

# Transforming Barrios

## *“The **ELACC** Way”*

*The East Los Angeles Community  
Corporation and a Community-Based  
Development Strategy for Latino  
Neighborhoods in Gentrifying Cities*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the East Los Angeles Community Corporation (ELACC), a community-based development organization advancing Latino housing opportunity and neighborhood stability in Boyle Heights. As gentrification and housing insecurity rise across U.S. cities, ELACC offers a grounded example of how development can be rooted in cultural identity, collective ownership, and long-term affordability. Drawing on organizational archives, interviews, and planning documents, this case study traces the evolution of “the ELACC Way,” a multi-pronged strategy that combines housing production, tenant and homeowner organizing, participatory planning, and new models of land and asset stewardship. Rather than following mainstream housing development approaches that often individualize need and prioritize short-term metrics, ELACC works to transform how development is done and for whom. From building affordable housing to launching a community land trust and commercial real estate initiatives, the organization links housing to dignity, power, and permanence. Its work challenges the risks of “predatory inclusion,” where access to housing is extended without long-term protections and instead emphasizes strategies that align investment with community control and cultural preservation.

This paper argues that equitable housing opportunity for Latino neighborhoods requires more than increased supply or expanded access. It calls for sustained investment in organizations like ELACC that act as intermediaries, cultural stewards, and policy innovators. It also calls for a shift in how success is measured, from unit counts to community-centered outcomes, from transactional investments to lasting partnerships, and from extractive models to frameworks that prioritize accountability and belonging. ELACC’s story is not a prescriptive model to replicate, but a call to action to invest in locally grounded strategies that protect affordability, cultivate resident leadership, and enable communities to shape their future on their terms.

## Introduction

In 2006, the East LA Community Corporation (ELACC) acquired the century-old Boyle Hotel, an iconic multifamily housing complex anchoring Mariachi Plaza, a longstanding gathering place for Mariachi musicians in Boyle Heights. Purchased from an absentee landlord who had long neglected the building and its tenants' wellbeing, the acquisition marked a pivotal moment in ELACC's mission to reverse decades of housing inequality and uneven development across the Latino working-class and immigrant neighborhoods of the Los Angeles Eastside. ELACC pledged not only to rehabilitate the building and convert all units into affordable housing, but also to resource and organize current tenants to guide the redevelopment process. Just months earlier, it had launched the *Plan del Pueblo*, a community-designed land use framework to ensure that future development is aligned with resident priorities. These efforts exemplified ELACC's shift toward a bold strategy aimed at asserting neighborhood control over land stewardship and urban planning decisions, while building community power through affordable housing development. This approach took shape during a historic wave of reinvestment in the Eastside, renewing hope for long-awaited recovery while ushering in aggressive speculative development. While market interest helped elevate the feasibility of new construction to address widespread blight and a distressed housing stock, it also raised property values and deepened unaffordability for long-term residents. As the barrio shifted, ELACC faced the challenge of leveraging incoming investment while defending the community from displacement.

The conditions facing the Eastside are not unique. Across the United States, longstanding and emerging Latino neighborhoods – commonly referred to as barrios – are increasingly caught between the forces of housing exclusion and real estate speculation, making them both targets of investment *and* difficult sites for affordable housing development. Barrios are rich in cultural and political histories but also shaped by legacies of segregation, economic marginalization, dispossession, and criminalization that have contributed to chronic housing insecurity, overcrowding, and disrepair. In recent decades, many have become sites of ongoing deportation and aggressive top-down redevelopment, threatening tenure stability for Latino households already facing wage precarity, diminishing housing assistance, and limited access to homeownership (Gonzalez, 2020). Such conditions have helped maintain the persistent homeownership disparity and racial wealth gap more broadly among Latinos (Hyde & Fischer, 2023; Sanchez-Moyano, 2019; Vallejo & Vasquez-Tokos, 2024). In this context, Latino-serving community-based development organizations (CBDOs), such as ELACC, have become critical intermediaries. Rooted in place, these organizations operate at the intersection of real estate development and grassroots advocacy. They provide essential services such as affordable housing, homebuyer education, and financial assistance, while organizing communities and shaping local policy. Their work reflects a comprehensive, place-based effort to expand housing access, protect neighborhood identity, and build Latino political and economic power.

This paper examines ELACC's work on the Eastside to understand how Latino-serving CBDOs create strategies to expand Latino housing opportunity in unequal and rapidly changing barrios. Founded in 1995 by four Eastside activists, ELACC has grown into the region's leading Latino-led affordable housing developer and anchor institution. Over time, the organization has developed what it now calls "The ELACC Way," a multi-pronged strategy combining housing production, direct services, and organizing to advance community control over land and shape neighborhood change. This approach has expanded access to rental housing and homeownership while positioning residents as active participants in planning and land use decisions. Yet, ELACC's

success has not been without challenges. The organization has had to remain agile in the face of repeated economic crises, rising development costs, and intensifying gentrification, all while centering the needs of the most vulnerable. In this paper, I ask: How do Latino-serving CBDOs intervene in racialized real estate markets to expand affordable housing opportunities in gentrifying barrios? In what ways does ELACC's multi-pronged strategy combining development, organizing, and planning redefine the role of CBDOs in addressing housing inequality?

Scholars have well-documented the evolving role of community development through national structural shifts that have positioned community-based development as an essential service and vehicle of asset development in historically marginalized neighborhoods, including barrios (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2010; DeFilippis & Saegert, 2012). As housing inequality has deepened, the range of CBDO's has expanded with the field broadly prioritizing the need for affordable housing production and rehabilitation (Scally et al., 2023). However, with the financialization of real estate and increasing development costs, this work has had to become more real estate savvy, causing it to grow more technocratic, emphasizing formalization, standardization, and replicability. This push has been accompanied by a drifting away from the racial and political struggles that continue to shape housing access at the neighborhood level. Despite the centrality of CBDOs and their work in local development, too little is understood about how they innovate strategies that address housing inequality and intervene in the built environment.

Building on critical urban scholarship, I argue that while housing inequality is a national-level issue, it is a structural feature of local racialized urban real estate markets *and* site of racial justice struggle, both of which continue to shape housing development and accessibility by determining who gets to live where and under what conditions (Amezcuca, 2023; Taylor, 2019). As such, CBDOs and their work must be understood through localized historical contexts and tied to community knowledge and empowerment to locate enduring barriers and opportunities. The work of CBDOs and the communities they serve should therefore be understood as embedded *in struggle*. They operate within a real estate system shaped by uneven development and dispossession, while drawing from longstanding traditions of neighborhood activism to unlock housing opportunity in exclusionary and complex markets. Positioned at the intersection of policy, capital, and community, CBDOs have been critical to ongoing housing resilience and neighborhood improvement efforts in barrios and other historically racialized neighborhoods, crafting and recalibrating strategies to contest racialized development, serve vulnerable residents, and reimagine equitable housing from the ground up.

The case of ELACC embodies this dynamic, demonstrating that CBDOs are increasingly drawn into local real estate politics as both service providers and racial justice advocates that shape housing markets and neighborhood futures. From its inception, ELACC challenged dominant development paradigms that reproduce racialized dispossession through *predatory inclusion* (Taylor, 2019), while creating space for collective agency and transformation within and against those systems. In what follows, I trace the history of housing and community development and its entanglement with racialization to argue how community development emerged as a racial justice intervention in the housing system, how it evolved within a shifting policy and economic environment, and how some CBDOs are presented with opportunities to adapt while continuing to center racial equity despite increasing institutional and financial pressures. I then chart ELACC's strategic evolution and identify three core dimensions of its strategy. First, as ELACC learned about the nuanced housing needs of the barrio, it adapted its development strategy to address the Latino homeownership gap through the diverse housing needs and pathways through which Latino

households seek out housing stability, whether through secure rental housing, homeownership, or cooperative models. Second, ELACC drew on coalition-building and community planning traditions to access land use decision-making arenas historically closed to low-income Latino communities. In doing so, it sought to transform local knowledge into a strategic resource to transform land use politics and tie neighborhood change to affordable housing opportunities. Third, ELACC positioned the barrio as a site of cultural and political power through every aspect of its work, rejecting narratives of perpetual decline and flight, and instead foregrounding local identity, pride, and resilience of longstanding residents. This case demonstrates how real estate development and community organizing can work as mutually reinforcing pillars in the struggle for housing justice and racial equity, that offers both a grounded and expansive vision of housing opportunity and community-building.

## Literature Review

### *Community Development as an Intervention to Racialized Housing Inequality*

Much of the existing literature traces the emergence of community development as a formal field to the 1960s, when progressive social movements and President Johnson's Great Society Initiative and "War on Poverty" catalyzed programs to address concentrated urban poverty (Halpern, 1995; DeFilippis & Saegert, 2012; Levine, 2021). However, this framing underemphasizes how racialized real estate and housing inequality structures the field's origins and trajectory. Long before the 1960s federal policy turn, U.S. cities were shaped by discriminatory practices confining Black, Latino, and other racialized communities to disinvested neighborhoods through redlining, racial zoning, restrictive covenants, and contract lending (Massey & Denton, 1988; Rothstein, 2017; Taylor, 2019; Trounstein, 2018). These mechanisms excluded communities of color from stable housing, homeownership, and intergenerational wealth while simultaneously stripping them of power over land stewardship and neighborhood planning decisions. The lack of housing stability entrenched exclusion from broader land use governance, diminishing community agency over how neighborhoods were shaped.

This cemented a racialized housing system that destabilized communities of color and laid the groundwork for an "urban crisis" created through subsequent cycles of speculative redevelopment and displacement that led to "substandard and slum housing, under-resourced schools, inadequate means of transportation, and discriminatory treatment of 'minority groups'" (Taylor, 2019, p. 57). Under the banner of urban renewal, local and federal actors rationalized clearing low-income neighborhoods as public good, often replacing affordable housing with highways, infrastructure, or market-rate development without right of return for existing residents (O'Connor, 2012). These processes reinforced a racialized development regime that cast communities of color as blighted and disposable, even as their neighborhoods were targeted for speculative reinvestment (Dantzler, 2021). Such dynamics fostered dominant narratives portraying them as "trapped in the stasis of blight, flight, and the inevitability of decay over time" (Taylor, 2019, p. 4), erasing their structural origins of disinvestment and local organizing histories.

By the 1960s, continuous urban unrest and grassroots activism directly challenging these structures. Inspired by Black insurgency, anti-colonial movements, labor struggles, and tenant

organizing, a “backyard revolution” emerged across U.S. cities (Boyte, 1980). Residents mobilized through neighborhood coalitions, civil rights organizations, and radical community-based collectives to demand not only improved neighborhood conditions but also democratic control over land, housing, and planning (Amezcu, 2023; Castells, 1983; DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2010; Dreier, 1984; Petitjean, 2023; Piven & Cloward, 1988; Taylor, 2019). While these movements addressed a wide range of social and economic issues, housing justice and equitable development were central pillars. They were understood not merely as material necessities for social welfare but as a pathway to racial justice, economic self-determination, and local control. Urban uprisings eventually compelled policymakers to confront these demands and address the failure of government-led urban renewal by experimenting with more participatory, community-driven models of urban redevelopment.

