

The Formation of Business Improvement Districts in Low-Income Immigrant Neighborhoods of Los Angeles

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Abstract

Business improvement districts (BIDs) are local organizations that have been revitalizing commercial areas for the last two decades in the United States. However, not every commercial district has succeeded in establishing BIDs despite some initial efforts. This research presents a comparative examination of two neighborhoods in Los Angeles—MacArthur Park and the Byzantine Latino Quarter (BLQ)—to examine the BID formation process in poor immigrant neighborhoods and to identify how community characteristics differ between the neighborhood that succeeded in BID formation and the other that did not. The BLQ displayed distinguishable factors that may have contributed to successful BID formation, including invested community stakeholders, organizational resources, residents' activism, and efforts to embrace multiethnic groups. This research demonstrates that community organizing capacity and characteristics can change the course and outcome of BID formation. This study also offers insights for multicultural community organizing and equitable distribution of public services to the areas with inconclusive or ineffective efforts of BID formation.

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Introduction

During the last few years, the Los Angeles city government has conspicuously struggled to provide public services. Financial scarcity due to the property tax limit of the 1970s and, more recently, the abolishment of the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) in 2011 have contributed to a decreasing capacity of the public authority to provide basic services and resources for neighborhood revitalization. In the void thereby created, there is an increasing need for neighborhood-initiated and market-based solutions. Business improvement districts (BIDs) are one of the organizations that represent such efforts. BIDs are local organizations funded by property or business owners to improve the social and physical environment of neighborhoods. More than 40 neighborhoods of Los Angeles have formed BIDs over the last 15 years and reported positive results in trash or graffiti removal and security reinforcement.

As BIDs have spread over Los Angeles, however, several neighborhoods have shown slow progress in BID formation according to the Los Angeles City Council file records. Such neighborhoods can be characterized by the following. They could not form BIDs for longer than five years, which far exceeds the average of 18 to 22 months taken in other neighborhoods in Los Angeles. The neighborhoods that show slow BID formation are generally found to be lower-income neighborhoods with higher concentration of foreign-born populations (Lee 2014). The slow, if not failed, attempt to form BIDs requires special attention considering that the areas without BIDs generally experience a lack of services and may suffer from the influx of undesirable elements from nearby areas with BIDs, as they may push those elements outside their boundaries (Briffault 1997, 2010; Caruso and Weber 2006; Hoyt and Gopal-Agge 2007; Lewis 2010; Pack 1992).

The main purpose of this research is, thus, to examine how BID formation efforts unfold in poor immigrant neighborhoods in Los Angeles, and more specifically, how the neighborhoods that struggle with BID formation differ from the ones that have successfully formed a BID. I present a comparative case study of two adjacent low-income immigrant neighborhoods, one with slow BID formation and the other with successful BID formation: MacArthur Park and the Byzantine Latino Quarter (BLQ), respectively. In both neighborhoods, BID formation is active on paper; however, MacArthur Park has not been able to establish a BID over the last several years, whereas the BLQ

succeeded in establishing a BID in 2003 and renewed it in 2014. The comparison of these two cases offers insights for how BID formation efforts in poor immigrant neighborhoods can evolve differently in relation to the capacity and characteristics of community organizing.

BIDs in Los Angeles

Los Angeles has the second largest number of BIDs in the United States, second to New York City. As of 2013, Los Angeles has established 44 BIDs since the 1990s, five of which have expired (i.e., are no longer in operation). Of the remaining, 34 BIDs are property-based and five BIDs are merchant-based. These types of BIDs vary primarily by whether the assessment is levied against the property owner or the merchant, the life span of the BID, and the petition thresholds for initiating the BID (Meek and Hubler 2008). Among property-based BIDs (PBIDs), Los Angeles has a unique type of BID called “alpha BIDs.” An alpha BID is a type of PBID that follows special rules concerning the formation procedures or governing characteristics of BIDs. Alpha BIDs have two major characteristics that distinguish them from the standard PBIDs: (1) Alpha BIDs can be established or disestablished with a 30% passage threshold, instead of 50%, and (2) the life span of alpha BIDs is lengthened from 5 to 10 years, instead of the maximum five years. These special rules were approved by the Council of the City of Los Angeles in 2000 with the intention to help economically depressed areas form and keep BIDs because economically depressed areas often contain a large portion of absentee commercial property owners and, thus, lack the ability to meet the 50% petition requirement for establishing a BID (Los Angeles Administrative Code 2000). The ordinance helped establish a number of alpha BIDs in low-income neighborhoods, including Chinatown, Highland Park, and the BLQ.

The benefits of BIDs are clear in the areas that BIDs serve. Walking along downtown, employees with purple, red, yellow, and green uniforms sweep the streets. The trash cans are emptied by the cleaning teams almost every day. Men with special colored T-shirts patrol for public safety. During exploratory field research for this project, one textile business owner who has run a store in the Fashion District in Los Angeles for 17 years said, “If those people don’t come for one week, or even two days, this area is a problem. This area will not be safe.” Another clothing storeowner said, “When there’s any problem, we call those guys first because they show up more quickly than cops.” These comments demonstrate that the role of BIDs has become an integral part of the daily activities of the businesses. Studies based on Los Angeles also showed that BIDs make a difference in lowering crime rate and youth

violence (Brooks 2008; Cook and MacDonald 2011; MacDonald et al. 2009; MacDonald et al. 2010).

However, the private and territorial characteristics of BIDs have some debatable implications. For example, BIDs can lead to unequal service provision across the city, the privatization of public space, or the possibility of spillover of negative elements from the areas with BIDs to the surrounding areas without BIDs (Briffault 1997, 2010; Caruso and Weber 2006; Hoyt and Gopal-Agge 2007; Pack 1992). Nonetheless, these concerning voices still do not negate that BIDs are effective in street sanitation and management. In fact, the Los Angeles city government acknowledges BIDs as a win–win urban revitalization strategy and has been providing financial and human resources to the areas that are in the process of BID formation.

