Episode 2: Traces of Violence in the City of Angels  
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2020 has been a year of protests for racial equity and justice prompted by continuing incidents of police violence against people of color. Set against this backdrop, Jackson Loop’s thesis, “It’s Important to Remember What Started It: Conserving Sites and Stories of Racial Violence in Los Angeles, 1943-1992” seems especially important to talk about. Loop examines three historical moments in Los Angeles: The Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, the 1969 police assault on the headquarters of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party, and the 1992 civil uprising in the wake of the acquittal of four police officers accused of beating motorist Rodney King. Why is it important to remember these events and how do we do it when most physical traces have been erased or forgotten?

TRANSCRIPT

Trudi Sandmeier [00:09]: Welcome! This is Save As, a podcast that glimpses the future of Heritage Conservation through the work of graduate students at the University of Southern California. I'm Trudi Sandmeier, Director of Graduate Programs in Heritage Conservation and an Associate Professor of Practice at the USC School of Architecture.

Cindy Olnick [00:27]: And I'm Cindy Olnick, a communications pro with a passion for historic places and a mission to help people save them. We're thrilled to kick off this new podcast with an interview with recent graduate Jackson Loop. Our producer Willa Seidenberg sat down with Jackson in January 2020 to talk about his masters thesis titled, "It's Important to Remember What Started It: Conserving Sites and Stories of Racial Violence in Los Angeles, 1943-1992."

Trudi Sandmeier [00:56]: It was really exciting to work with Jackson on this thesis topic. And it was something he was really personally passionate about. Our students often are motivated by stories and histories that are erased or underrepresented in the historic record.

Cindy Olnick [01:15]: Absolutely, absolutely.

Trudi Sandmeier [01:17]: He really dove into the stories and the places that illustrated these particular historic events, and I think you'll see in the interview that he is really passionate about them and about the places that tell not only the happy stories but the stories that are difficult and challenging for us, to make sure that we are telling them and that they're not lost to history in a way that is erasing that past.
Cindy Olnick [01:48]: Exactly. So, without further ado, here is Willa's interview with Jackson Loop.

[Music Interlude]

Willa Seidenberg [01:56]: What interested you in tackling this subject of troubled history?

Jackson Loop [02:00]: I studied history and German studies in undergrad. A large portion of German studies is basically Holocaust studies, so I was always kind of attracted to difficult history because studying difficult history, studying history that people like to hide reveals a lot about who we are and the darker side of things can really help keep me grounded and prevent me from studying only things that are boosterish and feel-good, and all of these case studies, I felt were underrepresented.

Willa Seidenberg [02:35]: So in your thesis, you describe three key events in Los Angeles: the Zoot Suit Riots in the 1940s against Mexican American youths, law enforcement's attack on the Southern California chapter of the Black Panther Party and the 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles. How did you end up focusing on those three events? And, then we'll just talk briefly about what was involved in each one.

Jackson Loop [03:08]: My initial interest was definitely in 1992 because it is obviously such a landmark event. It's the largest, civil unrest or rebellion in American history. So that caught my eye and I felt that there were intersections between that outbreak of violence and historic preservation that were underplayed. People bring up Florence and Normandie a lot, the flashpoint of the riots, and how it's not a designated site, locally. So that was the initial interest. The Zoot Suit Riots is also a lesser-known case, but it is pretty famous, especially here on the West Coast. So, those were kind of two big ones that I was interested in, and then I sort of just stumbled upon the Black Panther story in a book called “The People’s Guide to Los Angeles”. It's just this really beautiful, almost poetic case of erasure where there was this site and it's been leveled and there's nothing left, and so that attracted me to that case study.

Willa Seidenberg [04:20]: So can you briefly just tell us about the Zoot Suit Riots and what they were about and, maybe a little bit about what parts of the city were affected by the riots?