In response, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and philanthropic entities piloted community-based planning and poverty alleviation programs (O’Connor, 1996, 2012). Two major policy arenas emerged. The first was the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which established Community Action Programs through which funding was dispersed to local organizations engaged in anti-poverty initiatives. The second included a series of housing reforms, such as the creation of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1965 and the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968. These policies aimed to dismantle discriminatory housing practices, expand access to affordable housing, and empower grassroots organizations to participate in redevelopment. Yet, as Taylor (2019) argues, these reforms operated through *predatory inclusion*, facilitating access to credit and neighborhood development with the help of private real estate and business actors under exploitative terms that left underlying inequalities intact. Historically racialized communities and their neighborhoods were reimagined by policymakers and market actors alike as “urban frontiers” or untapped marketplaces ripe for investment, where poverty alleviation and racial inclusion would be pursued through market logics rather than structural transformation. While these policies promised wealth-building opportunities, including homeownership as a pathway to middle-class security, they ensured such promises would remain elusive for many communities of color by embedding access within extractive systems that continued to siphon value out of their neighborhoods. In doing so, these reforms upheld a racialized housing system that maintained stark racial wealth gaps, with white Americans gaining disproportionately greater wealth than Black or Latino communities overtime. Community development thus emerged as a field positioned to redress systemic racial injustice while remaining structurally tethered to the very real estate mechanisms that extracted value from the communities it aimed to support.

### *Struggle and Innovation in Community Development to Navigate Racialized Real Estate Systems*

From its early institutionalization, community development has been characterized by both promise and contradiction. Emerging out of social movements for racial and economic justice, its formalization integrated grassroots organizing into urban policy and real estate systems, embedding the field within broader structures of governance and finance. Programs like the

Housing and Community Development Act (1974), Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (1975), and Community Reinvestment Act (1977) were celebrated as organizing victories, expanding federal support for community-based development and mandating transparency and collaboration among real estate actors and nonprofits working to revitalize disinvested neighborhoods (Hoffman, 2003; Marchiel, 2020). Community development finance grew into a subfield of its own, and new nonprofit organizational forms such as community development corporations (CDCs) became primary vehicles for this work, advancing neighborhood self-determination while navigating funding systems oriented toward economic growth (Frisch & Servon, 2006; Vidal & Keating, 2004). Through CDCs and other community-based development organizations, an array of civic-minded actors, from faith-based leaders and community organizers to emerging development professionals, could harness community development tools to participate in and shape neighborhood real estate markets.

Among these efforts, the underlying theory was that economic development could bring prosperity to disinvested neighborhoods, and with the help of grassroots organizations, alleviate the harms of racism and poverty through uplift. Community development promised to channel private, public, and philanthropic capital efficiently into poor neighborhoods. As the field professionalized, three core assumptions crystallized. Markets were seen as the ultimate path to eliminate poverty and racism, achieving scale became the guiding imperative to reach the most people, and self-sustainability emerged as the disciplining mechanism pushing organizations to generate their own revenue streams to maintain operations without ongoing public subsidy. Helping to remedy the layered impacts of the racial wealth gap and lack of homeownership among racialized communities remained an important part of this work. These ideas intensified under neoliberal governance from the 1980s onward (DeFilippis et al., 2010; Levine, 2021). Deregulation, austerity, and welfare retrenchment shifted social welfare responsibilities onto the private sector, including nonprofits. Federal investment in public housing declined sharply, while policies such as the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (1986) and HOPE VI (1990s) incentivized market-based affordable housing production and mixed-income redevelopment, further normalizing the displacement of long-term residents (Goetz, 2013). Land use tools, tax abatements, and zoning incentives entrenched financialized development logics, privileging projects that maximized returns over community needs (Mele, 2017; Summers, 2019).

Yet, while scaling and integrating community development and finance delivered resources to poor neighborhoods at unprecedented levels, institutionalization and collaboration with grassroots efforts have not dislodged the racialized logics of real estate, nor has it helped sustain CBDOs' early racial justice commitments. Community development has expanded credit access for aspiring homeowners and financing for local organizations, but it has operated within markets that continued to devalue racialized neighborhoods, treating them as deficient unless transformed through private redevelopment. Policies and practices frame these communities in depoliticized terms, such as "opportunity areas," signaling their need for market integration to attain revaluation. This framing ignores existing community ties, senses of place, and the structural forces producing spatial inequities. Over time, these logics have come to dominate the commonsense of the field,

prioritizing market value and growth over equity. In doing so, they centralize the market as the primary mechanism of community development, shifting the field toward deracialized frameworks and drawing organizations into market-aligned approaches necessary to secure resources (Mele, 2013, 2017). These dynamics create profound barriers for emergent organizations advancing new ideas and strategies, shaping not only how resources are distributed but also what is recognized as legitimate redevelopment and community-building today.

In this environment, community-based development organizations face profound pressures to adapt. Many have adopted entrepreneurial models, scaled operations, and professionalized systems to compete for resources and legitimacy (Laskey & Nicholls, 2019; Nicholls & Hernandez, 2023). While some scholars have celebrated decentralized policy for fostering local, context-specific innovation (Erickson, 2009; von Hoffman, 2003), others caution that these shifts narrow political commitments and reify market logics (DeFilippis et al., 2010; Levine, 2021). Professionalization, while enhancing technical capacity, can distance organizations from their grassroots origins and community commitments, undermining their capacity to sustain racial and economic justice goals (Arena, 2012; McQuarrie, 2013). This market-based, colorblind policy discourse continues to constrain the field's ability to contest structural racism. As cities pursue revitalization strategies to attract investment and middle-class residents, equity is increasingly reframed in universal terms of growth and innovation (Huante, 2022; Mele, 2013; Summers, 2019; Dávila, 2004). Racialized neighborhoods once treated as abandoned are rebranded as “emerging markets” for redevelopment, often through gentrification that reproduces predatory inclusion by reinvesting in ways that deepen exclusion and displacement. Real estate speculators, with greater access to capital, acquire properties at low prices in these neighborhoods and hold them until market conditions change, extracting wealth by capturing value generated collectively by long-term residents.

Today, housing insecurity among historically racialized neighborhoods remains layered, with overcrowding, disrepair, and chronic tenure insecurity (Amezcu, 2023; Taylor, 2019). Rising costs, exploitative landlord practices, policing, and immigration enforcement further destabilize residents and erode community power. Racialized real estate logics persist as enduring structures that continue to shape who gets to live where, under what conditions, and with what prospects for dignity and self-determination. This contradiction undergirds community development today as it remains urgently necessary as a means of stability, affordable housing, and place-keeping for historically marginalized communities, yet is constrained by its reliance on market structures that reproduce racialized housing exclusion.

Taken together, these challenges and pressures have made it increasingly difficult for organizations and the broader field to fulfill their promises. Some organizations narrow their missions to prioritize institutional survival over grassroots empowerment, leaving unfulfilled commitments and fracturing local trust, especially when projects fail to deliver affordability or become complicit in displacement (Nicholls & Hernandez, 2023). These shortcomings continue to reveal the structural constraints organizations navigate and the risks of embedding community development within market-driven governance. Nevertheless, community development remains a

long game of struggle. The field has expanded as organizations rise to meet ever-shifting challenges in racialized landscapes. While many actors now look to community-based development tools to advocate for equitable housing and neighborhood stabilization, CDCs remain critical bulwarks of possibility and sources of lessons on development. They have a long history of innovating incremental strategies to stabilize and rebuild neighborhoods abandoned by state and market, demonstrating pragmatic adaptability (von Hoffman, 2003).

While incrementalism alone cannot dismantle structural inequalities embedded in housing and land use systems, many organizations continue to push the field forward by focusing on systems change rather than scalability, transforming unfulfilled promises and past missteps into foundations for bending markets toward justice in innovative ways (Laskey & Nicholls, 2019). They meld political commitments with grounded analysis to forge alternative investment strategies and ownership models, such as culturally grounded deeply affordable housing, community land trusts, limited-equity cooperatives, and tenant associations, that decouple housing from speculative markets, empower residents, and secure long-term affordability. Others combine development with organizing, policy advocacy, and cultural strategies to contest exclusionary planning processes and assert community control over land and neighborhood change. These hybrid approaches foreground housing and land stewardship not only as material interventions but as political projects rooted in racial justice, cultural identity, and collective self-determination.

Despite the challenges of neoliberal restructuring, financialization, and racialized exclusion, community-based organizations remain uniquely positioned to identify and respond to the layered housing and development needs of marginalized communities. Their embeddedness provides intimate knowledge of local histories, struggles, and aspirations, while their professional expertise equips them to navigate complex policy and financing systems. This dual positioning enables them to leverage resources strategically, mitigate harm, and advance development visions centering equity and dignity. From this perspective, community development is a technical field that can serve through anti-poverty interventions, but also operates as an arena of ongoing struggle, innovation, and possibility within racialized real estate systems. As these structures continue to differentiate value and shape access among neighborhoods, community-based organizations shape, contest, and reconfigure development possibilities, offering grounded insights into how housing and land stewardship can be leveraged toward just futures. Learning from their struggles and successes remains critical to building equitable futures in all neighborhoods.

## Methods

This paper draws on a single-case, ethnographic study of ELACC as part of a larger research project on community-based organizations and their responses to gentrification in Boyle Heights and the greater Los Angeles Eastside. I began this project in 2016 and have maintained an ongoing collaborative relationship with ELACC over the last eight years. This long-term engagement has allowed me to trace the organization's development across time and examine how its evolving strategy shaped both neighborhood dynamics and broader regional advocacy around

equitable development. In this paper I focus on ELACC's emergence as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit community development corporation in 1995 to 2020, when it underwent a massive organizational shift. I employed an extended case study approach (Burawoy, 1991) to understand how one organization builds institutional and grassroots responses to racialized urban change.

This study draws from two primary sources of qualitative data. The first is based on twenty-eight months of participant observation conducted between 2016 and 2020. During this time, I served as an unpaid volunteer with ELACC, working approximately thirty hours per week across multiple departments. I spent most of my time with the Real Estate and Community Organizing Departments, which were central to both the organization's founding and strategy. My participant observation included assisting with internal office work, attending private staff meetings and strategy sessions, public events, cultural gatherings, and neighborhood planning meetings. These experiences yielded over 200 field notes and an extensive archive of internal and public organizational materials, including meeting minutes, flyers, reports, and photographs. In addition, I was granted access to segments of ELACC's internal organizational drive, containing historical records and documents that helped situate the organization's strategic evolution within the broader housing and policy landscape of Los Angeles.

