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Hollywood's Urban Cleansing

PATRICK RANGE MCDONALD | JANUARY 3, 2013 | 4:30AM

In the 1960s, Mercedes Cortes arrived in Hollywood after fleeing her homeland of Guatemala, which was roiled by bloody unrest. After moving around a bit, she and her husband and their three sons settled in a two-bedroom apartment on Eleanor Avenue, a community of run-down apartment buildings and old Craftsman-style houses, which is a short walk

from Paramount Pictures and Hollywood Forever Cemetery, where many stars are buried.

A decade later, Cortes' world was shattered again – when gang violence and drug dealing hit her beloved neighborhood. This time, the affable, soft-spoken housekeeper bravely stood her ground as Hollywood was engulfed in the wave of bloodletting that gripped Los Angeles from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. A small, unimposing woman, she became a visible member of Neighborhood Watch, walking the dark streets in candlelight vigils to confront the thugs.

And it worked. Cortes and her neighbors slowly won back Eleanor Avenue. She never dreamed that she'd be evicted – for being too poor to live in her improved, more livable community.

But in 2002 her apartment building changed hands during the real estate bubble, a particularly frenzied phenomenon in Hollywood, where the taxpayer-subsidized, nearly \$1 billion Hollywood Redevelopment Project Area helped fueled a Wild West of land speculation, building flipping, profit-seeking – and skyrocketing rents. In 2003, projects such as the stylish face-lift of the Cinerama Dome were completed. In 2004, Cortes' new landlord told her she had to go.

"I was working and doing good things for my neighborhood and they treated me like that," Cortes says. "For what? They wanted more money."

A gracious, churchgoing woman, Cortes represents a Latino diaspora of working families priced out of Hollywood and East Hollywood, a mass departure that has fueled an unexpected – and, for City Hall, increasingly embarrassing – net population plunge of 12,878 people in those two neighborhoods between 2000 and 2010.

Hollywood, defined here as the huge flatlands roughly bounded by La Brea, Melrose, Western and Franklin avenues, has lost one in every 12 of its residents. Latinos are streaming out as a much smaller number of higher-

RESIDENTS. LATINOS ARE BEING PUSHED OUT, AS A MUCH SMALLER NUMBER OF HIGHER income whites takes their place. The Latino population plummeted 17 percent, about 6,000 adults and children gone.

East Hollywood, roughly bounded by Western, Beverly, Hollywood and Hoover, has seen a net loss of more than 5,000 Latinos.

Hollywood-area **City Councilman Eric Garcetti**, who is running for mayor in the March 5 primary and has for 12 years avidly led the urban renewal in Hollywood, **won't discuss the census data, the outflow of Latinos or the area's net population loss, none of which were foreseen by his office.** But Larry Gross, executive director of the Coalition for Economic Survival, a tenants' rights advocacy group, says, "It was an economic tsunami that pushed low-income people out. There was **massive displacement.**"

Representing more than 8 percent of Hollywood and East Hollywood's population, the exodus of nearly 13,000 mostly Latinos is believed to be the largest mass departure from an L.A. neighborhood since "black flight," between 1980 and 1990. In that demographic upheaval, 50,000 residents fled the violence and shattered neighborhoods of South Central and South Los Angeles.

Garcetti and other L.A. politicians have insisted that growth is as inevitable as summer tourists, and that City Hall is merely facilitating Hollywood's unavoidable, denser future with smart planning. But **census data and the stories of those who have fled suggest that city planners and political leaders are facilitating what some criticize as the urban cleansing of Hollywood.**

Father Michael Mandala, who was pastor at the landmark Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church on Sunset Boulevard from 1998 to 2011, repeatedly saw landlords drive out Latino families of three or four in order to rent the same space to one or two white tenants. "I'm wondering if the policymakers are on the mark with fixing Hollywood," Mandala says, "or are they **clearing out what they don't want?**"

In mid-July, the Los Angeles City Council approved a new Hollywood Community Plan championed by Garcetti, which wipes out height limits in parts of Hollywood to allow skyscrapers, some of which would obscure the Hollywood Sign. At tense public hearings, hundreds of residents decried the plans for a Century City skyline in their community. Business owners, led by the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, were among those who cheered the City Council's decision.