Jackson Loop [04:32]: Yeah, The Zoot Suit Riots took place in 1943. They lasted about a week and it was largely attacks from white sailors against Mexican American youths and some Black men as well. Mostly took place downtown and in the Chinatown area, and then leading up into the Chavez Ravine. Those were the areas that were ethnic enclaves at the time. There are a lot of different discussions of what exactly started it, but we know for sure that tensions were running high racially, partly because of wartime hysteria, and partly because the city built what is now a firefighter training center in the Chavez
Ravine, which was a Naval Armory in a Mexican American community. I've seen numbers as high as 50,000 people, 50,000 sailors per weekend on leave, were walking between that base and downtown to party. So they were really bumping up against the Mexican American community. And, then there were sort of more typical cases of sexual harassment on the streets in both directions, both of sailors' wives that were visiting the area and of Mexican American women by sailors. So push came to shove and one of the sparks that they say was in Chinatown was basically just a scuffle between some sailors and some Mexican Americans, and then the sailors returned to their base and basically returned out into the city with makeshift weapons. There's tales of taxi cab drivers giving them free rides into town to conduct this work in which they would kind of go into theaters or go on the street cars and pull young Mexican American men, some as young as 12 years old, out of their seats in theaters and strip them of these Zoot suits, which is where the title of the riots comes from. The Zoot suit, was this sort of highly stylized; there's chains, shiny shoes, extra fabric, and a big brimmed hat. And this was sort of an emblem of a refusal to fit into white society. It came from Black jazz in Harlem, and a lot of Mexican American boys were wearing it too. And, there were also wartime rations on fabric at the time. So that was an issue that became sort of anti-patriotic to wear this excess fabric.

Willa Seidenberg [07:17]: Okay, so now that you've described the Zoot Suit incident, can you talk about the Black Panther Party because I think that is a chapter in L.A. history that a lot of people don't know about.

Jackson Loop [07:29]: Yeah, I agree. The Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland in 1967, I believe. And I think the Southern California chapter was found within a year or so, by a really charismatic local leader named Al Prentice "Bunchy" Carter, his nickname was Bunchy. He sort of intersected I think with Eldridge Cleaver or another high party official in prison and was inspired by the teachings of Malcolm X. That was sort of a typical point of entry for a lot of young Black men, in particular, to the Panthers at the time. The Southern California chapter in Los Angeles was the second chapter founded nationwide and it was pretty successful. It was famous for its free breakfast program and some other sort of community services around public health. Healthcare access in general was really not great in South Central, as it remains today, and food justice with the free breakfast program and some other sort of legal advocacy and things like this. By the late Sixties, the FBI had identified the Black Panthers as the greatest threat to the internal security of the nation, in the famous words of J. Edgar Hoover, so they started a campaign to break up the Panthers in any way they could. And that led to a letter campaign that they had between the US organization and the local Black Panther Party and the Southern California chapter to sort of mislead both of these Black nationalist organizations into thinking that they were targeting each other, which eventually led to Bunchy Carter and John Huggins, his co-leader in the chapter, being
murdered at UCLA’s campus. The police had lied in court to obtain a warrant, that they believed there were illegal weapons in the building and that led to a standoff in which the Panthers had fortified the building because they knew that the nationwide campaign by the FBI had been happening. Fred Hampton in Chicago had been murdered a few days earlier in his sleep. So they were ready and it led to, I think it's like a four hour standoff, I think it was, in which they were exchanging gunfire, tear gas, et cetera. And they tried to dynamite the roof and the building held until the press showed up and that's when the Panthers felt comfortable surrendering. Almost all, I think 11 or 12 or 13 it was, were acquitted of the major charge, which was conspiracy to murder a policemen and because the jury found that the police were overly aggressive and a lot of them were convicted for ownership of illegal weapons.

Willa Seidenberg [10:31]: I think it's interesting that many people don't know that the roots of gun control legislation stem from the Black Panthers.

Jackson Loop [10:39]: Yeah, yeah. That was eye opening for myself too. Early on in '67, that's how I start chapter too, the sort of vignette of the high officials, I think 30 people stormed, or not stormed, but they occupied the assembly floor of the State Assembly with loaded weapons, which was completely legal, because they felt that this legislation to ban open carry in California was explicitly to work against their copwatching tactics in which they would follow policemen with armed weapons and just observe them, which really scared people, as you can imagine.

[Sound of News Reports]

Willa Seidenberg [11:32]: I think probably the 1992 uprising is most well known to people. And, many people see it as being sparked by the beating and the acquittal of the officers in the Rodney King beating. You argue in your thesis that it was part of a much broader and longer trend.

