

Understanding Placemaking and Success in Southern California

Research By: Luis Garcia / Spring 2026



College of Environmental Design
Urban and Regional Planning

Faculty Advisor: Geoffrey Starns

INTRODUCTION

- **Defining Placemaking:** A purposeful method of reviving a site through design and policy choices that creates a new social space for locals. Most seen through design of infrastructure such as plazas or malls, can also include other social community spaces such as parks.
- **Sites of Focus:** “The Culver Steps” located in downtown Culver City, “Albion Riverside Park” located in Lincoln Heights, Los Angeles, and “Vista Hermosa Natural Park” located in Echo Park, Los Angeles.
- This is a dissection of each site, and how well they serve their local community’s needs, the type and amount of placemaking characteristics they have, how safe and clean they are, and the type and ammount of ammenities there are in the surrounding area and on site.

METHODOLOGY

- An initial data collection for each project: Construction Financials, Project Development Data, Documents & Visuals utilized in Marketing, Safety Data, and a List of Placemaking Characteristics.
- A site visit consisting of: Documentation of Site Characteristics (Amenities, Cleanliness, Community/Cultural Identity)
- A site visit observing community behavior and use of the space. In addition, convenient sample surveys and interviews with attendees of the sites.
- A comparison of sites during marketing/development and post opening to highlight realistic challenges.

KEY FINDINGS



Children’s playground and rest area in Vista Hermosa Park



Graffitied ampitheater & Angelinos mural in Albion Riverside Park

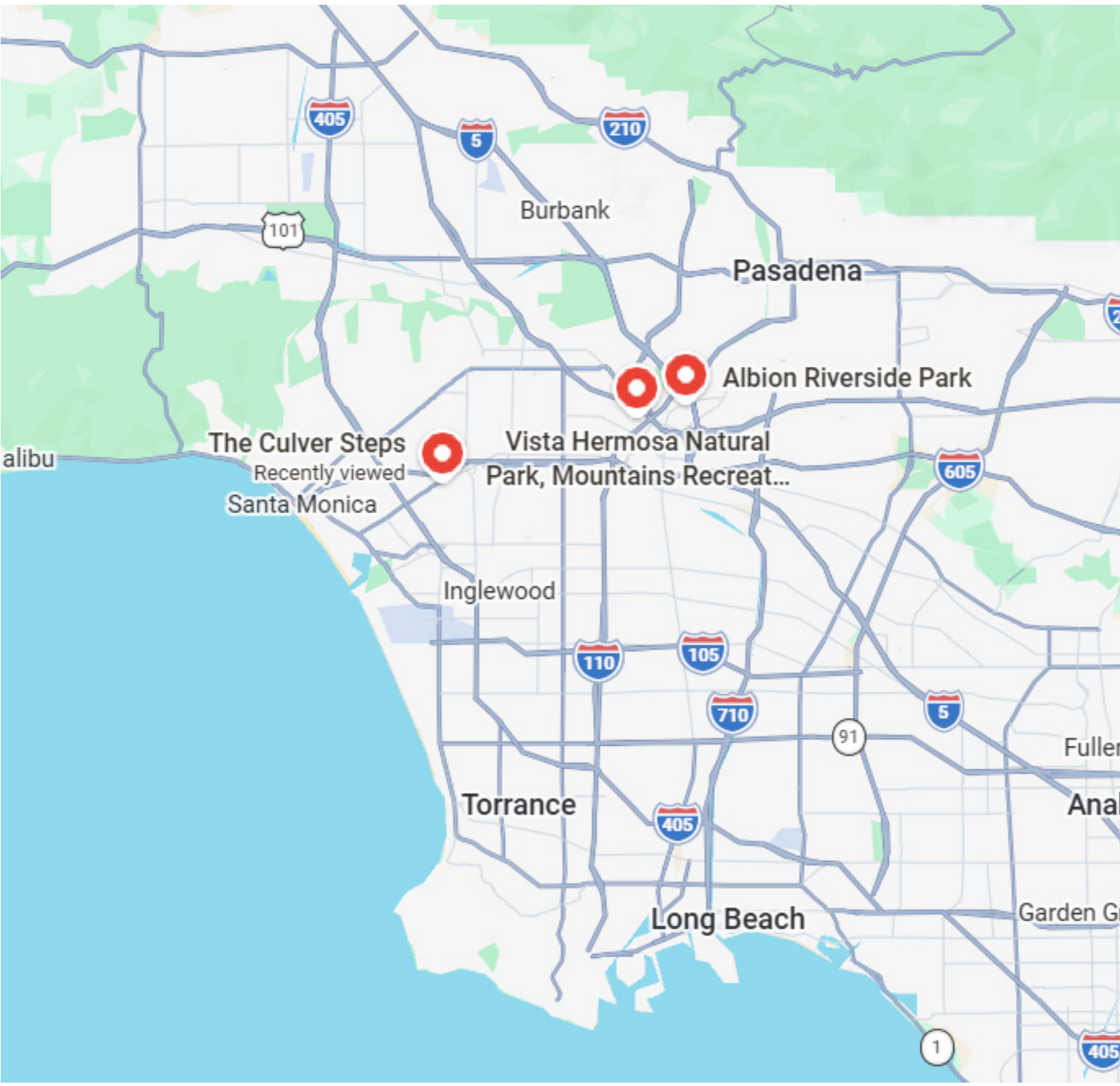
SITE NAME	NOTICABLE POSITIVES	SITE CRITIQUES	NO. OF PRESENT CHARACTERISTICS
The Culver Steps	Highest # of visitors, highest # of frequent visitors, most clean, most safe	Site lacked cultural identity (art, wayfindings, banners)	12/18*
Vista Hermosa Park	High # of visitors, high # of frequent visitors, quiet	Not very accessible, 2/3 gates locked. On a steep hill near a freeway	11/18*
Albion Riverside Park	Cultural connection (mosaic projects, mural of famous Angelinos). Youth sport promoted.	Frequent noise interference from freight rail, dirty amenities, nearby construction	9/18*

***Of the 18 Variables or Characteristics:** Such as an on-site art piece, wayfinding/branding signifiers, cleanliness of amenities, noise and discomfort, safety and crime information of nearby community, seating, shading, and green space.

STUDY AREAS

Sites of Focus: A mall/plaza in downtown Culver City aiming to bring retail and social space to a dense urban environment. A historic park in Echo Park signaing LA’s return to urban forests and recreation. An environmental riverside athletics park that also functions as a bioswale in Lincoln Heights.

Sites have minimal connection or overlap in function, yet they signify turning points by local governments to beautiful and bring amenities to their residents.



Location of sites in relation to Los Angeles metropolitan region



Top view of Culver Steps



Under bridge view directly North of Albion Riverside Park

SUMMARY

Through this analysis, the relationship of communities to space was explored, and how spaces in Los Angeles are not equally equiped to serve their residents.

THE CULVER STEPS

- Inclusion of an artistic or cultural statement.
- Possibility of including cheaper retail options.

VISTA HERMOSA PARK

- Allowing gates to be opened more frequently.
- Access to soccer field during off season for local recreation.

ALBION RIVERSIDE PARK

- Higher financial investment into maintenance of art, cleaning of amenities, and a return of the outdoor gym.