tuesday, December 12, 2017, 12:00 p.m.

I pull off the southbound 710 and head west on Alondra Boulevard. Today's inspections have me in East Rancho Dominguez. This area has a fascinating history.

3.

East Rancho Dominguez – ERD in our County vernacular – is an unincorporated community nestled between the Cities of Compton, Lynwood, and Paramount. For decades ERD was called East Compton; it shares City of Compton's zip code, streets, development pattern, and demographics. It too shared the notoriety of the appellation.

As historian Josh Sides chronicled in "Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban

Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb," the history, the meaning, the idea of "Compton" is contested terrain. What began in 1888 as a newly incorporated township of 500 settlers evolved in the 1950s into an idyllic middle-class "hub city" at the geographic center of the County; then, by the late 1970s, under the weight of intense sociopolitical forces, metamorphosed into the embodiment of urban strife in the popular imagination. Come the Reagan Era, "Compton" was a metonym for an entire constellation of social ills – crime, poverty, gangs, substandard housing, troubled schools, and so forth.

The infamy proved problematic for communities connected by geography and place-name. According to Sides: "By the late 1980s, in fact, the word Compton had become so powerfully suggestive, so notorious, the city's surrounding suburbs successfully lobbied to literally erase Compton from their city maps."

At the height of N.W.A's candid street reportage on the city, neighbors were taking *extraordinary measures* to dissociate from The CPT. Seeking an image makeover in 1985, the Dominguez Medical Center relocated its mailroom to another side of the hospital campus to switch from a "Compton" to a "Long Beach" address. The hospital administrator later told reporters: "Compton has a negative image as a city . . . that's what we're looking to get away from." Elected officials in nearby jurisdictions followed suit. Between 1986 and 1990, amidst allegations of racism and classism, five cities renamed the stretch of Compton Boulevard that ran through their turf. The very word Compton, and the accompanying presumptions, had become anathema outside of the city's formal municipal borders. As hip hop producer and native son Ricky Miller told Mike Davis, "Compton Boulevard used to run clean to the beach, until we became known as the gangsta-rap capital of the universe . . . Nobody can claim Compton now or give it any respect except for us."

Compton Boulevard in East Rancho Dominguez. Photo: Jonathan P. Bell

Similar events would unfold in ERD. In the late summer of 1990, community leaders and the County changed East Compton to East Rancho Dominguez. The name nods at L.A.'s historic Dominguez Family, the area's Spanish and Mexican land grant systems, and the mostly-industrial unincorporated Rancho Dominguez area bordering Compton, Carson, and Long Beach. Once again, Compton city officials cried foul. But this time, the accusations of deliberate place-erasure were not so simple. Indeed, hyper-parochial city/county politics were at play.

Residents in ERD had long dealt with a problem common to South Central's unincorporated areas: County-governed districts are often conflated with their better-known, neighboring incorporated cities. The phenomenon happens in Florence-Firestone, habitually confused with L.A. City's Watts neighborhood or the adjacent "Florence" district in city limits; Willowbrook, often described as Watts-Willowbrook, Watts, or Compton; and West Athens-Westmont, which is frequently and simplistically subsumed into the larger South Central geography. Yet these County districts nonetheless had an advantage not available in East Compton: they had unique place-names. The distinctive community nomenclature helps differentiate unincorporated areas from incorporated cities. East Compton, however, was simply lumped in with Compton. Residents in this County enclave wanted their own identity, their own history, their own story to tell, and they started by proclaiming their own name.

The move was interpreted differently at Compton City Hall. Tired of the perceived

slights, city officials took up a defensive stance. Compton's electeds and police alleged high crime rates in East Compton were unfairly attributed to the city, further tarnishing Compton's image. The late Councilman Maxcy D. Filer at the time even wondered whether ERD's rebrand was a "blessing in disguise."

Yet despite familiar appearances, ERD's renaming was less a matter of "Compton stigma" and more about autonomy. Unlike the five cities who'd whitewashed Compton Boulevard from their maps, ERD reflected comparable demographics for African-American and Latino residents as the City of Compton. ERD wasn't dissociating from the local populations; rather, it embraced them under a new, shared ethos within its borders. And while some stakeholders saw better economic development potential with the new name, backers argued that the rebrand would establish the autonomous identity rightly owed to this community. "I think we deserve it," declared ERD leader Margaret Comer. These days, any definitive motivation for the name change remains up for debate – but what's irrefutable is that this episode in local politics rendered publicly the fiercely independent spirit that defines East Rancho Dominguez.