Jackson Loop [11:52]: The media at the time and since has kind of latched onto Rodney King because of the tape and how sort of shocking this was to the country and the acquittal of the officers as the cause. And yeah, I won't deny that obviously that is a major cause, and it was probably the tipping point. But I just took on the task in my thesis of calling attention to some of the bigger socio-economic problems: a massive de-industrialization at a macro level of the entire nation, but that hit industrialized areas like South LA, which, within like five, six years, they were losing tens of thousands of jobs to places like Tijuana and simultaneously a total gutting of the social safety net from Reagan onward. So that case study, as I mentioned, was really not understudied but I just took that on as part of the contextualization of the event, calling attention to socio-economics before I moved on to discussing some of the sites, like Florence and Normandie, but also some of the lesser represented ones because I do feel that that one gets hyper-represented.
Willa Seidenberg [13:07]: So these three events are in the history books. People can go read books that talk about all three of these incidents. They can read articles, they can maybe see plays, but you also argue that there are sites that are associated with these incidents and what value does recognizing those sites have in being able to really play forward these incidents and the meaning of them.

Jackson Loop [13:36]: Right. My thesis sort of tries to call attention to heritage that takes place away from sites, but at the same time, I try to qualify that and say that absolutely historic sites matter, and that we shouldn't stop doing the work that we're doing, but we should probably do it more effectively. I think that sites are important because when you enter them, you have this immediate connection with history, this sort of visceral, the camaraderie -- the sights, the smells, the feeling. It's about being there and taking that experience in. So, I think that as a mandatory part of any historic preservation program, including difficult history. The questions that I ask are more about, how can we find ways to tell stories more holistically at sites?

So, some of the sites in my thesis are completely leveled now, including 4115, the ex-site of the Panther party or Sleepy Lagoon in the Zoot Suit Riot case study where Jose Diaz was murdered. There's nothing there, there's nothing left. There's nothing that really even imparts the connection, unless you know that it's there. And even when I was driving around taking the photos, you know, at 4115, I'd step out of my car, I take a photo of a parking lot and all I feel is alienated. I don't feel any connection to that past. I feel sadness, mostly just because I know about it and I feel even more sadness because there's people walking around every day down that street that have no clue that that happened. So, what my thesis says is, well, what now? Obviously sites aren't the end of our program. If we want to tell this story, how else can we do that? Because we aren't left with anything that we can tell a traditional preservation story with, which would be interpretive panels on a building. What do we do now?

Willa Seidenberg [15:46]: Do you have an example of a site that you might've visited that actually did bring you back to that history because there was something there to...?

Jackson Loop [15:55]: That's a good question. Also part of the issue is that the sites that are extant in my case studies, the stories they tell are sort of flattened. So for instance, the Hall of Justice. The Hall of Justice is a really gorgeous building, downtown, really historic courthouse. And, when you see it you know there's this monumentality, you know that things have happened there. But the story that is told by the building itself through the fabric is only one of civic grandeur. You sort of see it, and you're like, wow, the city is very powerful. The city has resources. The city cares about us or the city, you know, depending on your perspective, the city is oppressive. Whatever angle you
might take. But as far as when you just walk by it, you don't really get some of these other stories. Some of these stories about the protest that happened there after the FBI raided the Black Panthers. Or the release of those boys that were wrongfully arrested after the Sleepy Lagoon trial. Yes I feel something when I see a lot of these sites, I just don't think as someone who has pulled back the curtain and done the research, I don't think that I'm feeling enough, or I don't feel like I'm being affected by the story in a way that I should be as a passer-by.

[Music Interlude]

**Willa Seidenberg [17:37]:** You make it a point to say that you are White and you were doing this research about events that affected people of color in this community and marginalized communities. Why did you feel it important to point that out?

**Jackson Loop [17:55]:** There is a long history in everything I'm interested in -- history, urban planning and historic preservation -- of White people, White men in particular, speaking on behalf of others. And it's ugly, and it leads to stories that are not good. So that was something that I knew going in and I knew necessarily that the story I was going to tell would be affected by my perspective. So, part of the reason that I bring it up in the beginning is not really a disclaimer, but just to say, look, this isn't my story. I have access to resources. I have a scholarship that helps me sit here in these seats at USC and gives me access to this library or whatever, all these different things that I pulled from to create this project. So I felt it necessary to tell the story. I feel like it's important to do that and to take my time and use it wisely on behalf of others and to contribute to the betterment of society. So that was my big goal. But at the same time, I just tried to make it clear from the beginning that this story could be better told by someone else. But I think that still at the same time, it needs to be told by somebody. So, hopefully, one day someone will retell that story. Someone from that perspective, someone from that neighborhood. And I do plan to give some of these chapters off to neighborhood groups that might be interested in these stories.