The second data source consists of forty-five oral history interviews with current and former ELACC staff, founders, board members, volunteers, consultants, and organizational allies. These interviews began in 2017 and were conducted using purposive sampling to ensure a wide range of institutional perspectives across ELACC's twenty-five-year history. Interviews lasted between two and four hours, often taking place over multiple sessions, and were structured around participants' life histories, organizational roles, and reflections on ELACC's strategy, mission, and institutional challenges. Oral histories offered rich insight into ELACC's internal culture, key turning points in its development, and the evolving political and housing context of the Eastside.

My analysis followed an iterative and reflective process informed by grounded theory and case study methods (Yin, 2014). I began analytic memoing and open coding during data collection, identifying emergent patterns and tensions while remaining attuned to existing theories. I then conducted multiple rounds of thematic coding across interviews, fieldnotes, and organizational materials to construct a timeline of ELACC's strategic evolution, identify key inflection points, and map its development projects, alliances, and policy interventions. Together, these methods allowed me to examine ELACC's internal practices, external impacts, and strategic adaptations over time. They also captured how ELACC positioned itself within broader regional efforts to resist displacement, develop affordable housing, and engage in community development with a barrio-centered lens.

## **The Struggle for Community Development in the Barrio: The Emergence of ELACC in the Los Angeles Eastside**

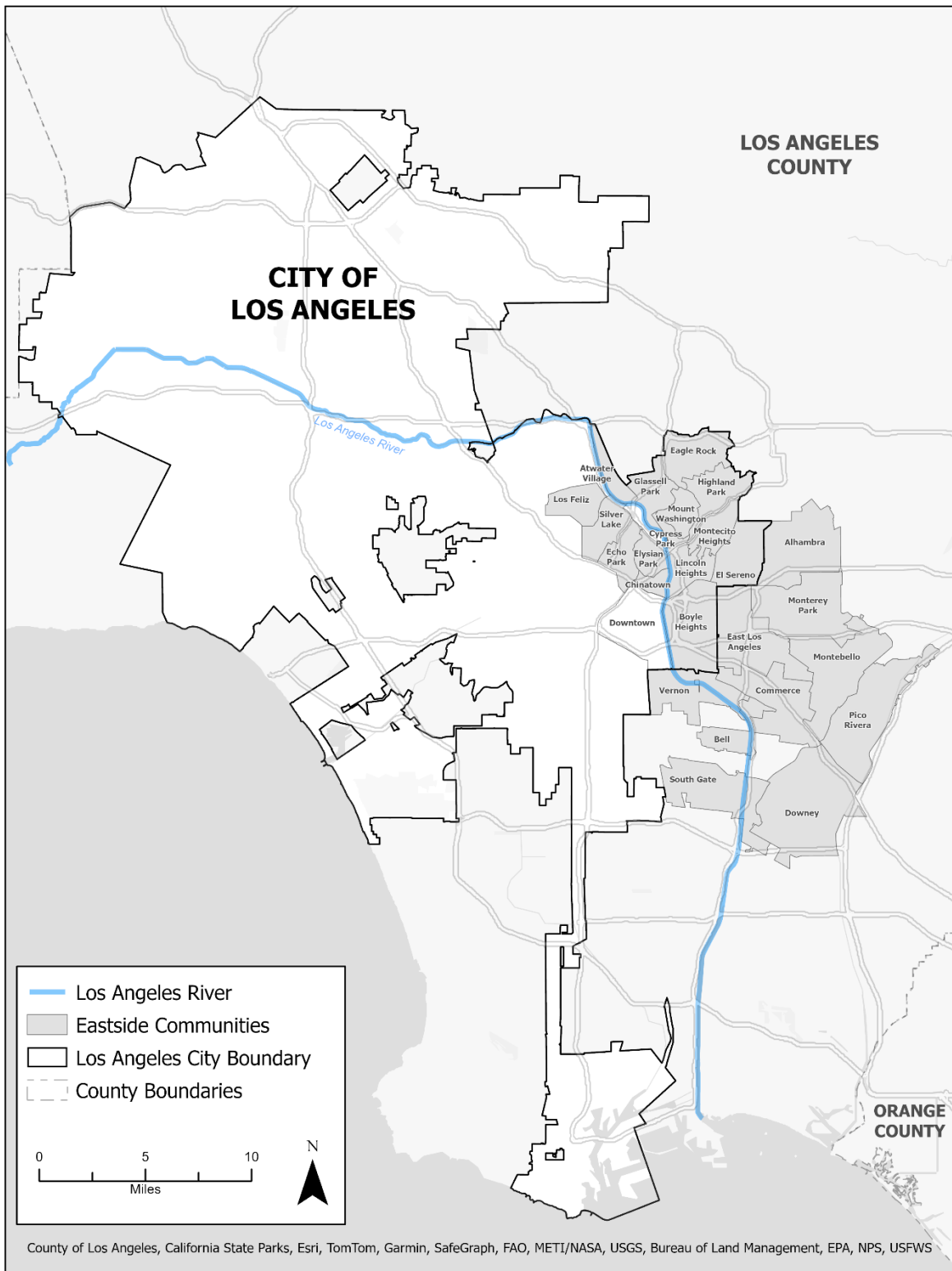
Barrios have long been produced through distinct racializing processes that differentiate them from other historically marginalized spaces. Emerging through layered systems of settler

colonial land dispossession, racialized labor extraction, and immigration enforcement, barrios have been positioned as both integral to urban economies and perpetually foreign within them (Diaz, 2005). Their persistence and reproduction in U.S. cities rely on this historic racialization. Barrios have endured as manufactured spaces of marginalization, where low-income foreign- and native-born Latino residents are treated as racial outsiders and disposable labor yet remain desirable market subjects for low-wage work, targeted consumption, and speculative planning and real estate investment (Amezcuca, 2019; Bender, 2010; Dávila, 2004; Rendon, Nevarez-Martinez, & Kulkarni, 2023; Sanchez, 2021). However, barrios have also commonly served as sites of collective resilience, neighborhood improvement, and political activism, where residents assert their agency over the very development processes that attempt to marginalize them (Amezcuca, 2019; Diaz & Torres, 2012; Main & Sandoval, 2012; Sandoval, 2021).

Today, barrios endure as spaces where poor and working-class Latinos concentrate, shaping neighborhood conditions and housing challenges marked by overcrowding, aging and substandard housing, exploitative rental markets, low homeownership, and chronic tenure insecurity (Sanchez-Moyano, 2019). Gentrification has exacerbated these issues by fueling displacement, rising housing costs, and intensified surveillance (Amezcuca, 2019; Dávila, 2004; Gonzalez, 2020; Huante, 2021). Yet, barrio communities and their housing experiences are far from uniform, reflecting the diverse realities that characterize Latino housing inequality broadly (Bender, 2010; Hyde & Fischer, 2023). They include long-time homeowners, extremely low- to moderate-income renters doubling up as an affordability strategy, and mixed-status families navigating informal housing arrangements. While some residents pursue opportunities outside the barrio, many remain by choice or circumstance, forging dense networks of mutual aid, cultural resilience, and political solidarity despite enduring disinvestment, surveillance, and displacement. While barrios are characterized by strong social capital and communal vibrancy, they remain profoundly shaped by sharpening inequality and the enduring challenges that exclude many from the benefits of secure property ownership, rendering them extremely vulnerable to market shifts (Gonzalez, 2020).

The Los Angeles Eastside exemplifies these contradictions. Located east of the LA River, the Eastside comprises some of the oldest barrios of the city, including Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights, El Sereno, and unincorporated East Los Angeles (see Map 1). This area is often regarded as the cultural and political heart of Mexican American Los Angeles due to its shared histories as a destination for Mexican immigrants, center of Chicano movement activism, and site of Latino cultural production (Romo, 1998). For others, the Eastside invokes an even broader region that includes northeastern neighborhoods and suburbs further east, shaped by waves of Latino working- and middle-class migration (Vallejo, 2012).

Map 1: The City of Los Angeles and “the Eastside”  
 Source: Map created by Ashley C. Hernandez and Philip McDaniel



The Eastside has been profoundly shaped by layered histories of dispossession following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, when former Mexican territories were annexed by the United States, dispossessing existing landholders and reclassifying Mexican residents as racialized foreigners within their own homelands (Rendon et al., 2023; Sanchez, 2021). Throughout the twentieth century, racial zoning, restrictive covenants, exclusion from federally backed mortgage programs, and infrastructural violence, including freeway construction that destroyed homes and fragmented communities, confined Mexican immigrants to under-resourced neighborhoods, reinforcing their status as permanent outsiders within the city's spatial and social hierarchies (Avila, 2014; Romo, 1998; Sanchez, 2021).

By the mid-twentieth century, Eastside barrios faced severe housing deterioration driven by landlord neglect, overcrowding, exclusion from homeownership, and urban renewal schemes that displaced thousands while withholding meaningful reinvestment. Public housing development in this era attempted to address housing shortages, but the Eastside received a disproportionate share of these projects, including Pico-Aliso, Estrada Courts, and Maravilla. While providing an important means of shelter, these developments also reflected racialized containment logics that concentrated poverty and shaped neighborhood stigma. Beginning in the 1980s and accelerating through the 1990s, redevelopment projects demolished large swaths of affordable housing, including portions of Pico-Aliso under HOPE VI, displacing hundreds of Latino families and deepening the housing crisis. Combined with landlord neglect, exclusion from mortgage markets, and aggressive speculative redevelopment, these policies entrenched the Eastside's status as a zone of disposability, where overcrowding became endemic and low-income tenants were forced into informal arrangements to remain housed. These dynamics mirror national patterns in Latino neighborhoods, where containment, extraction, and criminalization continue to define urban policy and housing inequality.

Even with these challenges, the Eastside has long been a site of fierce organizing traditions and cultural affirmation. In the late 1960s and 1970s, it became a recognized center of Chicano movement activism, home to the 1968 student walkouts, the Brown Berets, and generations of organizing spanning labor, immigrant rights, environmental justice, and anti-displacement campaigns (Muñoz, 2007; Oropeza, 2005; Pardo, 1998; Pulido, 2006). Residents have continuously asserted their right to remain, thrive, and shape the region's future, forging a political identity rooted in place-based pride, cultural belonging, and demands for dignity. Some of this organizing was radical and anti-colonial, fighting for self-determination, while other strands pursued civil rights and integration strategies. But, together, these traditions have shaped the region's distinctive grassroots organizing and community development landscape to this day.

Community-based development organizations (CBDOs) emerged on the Eastside in response to these layered conditions, seeking to address entrenched poverty and spatial exclusion. Among the earliest were Charo Community Development Corporation and The East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU), both founded in 1968 during the height of the Chicano movement. While their founding emerged from national leaders outside the region, they embodied an ethos of economic self-determination and Latino institutional power to serve struggling urban

communities. Charo focused on job placement and small business development for Mexican American youth, while TELACU pursued large-scale economic development and infrastructure projects aimed at creating a Latino entrepreneurial class (Bauman, 2008; Chavez, 1998). Over time, however, these organizations shifted strategies in ways that, according to Eastside activists, became increasingly disconnected from the barrio's poorest residents. Their models prioritized economic growth and institutional expansion, with limited attention to affordable housing or participatory development. TELACU grew into a powerful conglomerate expanding beyond the Eastside, while Charo remained focused on job training without substantial real estate development. Both retained legitimacy among some sectors, but some have argued that they had become entrenched in elite politics, guided by middle-class values and technocratic approaches unable to center housing struggles or the needs of the most vulnerable.