Considering the overall benefits of BIDs and the public support for the formation of BIDs, why certain areas struggle with BID formation is an underexamined question. In 2013, the Los Angeles Office of the City Clerk record showed that 19 neighborhoods proposed to form BIDs.¹ Among the 19 proposed BIDs, however, seven of them showed a particularly slow BID formation process. These areas showed a lower income level and a higher concentration of foreign-born populations relative to the city average as well as to the neighborhoods that have successfully established BIDs (Lee 2014). This correlation prompts an examination of the formation process of BIDs in poor immigrant neighborhoods, and more specifically, how the neighborhoods that struggle with BID formation differ from the ones that successfully formed a BID. In the next section “Literature Review,” I summarize the existing literature on BID formation and suggest community organizing as a guiding framework for this study.

Literature Review

The existing research on BID formation has mainly focused on identifying where BIDs form and what factors affect the formation outcome. These efforts primarily applied econometric analyses to examine the effects of socioeconomic factors on the formation outcome at various units of analysis. Some factors examined in the analyses include the presence of BID-enabling legislation, percentage of commercial properties, household income, property values, number of parcels, and the existence of “anchor participants”—key community players who are willing to bear the cost of BID formation (Billings and Leland 2009; Brooks and Strange 2011; Meltzer 2012). In addition, Ellen and colleagues (2007) suggested several community social factors that can act as catalysts for BID formation, including the existence of

long-standing neighborhood problems (e.g., high levels of crime and poor infrastructure), the establishment of a local development corporation, and local organizational capacity.

Although the existing studies identified a number of key factors that are related to BID formation, the major shortcoming of these analyses is that they have approached BID formation as an *outcome* rather than as a *process*. Past analyses primarily approached “BID formation” as the postcondition of BID formation whereby BID formation is conceptualized as a binary outcome (whether a BID exists or not: *BID exists* = 1, *BID does not exist* = 0). This approach, however, by leaving out the internal dynamics of the BID formation process, has limitations in explaining situations in which neighborhoods struggle to form BIDs. Considering that BID formation requires a certain level of collective action (i.e., 50% petition from property owners and their agreement on the BID management plan), the success of BID formation is contingent upon various social and political factors. Although local collective decision making is a complex process that involves various actors (e.g., public officials, businesses, residents/citizen) and strategies (Feiock and Carr 2001), adequate light has not been shed on the complexity of the BID formation process in prior literature.

The above knowledge gap also implies that there is need for in-depth case analyses of the BID formation process, which would eventually affect the outcome of BID formation. Particularly, small *N* analyses are advantageous to examine the context of low-income neighborhoods in detail. Despite its important implications for equitable inner city development, only a few studies have examined the sociopolitical dynamics in low-income neighborhoods regarding the formation of voluntary organizations including BIDs (Gross 2005; Schaller and Modan 2005; Sutton 2010). These studies suggest that low-income neighborhoods may deal with unique challenges for BID formation, for example, in incorporating the voices of marginalized low-income residents and small businesses, managing low fiscal and human capital, or resolving internal conflict among community stakeholders.

To supplement the scope of the prior work and further examine the process of BID formation, I suggest an additional framework for this study. I argue that community organizing offers a framework where an organizer can facilitate collective action even when the individuals whom the organizer works with have indifferent attitudes or conflicting self-interests. In the next section “BID Formation in the Context of Community Organizing,” I first establish the meaning and role of community organizing and discuss various aspects of community organizing that have significant implications with respect to BID formation.

BID Formation in the Context of Community Organizing

Community organizing (hereafter also referred to as organizing) has been regarded as a core element of progressive social change and community practice in various fields including social work, urban planning, and public health (Fisher and Shragge 2000; Gittell and Vidal 1998; Minkler 2005). Part of the goal and general mechanism of organizing overlaps with those of BID formation. For example, the following definition of organizing by Rubin and Rubin (2008, p. 7) suggests that the organizing process could play a critical role for BID formation by joining collective efforts to solve shared problems and by strengthening interpersonal, social, and community relationships:

Organizing entails working with people to help them recognize that they face shared problems and to discover that by joining together they can fight to overcome these problems. Organizing builds upon and strengthens interpersonal, social, and community relationships while establishing ongoing organizations that enable people to sustain collective actions.

The community organization strategy proposed by Reisch and Wenocur (1986) also implies that organizing could contribute to the formation of voluntary community organizations. The link between community organizing and the establishment of community-based, self-help collective action supports the link between community organizing and BID formation.

Community organizing has evolved in more than one direction over time. Types of organizing I find to be particularly relevant to BID formation are associated with consensus-building and community-building processes. Gittell and Vidal (1998, p. 52) described that the objectives of consensus organizing are “to develop neighborhood leadership, organize community-based and controlled organizations, and facilitate respectful and mutually beneficial relationships between neighborhood-based leaders and organizations and the larger metropolitan-area support community.” Consensus building is also framed by Fisher and Shragge (2000, p. 7) as “building relationships in the neighborhoods, developing partnerships with the powerful, using consensus strategies and tactics in order to actualize community capacity.” The consensus-building model is also closely related to the community-building model of community organizing, which focuses on strengthening the community’s internal social and economic capacity to solve its own problems (Smock 2004). Community-building practitioners use an asset-based approach that sees every institution and organization—nonprofits, businesses, public agencies, and churches—as a potential source of resources to rebuild the community. Both the consensus-building and community-building

models underscore the process of building leadership, relationships, and community capacity. These aspects of community organizing become the primary focus of this research.

In addition, multilingual and multicultural community organizing provides a useful framework for this research. The increase of multiracial and multiethnic neighborhoods and their rich ethnic contexts present complex dynamics for community practice (Maly 2005; Vitiello 2009). Daley and Wong (1994) pointed out that minorities' competition for housing, entrepreneurship, services, and educational opportunities in the inner city can lead to serious tensions, as demonstrated in historic conflicts among Cubans, African-Americans, and Haitians in Miami in 1988 and between African-Americans and Koreans in Los Angeles in 1992. These incidents suggest that diversity can complicate intergroup relationships and that the intergroup dynamics can be one of the determinants for achieving inclusive community development. And yet, the multicultural dimension has been fairly absent in the community organizing literature. The past work attempting to reflect diversity provides at most either general principles for community organizing or case studies of organizing practices among certain racial or ethnic communities of color (e.g., African-Americans, Native Americans, ethnic minorities) (Daley and Wong 1994; Rivera and Erlich 1998; Shaw 2009). What have been missing are narratives of community organizing in a multiethnic environment. By integrating the community organizing perspective, this research aims to contribute to taking into account the multicultural neighborhood environment for BID formation.