Three neighborhood groups have sued the city over the new skyscraper zoning. Brad Torgan, an attorney at The Silverstein Law Firm, which represents one of the groups, describes the Hollywood Community Plan as Garcetti's personal "vision for Hollywood – good and bad." But, Torgan says, "There's a perception that the plan was created for the development community at the expense of the residents."

Garcetti, the brainy, Ivy League-educated mayoral hopeful, revealed some of his thinking in a 2010 interview with Hollywood Patch: "We staged seminars in which we brought the New York banks to Hollywood and showed them the opportunities," Garcetti said. "Whatever the project's size, my philosophy is to let the creative entrepreneurs in." He added that "what we did was to use the nightlife to bring back the day life" – restaurants such as Beso, 25 Degrees, Cleo and Katsuya and night spots such as the Sayers Club, Drai's, My Studio and Eden.

Garcetti's chief of staff, Yusef Robb, waves off the flight of Latino families and individuals as a sign of their own good fortune, arguing that Hollywood's Latinos did so well during the past decade that they bought homes in "the suburbs."

"We looked into the population shift in Hollywood," Robb says, "and the situation tended to be people making choices to their own advantage."

Robb could not provide *L.A. Weekly* any data to back up his claim. In fact, it appears that Garcetti and his sizable staff – about 20 full-time personal aides

– are **unprepared to explain what is unfolding.**

The hollowing out of Latinos in Hollywood is particularly dramatic in the dense, L-shaped chunk of six U.S. census tracts at the heart of Hollywood – tracts 1908.01, 1908.02, 1909.01, 1909.02, 1918.10 and 1918.20 – bordered by Western Avenue on the east, Seward Street on the west, Melrose Boulevard on the south and Sunset on the north.

Tracts 1909.01 and 1909.02 between Western, Gower, Sunset and Santa Monica Boulevard saw a net loss of 664 Latinos. Far fewer Latinos moved into than out of the neighborhood's increasingly costly apartments, condos and bungalows, resulting in a steep population decline. The same thing occurred in tracts 1908.01 and 1908.02 between Gower, Seward, Sunset and Santa Monica, where a net loss of 896 Latinos created a sharp overall population drop.

Just south of there, in tracts 1918.10 and 1918.20 bordered by Gower, Seward, Santa Monica and Melrose, a net 1,402 Latinos took off. Having lost 2,962 Latinos, the historically affordable housing in these six flatland census tracts is now a thing of the past, creating ground zero in Hollywood's working-class diaspora.

In 2000, about 80,000 people lived in Hollywood, and L.A.'s Department of Planning announced that 85,489 would live there by 2008. By 2010, only 72,000 did.

What's going on is clear enough to USC demographer Jared Sanchez. He says the data show "**significant**" **gentrification**, with wealthier households moving in – which inevitably contain fewer people than working-class households – while others get squeezed out.

Many will cheer this turn of events. Hollywood, the neighborhood, is richer, flashier and more attractive than at any time since its golden era. Hollywood Chamber of Commerce president Leron Gubler says, "We've made significant strides in cleaning up Hollywood, restoring community pride and creating a

vibrant economy here in Hollywood."

Longtime Hollywood resident and Garcetti ally Ferris Wehbe says, "There has been big change in the area. Hollywood is going to soar."

The L.A. City Council in 1986 approved a 1,100-acre "redevelopment project area" with the aim of remaking Hollywood into a livable community. The nearly \$1 billion Hollywood Redevelopment Plan was one of the most heavily subsidized projects in California, with taxpayers underwriting such items as a \$32 million parking garage at the pricey Cinerama Dome and ArcLight Theaters and \$98 million for Hollywood & Highland. Los Angeles County transportation officials broke ground in 1986 on the Red Line subway with stops along Hollywood Boulevard, at that time the haunt of heroin dealers and prostitutes.

