

## **Do Sidewalks Talk?**

by Claire Stanford

The other day, walking down my street in West Hollywood, I came across a square of freshly poured sidewalk. The city maintenance crew was no longer there, the only human trace a perimeter of yellow tape, staked around the fresh concrete as a warning. Soon, the sidewalk would dry to a bone-breaking hardness. But for a few hours, it was wet and malleable, vulnerable to paw prints and lovers' initials and the imprint of the leaves falling from the gingko tree overhead. As I stood looking down at the wet cement, I felt an almost overwhelming urge to mark it in some way of my own. But before I had decided what my mark might be, the urge passed, and I moved on, leaving it — for the moment — as virginal and pure as I had found it.

For many people in the car-centric city of Los Angeles, the sidewalk exists as a liminal space: the few squares of pavement one must cross on foot to get from home to car to work to car to home. When it's thought about at all, the sidewalk is often considered secondary to the streets and the buildings among which it winds its way. This secondariness is embedded in the very word sidewalk, with its emphasis on adjacency. The sidewalk is defined by being beside something, alongside something: it does not exist on its own terms but always in spatial relation to something else. Picked up and transplanted to a park, a sidewalk becomes a path.

The sidewalk plays much more than a supporting role in the ecosystem of the city. More than 10,000 miles of sidewalk crisscross the city of L.A., nearly, but not quite double the city's 6,500 miles of streets. Many people may think of the sidewalk as only concrete underfoot. But for many others, the sidewalk serves entirely different — and often overlooked — functions: a place to sit or sleep; a place to sell wares or food; a place to wait for the bus; a place to interact with community; a place to gather signatures or stand in protest; a place to run or walk or play; a

place to interact with nature, from the plants that pop up between the cracks in the concrete to the squirrels that scuttle across the pavement.

Most of all, the sidewalk is a place of paradox within the ecosystem of the city. It is subversive but also highly regulated, simultaneously public and exclusionary. It is inanimate but also alive. It is a built environment that simultaneously masters the natural environment and the human and is mastered by them.

In *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, literary scholar and writer Rebecca Solnit (2000, 12) argues that walking is a “subversive” act: in a modern society increasingly concerned with speed and productivity, moving at the pace of three miles per hour is a kind of revolution. The act of walking, Solnit asserts, counters our ever-greater tendency to confine ourselves to the interiors of cars and buildings, updating our technology in an attempt to satisfy our need for connection, while becoming ever more disconnected from both our fellow humans and our nonhuman surroundings. “On foot,” Solnit writes, “everything stays connected.... One lives in the whole world rather than in the interiors built up against it” (9).

If walking is a subversive act, then the sidewalk is a subversive space. While only those with access to cars and driver’s licenses are welcome on the street, anyone is allowed on the sidewalk. The sidewalk is free, in a sense: it costs the taxpayer in the long-term, but it bears no entrance fee up-front, not even a bus ticket or a gallon of gas. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, writer and activist Jane Jacobs calls sidewalks “the main public places of the city” and “its most vital organs” (quoted in Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009, 1). Jacobs was writing in 1961, but sidewalks serve an equally important public function today. As urban planners Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Renia Ehrenfeucht explain in their 2009 book, *Sidewalks: Conflict and Negotiation over Public Space*, sidewalks have been “integral to a

contested democracy” (3). From the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s to the Black Lives Matter protests today, the sidewalk has acted as a key space for demonstrations and protests, for picket lines and petitions.

But the sidewalk need not be host to an explicitly political gathering to act as a democratic public space. To write her book of tanka poetry, *Urban Tumbleweed*, Los Angeles poet Harryette Mullen (2013) went for a walk every day and made a record of what she saw. Sometimes these walks took place in the canyons on the edge of the city, but most often they took place on the sidewalks of L.A., and the resulting poems showcase the sidewalk as a place where a diversity of people can (and must) interact. Mullen notes the dog walkers (10) and the moms running with strollers (53), the girl waiting for the bus “with plush pink/ rabbit ears to match her spring outfit” (48). She sees the vendors on Venice Boulevard, selling oranges and flowers (56), “la señora/ selling foil-wrapped homemade tamales/ to workers waiting for the bus” (8). She writes of the homeless woman sitting in front of an all-night drugstore (112), the male prostitute (102), the “violent man with the teardrop tattoo” (98). Even in the most homogenized neighborhoods of Los Angeles, the sidewalk is a space that belongs to everyone, creating an opportunity for cross-cultural exposure and, possibly, greater understanding.

But the sidewalk is only a public space to a point. In one of her poems, Mullen tells of a friend who went out for a walk and came back “with wrists bound, misapprehended by cops” (2013, 94). For Mullen’s friend, the interaction with the police was apparently due to a misunderstanding, but for many who use the public space of the sidewalk, the threat of arrest is real and ever-present. As the city tries to regulate the sidewalk’s use, more and more activities become illegal, raising questions like, what is the purpose of the sidewalk? And who is it intended for? The sidewalk may technically be a public space, but, as Loukaitou- Sideris and

Ehrenfeucht note, public “does not mean inclusive of all urban residents or all people who use city sidewalks; it never has” (2009, 5).