Method

A Comparative Study

This project involves a comparative case study of two low-income immigrant neighborhoods in Los Angeles, MacArthur Park and the BLQ (part of Pico-Union). A comparative study design can strengthen the findings from a single case alone and offers an opportunity for theoretical replication (Yin 2009). Specifically, this study examines two similar cases that show different outcomes. This design fits with what Gerring (2007, p. 131) referred to as choosing “most-similar cases,” as he described as follows:

Often, fruitful analysis begins with an apparent anomaly: Two cases are apparently quite similar, and yet demonstrate surprisingly different outcomes. The hope is that intensive study of these cases will reveal one—or at most several—factors that differ across these cases. These differing factors are the putative causes.

This rationale was employed to select two cases that resemble one another socioeconomically, while exhibiting contrasting BID formation processes. The cases were selected based on consultation with city staff and archival research. The specialist at the Office of the City Clerk pointed out that MacArthur Park is one of the neighborhoods that has taken a particularly long time to form a BID among the neighborhoods that proposed to form a BID. Furthermore, the City Council archive showed that the City Council and the Office of the City Clerk supported the process of BID formation of MacArthur Park by investing financial and human capital. The case of MacArthur Park (i.e., a neighborhood that has taken a long time to form a BID despite a certain level of interest and support) offers useful conditions to investigate the potential challenges associated with the BID formation process.

Consequently, the BLQ was selected as a comparative case-study site based on its similar socioeconomic condition, adjacent geographical location, and contrasting BID formation outcome. The BLQ formed a BID in 2003 (and started to maintain it since 2005) and has been in the process of renewing the BID since 2013. Renewing a BID requires the same procedures (e.g., preparing a District Plan, collecting 50% petitions) as those involved in establishing a BID for the first time. Therefore, the BLQ BID-renewal process provided a useful platform to examine the BID formation process as it was unfolding.

Data Collection Method

The data of this study were collected during a year-long field research in Los Angeles from April 2013 to April 2014. Three types of data—interviews, archival records and documents, and observations—were collected to understand the BID formation processes in MacArthur Park and the BLQ.

Interviews drew in-depth insights into the dynamics among actors involved in the BID formation process and the decisive factors that led to the formation. A total of 37 semistructured, open-ended interviews were conducted. Interviewees were selected by identifying key persons directly involved in BID formation and local community meetings. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. In total, 31 interviews were voice recorded upon the verbal consent of interviewees. Major interviewees include community stakeholders, community development partners, city employees, and BID consultants. Community stakeholders include property owners, business owners, or residents of MacArthur Park and the BLQ. Community development partners include the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); Department of Urban Planning; and Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative

(LANI)—a nonprofit organization that manages the BLQ BID. The Office of the City Clerk, Bureau of Street Services, Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, Planning Department, the City Council Office, and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) participated in the interviews. In terms of BID consultants, I interviewed those who worked in the case-study neighborhoods as well as those who consulted other parts of Los Angeles to understand a diverse array of opinions and approaches for forming BIDs. In addition, a number of executive directors of other BIDs, community organizers, developers, and homeless community advocates provided diverse perspectives on BIDs and BID formation in Los Angeles.

The purpose of archival research was to collect background information on the process of BID formation and the socioeconomic characteristics of the selected case-study sites. The Census data and “Mapping L.A.” sections of the *Los Angeles Times* were used to map out demographic and economic characteristics and the history of these neighborhoods. The review of media sources (mainly the *Los Angeles Times* and *Downtown News*) and the Los Angeles City Council files provided the history of the case-study site and the discussions around the formation of a BID. In addition, the existing and newly proposed District Plans of the BLQ BID provided guidelines for BID formation and details about the information on properties inside the BID boundary.

Observations of real-life situations added important insights on cultural atmosphere, political subtleties, and socioeconomic condition that do not implicitly or explicitly surface in the written documents. I audited a number of closed meetings such as BID Board meetings and BID Consortium monthly meetings in addition to a number of public meetings such as City Council Working Group, Street Vending Summit, and local community initiatives meetings. These meetings informed me of updated issues with managing public spaces in commercial districts at both the city and local levels.

Description of Cases

MacArthur Park and the BLQ are dense immigrant low-income communities located in Central Los Angeles, California. MacArthur Park and the BLQ are adjacent, flanked by Koreatown to the northwest and downtown to the east. The geographical adjacency allows these two neighborhoods to share boundaries for various government jurisdictions and initiatives such as the City Council District 1 (CD1), police division, and Promise Zones²—a recent Federal revitalization initiative for high-poverty communities across the country (Karlman 2014; The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2014). Figure 1 presents the boundaries of MacArthur Park and