In 1992, Leron Gubler, a soft-spoken, determined power broker, became president of the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, which supervises the Walk of Fame and is one of the most influential champions of redevelopment. Politicians rarely run afoul of the Chamber, which counts among its members top executives from Paramount Pictures, Walt Disney Studios, real estate developer Millennium Partners, The CW television network, the Renaissance Hollywood Hotel and Hollywood & Highland.

At first, Gubler says, "We had a lot of homeless. The sidewalks were dirty. Businesses were closing left and right. ... People had given up on Hollywood."

In 1993, Jackie Goldberg was elected to represent Hollywood on the City Council, and she pushed hard for redevelopment. Gubler told her that first they should focus on "nuts-and-bolts" issues, which Gubler narrowed down to "crime and grime." The Chamber and Goldberg's office launched much-publicized efforts to make Hollywood's streets cleaner and safer.

But beyond the headlines, Mercedes Cortes and her neighbors were already on the job, creating a successful Neighborhood Watch that teamed up with the Los Angeles Police Department. So were many other Spanish-speaking

THE LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT. SO WERE MANY OTHER SPANISH-SPEAKING residents, including Manny Romero, who worked as a youth organizer in unstable El Salvador, escaped that country's violent civil war, which took the lives of his family and friends in the 1980s, and moved to Los Angeles.

Romero eventually became the popular and well-respected groundskeeper at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, built in 1928, an important community center for Hollywood's Latino population.

In 1978, Romero moved with his wife and two children into a cheap bungalow on Las Palmas Avenue just south of Sunset. It was a few blocks west of De Longpre Park, which became a notorious cesspool of drug dealers and junkies in the late '80s and early '90s.

Romero suddenly faced a new kind of war. He went to incredible lengths to save his community, joining a neighborhood patrol group called the Hollywood Sentinels, whose members put their lives on the line by running drug dealers and gang members off of street corners. Criminals threatened to kill Romero and his family.

"I was scared of the gang members," Romero recalls, "but it didn't stop me from doing my citizen's duties."

The Chamber's Gubler and many journalists credit the 2001 opening of the concrete elephant-bedecked Hollywood & Highland mall, where the Academy Awards are held, for initiating Hollywood's turnaround. But low-income working folks like Cortes and Romero were key figures in first steadying the community's foundation.

Romero was treated like anything but a hero. In 1996, his landlord sold the cluster of bungalows on Las Palmas Avenue, and the new owner doubled Romero's rent from \$600 a month to \$1,200. Romero was forced to abandon his dramatic but unsung quest to create a livable community. He and his family moved to then-affordable North Hollywood.

Five years later, in 2001, Cortes took a job with the City of Los Angeles.

Five years later, in 2001, Garcetti took over from Goldberg on the City Council. He was 30, fresh-faced and eager to move forward with a new kind of politics that would put residents, not big-moneyed special interests, first.

Community activist Ferris Wehbe, who spearheaded the unsuccessful Hollywood secession movement in the early 2000s, supported Garcetti then and backs him today. "Eric played a big role" in turning around Hollywood, Wehbe says. "He saw that good changes took place. You need good leaders to make decisions and not try to please everyone."

By the mid-2000s, land speculation in Hollywood turned into a frenzy. In 2003, Ralph Horowitz and developer Larry Worchell bought historic Columbia Square on Sunset Boulevard, the West Coast home of CBS, for a reported \$15 million. Three years later, Horowitz and his partner sold the property to Las Vegas-based developer Molasky Pacific for \$66 million. That land flipping, and the breathtaking \$51 million profit for Horowitz and Worchell, were fed by the widely held belief that Garcetti, now the powerful arbiter of what could and couldn't be built, would let developers ignore the neighborhood's longtime height limit of a few stories to build a skyscraper.

About the same time, Mercedes Cortes' landlord sold her building to Prime West Management chief executive officer Mercedes Anaya. In 2004, when the eviction notice arrived, Cortes was paying \$450 a month. Although she had divorced, her three adult sons still lived with her and she enjoyed a vibrant social life as an active member of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church.

She drove each day to clean houses in West Hollywood or Beverly Hills. At 61, she fought eviction. She eventually won a settlement that paid her some "relocation" expenses, and she and two of her sons found a place far from home, in North Hollywood.