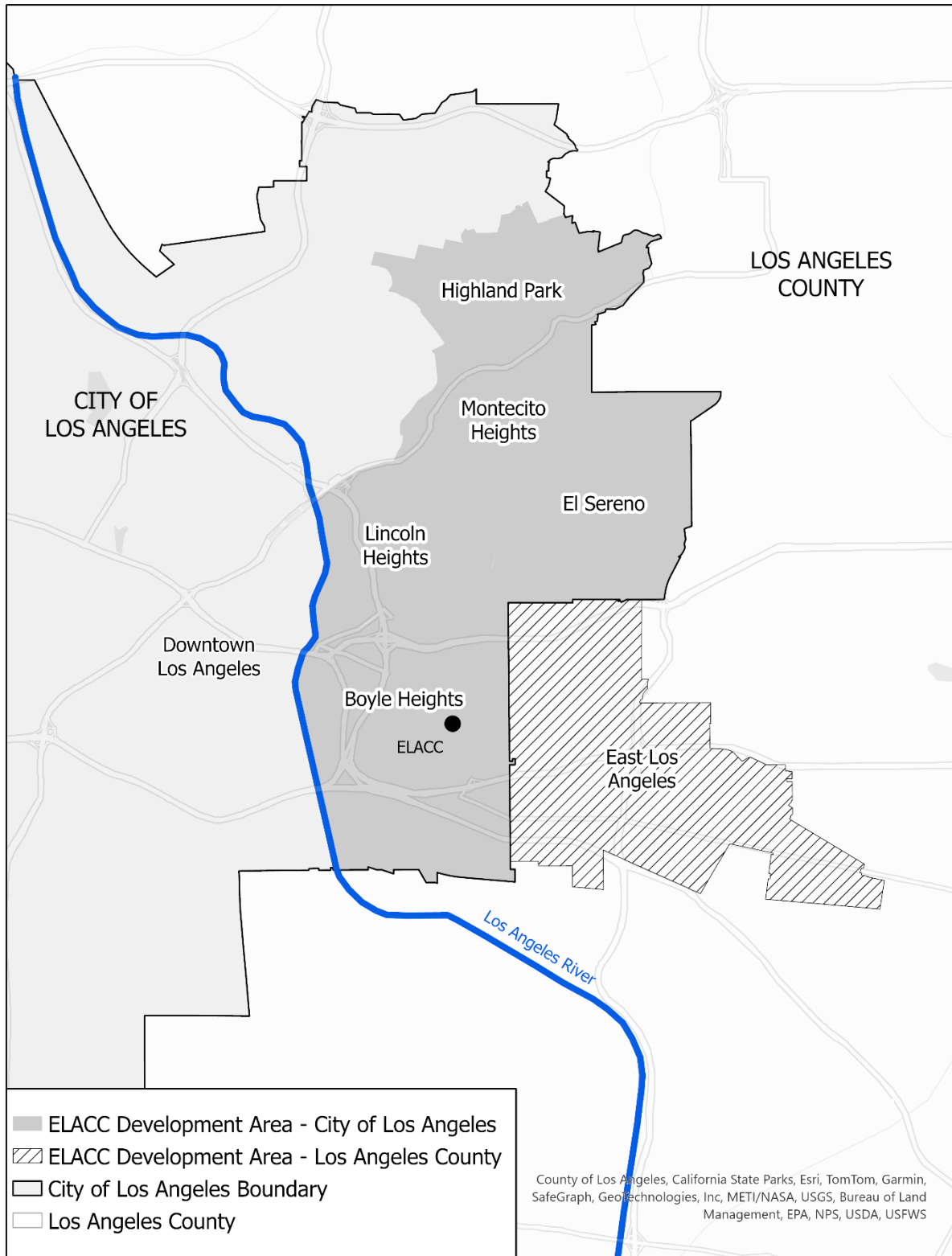
It was within this landscape that the idea for ELACC emerged. In the early 1990s, four Eastside activist friends – a housing authority administrator, a legal aid attorney, a community organizer, and a project manager for a local nonprofit affordable housing developer – came together with a shared vision of what they called “community-driven development.” Each was raised in an immigrant working-class household, coming of age amid disinvestment and criminalization. They saw that Eastside neighborhoods were, as one co-founder described, “overwhelmed with empty lots and vacant homes that cast a shadow over the vibrant community,” marked by concentrated poverty, severe overcrowding, and aging housing stock. By this time, many nonprofit social service organizations were providing critical but underfunded services, while economic development models often pursued growth for its own sake or adopted technocratic approaches detached from neighborhood realities. Prevailing CDCs were hierarchical and paternalistic, often operating as closed institutions led by long-standing executives with limited turnover or democratic governance. As one co-founder explained, existing organizations “didn’t allow for new leadership to grow... they operated like personal kingdoms.” Another reflected, “Planners of Boyle Heights and East L.A. really didn’t care about the people who lived here... we needed to build an organization rooted in our own dignity and agency.”

Rather than replicating these models, they envisioned ELACC as an organization treating housing as a right tied to dignity, belonging, and political power. From its inception, the founders wanted ELACC to be both a developer and an organizer. Real estate development was not an end in itself but a means to challenge racialized market exclusion and reclaim neighborhood space for community-defined priorities. They imagined a strategy integrating housing production with community organizing, popular education, and participatory planning to transform land use politics in the Eastside. As one co-founder summarized, “we wanted people to feel very differently about the place that they lived. It is not a place to want to run away from, or to be ashamed of...it was a place that people would want to stay.”

This vision was novel for the time. No other organization on the Eastside was combining real estate development with grassroots organizing to build affordable housing opportunities tied to resident power. The founders imagined ELACC’s impact area stretching across the Eastside (see Map 2). Although there were distinct challenges and diverse needs within the region, it shared the

potential political will and similar conditions marked by low homeownership rates, aging building stock, concentrated poverty, high immigrant populations, and visible blight. Some major institutional gatekeepers, like Enterprise Community Partners, were skeptical and initially turned ELACC away, withholding critical resources for an emerging organization and arguing that the area was already served by enough nonprofits. Yet, the founder pressed on. As one founder reflected, “Quite honestly, when we decided to found ELACC, we didn’t have anybody roll out a welcome mat for us, nor did we have people or organizations eager to partner with us. We had to be tenacious.” As they would later describe, the conditions of concentrated poverty, disinvestment, and overcrowding inspired them to forge a double and mutually reinforcing strategy that would eventually become known as “the ELACC way,” drawing on the Eastside’s powerful organizing traditions while forging new pathways for equitable housing and community development. This would be done through a founding organizational structure that had a Real Estate Department and a Community Organizing Department.

Map 2: ELACC Development Impact Area  
 Source: Map created by Ashley Hernandez and Philip McDaniel



## Forging “the ELACC Way”: Building Capacity and Supporting Pathways to Homeownership

ELACC’s first decade was defined by experimentation and pragmatic learning in community development, shaped by an evolving understanding of the Eastside’s housing needs. As a new organization entering a crowded nonprofit field, ELACC faced a dual challenge. It had to build community trust while convincing funders that its hybrid model combining organizing with real estate development was viable. The founding staff knew they would need to demonstrate both community credibility and technical capability to differentiate themselves from older, well-established organizations. As one co-founder recalled, building this new model required “getting people willing to take risks” on a different vision of development. Their projects were intentionally small in scale at the outset, allowing for flexibility and experimentation, but often required navigating significant resource constraints through creative negotiation and banking on the future success of small grants:

“It was about getting people willing to take risks in creating this brand new model and convincing people to take that risk. The kind of projects we started were small projects. That sort of thing I think sometimes is the tension between organizations and their leaders wanting to do the big things or the big developments...we decided to do one thing at a time instead, which would allow for more flexibility, but it would need much more resources.”

Interview with ELACC Co-Founder, 2019

Despite these struggles, the founders were clear-eyed about why ELACC was needed on the Eastside. They believed that larger organizations were too disconnected from the neighborhood to prioritize low-cost housing for poor and working-class families. As another co-founder explained:

“These big organizations aren’t going to figure out that we really need to build housing in our community. They’re never going to do housing for poor and working families. They’re not going to build this stuff because it’s not easy, but we’re going to figure it out and actually do it, even though we’re kind of scrappy and young.”

Interview with ELACC Co-Founder, 2019

ELACC’s earliest projects were shaped by this ethos of incremental, community-driven development. Through the *Neighbors Building Neighborhoods* initiative, ELACC employed a block-by-block organizing model that held small pláticas where residents identified local concerns and imagined collective solutions. These efforts laid the groundwork for their organizing base and enabled cultural-political events like the *Posada Comunitaria* during each holiday season in December, which fused tradition with advocacy, while calling attention to community need. On the development side, ELACC tackled the visible signs of disinvestment, including abandoned homes and vacant lots, beginning with small rehabilitation projects that prioritized first-time homebuyers. As one co-founder noted in a presentation on ELACC’s work:

“The very first projects we took on really addressed the priorities of the community... we tackled the abandoned properties, vacant properties in our community...this was during the aftermath of the savings and loan crisis. So, there were vacant properties almost on every block, and so we started by little by little, buying [and] fixing up, and then if they were for sale, selling them to first-time home buyers, and then holding on to our multifamily housing and again, with priority on taking abandoned properties and bringing them back to be assets in the community.”

Presentation by ELACC Co-Founder, 2018

ELACC’s single-family rehabilitation efforts aimed not only to reclaim blighted spaces, but to expand access to homeownership for longtime residents, viewed by the founders and ELACC’s early staff as a pathway to family and neighborhood stability. Simultaneously, the organization began organizing around issues connected to housing, including school quality, jobs, and infrastructure, to improve the overall quality of life in the Eastside. These early years marked a period of expansive learning, as ELACC sharpened its dual commitments to grassroots accountability and material development.

By 2005, ELACC had made notable gains. It had developed a modest but stable paid staff, maintained a consistent presence of interns and volunteers, including those from AmeriCorps and university partnerships, and built strategic relationships with LA city and county agencies as well as national intermediaries like Enterprise Community Partners and UnidosUS. It had built 87 single-family homes and 39 units of affordable multifamily housing across its target develop area, largely through creatively layered public-private financing (see Map 3). More significantly, it had built an organizational pipeline of future development opportunities, which, as one co-founder described, became a form of “insurance for the organization,” by “providing continuity of work and predictable funding streams” while establishing the organization’s credibility in a competitive landscape.

