

# THE EPHEMERAL ANATOMY OF THE STARLITE SWAP MEET



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FALL 2009

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## INTRODUCTION

The space occupied by Starlite Swap Meet, an ephemeral gathering place facilitating sales and bartering in what otherwise would be a vacant lot in the East Los Angeles region, can best be described as a void in the urban landscape, only becoming a place upon the arrival of the people who occupy it on its weekends. Not only does the space become occupied, but it also comes to house what can be considered a true shopping center, whose “retailer” variation and livelihood are perhaps nearly comparable to that of the brick and mortar establishments of the Americana in nearby Glendale and The Grove in Los Angeles – of course, in its own much more discounted class. Like the latter entities, though, the swap meet is also privately owned; vendors pay to occupy the space and customers are charged a 75 cent fee each to enter it.

Despite only being occupied two days out of the week, the space has managed to sustain a strong following, attracting many to its temporary “streets” and lively “public” sphere. It has continually retained such a large following that any opposition, of which there has been much, particularly from health and safety officials with legitimate and justifiable concerns, has been relatively easily squashed by the space’s ownership and the many linked to its existence.

This paper documents the workings of Starlite Swap Meet and comments on its relevance to contemporary urban planning and community development. In addition to what is written, diagrams illustrating the swap meet’s many components and its relationship with adjacent and nearby and comparable entities have been created to communicate findings.

## METHODOLOGY

The documentation of the swap meet’s workings is part biographical, being that my family and I have sold at the swap meet for the last twenty-some years. Our bicycle business, purchased from another dedicated bicycle vendor, began as a hobby and eventually became the base of my family’s income as my parents’ employment status changed. The entire family, as well as the day laborers, teens, and occasional uncle we have employed over the years, have worked the stand, engaging in the swap meet’s demands alongside the other approximately 200 vendors.

Assuming the role of vendor turned researcher, I was therefore able to navigate the swap meet relatively comfortably, easily asking vendors, of all kinds, to pose for pictures and offer commentary when I conducted my research during spring and fall 2009. My being a longtime vendor, whose growth has been witnessed by the many decades long vendors who sell at the swap meet, brought to my research an ease – whether it be because of familiarity or trust or both -- likely not available to an outsider unaware of its internal workings.

Also largely informing my examination of the swap meet is work produced by James Rojas, a Los Angeles based urban planner and theorist, who coined the term the “enacted environment,” as applied to urban theory in his thesis, *The Enacted Environment: The Creation of “Place” by Mexicans and Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles*. In *The Enacted Environment*, Rojas documents how Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles regularly modify their environments for the purposes of social and entrepreneurial

PRIMARY SWAP MEET ENTITIES



BOTTLE COLLECTORS	individuals who sort out swap meet trash piles and cans in search of bottles that are then taken to recycling centers in exchange for monetary gain
CART VENDORS	individuals who sell goods out of shopping carts; typically these vendors do not have permits
DAY LABORERS	individuals who work for daily wages, especially as an unskilled laborer; in the case of the swap meet, day laborers seek work as sales and stand maintenance assistance
SWAP MEET CUSTOMERS	visitors who pay a small fee to enter the swap meet to use its services
EXTENDED VENDORS	swap meet vendors who have paid to set-up a swap meet stand for vending a particular item, but also sell other items out of their stands, such as food or beverages, which they deliver around the swap meet; typically, other swap meet vendors are their regular customers
SIDEWALK VENDORS	individuals who vend along the swap meet’s nearby or adjacent sidewalks and fences, taking advantage of the influx of people visiting the swap meet
SWAP MEET STAFF	individuals employed by swap meet management and include administrative staff, cafeteria staff, maintenance staff security guards, ticket booth staff, and trash collectors
SWAP MEET VENDORS	individuals who pay a fee to vend at the swap meet within an allocated space; they are either regular vendors who pay a monthly fee or temporary vendors who only pay on the days a space becomes available to them; spaces are available to temporary vendors only when regular vendors do not arrive by the 8 AM cut off time, at which point spaces are distributed to interested vendors on a first come, first served basis; regular vendors are required to have permits and report sales to the IRS
TRANSIENT VENDORS	swap meet customers who bring items to the swap meet to sell; typically, swap meet vendors are their customers; these vendors may walk around the swap meet taking orders for food, for example, and later return with items stored in their vehicles; as well, these vendors may carry in items, such as beverages, and sell them as they walk around the swap meet premises