About 20 of her Latino friends and acquaintances were similarly pushed out of Hollywood, she says. A neighbor still living in the flatlands recently told Cortes that **her old \$450 rental now goes for \$1,200.**

In the legal battle that ensued, Anaya claimed in 2004 that Cortes' sons were heavy-drinking gang members and nuisances. When that didn't work, says Cortes' lawyer Marty O'Toole, Anaya's lawyers claimed that Cortes didn't respond to a three-day notice that demanded she pay her rent or vacate. The landlord did not respond to emails requesting comment.

During the six-month legal battle to keep her apartment, Cortes formed a prayer group with her friends at Blessed Sacrament. "I was asking for justice," she recalls. "Because if I lost the case, I would've been in the streets."

Her prayers were partly answered. Just before the trial, Anaya's lawyers offered Cortes five months of free rent and several thousand dollars if she moved out. Emotionally drained, she took the deal.

Not long after her battle, several blocks away, Roy Maule and his Latino neighbors faced their own war against eviction on tree-lined Camerford Avenue in a quaint bungalow complex built in 1912 for actors working at Paramount Pictures.

Many of Maule's neighbors – mostly Latino families – had lived on the quiet block, near tony Larchmont Village, for decades. "It was great," says Maule. "Everyone knew each other."

They traditionally closed the street to celebrate Fourth of July, with adults lighting fireworks and kids running around. One day, a young man walked up to Maule's mailbox and snatched a package sticking out of it. Maule's neighbors, he recalls, "gave chase, got the package and beat up the guy. ... The poor guy didn't know he was in a neighborhood like that."

But the property was sold, and around 2006, the landlord made clear he wanted the families gone. Neighbors from Mexico and Central America told Maule that the landlord had threatened to make calls to federal immigration officials. Other tenants were offered money to leave.

But Maule hired a lawyer to fight his eviction and wrote to Garcetti's office for

help. He did his own homework, finding in a title search that Santa Monica-based developer Watt Genton Associates owned the property.

Maule says Garcetti "did nothing," and at least 150 people were displaced from the bungalows and adjacent apartment units. In 2007, Maule was paid relocation money to leave, and the city put its political weight behind the developer, with the City Planning Commission and Garcetti backing his demolition of the historic bungalows and newer apartment buildings to create luxury condos for affluent professionals.

Today, the corner property stands barren, a victim of the economic disaster that struck the nation, and the historic bungalows are long destroyed. A new plan calls for a luxury apartment complex with ground-floor retail. Developer Jonathan Genton and Watt Commercial Properties executives declined to take questions from the *Weekly*.

"Here it is five years later," Maule says. "There's nothing."

Manny Romero says it's a maddening scenario he has seen over and over in Hollywood: "There are many, many people like us."

At 41, having served as Hollywood's councilman and the area's chief land-use visionary and community policymaker for nearly 12 years of his life, Eric Garcetti wants to become the 42nd mayor of Los Angeles. He is clearly proud of Hollywood's turnaround and its bustling nightlife scene. In fact, Garcetti has publicly said that he wants to replicate Hollywood's style of urban renewal across communities in Los Angeles.

Driving out thousands of Latino working and poor families in favor of affluent residents and high-end restaurants is not part of his pitch.

"L.A. is full of bad planning," Garcetti said at a recent mayoral debate in Hollywood with rival candidates Wendy Greuel, Jan Perry and Kevin James. "You look at places where there are four jobs for every one unit of housing, and wonder why they're stuck in traffic. Hollywood has become a template for

and wonder why they're stuck in traffic. HOLLYWOOD HAS BECOME A TEMPLATE FOR a new Los Angeles."

Except Hollywood's traffic is immeasurably worse than when Garcetti was elected to represent the area, even though one-twelfth of the population has left. For all their planning, the City Council, Los Angeles Planning Department and Garcetti have brought mass congestion to a residential community that is shrinking, not growing.