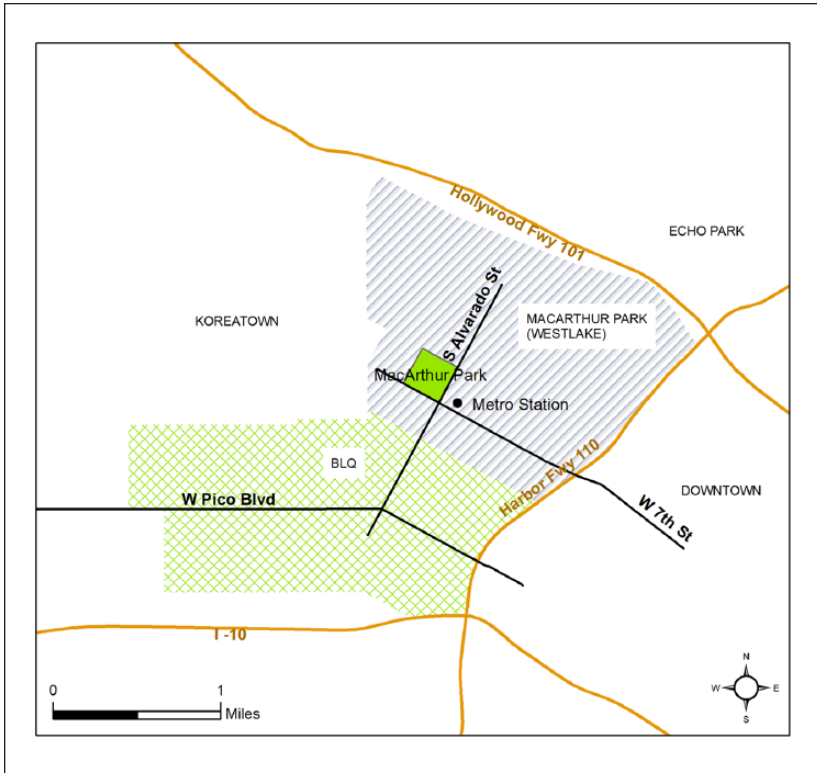


Figure 1. Boundaries and major commercial corridors of MacArthur Park and the BLQ.

Note. BLQ = Byzantine Latino Quarter.

the BLQ. The map also marks the major commercial corridors in each neighborhood: Pico Boulevard in the BLQ and Alvarado and 7th Streets in MacArthur Park.

Both neighborhoods are multiethnic, represented by the four largest countries of origin: Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Korea. Mexican residents consist of approximately one-third, El Salvadorans and Guatemalans combined consist of another one-third, and Koreans and other ethnic groups make up the remaining one-third of the entire ethnic groups. In terms of the income level, MacArthur Park and the BLQ are two of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. There was an approximately US\$20,000 gap in median household income between the study areas and the city average between 2007 and 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau 2007–2011). Using the same data, 36.7%

and 32.3% of individuals in MacArthur Park and the BLQ, respectively, were below the poverty level, whereas 20.2% of individuals were below the poverty level in Los Angeles on average. Persistent social problems, such as the presence of gangs and drug activity, also have been commonly shared between MacArthur Park and the BLQ since the 1980s (Kendall 1989; Pool 1990; Vigil 2002).

Commercial areas in MacArthur Park and the BLQ mostly comprise small businesses in terms of sales and employee size (ReferenceUSA 2014).³ Among 1,020 and 1,322 businesses analyzed in MacArthur Park and the BLQ, respectively, around 40% of the local businesses make less than US\$500,000 sales per year, and around 70% of the local businesses have employee sizes of between one and four in both neighborhoods. MacArthur Park and the BLQ, overall, show similar types of businesses based on the analysis of popular types of businesses categorized by the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes. Table 1 summarizes the 10 most popular types of businesses in both neighborhoods in comparison with the areas with BIDs. The common types of businesses in MacArthur Park and the BLQ include health services, eating and drinking places, miscellaneous retail, personal services, food stores, real estate, and membership organizations. A comparison of the top 10 business types in MacArthur Park and the BLQ shows that social services and wholesale trade of durable goods are unique to MacArthur Park and the BLQ, respectively. MacArthur Park and the BLQ distinguish themselves from the neighborhoods with BIDs by the presence of membership organizations; MacArthur Park and the BLQ have 25 and 34 churches, respectively. Compared with these two neighborhoods, the areas with BIDs have a relatively high presence of businesses that provide legal services and engineering, accounting, research, and management-related services.

According to my windshield and on-foot observations, both MacArthur Park and the BLQ show a heavy presence of Latino businesses and customers. Although many businesses in both districts show Spanish signs, businesses in the BLQ reflect more cultural diversity through Greek, Latino, and Korean shops and restaurants. MacArthur Park and the BLQ have been slow in redevelopment and gentrification, trends characteristic of downtown and neighborhoods nearby downtown including Koreatown, Echo Park, Silver Lake, and Los Feliz. The high concentration of recent immigrants and slow development may also be related to the prevalence of informal economic activities in these neighborhoods. Merchants who sell illegal items and street vending are especially concentrated in MacArthur Park.

Although MacArthur Park and the BLQ share similar demographic, cultural, and commercial characteristics and socioeconomic disadvantages, the history of BID formation diverged in the 2000s. Figure 2 shows several major

Table 1. Top 10 Popular Types of Businesses in MacArthur Park and Pico-Union by SIC Categories, 2014.

SIC Categories	Count	%
MacArthur Park		
Health services ^a	185	18.1
Real estate	80	7.8
Personal services ^b	59	5.8
Eating and drinking places	52	5.1
Miscellaneous retail	50	4.9
Food stores	44	4.3
Nonclassifiable establishments	42	4.1
Social services ^c	41	4.0
Business services ^d	38	3.7
Membership organizations	37	3.6
Pico-Union		
Miscellaneous retail	100	7.6
Health services	99	7.5
Eating and drinking places	98	7.4
Personal services	87	6.6
Wholesale trade—Durable goods	73	5.5
Food stores	71	5.4
Business services	47	3.6
Real estate	46	3.5
Nonclassifiable establishments	45	3.4
Membership organizations	40	3.0
Neighborhoods with BIDs		
Health services	7,336	16.8
Legal services	3,456	7.9
Miscellaneous retail	2,388	5.5
Eating and drinking places	2,125	4.9
Business services	2,054	4.7
Engineering, accounting, research, and management	2,020	4.6
Personal services	2,014	4.6
Real estate	1,779	4.1
Apparel and accessory stores	1,603	3.7
Nonclassifiable establishments	1,551	3.6

Source: ReferenceUSA (2014).

Note: SIC = Standard Industrial Classification; BID = business improvement district.

a. The dominance of Health Services in MacArthur Park can be attributed to the presence of two general hospitals: Good Samaritan Hospital and St. Vincent Medical Center.

b. Personal Services include businesses such as laundries, dry cleaning, tailor shops, photographic studios, beauty shops, hairdressers, repair shops, and personal document and information services.

c. Social Services include businesses such as individual and family services, geriatrics social service, child care, crisis center, counseling, community center, public welfare, social worker, refugee service, and job training.

d. Business Services include businesses such as advertising, mailing, lettering, reservation, employment, equipment rental, and radio, television, and publisher representatives.