AERIAL SHOT OF THE STARLITE SWAP MEET\*



The changing gradient of the swap meet's asphalt flooring, made by years of vehicular access both as a drive-in theatre and swap meet, is indicative of the traffic patterns made by the cars and trucks occupying the space. The lines also demarcate where vendor spaces and adjacent "streets" are located.

\* Google Earth, Retrieved 3 December 2009.

interests. Their interactions become overt and, perhaps, unintended acts of revolution as they defy architectural form and activate what are often dormant environments, such as empty streets, sidewalks, and parking lots, the latter being the case of the swap meet. Impulsively modifying them without much consideration to social norms and the perhaps initial intended use of a space, many of East Los Angeles' residents create place merely by their presence. I have used Rojas' approach and much of his terminology to structure my observations and findings.

#### THE SWAP MEET

Opened in the mid 20th century, the Startlite Swap Meet once operated as a drive-in theatre that housed up to 860 vehicles. The otherwise empty theatre lot simultaneously began operating as a daytime outdoor swap meet shortly after its opening. Over time, the swap meet proved to be more successful than the space's cinematic use; despite the eventual demise of the theatre in the mid 1990s, the swap meet continues to thrive in the shadow of the Art Moderne-like marquee that once marked the theatre's main entrance, and now welcomes swap meet visitors. Aside from the marquee, its only notable infrastructure is the fence that denotes its boundaries in relation to its light manufacturing and residential neighbors, and two relatively modest buildings located at the center of the swap meet where a cafeteria, administrative office, and restrooms are located. Sold at the swap meet are toiletries, herbal medicines, pet clothing, and seemingly everything in between.

The swap meet is located approximately 20 minutes east of downtown Los Angeles in the industrial suburb of South El Monte, and only minutes from where Rojas conducted his research. Invariably, many of the demographic and cultural components, largely defined by Hispanic, immigrant, and low-income families, noted in the East Los Angeles community examined in his work are also present in South El Monte, where the swap meet is located. However, South El Monte, neighbored by other San Gabriel Valley<sup>1</sup> communities, also contains a significant Asian community, if not as residents, but as the occasional occupiers of businesses and other services located in the city. As such, the swap meet's landscape is altered by this community's varied cultural influences and can be seen as one walks through the swap meet and learns of the interactions made between vendors, and vendors and customers. It would be negligible, though, to say that the influences are obvious, beside the language barriers that exist, broken English often being the only language that ties the communities. The entrepreneurial spirit, though, is seemingly equal, although perhaps more contained on the part of Asian vendors. Unlike their Hispanic counterparts, Asian vendors seem to prescribe to the idea of remaining inside the spaces for which they have paid. Hispanic participants oblige to a more anarchistic approach, more fluidly taking on the varied roles defined in the 'Primary Swap Meet Entities' diagram.

On any given weekend day -- rain or shine -- vendors begin arriving at the break of dawn, driving their packed vehicles through the swap meet's west entrance. As Rojas might state, vendors enact, or begin enacting, the environment with their presence, their arrival marking the birth of a new swap meet day. By mid-morning, vehicles are unloaded and stands set-up in time to welcome early customers. Vehicles, particularly those containing the components of a larger stand, are often modified and outfitted with shelves, metal crossbars, and netting to better store merchandise. The stands created are themselves props, or "movable items, easily manipulated by the user who provides instant modification" (Rojas). Just like the props

1 The San Gabriel Valley is a Southern California region located east of downtown Los Angeles. Included in its 200 square miles are 31 cities and five unincorporated communities, one of which is Monterey Park, the first American suburb to boast an Asian majority. Other notable cities include Pasadena and San Marino, both of which house widely recognized institutions, such as the Norton Simon Museum and the Huntington Gardens.