Gary Slossberg, a public-interest attorney who represents low-income clients and who ran for City Council against Garcetti in 2009, says, "A lot of his policies don't match what's best for the people in Los Angeles, but a lot of people are getting rich."

Garcetti has raised nearly \$3 million for his mayoral bid by promising "bold, new ideas" and calling for the need to create more jobs for working families.

The urban cleansing some see unfolding in Hollywood puts Garcetti in an awkward position with activists like Ziggy Kruse. Kruse became an expert on fighting City Hall when, as a waitress at Hollywood Star Lanes in 2001, she stood up to the Los Angeles Unified School District's eminent-domain plans to destroy the bowling alley where she worked.

Now a well-known whistleblower who tracks the sweetheart deals often granted to developers, Kruse sees Garcetti as a cold figure who is in denial about the high-end development he embraces.

There's palpable resentment among Kruse and other activists toward Garcetti, who was raised in an upper-class household in Encino and whose life has been eased by a bequest of property that provided him thousands of dollars in annual income starting when he was a young man.

Kruse says Garcetti "has gone more times against the community than with the community," backing zoning variances and other exceptions that let developers ignore protective zoning laws, and supporting what Kruse sees as too-generous tax-exemption subsidies. "The only time he goes with the

too-generous taxpayer subsidies. The only time he goes with the community," she says, "is when it's a politically smart move."

Now, Garcetti is wooing Latinos to elect him as mayor, even controversially claiming that he is a Latino candidate. Garcetti is half-Jewish, part Latino and part Italian. His great-grandfather was Italian and immigrated from Europe to Mexico, where Garcetti's paternal grandparents were born and raised. Three great-grandparents on his father's side were Latino. *[Editor's note: This paragraph has been corrected. Please see correction at end of story.]*

Romero, the groundskeeper at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, has found the councilman to be "a nice person to talk to but different when you want to solve a problem."

Such sentiments could pose a problem for Garcetti in the mayoral race. But he still has a deep well of voter support in Hollywood, having been easily re-elected more than once.

Many people welcome the changes Garcetti has pushed through.

"Development has been great for Hollywood," says Laurie Goldman, president of Friends of the Hollywood Central Park, a nonprofit that's pushing an effort to build a park over the 101 Freeway. The neighborhood has improved so much, Goldman says, that she wants to move back to where she once lived, but "it's too expensive. My rent is cheaper in Beverly Hills."

Wehbe, a longtime resident who walked the streets with the Hollywood Sentinels in the early 1990s, is more than happy with Garcetti's policies. Of Hollywood's transformation, he says, "It's day and night. It's amazing. You can walk around at any given time. Back then, you couldn't get out of your house."

Manny Romero chuckles when he hears such talk, repeating an old saying: "*El saluda con sombrero ajeno.*" The church groundskeeper, who faced down violent gang members on Hollywood street corners before Garcetti's time, says the phrase essentially means that "someone else does the job and the

person who's the opportunist takes the credit."

Hollywood historian Greg Williams also gives voice to residents who are not pleased with Garcetti's sleek vision. "It's really bad development," says Williams, who was born and raised in the community. "There's no variety. It's the same mixed-use with retail on the bottom floor and condos on top." He's come to see Garcetti as "totally in the developers' pockets. He's not for the preservation of old Hollywood."

Robb, the aide speaking on behalf of the unavailable Garcetti, strongly disputes that notion. "What developers tell us is that community activists have too much of a say" in Garcetti's decision making. Robb says his boss completely supports preserving old Hollywood, while looking to the future. "It's always been about taking what Hollywood offers," Robb says, "and enhancing it."

But when asked by the *Weekly*, Garcetti's staff could not provide basic figures that might shed light on what their enhancement efforts have produced. Garcetti's team does not know how many "affordable" housing units have been built in Hollywood, or the total amount of housing built or lost, since 2001. Nor could Garcetti's aides, whose salaries and overhead cost L.A. taxpayers about \$1.5 million a year, provide the *Weekly* even a ballpark figure for how much taxpayer money has subsidized Hollywood's makeover since 2001.