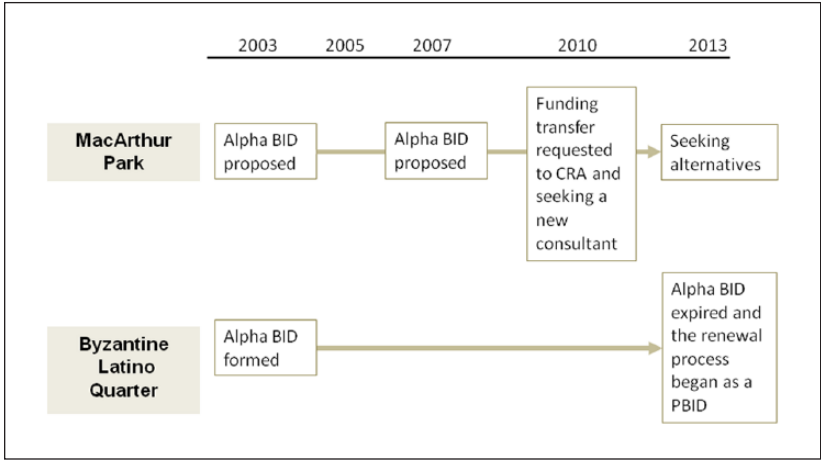


Figure 2. Major events concerning BID formation in MacArthur Park and the BLQ. Note. BID = business improvement district; BLQ = Byzantine Latino Quarter; CRA = Community Redevelopment Agency; PBID = property-based BID.

events that mark major differences between the BID formation processes in MacArthur Park and the BLQ.

MacArthur Park. Although MacArthur Park has never had a BID, the idea of forming a BID has been in existence since the 1990s, according to the chief of staff at the CD1, who has been serving the CD1 for more than a decade. Among those numerous plans and attempts, two accounts of BID formation efforts are displayed on public records. The first one was in 2003 when one of the BID consulting firms in Los Angeles submitted a proposal to the CD1 concerning the problems in MacArthur Park and ideas to improve the Park as well as the commercial areas in the neighborhood. However, this attempt did not lead to BID formation. The City Council record indicates that a BID was proposed again in 2007. Sandoval (2010), in his book, *Immigrants and the Revitalization of Los Angeles*, described a hopeful prospect for BID formation in MacArthur Park during that time. Sandoval noted that local groups had organized a new BID with the help of the councilor’s office. Regarding this account, however, little is known about which local groups were organizing the BID and to what degree the local groups were taking initiative.

Despite promising evidence, however, the MacArthur Park BID formation effort neither succeeded nor reached an official conclusion. City officials, BID consultants, and previous CRA staff identified two main factors that

contributed to the failure: a lack of interest among property owners (especially large property owners) and a high portion of absentee ownership. It is also probable that these two factors are reciprocally associated in that property owners who do not reside in a certain neighborhood are less likely to care about the economic health of the neighborhood compared with those whose eyes and ears are close to the neighborhood. Furthermore, residents and the LAPD suggested that the relationship among business owners, street vendors, and local gangs causes a major obstacle for implementing local business improvement effort. According to my interviews, vendors gain protection from gangs by paying them rent, and, thus, business owners and volunteers who clean the streets have been afraid of challenging the vendors even when they occupy the doorways and disrupt the foot traffic.

Currently, the CD1 has put the idea of forming a BID on hold. Instead, the staff is seeking alternatives to a BID and planning to first form a merchant association. The CD1 is hoping that the merchant association will attract the merchants' and the business community's attention, which can eventually evolve into a BID.

The BLQ. Compared with the case of MacArthur Park, the BLQ shows a longer and more successful history of BID formation. The BLQ BID was approved and adopted by the city in 2003 as a 10-year alpha BID. The BID assessed about 193 properties, which included about 450 businesses. The BLQ BID has been engaged with various activities, including trash pickup, graffiti removal, and beautification. Some examples of the activities are shown in Figure 3. The BID term lasted for a period of 10 years and expired on December 31, 2013. When the BID was expired, the City of Los Angeles did not permit alpha BIDs.⁴ As a result, the community leaders and LANI staff decided to extend the BID as a standard 5-year PBID. After an extensive outreach effort, more than the required amount of petitions was submitted to the City in September 2013. In April 2014, the BLQ BID passed the ballot process and awaits approval from the City of Los Angeles to begin its second term. The new BID is extended until 2019.

Aspects of Community Organizing

The comparison of BID formation trajectories in MacArthur Park and the BLQ reveals how each neighborhood carried out community organizing differently for BID formation. I summarize the differences with four comparative characteristics of community organizing, which include source of leadership, organizational resources, functionality of neighborhood councils (NCs), and attitude toward multiethnicity.

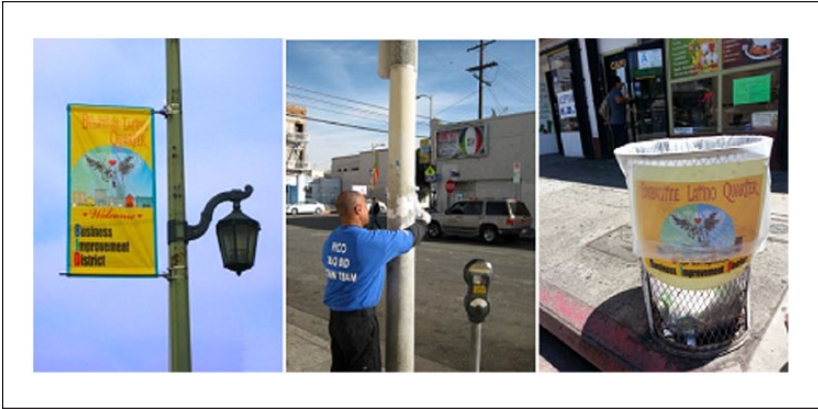


Figure 3. Various activities of the BLQ BID.

Note. BLQ = Byzantine Latino Quarter; BID = business improvement district.