It still plays out today, this Compton/ERD dialectic. In 2013, ERD residents refused to be annexed by the City of Compton, citing better services and sovereignty under the County. "We stand to lose everything that we have gained – our continuity, our process, our identity," said Sinetta Farley, ERD's neighborhood association president. In this move, the community upended a prevailing assumption in municipal affairs that stakeholders always prefer cityhood, be it through incorporation or annexation. East Rancho Dominguez remains proudly and defiantly unincorporated.

4.

Near the intersection of Atlantic Avenue and Compton Boulevard, 12:22 p.m.

The roasted and tantalizing aroma of *comida Mexicana* scents the air. It's lunchtime. I get a craving for tacos. I decide to hit up a spot I know in Lynwood, a couple blocks from ERD proper.

One of the earliest lessons I learned working zoning enforcement was to buy lunch outside of my jurisdiction. Here's the calculus: when you're eating in a neighboring city, you're not in a place you or coworkers inspect. So when you walk in sporting the County Zoning regalia in city limits, so the reasoning goes, the cooks can't be mad at you for any citations the restaurant has gotten, and won't put surprises in your food. Admittedly this

is a very defensive mentality, but it's understandable after you've pissed off enough people doing this job.

5.

I drive north on Atlantic and cross McMillan Street into Lynwood.

At a red light, an angular protrusion catches my eye. ". . . the f*ck is that?"

Now, detractors accuse our urbanized areas of maintaining "unpleasant" aesthetics. They consider actual street art an affront; density is disturbing; homelessness is a crime; street vending threatens property values; and houses without fresh paint, or conversely, too lively a color palette, are derided as foreign-looking and indecorous. In this reactionary perspective, I see a clash between homogenized suburban ideals and the wider cultural values, different socioeconomic positions, and more diverse lived experiences of urban space.

Sure, our urbanized areas can have rough edges. I don't romanticize the hardships. We all strive for a good life. But we can aspire to good living without attacking the hood, and judging the families who live there. Sh*t talkers and cynics, say what you will, but I see beauty in the unpolished realism, in the immediacy and vibrancy you feel on South Central streets that you'll never experience at some Caruso affiliated simulacrum. As a raconteur of South Central, I want to see the reality with my own eyes, know it, sense it, feel it, interpret and document it *in situ*, so I can help others understand the beautiful complexity of this life.

So I make a quick right and double back, my SUV crossing the meandering invisible borders separating Lynwood, Compton, and ERD. I come up on Atlantic. Street parking is hard to find in this dense part of town, yet I find a wide-open space in front of an apartment complex. This is always a good sign.

E. McMillan Street, where Compton, Lynwood, and East Rancho Dominguez meet. Photo: Jonathan P. Bell

I step out wearing the blue County jacket. A *señor* on a bicycle slow rolling on the sidewalk glances at the official seal beneath my left shoulder. "*Buenas tardes*," I greet. "*Hola*," he utters apprehensively.

This get-up isn't helpful *every* time. Some people are disposed to distrust official-looking government types. Life experiences do that. I see this hesitation a lot in South Central, where there are long memories of strained relationships with all levels of government. I try my damnedest to earn the community's trust.

A few of my colleagues choose to work in plain clothes. When you're incognito you can cruise in and out, low profile. I get that. In my planning approach, however, I prefer to convey unmistakably that I'm representing the County when I'm knocking at your door.