Rojas identified on East Los Angeles's streets, the stands work to connect the user to the space in the enacted environment created by the vendors occupying the property's void.

Stands sometimes occupy more than one space, each space totaling approximately 400 square feet and costing about \$50 a day to lease. The structures are, for the most part, modest in size and design, but will occasionally reach heights equivalent to a two-story building and may sinuously weave around the many trucks, equal extensions of these entrepreneurial enterprises, parked in between the stands. Several hours are often spent building the structures, which are typically composed of metal poles, tarps, and the joints and cables that hold them together. As may be inferred, working a stand can be rigorous, and requires a certain kind of physical stamina that can endure seasonal weather changes and heavy lifting.

Remaining relatively intact for only a few hours of the swap meet's 10 – 12 hour long days, the stands usually begin to see their end at about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. The ritual of erecting and dismantling the stand is largely determined by natural time in that the swap meet is solely lit by sunlight, yet sometimes still remains beyond despite evening's darkness; some vendors are stubborn enough to work according to abstract time in order to make an extra buck.

The swapmeet, although legal, has often been a source of concern to local officials, who have regularly identified health and safety violations. As a result, property owners have often felt pressured to close the swap meet – or at least distribute a sense of concern amongst vendors. The swap meet manager will periodically – approximately, every six months or so –try to clear vendors' violations, which may be everything from not placing items outside of a demarcated vending space to not selling food out of one's truck. For the most part, vendors will comply, but will eventually take to going back to old habits.

The entire scenario – from officials showing up to the eventual vending of uninspected foods – seems to happen so regularly that it almost seems like an inherent part of the swapmeet's workings. Of course, the concerns brought to light by the officials legitimate and ones that should and can, perhaps, be addressed more efficiently. Some thoughts turn to architectural and planning solutions. Beginning with simply



repainting lines that create more generous egress and ingress passageways for safety vehicles to providing spaces where people can prepare food within health code regulations.