Source of leadership. The first major difference between the BID formation processes of MacArthur Park and the BLQ lies in the source of leadership. In the BLQ, BID formation was initiated by several community stakeholders from inside the community. The groundwork for the BLQ BID began in the 1990s when Pico-Union showed vigorous community activism and development efforts (see the BLQ BID webpage: <http://blqbid.org/main/about-us/history-of-bid.html>). During this time, church leaders, community-based organizations, and business owners were motivated to combat communal problems such as crime and deterioration of local businesses (Ramirez 1999).

During my archival research and interviews, one of the local church pastors was identified as the key stakeholder who initiated the BID formation. Lamenting the deterioration of the neighborhood and threats to the local businesses, he realized the need to improve and maintain the environment for local businesses and started recruiting other community stakeholders to participate in the BID formation movement. He received support from other major church and school leaders that include St. Thomas the Apostle Church, St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Loyola High School, and Bishop Conaty-Our Lady of Loretto High School. One interviewee who remembers the role of the church leader in the 1990s mentioned that his leadership is one of the key factors for BID formation:

One of the things that was helpful for the BLQ . . . both the BLQ and MacArthur Park are migrant, impoverished communities, but the BLQ had some big

institutions that were very willing to help. Two big churches, and Loyola . . . all these three institutions realized that they wanted to help the community and it was also their benefit to help the community. They had resources, they had power, they had connections, networks, and this helped. The other thing that helped was more of the personal level. You don't often find people like the Greek Church leader who is so involved in the community, pushing things to happen. At that time the leader of the Catholic Church was also very active, well-liked religious leader, and so you know their leadership played a big role. (personal communication, January 21, 2014)

Considering that property or business owners normally initiate BIDs, the ecumenical leadership in the BLQ is a unique driving force for the BID formation. The BID consultant who helped create the BLQ BID noted, "BLQ was the first district in the country that was motivated by churches" (personal communication, August 28, 2013).

However, in MacArthur Park, the BID formation was initiated by the City Council—the governmental authority from outside the community. The City Council record mentions that the City Council office, not a group of property or business owners, submitted a motion to form a BID in MacArthur Park, which suggests that the idea to form a BID was introduced from outside the community. After submitting the motion, the City Council, CRA, and the BID consultant reached out to property owners in the neighborhood; however, the attempt failed due to insufficient interest among property owners according to my interviews with city employees, BID consultant, and previous CRA staff.

The comparison of the two neighborhoods makes it considerably clear that the extent to which dedicated community stakeholders from inside the community are involved is a possible determining factor for BID formation. One CRA staff mentioned that one of the necessary components for BID formation is "a couple of true advocates who keep up the pressure and move the process forward" (personal communication, May 23, 2013). He underscored that these key individuals convince those who are opposed or indifferent to the idea of forming a BID. The chief of staff of the current CD1 also identified that the BLQ had "invested participants" as part of his answer to my interview question, "Why MacArthur Park failed to form a BID while the BLQ BID succeeded?" (personal communication, February 25, 2014).

Organizational resources. At an organizational level, it was evident that the BLQ had more organizations that actively participated in community development, many of which have also participated in planning and managing the BID. The successful establishment of the BLQ BID is closely related to long-standing strong grassroots activism and community development efforts in

Pico-Union (Kotkin 1997; Twelvetrees 1989), the neighborhood in which the BLQ is nestled.

Internally, Pico-Union Housing Corporation (PUHC) (previously also known as *Pico-Union Neighborhood Council*), a private nonprofit corporation, has effectively organized local voices and completed neighborhood improvement projects since 1965. PUHC mobilized 300 to 500 local people in mass meetings and established street lighting and social services in the community (Twelvetrees 1989). Moreover, Pico-Union attracted attention from institutions outside of the community. Although both Pico-Union and MacArthur Park are close to downtown and, thus, had a potential to be “land bank” for corporate development schemes, CRA’s first redevelopment project for Pico-Union began in 1976, which is more than 20 years earlier than the one in MacArthur Park (Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles 2014). The CRA projects in Pico-Union contributed to streetscape improvements and housing developments.

Pico-Union has also had a strong partnership with non- or quasi-governmental organizations. In late 1960s, the UCLA Department of Community Affairs provided technical assistance and training sessions for PUHC. The UCLA worked with the community again in the 1990s when a Greek Church pastor (community leader) reached out to Greek faculty members at the UCLA, to help the community. In their harmonized efforts, the UCLA Department of Urban Planning conducted studio projects in 1997 to 1998 in which students acted as project managers to assess the community needs and strategize plans to address those needs in the BLQ (Barajas et al. 1998). Although the university project ended before the BID was formed, the faculty member who led the studio project comments that the university–community partnership definitely strengthened the BLQ’s capacity to expand its visions to the next level:

It [the university–community partnership] did contribute because we prepared the plan for them, we had different venues, we had town hall meetings here at UCLA, we gathered more than 200 people to come to these meetings . . . they [the BLQ] could’ve chosen a private consulting firm to be their project manager, but they realized that it was their advantage to bring the university alone. (personal communication, January 21, 2014)

The BLQ community stakeholders desired to sustain the improvements that were initially provided by the university. In their efforts to maintain the safety and cleanliness of the neighborhoods, the BLQ came up with the idea of forming a BID. The university–community partnership also involved a nonprofit organization, such as LANI, which played an indispensable role in

community outreach, planning, and management for both the initial and the renewed BIDs.

In comparison, MacArthur Park did not receive the same type of support from nongovernmental organizations for community development or for BID formation. A community campaign called “Rediscover MacArthur Park” has been a great venue that offered monthly meetings and connected residents to nongovernmental (i.e., partnering organizations) and governmental (i.e., CDI, LAPD) organizations. Nonetheless, the recent agendas of the meetings are mostly limited to the issues related to revitalizing the park (e.g., homeless, vendors). When it came to neighborhood level improvement or development goals, government agencies have played the most significant role for proposing and fulfilling them in MacArthur Park.