Two major milestones from this period proved foundational for ELACC’s model. This included the creation of its Community Wealth Department and the formation of the *Comunidades Unidas de Boyle Heights* coalition. The Community Wealth Department emerged in response to a recurring challenge. While ELACC figured out how to successfully build homes, it struggled to find financially prepared buyers among the low-income community members it sought to serve. Staff quickly realized that project managers could not simultaneously develop real estate and provide the financial literacy support many residents needed to purchase a home. As one staff member explained:

“The real estate project managers didn’t have time to be doing wealth counseling with the people they wanted to sell the homes to, because of the work they carried already and the people that are going to buy the home were simply not ready.”

Interview with ELACC Service Provider, 2022

Through HUD certification and collaboration with UnidosUS, ELACC launched a suite of financial literacy services aimed at serving neighborhood tenants, including homebuyer education, credit counseling, and down payment assistance. This allowed the organization to better support residents in their journey toward homeownership, as reflected in the words of one former real estate project manager:

“When I started, we were helping renters purchase the homes they were living in, and even after renovation, make mortgage payments that weren’t any more than they were paying rent. When you educate a community of renters, we can build a community within ourselves and bring pride to the neighborhood. We might not all be homeowners, but we share the dream of homeownership.”

Statement from former ELACC Project Manager, 2023

Still, the dream of homeownership proved increasingly difficult to realize in practice. Producing for-sale housing grew more expensive, and the pool of financially eligible buyers remained limited. Eventually, ELACC shifted more heavily toward affordable rental housing as a more impactful and sustainable approach, both to meet the overwhelming immediate need and to stabilize organizational finances.

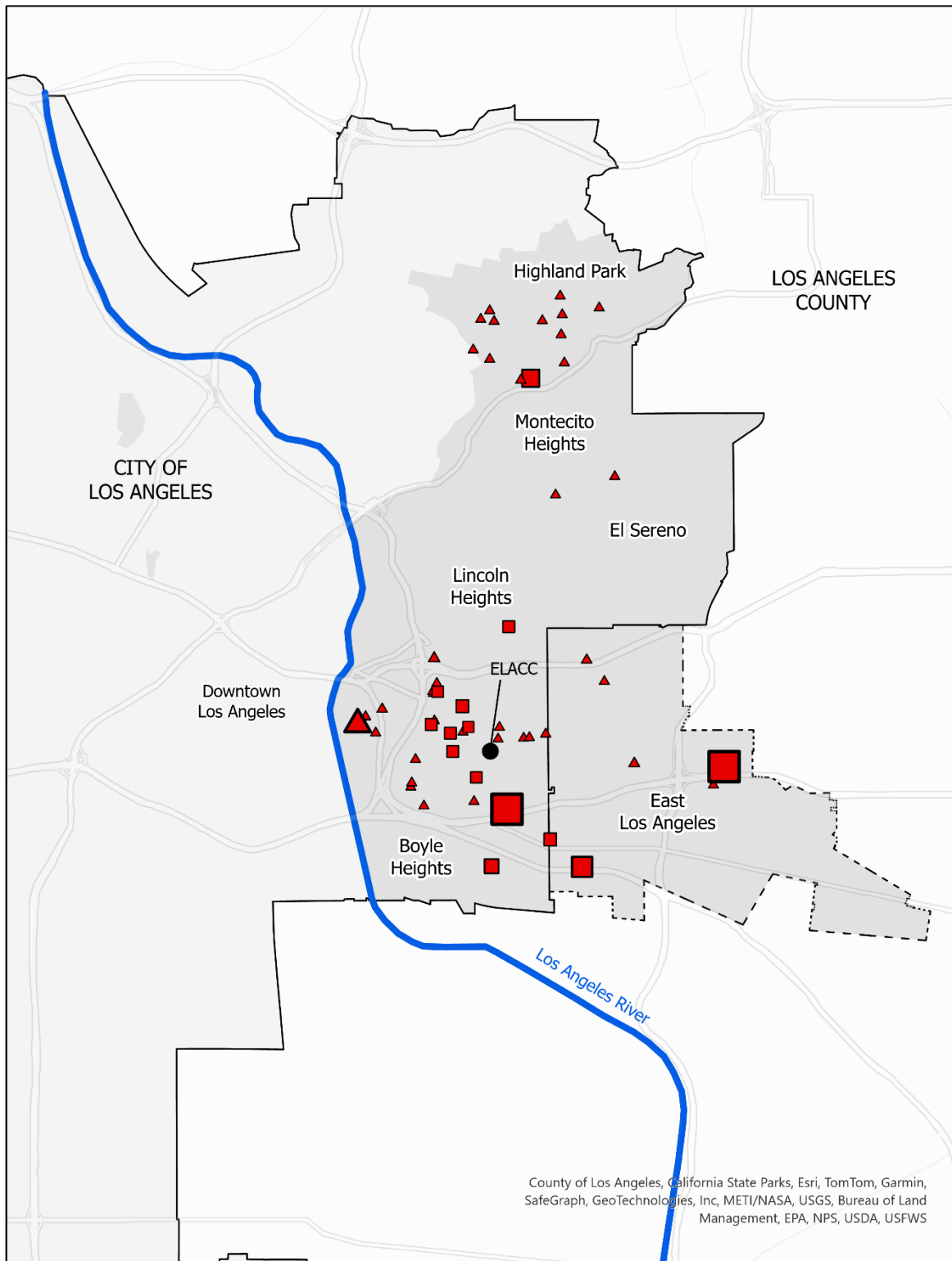
The second major milestone was ELACC’s role in convening *Comunidades Unidas de Boyle Heights*, a cross-sector coalition that included InnerCity Struggle, Union de Vecinos, Homeboy Industries, and Jovenes Inc. Although each organization addressed different aspects of neighborhood well-being in Boyle Heights, ELACC helped unite them around issues of real estate development and a shared concern of growing signs of speculative reinvestment and impending gentrification throughout the Eastside. Together, the coalition conducted a neighborhood landscape analysis, combining community surveys with analysis of city plans and reinvestment trends. Though gentrification was not yet widely accepted as a neighborhood threat, the coalition’s research indicated that neighborhood transformation was working its way throughout the Eastside and Boyle Heights was at the edge of profound change. Coalition meetings became sites of political education and planning. For ELACC, they reinforced a pivotal conclusion that the neighborhood could no longer afford to simply react to change and it had to proactively shape it. The coalition also deepened ELACC’s approach to development as both a political and cultural process.

By the end of its first decade, ELACC had developed what it came to call “The ELACC Way,” a community development model that integrated deeply affordable housing development, organizing, leadership cultivation, and culturally grounded planning. Unlike many CDCs that narrowed their focus to survive, ELACC widened its strategy to address displacement and neighborhood change at multiple levels. It distinguished itself in three ways: (1) by supporting housing stability across tenures and household structures; (2) by investing in political education and grassroots leadership; and (3) by employing planning tools to directly shape urban development. As one founder put it, ELACC understood that it needed “to engage in real estate

development to provide affordable housing resources that respond to existing community needs in the short term, while working to stabilize the neighborhood through community organizing and advocacy in the long term.” The threat of gentrification was becoming visible on the horizon. ELACC was preparing to meet it.

### Map 3: ELACC Development 1995-2005

Source: Map created by Ashley C. Hernandez and Philip McDaniel



## **Expanding “the ELACC Way”: Engaging in Participatory Planning and Tying Affordable Housing and Equitable Real Estate Development to Reinvestment**

ELACC’s early momentum carried the organization into its second decade with sharpened strategy, solid financial grounding, and deepened community ties. By the mid-2000s, it had established itself as a credible and capable organization with a steady development pipeline. However, the terrain was shifting. From 2005 to 2015, the Eastside entered a new stage of urban transformation. Gentrification pressures intensified from Downtown Los Angeles, which was undergoing a multi-billion-dollar redevelopment process itself (Saito, 2022). Private developers began aggressively bidding on historic sites and pushing rents upward throughout the Eastside (Lin, 2019). The construction of the Metro Gold Line heightened the area’s visibility and accessibility, tying the Eastside more closely to Downtown and accelerating land speculation, particularly in transit-adjacent neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the Los Angeles City Planning Department began preparing for its Community Plan updates in Eastside neighborhoods, beginning with Boyle Heights and shaping zoning and development for years to come. On top of this, the 2008 foreclosure crisis destabilized families, halted development, and made the terrain of affordable housing even more precarious. Together, these forces of speculative growth and economic crisis placed intense pressure both on Eastside communities and on ELACC. The organization needed to expand its affordable housing production while also responding to intensifying displacement. Moreover, it had to adapt to a landscape increasingly shaped by city-led redevelopment. In a joint statement, ELACC’s co-founders reflected on this moment:

“We knew no one was changing the community’s relationship to power. The investments, powered by outside financial capital and political will, were not ready to work with residents to create an equitable development model... We knew that first, we needed to build stability for the most disenfranchised community members, which were low-income renters. As the neighborhood was becoming more attractive to outside developers, Boyle Heights families were ignored and often subject to predatory financial practices when building assets”

Statement by ELACC Co-Founders, 2023

Building on its collaborative efforts and insights from its work with Comunidades Unidas, ELACC continued to track and analyze reinvestment and demographic change. Staff and interns mapped proposed developments, analyzed census and public data, and conducted ongoing community surveys and listening sessions. Although skepticism of gentrification remained, the findings confirmed residents’ fears as displacement was accelerating, driven by speculative property sales, rising rents, and a lack of tenant protections. As one former organizer recalled:

“So when we were doing that engagement and mobilizing people... there was concern, but there was also skepticism because the light rail was still under construction... But also, there were the pressures of displacement because of the increased costs in property and housing, right? Two

years before the recession, the prices were increasing. We were hearing from community residents about the flipping of properties... From some folks we were hearing that their landlord flipped the property they were living on two, three times in a year, and they were getting notices of rent increases and feeling cumulative pressures... It was like every door we hit, ‘Oh yeah, I know my neighbor moved out because he couldn’t afford staying here anymore and was getting harassed by the landlord to leave.’ In that moment, it was really the beginning of what led to the fight against gentrification.”

Interview with former ELACC Organizer, 2020

What ELACC found was alarming. Approximately \$2 billion in combined public and private investment targeting Eastside neighborhoods was anticipated with no meaningful policy strategy for engaging and protecting existing residents. Boyle Heights, in particular, faced layered vulnerabilities with some of the lowest homeownership rates, highest rates of poverty and rent burden, and a large share of aging housing stock (see Appendices A, B, and C). At the same time, it was rich in cultural institutions, small businesses, and tenant organizing history. Together, these conditions made the impact and stakes very high.

ELACC staff saw both a political risk and a political opportunity. Internally, the organization undertook strategic planning to realign its work to take on urban planning and policy. It made the difficult decision to consolidate its community organizing efforts around Boyle Heights, closing other committees in the Eastside. As one organizer put it:

“We decided to really focus on anti-gentrification strategies and community planning. We made the hard decision to... focus our efforts in Boyle Heights... Our thought back then was that we could serve tenants with the most urgent need and demonstrate how to hold off gentrification here before it spread any further.”