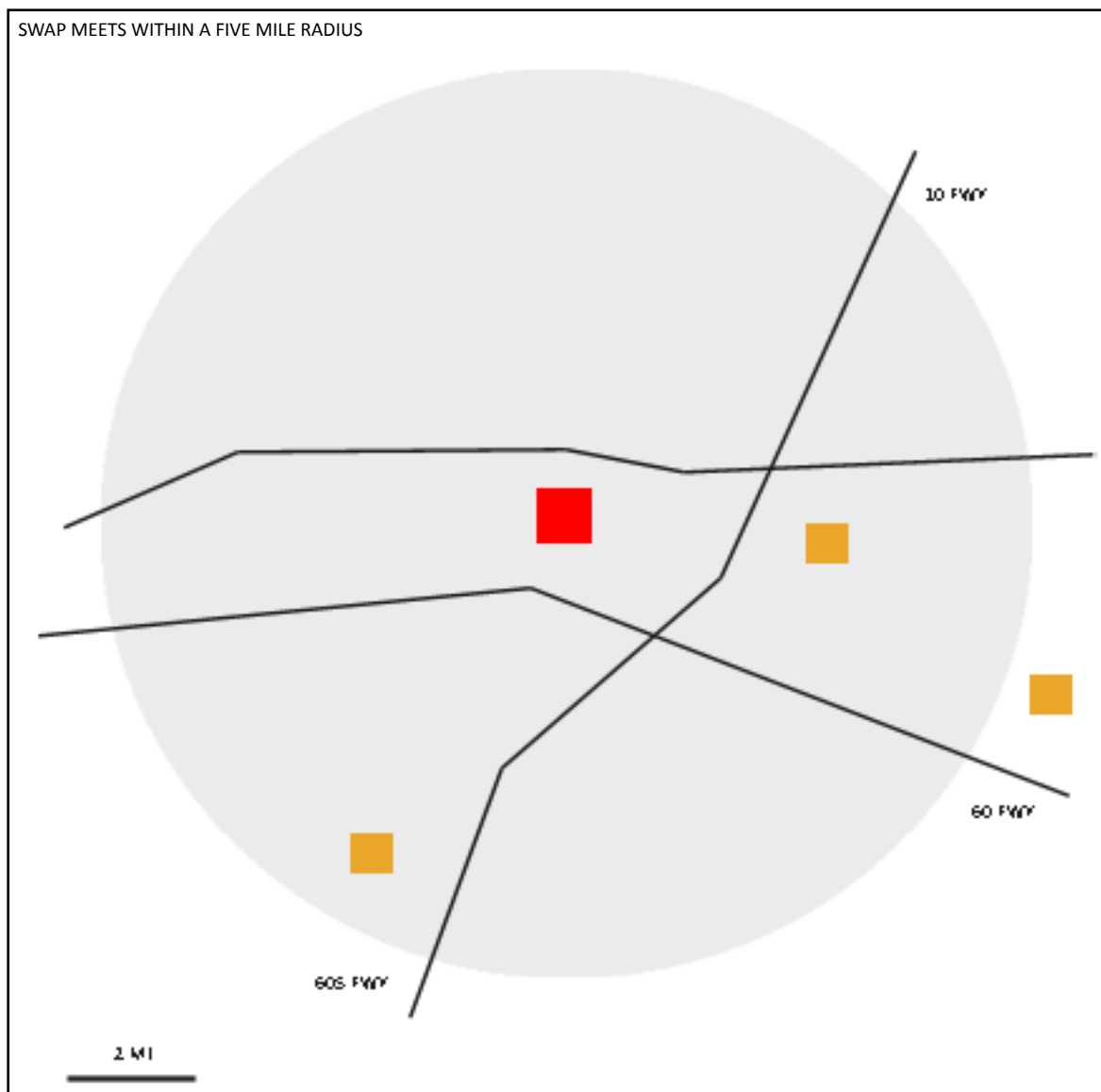
## CONCLUSION

As I walk through the swap meet's rows and rows of stands these days, many engaging me with their questions about my family and studies, I am in awe with the solid sense of community that exists despite the seeming ephemeral nature of the whole operation. As is the case, despite its thriving weekends, by Sunday evening and straight into the end of the week, after the trash and bottle collectors have stocked their supplies, this loud, eclectic place, where raw capitalism settles the score, becomes a desolate, concrete landscape where runaway plastic bags, caught on fences, rustle in the wind. Always becoming, it follows a constant cycle of rowdy occupation and silent emptiness; once again, it is what it was last week and, come the following weekend, the swap meet will appear and disappear.

This consistency within a seeming transient existence – as marked by the immediateness of the transactions, the exchanges, the relationships, the potential for growth, the ability to mobilize and move ahead into new spaces, relatively easily reshaping one's business as one goes – is perhaps part of the reason why spaces like the swap meet thrive as they do and have long appealed to folks like my family and the many others who shape them. As well, to be able to go from drive-in theatre, to swap meet, to vibrant community all in one space and in such little time is both exciting and inspiring to witness and live.

One wonders whether this kind of exchange can work as the foundational model for how potentially lost spaces can become thriving economic urban centers. Can a place as seemingly ephemeral as the swap meet, or any other similar entity, provide the type of subsistence needed to stay afloat? Can this model become, or is this model, a legitimate way to retain a repertoire amongst vendors, customers, and a community? While a more conventional way of doing business has its place, it seems that this kind of exchange can and should be considered a viable way of doing business. It embodies an opportunity to tap into one's own entrepreneurial spirit without having to commit much initial time or money.