Functionality of Neighborhood Councils. MacArthur Park and the BLQ contrasted in the functionality of NCs. Los Angeles created a system of NCs in 1999 as part of a charter reform, which aimed to empower stakeholders in local communities to participate in planning and politics (Musso 2012; Purdum 1999). For the first time, the charter established a system in which neighborhood groups can form their own advisory councils that can discuss and make decisions on community affairs. According to Musso (2012, p. 54), NCs are quasi-governmental organizations that are “endorsed and regulated by the city but with a strong grassroots character and unpaid volunteers.” As of 2014, there are approximately 100 NCs in the City of Los Angeles (Department of Neighborhood Empowerment 2012).

Both MacArthur Park and Pico-Union certified NCs in 2003; however, the Pico-Union NC (which governs the BLQ area) is more active compared with the MacArthur Park NC. The Pico-Union NC also shows a close connection with the BLQ BID, presumed from the fact that the first president of the Pico-Union NC was also a dedicated president of the BLQ BID Board since 2005 until he passed away in 2013 (Byzantine Latino Quarter Business Improvement District 2014; Pico-Union Neighborhood Council 2014). The BID Board meeting that I attended in the BLQ in late 2013 received the presence of some residents (the members of Pico-Union NC) who actively shared concerns and ideas about community affairs.

However, the MacArthur Park NC has shown signs of internal divide, weak leadership, and a lack of interest from the business community. According to my interview with a project coordinator at the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, the government branch that assists neighborhoods with the operation of NCs, the MacArthur Park NC has been recently struggling with an internal divide within the Board members (personal

communication, June 21, 2013). As of mid-2013, many Board member seats were vacant; the quorum of the NC was not met; some of the NC meetings were canceled, and, thus, the funding was frozen by the government. The project coordinator mentioned, "If the recent issues continue, the NC is in danger of dis-certification." According to a former member of the MacArthur Park NC for 11 years until 2012, recruiting business people to be involved was always difficult for the NC. In addition to the MacArthur Park NC, two more NCs emerged in 2011 to cover the other side of the neighborhood, named Westlake North and Westlake South. It is not clear whether the newer NCs are functioning better; nonetheless, the fact that MacArthur Park is governed by three different NCs as compared with Pico-Union's single NC may reflect that there is a greater degree of cohesive neighborhood governance in the BLQ. Considering that NCs represent local venues where community members can voice their opinions and participate in community affairs, the close relationship between the BID and NC in the BLQ, which is in contrast to the precarious status of the NC in MacArthur Park, may suggest that a healthy and functioning NC is conducive to making the collective action necessary for forming a BID.

Attitude toward multiethnicity. Although both MacArthur Park and the BLQ are multiethnic immigrant neighborhoods, the BLQ has been more active in creating an environment that embraces the multiethnic groups of the community. For example, community leaders in the BLQ adopted the name, *Byzantine Latino Quarter*, in the late 1990s to celebrate multicultural history and diverse backgrounds of the residents and businesses, and to create a new identity that moves away from the negative image associated with Pico-Union (Levin 2009; Loukaitou-Sideris 2000). The community's initiative to embrace multiethnicity is explicitly demonstrated in the message on a monumental mural at the corner of Normandie Avenue and Pico Boulevard. Figure 4 shows the mural with a big sign of the neighborhood name and an inspiring message on the top, noting, "We are each of us angels with one wing. We can only fly embracing each other." In almost every community meeting, this motto was repeatedly brought up by a local church leader to remind the audience of the importance of diversity. The church leaders' effort and its influence on the neighborhood are well captured in an article in the *Los Angeles Times* (Watanabe 2002):

After a three-decade hiatus, the church has restarted its annual Greek Festival, which fits its neighborhood by putting a Cuban show band alongside Greek dancing and dolmas up against a margarita booth and tacos with lamb and feta cheese.



Figure 4. The mural in the Byzantine Latino Quarter.

Church leaders have spearheaded monthly town hall meetings to bring neighbors together, air concerns to local officials and help the area's immigrant population learn to demand services and participate in the democratic process.

When the meetings first started in 1996, some drew as few as five people. Many immigrants who fled corrupt Latin American regimes without legal papers were fearful of authority figures, church members say. Today, the meetings draw as many as 200 people to quiz representatives from law enforcement, education and government.

Although the name "BLQ" itself does not represent every racial or ethnic group in the neighborhood, the message explicitly underscores the importance of acknowledging one another and collaborating with other groups. Comparatively, according to my observations of the neighborhood external characteristics and internal meetings, the MacArthur Park community did not show similar or other kinds of distinct effort to embrace multiethnic backgrounds of the community members.

In sum, the key comparative characteristics I described above can be summarized in Table 2. The factors that may have contributed to the successful BID formation in the BLQ include the presence of invested and persistent community stakeholders, strong organizational resources, residents' participation and

Table 2. Comparative Characteristics of Community Organizing in MacArthur Park and the BLQ.

	MacArthur Park	The BLQ
Source of leadership	Outside community	Inside community
Organizational resources	Mostly the city government and CRA	The city government and CRA as well as university and nonprofit organizations
Neighborhood council	Weak	Strong
Attitude toward multiethnicity	Does not explicitly show a clear goal or direction to embrace diversity	Has a clear goal and direction to embrace one another

Note. BLQ = Byzantine Latino Quarter; CRA = Community Redevelopment Agency.

activism in local community development, and an awareness of demographic change and openness to multiethnic groups in the neighborhood. In contrast, MacArthur Park showed relative absence of grassroots leadership, partnership organizations, venues where residents can participate in community affairs, and an explicit goal or direction to embrace multiethnic groups in the neighborhood. The comparative examination of the two neighborhoods suggests that the key aspects of community organizing—leadership, relationships, and community capacity building—are critical to successfully form a BID.

Conclusion

Summary

The main purpose of this research is to examine the BID formation process in poor immigrant neighborhoods in Los Angeles and to identify how community characteristics differ between the neighborhood that succeeded in BID formation and the other that did not. Although the two case-study neighborhoods—MacArthur Park and the BLQ (part of Pico-Union)—share common challenges such as a large number of commercial vacancies, a high turnover rate, and insufficient funding and staff, the BID formation efforts in MacArthur Park and the BLQ evolved differently with respect to community resources and organizing processes. The BLQ managed to form a BID (even twice) since 2003, whereas MacArthur Park has not been able to establish a BID even after a long pursuit by the City Council and the CRA. This study identified four comparative differences between MacArthur Park and the BLQ, concerning the neighborhoods’ source of leadership, organizational

resources, functionality of NCs, and attitudes toward multiethnicity. This research demonstrates that community organizing capacity and characteristics can change the course and outcome of BID formation.