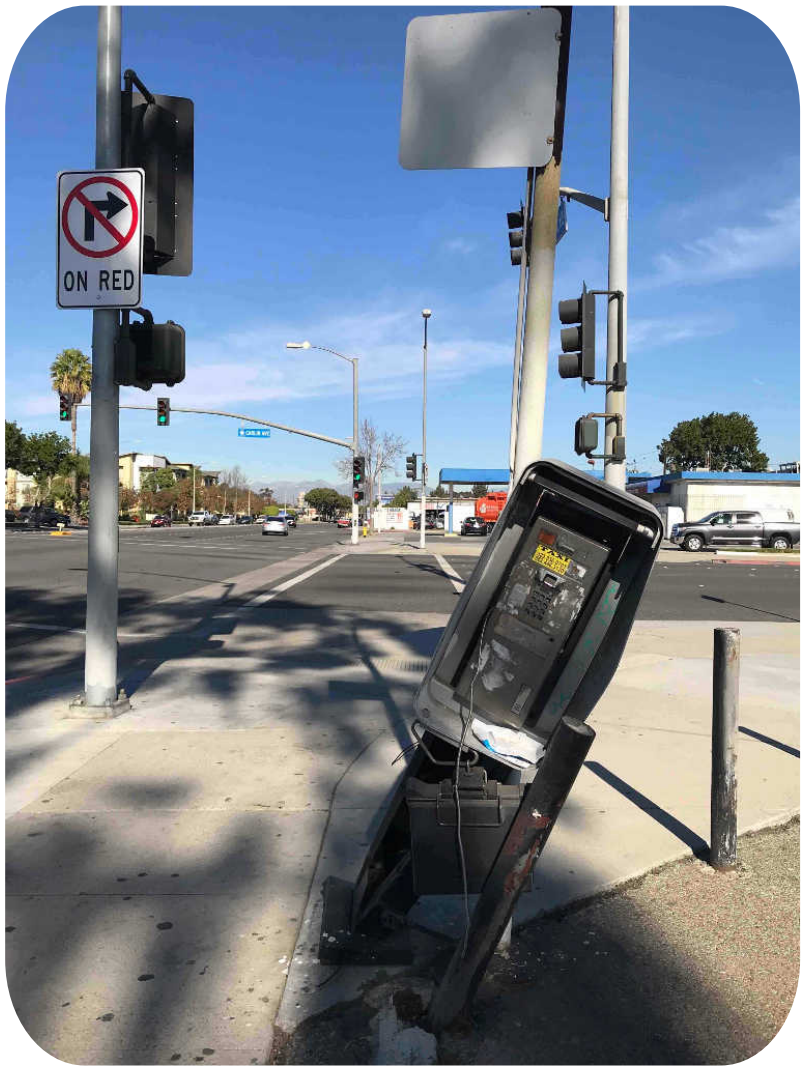
So I wear the gear.

In an ironic appropriation of gang vernacular, the cops we work with call this "flying your colors." That's when you choose to represent your regulatory affiliation out here through visual tactics, including wearing optional uniform-style garb on duty.

The *señor* on the bike reacted to me flying my colors.

The projection that caught my eye is on the corner. I walk over. The thing straddles the property line demarcating the sidewalk from an auto shop business. The shop's large parking lot is nearly empty. There's a small building further back, closer to some houses. For a moment the business looks vacant, but then two workers come out. I nod. The guys nod back.

Turns out what attracted me to this street corner is a mangled old public payphone. It leans at a precarious 45-degree angle, likely the result of some prior car crash. The phone receiver is missing; its cord dangles lifelessly over a rusted black bollard, also bent from the wreck, planted in the asphalt of the parking lot. I consider asking the mechanics how long it's been like this, but I don't want to bother. Maybe days . . . perhaps years.



Old Payphone on Atlantic Avenue in Lynwood. Photo: Jonathan P. Bell

Deregulation of the payphone industry coupled with rapid cell phone proliferation has left this an orphaned stack of scrap metal. It is, in a word, striking – a striking sculpture in this landscape. The angular posture disrupts an otherwise prominent rectilinear grid of utility poles, street lamps, light posts, and rooflines behind it. I find it aberrant and picturesque. With iPhone in hand, I start snapping photos.

"Hey, you Fire Department?" an eager voice inquires. I turn towards the voice and see a young brotha looking at me from a bus stop.

It's my jacket.

The County gear marked me as someone he could approach.

"No sir, I'm a Zoning Enforcement Planner at L.A. County," I say.

He says: "Tell me what that is and how you got there."

I'm accustomed to this curiosity when I tell people what I do. Urban planners usually don't do field enforcement. But they should. And I savor the chance to explain why.

I begin by outlining for him what a typical planner does: review plans, analyze demographic data, create maps, write reports, present to community groups, testify in public hearings to muckety mucks, and occasionally do some site visits. This work, though, is office-based, and typical planners, by consequence, are detached from the neighborhoods and people they serve.

In contrast, I tell him, enforcement planners work directly with community members to solve neighborhood problems. Our job is to enforce the zoning code to remove violations – like those neighbors with trash all over the yard, we can get that cleaned up.

I tell him about the variety of informal housing arrangements I've seen over the years – garages converted into apartments, garden sheds modified into micro units, houses discreetly cut up into mini-hotels, an occupied U-Haul trailer on someone's driveway – and how demand for these dwellings has risen in this housing crisis.

I point east and explain how we serve the people of ERD, and I explain this unincorporated territory next door.

"We respond to reports of all kinds of unpermitted housing, but we work with property owners to get permits. It's planning *on the ground*," I say. "We educate people while we enforce."

His eyes widen. He lifts his chin slightly, as if something he heard caught his ear and he's drawing it in.