Robb says one of Garcetti's top priorities has always been affordable housing. Yet Barbara Schultz, the directing attorney of the housing unit at the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, which helps working-class and poor people in disputes involving housing rights and landlord-tenant disagreements, says Garcetti hasn't stood out. In fact, Schultz says, "There's not any top council member whose top priority is affordable housing."

Dennis Frenchman, a well-regarded professor of urban design and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, says smart policymakers always

know how their planning strategies are playing out in communities. "They should have a sense of demographic changes and what's been happening," says Frenchman, one of the world's leading experts on building and maintaining a sustainable city. "They should know if people have been pushed out."

Father Mandala knows what is happening at the neighborhood level. He has seen his mostly Latino parishioners leave Hollywood, while the Latino population grew in the rest of the city. He has seen parents take their kids out of Blessed Sacrament Elementary School. Between 2000 and 2010, student enrollment at that grade school plummeted from 250 to 100.

Contrary to Yusef Robb's claim, Mandala says these people did not want to leave. "If they could have bought a home in Hollywood," says the priest, "they would have. ... It's bad for Hollywood because if your goal is to have a mixed-income community, you're losing tax-paying citizens. These are the teachers, the contractors, the furniture makers of the community."

Wehbe argues that Garcetti is very connected to what's happening, declaring, "I bet you anything there isn't a single councilmember who walks the neighborhoods every month and knocks on doors like Eric. To me, that's saying something."

But Dowell Myers, a demographer and urban planning professor at the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, who researched Los Angeles County's shrinking youth population, predicts that Hollywood's schools will drop in enrollment and Hollywood will become less family-oriented, with more of an emphasis on nightlife. That means fewer families will be around to keep an eye on the neighborhood. "They help to keep streets safer," Myers says.

Garcetti aide Robb said in a recent *L.A. Weekly* story reporting on the rise of Koreatown that Garcetti is not necessarily interested in duplicating Hollywood's urban-renewal template in Koreatown. Robb warned, "A robust nightlife is good for the economy, but too many night spots in a neighborhood can create dead spots during the day" and community "balance" is needed

can create dead spots during the day and community balance is needed.

Myers says L.A. political leaders and planners have already gone too far to draw a high-end crowd to Hollywood. "We don't need more condos," he says. "We need more rentals. Rentals are where you house lower-income and poor people."

Frenchman has a similar message for Los Angeles' leaders: "Diversity is the key to long-term sustainability. ... Density without diversity makes things worse."

Mercedes Cortes sits in a back room of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church on Sunset while trumpets in a mariachi band sound off for a mass celebrating the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Like some parishioners, Cortes still drives in from the Valley to Hollywood to worship, and the church is jammed with Latino parents and children.

But not everyone returns to Hollywood. "That's why we lost so many members of the church," Cortes says. "They moved to Palmdale, North Hollywood and Burbank" – but not because they were better off. Instead, many doubled up with relatives as the recession bore down.

Hollywood's business community often says that the catalyst that really set off development in Hollywood was Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg's pet project, the Hollywood & Highland mall, which houses the Kodak Theatre (now Dolby Theater), home to the Academy Awards show.

But Cortes says the glitzy, architecturally unloved mall has had a more complex long-term effect on the bigger neighborhood around it: "Once the Kodak Theatre was built," Cortes says, "we started seeing the rents going higher and higher."

Cortes generally likes Eric Garcetti, but she noticed a difference between him and his predecessor, Goldberg. Goldberg at least got involved in the community without prodding or protest, she recalls.

Garcetti, according to Cortes, did not seek out members of her activist group but waited for them to complain.

As if talking directly to Garcetti, the grandmother and retired house cleaner delivers up one of their complaints, still unanswered after all these years: "When they start to build something, why does the middle class have to suffer for that?"

Reach the writer at pmcdonald@laweekly.com.

[**Correction:** The original version of this story erroneously stated that Eric Garcetti has no Latino ancestry. His father, Gil Garcetti, is Latino and a number of his father's ancestors were Latino. Further, Garcetti's great-grandfather moved from Italy to Mexico alone, not with family members as originally reported.]



Leon Gubler, Hollywood Chamber of Commerce president

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