Interview with former ELACC Organizer, 2020

This shift was not only geographic but strategic. The real estate, organizing, and community wealth departments began to collaborate more closely, and ELACC expanded its focus on land use and planning, political arenas historically dominated by technical experts and exclusionary practices. Staff were now facilitating community workshops on zoning, parcel-level development, and the planning process. Organizers became facilitators, educators, and popular planners. The same organizer recalled:

“We were literally co-learning with the community members because we were helping facilitate community meetings on planning and development... So, in effect, we were playing the role of planners *and* organizers... Experientially, yes, I can now look at maps, and I can do zoning, and I have the planning context.”

Interview with former ELACC Organizer, 2020

Another added:

“Talking to the LA Planning Department about the Community Plan, and I’m like, ‘I have no idea what you’re saying, but I’ll figure it out!’ There was a lot of self-teaching... especially the city planning piece. Planning 101: ‘What is zoning? What is R2?’ I had no idea!... But the way that we would break down information, make it digestible, like popularize it for community members to understand the impact that development has on their communities... That was crucial.”

Interview with former ELACC Organizer, 2020

ELACC’s deepened investment in planning culminated in the Plan del Pueblo, ELACC’s signature initiative for the decade. It was a community-led planning framework developed through popular education, resident engagement, and neighborhood analysis. The initiative aimed to influence the city’s upcoming Boyle Heights Community Plan and to insert community priorities, like affordability, cultural preservation, and anti-displacement, into the city’s long-range vision. Through community workshops, like its “Policy con Pan Dulce”, focus groups, and protests, ELACC transformed the community planning process from a bureaucratic tool into a vehicle for power-building. At first, the work was misunderstood. Funders and peer organizations often dismissed community planning as overly abstract. But residents were engaged, and the impacts became clear over time. As one organizer explained:

“At first, people told us not to waste our time on community planning, saying that it had no teeth. But residents wanted it. We marched not to protest, but to get people involved... And then, within a few years, everyone was paying attention to planning. I think our work helped shift that conversation”

Interview with former ELACC Organizer, 2019

While the organizing team built out the community planning campaign, ELACC’s real estate division adjusted to meet rising needs. Foreclosure prevention and tenant stability became central, particularly for families vulnerable to predatory lending. The organization expanded its homeownership services and ramped up its rental development pipeline primarily with resources through the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program, allowing them to continue developing housing and expand into commercial mixed-use development. It also began to acquire culturally significant properties and those along major transit corridor routes. ELACC’s rehabilitation of the Boyle Hotel stands as one of its hallmark developments of this period, earning ELACC the Southern California Association of Non-profit Housing’s Affordable Housing Project of the Year award in 2012 and the Los Angeles Conservancy Preservation Award in 2013 for the adaptive-reuse affordable housing redevelopment. This was one of many projects that put ELACC on the proverbial map in the world of community development with the organization constructing 28 multifamily buildings, producing a total of 568 affordable rental units (see Map 3). With this growth, the organization expanded its infrastructure, adding new departments in Asset

Management, Cultural Vitality, and Tenant Services as it became an important steward of neighborhood resources.

These efforts mutually reinforced ELACC's organizing and planning campaigns. Housing development became a tool for neighborhood preservation and cultural affirmation. As one former real estate project manager explained:

"At ELACC, it's not just about the building. It's not just about physical space. We're always thinking about the neighborhood as a whole and how [the development] is going to fit in. We're always going to be interacting with the community members that are going to be a part of it. We're always bringing that to the table. So, it's always a total exercise of how development fits within the community"

Interview with former ELACC Project Manager, 2020

This convergence of real estate, planning, and organizing led to a set of integrated campaigns. These included the Accountable Development Campaign, pushing for community benefits from developers and demonstrating through practice how community-engaged development should be done; the Metro Campaign, organizing around publicly owned land; and the Street Vendor Campaign, which sought to decriminalize sidewalk vending. Each of these campaigns expanded the meaning of housing justice, linking it to land use, mobility, racial equity, and labor rights.

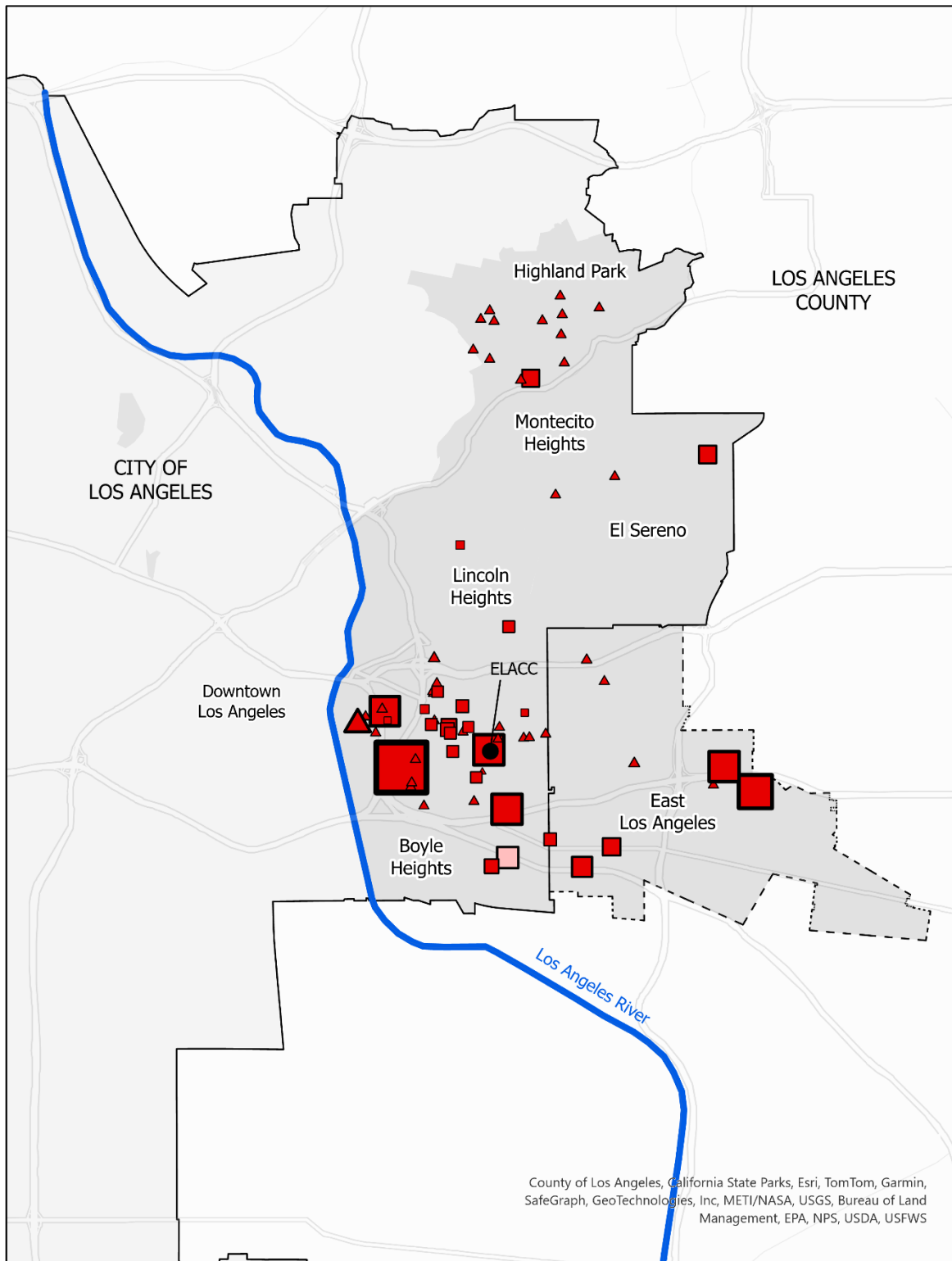
By the end of the decade, ELACC had become a trusted anchor institution in Boyle Heights and a regional leader in community-based development. Through the California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities Initiative, ELACC helped incubate ACT-LA, a regional coalition connecting transit and housing justice. It also joined national alliances like Right to the City and contributed to campaigns like *Renters' Day LA* and *Homes for All*. These coalitions supported victories like expanded tenant protections, new guidelines for Metro's development strategy, and increased visibility for the Eastside in regional debates. In 2014, ELACC declared in its Annual Report:

"ELACC is part of a larger movement... In Los Angeles, we are part of Renters' Day, and together we won a resolution for Renters' Day LA... As a core partner with Right to the City, we helped lead the 'Homes for All' campaign and the publication of *Rise of the Renter Nation*."

In sum, ELACC's second decade represented a leap in scale, sophistication, and impact with affordable housing at the center. It built out an integrated strategy that tied housing development to policy advocacy and participatory planning. Rather than retreating in the face of gentrification, ELACC expanded "the ELACC Way" to confront it head-on, showing that development could be done with, by, and for the community.

### Map 3: ELACC Development 2005-2015

Source: Map created by Ashley C. Hernandez and Philip McDaniel



## Transforming “the ELACC Way”: Stewarding the Barrio into the Future and Working Towards Community Ownership

The third and most recent phase of ELACC’s work, spanning roughly 2015 to 2020, unfolded during a period of heightened crisis and transformation. In these five years, the conditions that had long challenged residents of Boyle Heights became even more acute. The United States was firmly entrenched in an affordable housing crisis, and in 2015, the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies identified Los Angeles as one of the most unaffordable and unequal places to live nationwide (JCHS, 2015). On the Eastside, gentrification and speculative development accelerated, while housing costs continued to rise, pushing longtime residents to the brink of housing instability and homelessness. Community members voiced increasing concern, not only over being priced out of homeownership, but also about the very possibility of remaining in the neighborhood. For ELACC, the landscape of housing and community development work became more complex and costly. The rising expense of real estate, development, and financing made it harder to preserve affordability in the neighborhoods they served. And yet, the organization responded not by pulling back, but by doubling down, both to sustain its foundational work in housing and organizing and to pioneer new models for resisting displacement and building collective power.

During this time, ELACC began to ask deeper questions: What would it take to resist gentrification *and* steward the barrio into the future? What would it mean to go beyond producing affordable units, to securing long-term affordability *and* community control? The organization increasingly viewed its mission through a systems change lens, centering policy and production, but also culture, collective identity, and structural transformation. As one staff member put it: “We started thinking differently about how we support residents to remain in their homes and about how we build more interconnectedness by infusing our work with traditional arts, cultural practices, and economic justice.” While ELACC continued to pursue multi-family affordable housing and commercial real estate projects, it took a bold shift toward investing time and resources in the prospect of community ownership. ELACC leaders began to see ownership of land, housing, and commercial space not just as an economic tool, but as a pathway to empowerment, sustainability, and self-determination. This vision built upon earlier anti-displacement strategies and proposed a more expansive horizon in which residents were able to stay in place if they desired but also shaped the future of their neighborhood.