**Willa Seidenberg [19:45]:** And on that same note, you talk about, you know, there are some sites, for instance, *Parker Center*, the former police headquarters that was demolished. That for many in these communities was a very troubled building. And, just like you might talk about the camps in Germany, the concentration camps that are reminders of real tragedy and abuse that the community suffered. And you mentioned how it's often this disconnect between largely white preservationists, middle-class, who are trying to save buildings or sites, whereas a community might not want them saved, might not want that reminder. How do we navigate that?

**Jackson Loop [20:42]:** Yeah, well, in Parker Center's case, I mean, I think it was just an amazing case study in this conundrum, we can call it. And, I don't have an answer. And I think anybody who does, I don't trust them
because it's really dicey and it's really confusing. It's totally case-by-case. So I have my own opinion, but I don't really know if that ever can work as a framework moving forward for other sites of dissonant history where there's multiple perspectives and all history is such, right, all history has all of these different perspectives wrapped up in it. The only thing I can say is I just think the preservation movement in general should be mindful of the fact that not every person who wants to see a building gone is a greedy developer trying to flip a property.

And one of the other beautiful things about heritage conservation, when you zoom out and you include intangible discussions about the past as a part of heritage, when you zoom out and you get off of the building for a minute, this sort of discussion around Parker Center and its eventual demolition is in itself an act of heritage. So we have multiple groups -- we have the police, we have the city, we have the [LA] Conservancy, we have the Japanese American community, and then we have preservationists all sitting down round table, which did happen. We had these talks and that is a beautiful thing. It's extremely uncomfortable, but that, in some ways is as useful and as beneficial as a saved building, if we find the means to document it. But that exchange, where we come together and butt heads about the past in that process, in that discomfort we learn about each other and we learn about what version of the past we want to tell. And, I think that's useful still, despite the loss of the building itself.

[Music Interlude]

**Willa Seidenberg** [23:01]: These communities of color don't necessarily want to be remembered by these events or by the police abuse or by their poverty or by drug use or whatever it is, that they don't want to be defined forever by those realities. And, you know, I wonder if part of the problem is that we don't have enough sites that celebrate the positive parts of the community.

**Jackson Loop** [23:34]: Yeah, that's two-fold. I think that ideally a project like mine would come alongside or dovetail with a project that is an equal parts survey of good things that have happened in that area. I also think that alongside a preservation program that acknowledges a history that means something to communities like that, like the *Central Avenue* story, I think that we can at the same time tell the difficult history in a more effective way that doesn't demonize people. That's what this work was all about. When I spend time, like 30 pages of my '92 study trying to build those socioeconomic context, that wasn't just to show off that I knew some statistics, it was trying to make a claim like, okay, this was a legitimate bread riot. This was a poverty riot, which reframes this narrative of, well this is just a volatile community, there's just angry people there. What's their deal? They're all drunk all the time. Why are they all drunk? There's a liquor store on every corner. So, reframing that story, it's not just
sort of this violence, this fetishization of violence that happens in academia sometimes. It's more about trying to call attention to why people do the things that they do. You know, people don't take to the streets just for fun, just for their own entertainment. They do so because they're frustrated in the legal channels, that people with resources have access to, aren't working in these areas. But the reason that I'm attracted to history and historic preservation is because I think that it plays a crucial role in the narratives that we build about places and people. So for instance, like South LA is a food desert and it's been that way or developing in that direction since the Watts Riots, they say, when a lot of Jewish shopkeepers pulled their stores and it got worse after 1992. So, we see what's happening is people in the private sector, people in all sectors really, are making decisions based on scary history, right? So there's a negative event and it leads to a lack of resources in an area. So how can we reframe that negative event in a way that removes fault from the people that live there and maybe puts it back on the city, maybe puts it back on the police force.

Willa Seidenberg [26:24]: And as you point out, a lot of city officials may not want to recognize these histories because, as you say, they could be embarrassing or tarnish the government's image as benevolent. So how do we get elected officials, city officials, to feel more comfortable about telling a more complete story?