In comparison to a brick and mortar business, it comfortably teeters between a hobby and a small business, allowing someone to slip in and out of its demands without much difficulty. In that, the risk is lessened, more readily allowing for an exchange of ideas and resources. Research conducted



THE LIFE CYCLE OF A SWAP MEET STAND



SWAP MEET WEEKEND DAY TIME LAPSE \*

TIME	VISIBLE ACTIVITY	ENTITIES PRESENT	DENSITY
0600	swap meet staff arrive and open ticket booth at main vendor entrance; regular swap meet vendors arrive, drive vehicles through main entrance; swap meet vendors seeking to obtain a one day permit begin lining up near entrance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> </ul>	•
0700	swap meet vendors continue to arrive; stands are assembled; customers begin to arrive; sales begin to take place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• customers</li> <li>• transient vendors</li> </ul>	••
0800	main vendor entrance shut down; available spaces are distributed to temporary vendors; temporary vendors allowed entrance; stands continue to be assembled; sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• customers</li> <li>• transient vendors</li> </ul>	•••
0900	stands set-up; sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• customers</li> <li>• transient vendors</li> </ul>	••••
1000	customers arrive and depart; sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• customers</li> <li>• transient vendors</li> <li>• sidewalk vendors</li> </ul>	•••••
1100	customers arrive and depart; sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• customers</li> <li>• transient vendors</li> <li>• sidewalk vendors</li> </ul>	••••••
1200	customers arrive and depart; sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• customers</li> <li>• transient vendors</li> <li>• sidewalk vendors</li> </ul>	•••••••
1300	customers arrive and depart; sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• customers</li> <li>• transient vendors</li> <li>• sidewalk vendors</li> </ul>	••••••••
1400	customers arrive and depart; sales; stand breakdown begins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• customers</li> <li>• transient vendors</li> <li>• sidewalk vendors</li> </ul>	•••••••••
1500	customers arrive and depart; sales; breakdown continues; cart vendors begin to arrive; bottle collectors arrive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• customers</li> <li>• bottle collectors</li> <li>• cart vendors</li> </ul>	••••••••••
1600	swap meet closed to customers; last few sales made by swap meet vendors; trash collectors begin to appear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• customers</li> <li>• bottle collectors</li> <li>• cart vendors</li> <li>• trash collectors</li> </ul>	•••••••••••
1700	last few vendors exit swap meet; trash collectors continue to work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• swap meet vendors</li> <li>• trash collectors</li> </ul>	••••
1800	swap meet shuts down	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• swap meet staff</li> <li>• trash collectors</li> </ul>	•

\* Based on observations made in April and November 2009.

by Alfonso Morales supports this theory, arguing that markets, of which the swap meet is an example of, are opportunities for community development and provide a legitimate infrastructure for becoming self-employed. According to Morales, these spaces “bring together a number of seemingly disparate goals of sociability, entrepreneurship and employment, sustainability, health, and demographic change.”

The United States Congress has also actively promoted the adaptive reuse of urban voids and properties whose initial intended use have reached their expiration, of which the swap meet’s evolution is an example. Recognizing the potential these spaces have, Congressman Tim Ryan (Ohio 17th District, Democrat) and Member of The Livable Communities Task Force, introduced the Community Regeneration, Sustainability, and Innovation Act (H.R. 932) in 2009. The Act would create a new pilot program and a dedicated funding stream within the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development targeted toward cities experiencing large-scale property

vacancy and population losses. It would be especially pertinent, though, that, in pursuing the reinvigoration of such spaces, there be consideration of the varied benefits of retaining voids in the urban landscape. As illustrated by the swap meet’s vibrancy and economic contributions to the local community, there are clear benefits to having open spaces solely existing to facilitate ephemeral happenings.

These observations are based on my increasing appreciation for the seeming happenstance innovation that comes into play as a part of the swap meet’s and similar institutions’ inhabitation of potentially lost urban spaces, their vast emptiness seeming to be their greatest asset. Enriched by its openness, flexible to the demands of hand and wind, the swap meet’s small intimate setting lends itself to being a kind of welcoming introduction to the entrepreneurial world – an introduction to be considered as current economic models reshape themselves and urban spaces lose their original meanings as a part of the aftermath.

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#### PHOTOGRAPHS

All photographs were taken by Jennifer Renteria in April 2009, unless otherwise noted.