In 2018, this shift crystallized in two major initiatives. First, ELACC supported the launch of the first community land trust on the Eastside, Fideicomiso Comunitario Tierra Libre (FCTL). With acquisition subsidies secured through innovative partnerships, ELACC and a cohort of committed Boyle Heights residents acquired three vacant lots and began building an organization centered on sustainable, community-led land stewardship. Over the next two years, the CLT evolved from concept to practice, establishing a model that enabled affordable housing and small business ownership while ensuring long-term affordability and community control. FCTL became a platform not only for ownership, but also for connection, enabling residents to build social capital

with neighbors and organize collectively around shared goals. Second, ELACC joined forces with Inclusive Action for the City and Little Tokyo Service Center to form Community Owned Real Estate (CORE). Together, the three organizations acquired five commercial properties across the Eastside with the goal of supporting local entrepreneurs and preventing the displacement of cultural and economic anchors. CORE's model was to purchase properties, preserve existing tenants, provide affordable space for local business owners, and build pathways to ownership. Over time, the program aims to transition these buildings into cooperative or nonprofit ownership structures, ensuring long-term affordability and rooting wealth in the community. As ELACC described it, CORE sought to "build a more just economy and small business ecosystem in Boyle Heights and the greater Eastside." These initiatives were not just technical interventions, but the product of years of community listening, internal learning, and courageous experimentation. As one former real estate project manager described:

"There was a moment when we said, 'Why does ELACC need to be the landlord forever?' What would it look like if residents could one day own the buildings themselves? If the tenants in our affordable housing could become their own landlords?"

Interview with former Project Manager, 2020

This internal dialogue reflected a maturing organization that had moved from resisting gentrification to building alternatives rooted in collective ownership and financial empowerment. This shift was not easy as it required unprecedented levels of collaboration across departments, learning from community organizations across LA, and assistance from major community development groups beyond the neighborhood. It also demanded that ELACC stretch its technical, legal, and financial capacities, often venturing into new territory with little roadmap. But the organization embraced the challenge, understanding that the future of the barrio depended on bold experimentation. As one former real estate project manager recalled:

We've always tried to build at least in RED [The Real Estate Development Department] like this department-wide buy-in on the work that we're doing, just to make sure everybody knows the work that we're all doing it but also can support it. And I think that that was just growing as every year went by like the more we had open communication and cross-department communication in our management team meetings, the more people knew the developments we were working on it and then more people were beginning to engage in the real estate side to say like, 'what can we do to help? What can we do to leverage this building to do other things?' Like, 'how could we make the building better? Or now that we're in this community here, what else could we do in this community to help enrich the community in other aspects beyond housing? So, it was going in a good direction.

Interview with former Project Manager, 2021

These questions also took on new urgency as ELACC's existing developments reached maturity. Many of its LIHTC properties were approaching the end of their 15-year compliance period, offering the organization a choice to buy out the investor partners and retain control, or explore models for resident ownership. The same project manager described this as an urgent opportunity and risk:

“And then the other direction was that, I mean, now that we've had developments that have been in our portfolio for, some of them, over 15 years, some of them getting close to 15 years. So, there's that opportunity to...either resyndicate, like basically refresh the tax credits or we buy the buildings out right. And the conversations this was leading to were like, ‘why does ELACC need to be the landlord here? Why can't we have the members, the tenants living in the buildings buy the building from us and be their own landlord?’ Right? So, there's different conversations that were happening around land use and the community land trust and basically having our tenants participating in this ownership structure. Right? So that way at the end of the day, say if ELACC didn't exist anymore or we did everything that we developed, we decided to sell it all off to the community members, to the tenants who are living in our buildings, then that would be a successful thing, right? Because it's no longer dependent on ELACC. It's basically now the residents or the community are the ones who ended up owning and are now doing what ELACC was doing but they're doing it for themselves now.”

Interview with former Project Manager, 2021

These conversations hinted at a deeper possibility that allowed ELACC staff to imagine a future in which ELACC's legacy was not only measured in units built or dollars raised, but in the capacity it helped seed among the residents themselves to advance collective ownership and self-determination from permanent affordability. As another former project manager noted, this work sparked debates within the organization and led to transformative questions that reimaged how affordable housing and real estate development is done around what to do with future unrestricted funds: Should ELACC reinvest to continue building and expanding its core programs? Should it launch new ones? Should it transfer assets to the community? The very success of its model raised new questions about scale, sustainability, and accountability.

Amid these debates, ELACC worked hard to remain grounded in its values. Even as it pursued complex real estate deals, it pushed itself to maintain its cultural and political commitments, infusing development with arts and tradition, and uplifting the lived experiences of residents impacted by displacement. Its campaigns continued to expand, building on earlier work around Metro land use, street vendor decriminalization, and renter protections. Through this work over time, ELACC staff were able to see community development change in response. As one longtime partner reflected:

“Today, I can't think of anyone organization in any sector where people that are working with and around community development aren't touched or aren't challenged by housing stability and affordability. So that's one factor. The other factor is resources, right? Like took all these years to get resources and foundations and governments to be like, ‘Okay, this is an issue. Like we got to figure it out.’ So folks can no longer be like, ‘Oh, it's not an issue.’ We can look at resource allocation and the calls for proposals that focus on this area now and see community development and affordable housing merging, I think that's what's shifted on the side of community development organizations. I think it was just the combination of the historical work that has always happened in the Eastside, like the work that happened in the early 2000s Comunidades Unidas and the organizing infrastructure that other organizations were building up...It's very exciting to me, seeing the community resident involvement, seeing the cross-sector organizing and different sectors of work intersect, 'cause now it's like, there's people have come out of left field, like, ‘Oh, you can do this work from a housing perspective’ and I have been like, “what are you talking about? Where have you been? We’ve *been* doing this work!”

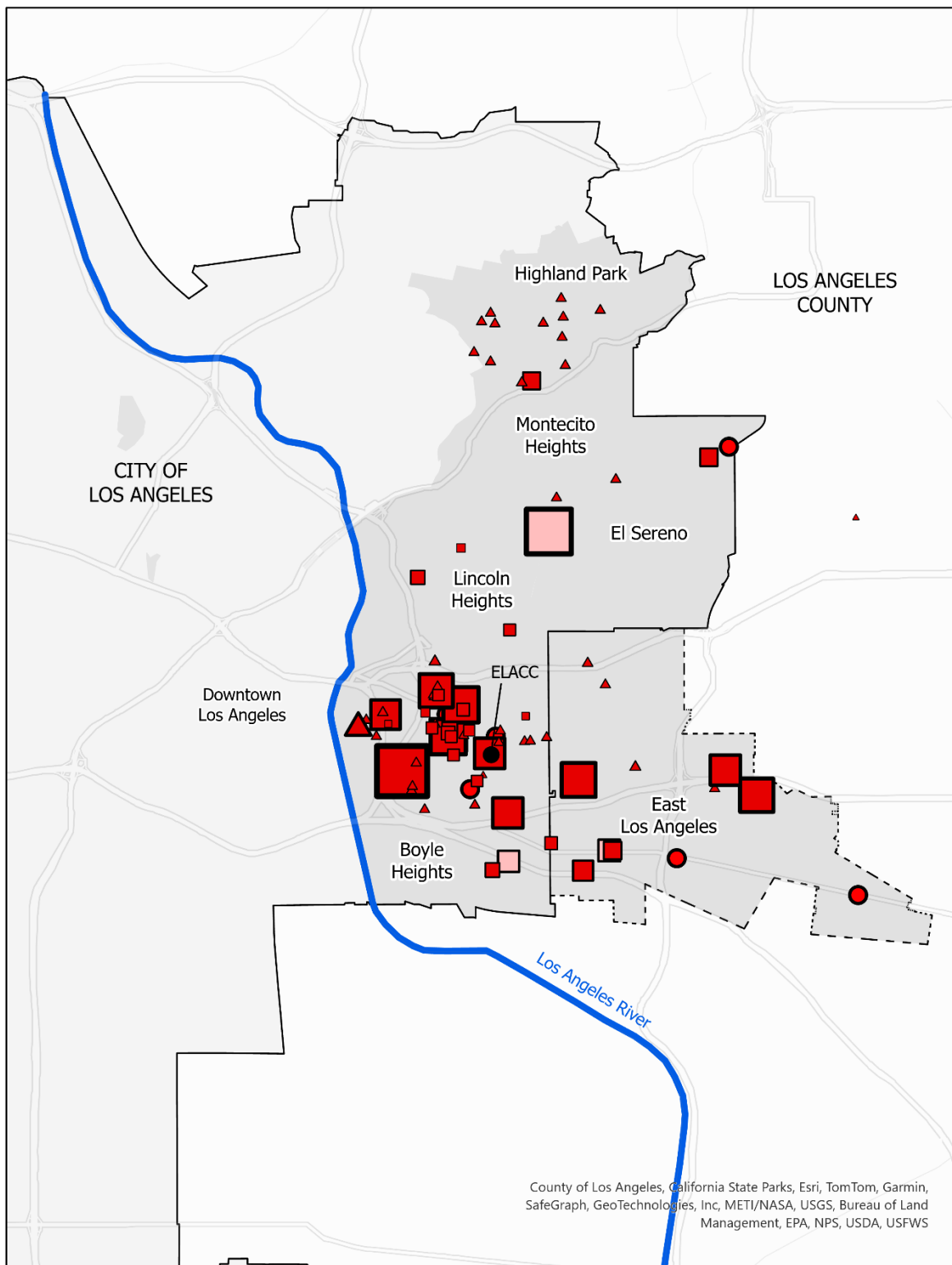
Interview with former Community Organizer, 2019

Through these efforts, ELACC's third decade marked a powerful evolution. It didn't just build housing (see Map 4). It reimagined how land, power, and identity could intersect to sustain a neighborhood. It didn't just resist displacement. It also cultivated resident leadership and advanced community-controlled development. And it didn't do it alone. FCTL and CORE now stand as living models and proof that collective ownership is not only possible, but increasingly necessary.

This phase of ELACC's trajectory reflects a deliberate move toward transformation. It is the story of an organization seeking not just to respond to crisis, but to rewrite the rules of urban development. It offers a glimpse into what becomes possible when long-term community relationships, organizational courage, and collective imagination converge. In a city where displacement often seems inevitable, ELACC attempted to chart another path that was rooted in cultural pride, economic justice, and community stewardship of place.

Map 4: ELACC Development 2015-2020

*Source:* Map created by Ashley Hernandez and Philip McDaniel



## Discussion: Lessons from the ELACC Way and a Call to Action to Advance Equitable Development Through Community Ownership and Place-Based Power

The story of ELACC offers critical lessons for rethinking how we invest in housing, neighborhoods, and long-term equity. In a time of mounting pressure on urban communities of color from displacement, speculative investment, and inequitable planning processes, ELACC has demonstrated what it means to build a development model rooted in local culture, resident leadership, and collective stewardship. From 1995 to 2020, ELACC grew beyond conventional nonprofit housing production to become an effective neighborhood intermediary and community anchor. It has helped secure affordable housing, supported diverse pathways to ownership, piloted cooperative land models, and tied these efforts to broader organizing and planning strategies. This approach has been responsive to the needs of Eastside barrios, while also speaking to long-standing gaps in the broader housing and community development landscape.