Jackson Loop [26:47]: I think there's two answers to that too. I think an important early step is recognizing that not all historic preservation work and not all memory work needs to take place through the state. So acknowledging that when people have a vigil or when people come together at a conference or sit down and have pancakes together like they were having after the Black Panther party chapter was broken up, they were just having a breakfast together. These are valid ways in which small actors are maintaining their own past, without dealing with the bloated bureaucracies and the politicians that are scared to tackle this sort of stuff. So I think that's recognizing that work is important. In my analysis chapter, I discuss some tools that we might be able to actually look at for doing this sort of thing and I think one of the better ideas that I had, that I was like, Oh, actually this might actually work was the idea of a site of contention designation. So just kind of saying, this is a site where something happened that we are not interested in trying to figure out who was right or who was wrong, but we are recognizing that this is something that we should be looking at. So we all know something happened. Can we admit it and just put that out there and then see where that takes us? I think that's the first step. And there are some other programs across the country. There's ones in Texas, actually of all places, where they're levying a fee for every designation form and putting it into an undertold marker program. So that program funds, applications for stories that are endangered or underrepresented, and they've actually designated a lot of stuff -- locations where sit-ins happened, locations of massacres, et cetera.
So just kind of acknowledging that there's an imbalance in the way that these stories get told, I think, in a conceptual way might help community groups step in and make sure that those stories are told more effectively.

Willa Seidenberg [29:01]: So some of the things that you talk about in terms of how we can commemorate these events and sites, you talk about performative heritage. One example is the Anna Deavere Smith production of Twilight, which was about the 1992 uprising, you talk about public art, monuments. And I wanted to ask you about what you think the role of the internet and technology, things like virtual reality, might have in preserving some of this history and heritage even when the sites might be gone.

Jackson Loop [29:44]: I think that it's going to play a crucial role. I think also that a lot of the discussions about it age really poorly. So something that I'm saying right now might sound absolutely ludicrous in 10 years. But I do know that it will be important. I think it's already showing that it's important when people are able to map stories and sites in real time, you know, with GIS. People, like the project Place Matters in New York, which I bring up, where they're actually serving community members and saying, what sites mean something to you? We're not saying, do they have to meet this certain criteria. What means something to you? And you put a dot on a map, you'd put a little, a little description and then people can actually come and also add their own comments, their own stories, their own photos. And that's kind of this rich tapestry that pen and paper preservation could never get. And there's other advantages to digital heritage that I was able to tease out in this project, the problem of viewer fatigue. Like when I go to a museum and even something that means something to me and as educated as I am, I get tired and I don't want to read all that stuff, to be honest. And it makes me feel like I'm a bad student, or I'm a bad intellectual, because I don't want to do that. I want to go home. My back hurts. You know, these exhibits, to tell the story effectively become really exhausting. So a digital heritage space that you can revisit for free over and over again, you know, and more and more people have access to the internet now, I think that that is really meaningful. And then those, "find a grave" thing...so this was this website that people, they go to a grave site, they make a little map and they say, this is where it is. And you can do it for anybody, or anybody with an internet connection anywhere in the world can sort of visit quote unquote, “this grave” and leave a commemoration. I found that very powerful. And that’s something that can only take place in the digital realm.

Willa Seidenberg [31:52]: Well, thank you so much. We've been talking with Jackson Loop about his thesis called....

Jackson Loop [32:00]: Oh gosh, "It's Important to Remember What Started It: Conserving Sites and Stories of Racial Violence in Los Angeles, 1943-1992."
Willa Seidenberg [32:08]: Thank you very much.

Jackson Loop [32:09]: Thank you.

[Music Interlude]

Cindy Olnick [32:14]: So, as we mentioned, this interview took place in January, and a few things have happened since then.

Trudi Sandmeier [32:22]: We have had a lot of interesting developments over the last few months that really directly relate to the work that Jackson did in his thesis, and continue to resonate today. He's actually been able to present his research at several conferences since that's really hit a note because of all the conversations we're having right now regarding Black Lives Matter and the issues that surround the murder of George Floyd and things that are related to those issues. One of the interesting things too is that we're having a conversation now about how to remember these protests and how to think about them going forward. The Smithsonian is collecting artifacts from these protests, signs and memorabilia. There's been a lot of conversations about Confederate monuments and the legacy of those racist elements that still remain in our built environment and what do we do with them. And, Jackson's work is a part of that conversation. So, it's exciting that we're able to talk about this work now, in particular.

[Credits]