Limitations

This study shares general strengths and weaknesses of a case-study research. By nature, a case study provides minute and concrete details of an interesting phenomenon in politics and planning, but it does not allow inference of causality between variables of interest or summary into general propositions (Flyvbjerg 2006). Although MacArthur Park and the BLQ showed several contrasting characteristics, the findings do not mean that the failure of the effort to form a BID in MacArthur Park is caused by a lack of internal leadership or organizational capacity. In addition, BID formation is a sub-local phenomenon that is sensitive to different sets of legal and political measures created by state and local governments and also to the socioeconomic condition of business communities. Therefore, inference should be made carefully.

Furthermore, although this study describes several key differences in the two neighborhoods, it provides limited insights into the underlying cause of why the BLQ was able to possess more resources than MacArthur Park. For example, this research provides limited evidence to answer questions such as why faith-based organizations or NCs have been more active in the BLQ than in MacArthur Park concerning BID formation. Due to the time constraints during the field research, there were challenges with tracking past incidents and finding informants who are knowledgeable about events that took place more than 10 years ago. To supplement the current findings, additional in-depth historical research can help to understand the root cause for the varying characteristics of community capacity.

Methodologically, this study bears limitations with collecting interviews from property owners. Challenges occurred with contacting and interacting with property owners because of high absentee ownership and outdated city records. For the case of the BLQ, I had relatively more opportunities of interacting with property owners because the BID-renewal process was persistently in action during the time of my fieldwork, and also because I was part of the outreach process to property owners. However, I could not conduct as many systematic interviews with property owners as I had hoped in MacArthur Park because I did not have connections or proper resources to identify property owners. Due to these obstacles, the presentation of direct knowledge of property owners is relatively weak in MacArthur Park.

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings of this study engender implications for the research of BID formation. First, this research demonstrates the importance of community resources and dynamics for BID formation. The stories of MacArthur Park and the BLQ show that BID formation is a complex process that depends not only on the economic characteristics of properties and property owners but also on various social and political aspects of communities and the process of community organizing. This study provides a strong support for some of the criteria identified in previous research for successful community organizing and development, including internal leadership, grassroots community organizing, and strong and direct ties with various human and organizational resources (Chaskin 2001; Dreier 1996; Peterman 2000; Smock 2004).

Second, this research particularly suggests that religious institutions can play a key role in community organizing. Dreier (1996, p. 126) underscored the role of religious institutions and states, "in part because they provide the moral solidarity that adds an important dimension to self help efforts that transcend narrow concepts of self interest." The case of the BLQ demonstrates that the engagement of churches and schools can add an important aspect for future BID formation research especially in the context of low-income immigrant neighborhoods. The historic importance of religious organizations for providing leadership, leadership training of local residents, and information networks could be one direction that can further guide this research (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008; Pardo 1998).

Furthermore, this study expands the current theoretical and empirical understandings of multicultural and multilingual community organizing by providing an actual case of organizing process in which multiethnic community stakeholders cooperate to achieve a collective goal. Furthermore, the BID formation process in the BLQ suggests challenges with multicultural and multilingual organizing, which include territorial competitions over ethnic identity, knowledge gap among various ethnic groups, and, thus, their unequal participation in local governance. These issues create room for discussing communicative, collaborative, pluralistic, and participatory planning models (Healey 2003; Huxley 2000) for multiethnic communities.

For practice, this research suggests important prerequisites for low-income immigrant neighborhoods to achieve BID formation and further community development. As demonstrated by the case of the BLQ, BIDs can serve not merely as an economic development strategy but also as an intermediary path for community development in inner city neighborhoods that struggle with poverty and other social problems. And yet, some of these neighborhoods may be stuck in the BID formation processes and at risk of economic marginalization

when they lack community capacity and resources. These areas need alternative or more incremental approaches to achieve collective action to improve the local commercial districts. Public officials and community organizers can assist the community-building efforts by identifying organizations that can best serve the local need, investing in leadership training, developing partnership organizations, and holding educational sessions or social events that can raise awareness of collective problems and diversity in the community.

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Notes

1. "Proposed districts" refer to "areas under consideration relative to feasibility and include areas which have begun the formation process" as opposed to "established districts," which refer to "areas that have completed the legislative process and are commencing or continuing operations" (Los Angeles Office of the City Clerk 2015).
2. Los Angeles is 1 of the 5 communities designated as Promise Zones in January 2014. The Obama administration plans to designate 15 more communities over the next 3 years. Promise Zones will receive benefits including: federal assistance to navigate federal funding and programs and tax incentives for hiring local residents and investing in businesses. The term of Promise Zone designation is 10 years, and it can be extended as necessary if the tax incentives are enacted (The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2014). The Los Angeles Promise Zone includes the neighborhoods of Pico-Union, Westlake, Koreatown, Hollywood, and East Hollywood. The focus of the Los Angeles Promise Zone is on increasing housing affordability, ensuring a high-quality education and career and technical training opportunities for youth, investing in transit infrastructure, and eliminating wasteful and duplicative government programs (The White House Office of the Press Secretary 2014).

3. In this analysis, I narrowed down the geographical search to “MacArthur Park” and “Pico-Union,” which represent the neighborhoods that are closest to the comparative study areas. Therefore, the businesses analyzed include not only the ones that would make up a Business Improvement District (BID) but also those outside the BID boundaries.
4. The city has not acknowledged the “alpha BID” ordinance for the last several years even though the ordinance still exists. It is difficult to find out since when and why the ordinance has been put on hold because there is no official record that announced temporary or permanent discontinuation. According to my interviews with city officials and some BID consultants, the fairness of alpha BIDs (i.e., to what degree 30% of the petition requirement is democratic) is at least one point of issue that triggered a debate. Whether or not to permit the ordinance is still being discussed among the City Attorneys.

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