ELACC's work does not present a one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, it illustrates how locally grounded organizations can build durable, equity-centered development strategies that expand access while challenging systems that have historically produced exclusion and instability. This case offers both a challenge and an invitation to invest in models that align capital with community control, and to support strategies that build wealth, stability, and power from the ground up.

#### *Lesson 1: Housing policy must move beyond short-term access towards lasting inclusion*

ELACC's experience shows that, while urgent, expanding access to affordable housing is not enough on its own. When public investment facilitates entry into ownership or rental opportunities without long-term protections, affordability can quickly erode, and communities may still be vulnerable to extraction. In many cities, we have seen how well-intentioned programs can unintentionally reproduce housing insecurity in new forms, especially when market logics remain intact. To build durable housing solutions, policy must shift from short-term production metrics to long-term affordability, tenure security, and community governance. ELACC's initiatives, such as FCTL and CORE, reflect a growing recognition that stabilization requires more than subsidy. It requires stewardship. These models hold affordability and ownership in the community over time, reducing both displacement risk and speculative pressure.

#### *Lesson 2: Development must be grounded in cultural legitimacy and community leadership*

Much of ELACC's strength has stemmed from its legitimacy in the neighborhood, built over decades of advocacy, cultural organizing, and responsive service. As a CBDO, it does not simply implement policy or build units. It engages in a broader project that recognizes that neighborhoods are more than real estate markets. They are spaces of cultural belonging, political struggle, and collective memory. By centering culture and history, ELACC offers an alternative to the narrative of deficiency that too often surrounds low-income communities of color. Rather than treating these neighborhoods as sites to be "revitalized," ELACC frames them as sites of value, deserving of public investment that affirms community identity and expands opportunity, rather

than striving to remake them. For planners and policymakers, this means supporting development that grows out of communities, not over them.

*Lesson 3: Innovation must align with community capacity, not just market gaps*

ELACC has demonstrated that some of the most important housing innovations today are not about financial engineering but about redesigning governance, ownership, and participation. Through popular education, participatory planning, and collective ownership experiments, the organization cultivated a model where residents help shape and steward development outcomes, rather than simply receiving them. Too often, innovation in community development is framed as a product to be scaled, rather than a process to be adapted. ELACC reminds us that the most impactful solutions are those that emerge from community and context – shaped by community knowledge, responsive to shifting conditions, and committed to equity over expediency. Supporting this kind of work requires flexible funding, policy agility, and recognition that the best ideas often come from those closest to the problem.

*Lesson 4: Predatory inclusion is still possible, even through well-intentioned programming*

ELACC's work also sheds light on a tension that continues to shape affordable housing and real estate policy. This is the risk that access can be granted on terms that still extract value or reproduce inequality. This phenomenon, discussed by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2019) as predatory inclusion, is evident when homeownership or development programs ostensibly serve low-income communities, yet fail to address the structural conditions that made housing inaccessible and unstable to begin with. In Boyle Heights, ELACC worked to confront this risk directly, crafting strategies that resist this cycle. Their emphasis on long-term affordability, local control, and culturally appropriate development ensures that benefits accrue not just to individuals, but to the neighborhood as a whole, no matter who lives there. For public agencies and funders, this lesson is critical – programs that aim to increase access must also ensure that access is meaningful, durable, and free from extractive dynamics.

*Lesson 5: Equity requires cross-sector collaboration and structural support*

While ELACC's success is extraordinary, it is not sufficient. As one of ELACC's longtime leaders has shared with me, "each success is a fight" and has been hard-won through coalitions, advocacy, and creative problem-solving in the face of limited subsidy, regulatory barriers, and exclusionary land use practices. To sustain this kind of work, community-based organizations need more than project-based support. They need structural alignment, including, but not limited to, longer-term funding, streamlined acquisition and entitlement pathways, deeper, integration into regional planning and policy conversations, and support for coalition-building across sectors. Practitioners, impact investors, and policy professionals all have a role to place in building ecosystems where organizations like ELACC can have a chance to thrive and where equity is a shared responsibility.

*Lesson 6: From local precedent to shared principles*

The ELACC model is deeply grounded in the barrios of the Los Angeles Eastside, but the principles that undergird its success, including place-based trust, participatory governance, asset stewardship, and cultural rootedness, are widely evident. As more communities seek to guard against displacement and build generational wealth, these strategies offer a glimpse of what development can look like when it is designed not just *for* community, but *with* and *by* community. Rather than replicating outputs, funders and policymakers can look to cases like ELACC's and ask: What does equity require here, in this place, for this community? And how can existing finance, policy and planning tools be reshaped to deliver it? This might get us closer to developing the dignified housing that we all deserve.

## **Conclusion**

The story of ELACC is a reminder that working to undo racialized housing inequality and expanding housing opportunity is not just a question of how many units get built, or how efficiently dollars are spent. It is also a question of who shapes development, who benefits from it, and how communities remain whole and unharmed in the process. As housing professionals, policymakers, and advocates participate in the struggle toward more inclusive and stable neighborhoods, this case invites a broader shift from access to accountability, from subsidy to stewardship, from abstract equity goals to grounded investments in people and place. ELACC's trajectory offers not just a model to admire, but a provocation to act.

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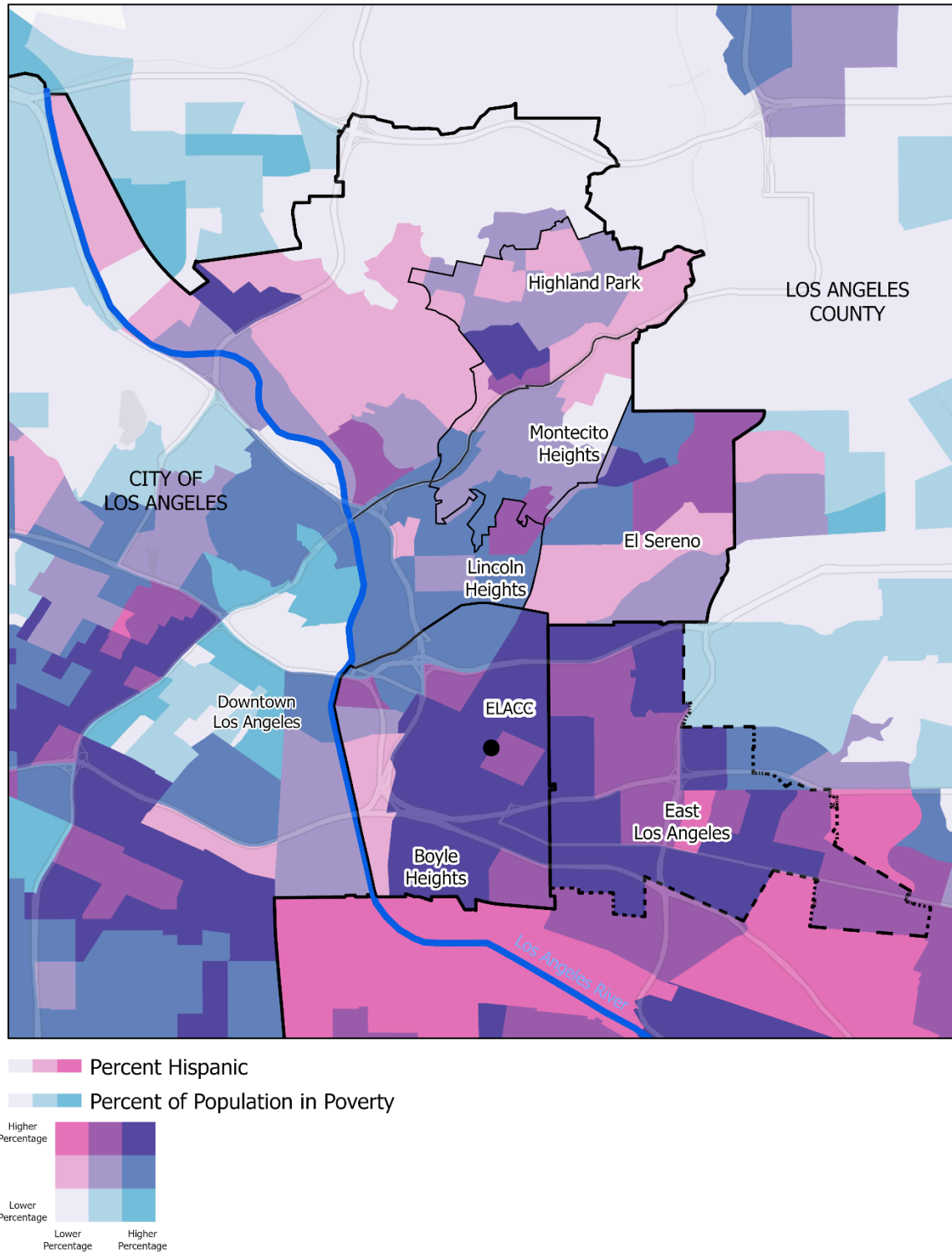
## Appendix A

### Demographics of ELACC's Development Impact Area

|   | All Areas |          | Boyle Heights |          |
|---|-----------|----------|---------------|----------|
|   | 2000      | 2020     | 2000          | 2020     |
| Total Population                              | 360,668   | 333,900  | 95,754        | 88,824   |
| Hispanic Population                           | 312,149   | 275,086  | 87,272        | 81,997   |
| Percent Hispanic                              | 85%       | 81%      | 91%           | 91%      |
| Foreign Born Population                       | 173,735   | 133,361  | 48,428        | 37,538   |
| Percent Foreign Born Population               | 44%       | 40%      | 47%           | 42%      |
| Median Household Income                       | \$75,562  | \$72,144 | \$67,666      | \$58,368 |
| Percent Families in Poverty                   | 23%       | 15%      | 28%           | 20%      |
| Percent Population in Poverty                 | 26%       | 18%      | 31%           | 25%      |
| Percent Unemployed                            | 11%       | 8%       | 12%           | 9%       |
| Median Gross Rent                             | \$1,432   | \$1,543  | \$1,395       | \$1,422  |
| Rent as a Percentage of Income                | 27%       | 32%      | 28%           | 35%      |
| Percent Renter Occupied Housing Units         | 60%       | 65%      | 69%           | 77%      |
| Percent Hispanic Owner Occupied Housing Units | 32%       | 33%      | 24%           | 23%      |
| Percent with Less than High School Education  | 56%       | 38%      | 63%           | 45%      |

## Appendix B

Percent Latino and Percent Population in Poverty in ELACC's Target Development Area in 2000



## Appendix C

Percent Latino and Percent Latino Homeownership in ELACC's Target Development Area, 2000