Then I give the concise version of how I got here. I tell him that I started at East L.A. College in 1995, right after high school, studied architecture for a couple years, bounced around a few jobs during school, switched majors, then transferred to Cal State L.A. and eventually graduated with a political science degree in 2002. I explain that in my effort to "make sense" of all those years, I then went to UCLA to study the "politics of city design" in the urban planning master's program. I tell him that I completed the program in 2005 and started working at the County in 2006.

But there's an earlier origin story to divulge. I also tell him about my graffiti writer days, 1989–1993, running with my homeboys, riding the RTD into a desolate downtown L.A., meanstreaks in pocket, Krylons in the backpack, seeing a canvas on every surface, bombing every surface, getting gaffled up by one time, then heading back out to enamel those streets. This was my introduction to urbanism. To appreciating the city.

"Man . . ." he pauses, then his sentence fades. I see him in a moment of reflection. The young man goes on to say he likes my description of urban planning on the ground. And he appreciates me opening up.

"I need to make changes," he declares.

He tells me he's 20 years old, just restarting school at El Camino College. He's waiting for the bus to get to his warehouse job, where he works long and late hours. It's exhausting. "You in a union?" I ask. "Nope." He knows he can do more, he says, if he just finds the right path. "I wanna do *more*."

An orange bus appears in my left periphery. "This is me right here," he says.

With time cut short, I attempt to summarize. I tell him that urban planning is a dope career because planners help people build strong and stable communities. “That’s what I’ve been doing in South Central for 10 years!” I say.

He smiles wide.

The bus rolls up.

I’m out of business cards, but we’re not done here. The doors swing open.

“Lemme give you my office number so we can continue talking,” I implore. At this point we finally exchange names. We both have biblical names.

He pulls out a cellphone from his back pocket. I tell him my office number. I reiterate that we need to talk more about urban planning, his studies, his future.

The young man boards, still tapping at the screen while ascending the steps.

“Call you tomorrow!” he says, as the doors close and the orange Metro bus slowly pulls away.

6.

Wednesday, December 13, 2017. 6:00 p.m.

End of the workday. No call.

7.

Wednesday, December 27, 2017. 6:00 p.m.

This is my last full workday of the year. Thus far no call.

Since that chance encounter at the bus stop I’ve wondered everyday if today will be the day.

I know he’s busy. He’s juggling a lot in life, and right now life’s challenges seemed to be winning. He told me that in so many words; but so did his face. As we spoke, his

expression was, at once, one of excitement and hesitation in the possibilities. Like he was seeing opportunities he hadn't known, never considered, of which he never dreamed, while confronting in real time the realization that obstacles lay in his path.

That's why he shouldn't go it alone. That's why urban planners need to mentor.

I suppose I could drive back to the bus stop at 12:00 p.m. next time I'm in ERD. I tell myself, "Perhaps he needs that reassurance." Yet I hesitate putting upon him the imposition. It seems forced. Mentorships can't be compelled.

So for now I await. I hold onto hope that he will call me up and we'll start a conversation about his future. I want to give him some intro readings on urbanism, help with his course selections at ECC, assist on scholarship apps, arrange a tour of my department, all things I've done for other students. If he likes urban planning, we'll work on transfer applications to an undergraduate program.

Good planners understand the hardships of urban life. Some of them lived it. Others came to know it through the job; for instance, by working zoning enforcement in any of our unincorporated South Central communities. Either way, the point is to want to improve lives.

I've done this gig long enough to perceive that spark in others, and I recognized it in him. In those brief moments at the bus stop, I saw the hunger of a young person wanting to do right by his community, to make this place better for families like his. I see him doing it. I see him connecting neighbors with resources. I see him demystifying the bureaucracy in plain language. I see him supporting community leaders. I see him advocating for people in ERD, Compton, Lynwood, and South Central.

I believe he's a future planner.

And in a few years he'll be out here, on these imperfect yet beautiful streets, and he'll be wearing this jacket.

The Jacket. Photo: Jonathan P. Bell

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About Jonathan P. Bell

Jonathan Pacheco Bell (@c1typlann3r) is an Embedded Urban Planner in South Central Los Angeles. Jonathan was born in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of L.A. and raised by his headstrong single mother and grandmother in East Los Angeles/Montebello. A fierce advocate for South Central L.A.'s unincorporated areas, Jonathan's passion for the community was born in 1988 when he first heard NWA's groundbreaking album Straight Outta Compton. On any given day you'll find him in the community of Florence-Firestone partnering with stakeholders to improve quality of life. A product of the California public school system from kindergarten to graduate school, Jonathan holds an M.A. in Urban Planning from UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and an MLIS from SJSU iSchool.