In Los Angeles, the sidewalk is an increasingly contentious place as the city attempts to limit its public uses. These limitations disproportionately affect the city’s low-income residents. Street vendors, represented in part by the East LA Community Corporation, are lobbying the city to legalize street vending (currently punishable with fines up to \$1,000 and up to six months of jail time). They argue that L.A.’s more than 10,000 street vendors form a vital part of the city’s economy (East LA Community Corporation 2016). Meanwhile, a group of street vendors is suing the city, claiming that it improperly seized and destroyed their property as part of enforcing the no-vending law (Reyes, “Sidewalk,” 2015). A group of homeless plaintiffs also successfully sued the city in 2012 for illegally seizing and destroying their property, which they had temporarily left in shopping carts on the sidewalks while using restrooms, filling water bottles, and waiting in line for food (Holland 2013). Until 2006, it was illegal to sit, sleep, or lie on the sidewalk in Los Angeles from 9:30 p.m. to 6 a.m. That ordinance was overturned by a federal appeals court, which ruled that the city could not enforce the ordinance because it was not providing adequate housing options to help homeless people get off the sidewalk at night (Archibold 2006). Recently, however, the city has again been cracking down on homeless people’s use of the sidewalk, making tents illegal on the sidewalk from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., a practice that forces the unhoused to pack up their belongings and move every day or face citation or arrest (Littlejohn 2016).

While some limitations on sidewalk use are arguably necessary, the overall end result is that the sidewalk becomes hostile to certain kinds of urban residents: the poor and unhoused, who use the sidewalk as a space for shelter and commerce. It is perhaps not surprising that the

city would try to limit these uses, but more surprising are recent steps against political uses of the sidewalk. In many cities across the United States, drawing on sidewalks with chalk is illegal because it is considered vandalism — even though chalk on the sidewalk is temporary. While technically the anti-vandalism laws could apply to children (and some children have been cited), the majority of chalk-related citations and arrests come from political chalkings. In Los Angeles, at least 15 people were arrested in 2012 on chalk-related charges, many connected to the Occupy movement. Occupy L.A. responded by staging a “Chalk Walk” in downtown L.A., an event that drew 140 riot police, as well as a “Chalkupy the World Day” with chalk art protests in a dozen locations across the country (Harkinson 2012).

The sidewalk can also be a hostile place for nonhuman nature. While the sidewalk forms a habitat for nature in the city, it is a precarious one, subject to humans’ conscious and unconscious destruction. In one of Mullen’s (2013, 4) poems, jacarandas bloom spectacularly overhead but become a “sticky mess” underfoot. In another, Mullen writes of sparing a snail’s life, made precarious by its slow movement across what is often seen only as human space: “Returning home tonight, I avoid crushing/ a snail that casts a scant shadow/ on the wide sidewalk in clear light of a full moon” (42). Mushrooms, grass, and clover may pop up between the cracks of the sidewalk, but they are liable to be trampled, removed, or sprayed with weed killer. Branches that hang too low over the sidewalk are trimmed back. Hedges that encroach are cut down to size. Intruding roots are cursed. Certain animals are welcome on the sidewalk. We approve of most dog breeds, provided an owner is nearby. We allow cats to move about on their own, as long as they are collared or otherwise seem to belong to a human owner. We love birds, but not if we happen to be unlucky enough to be the target of their droppings (how dare they!), and also not if they are pigeons. We tolerate squirrels.

But what about feral cats, raccoons, rats, cockroaches, and other animals considered urban pests or undesirables? These animals frighten us; they seem not only dirty, but also wild and unpredictable. In other words, they are uncontrollable. Even as we trap and kill them, we can never fully master them, and therefore we believe that they do not deserve the right to coexist with us. We believe these animals don't belong in our cities, let alone on our sidewalks. In other words, nature can share the sidewalk with us, but only if it's the kind of nature we want, behaving in the way we want it to behave.

These three forces — human, built environment, and nonhuman environment — come fully into conflict in another point of sidewalk contention: sidewalk maintenance. All over the city of Los Angeles, sidewalks languish in various states of disrepair: they crack and bend, they slant at unexpected angles, they erupt out of the two-dimensional plane. This is no minor problem: the city estimates that 4,600 miles of sidewalk (out of a total of 10,750 miles) are in need of repair, and more than 19,000 sidewalk complaints have been called into the city's 311 line in the past five years (Poston and Menezes 2015). While for many able-bodied people, the surprising peaks and valleys of the sidewalk might cause only a minor inconvenience, for the elderly or disabled, the sidewalk is either practically or completely impassable in thousands of places throughout the city. It is not uncommon to see a person in a wheelchair rolling down the side of a busy street, sharing a lane with speeding cars because the adjacent sidewalk is too gnarly to use.

These maintenance problems raise questions: who are sidewalks for? And, more generally, who is allowed to live fully in the city? In 2013, a group of disabled residents filed a class-action lawsuit against the city under the Americans with Disabilities Act. The mangled sidewalks, the lawsuit alleged, create a lack of public access for those in wheelchairs and

scooters, effectively limiting their ability to be both financially and socially independent. As the lawsuit itself describes, this maintenance problem “relegates [the disabled] to second-class citizen status” (Reyes, “L.A.,” 2015).

“What distinguishes the city,” writes literary scholar Franco Moretti, “is that its spatial structure (basically its concentration) is functional to the intensification of mobility: spatial mobility, naturally enough, but mainly social mobility” (quoted in Solnit 2000, 176). But what happens when that spatial mobility is impaired? In *Wanderlust*, Solnit assumes that the reader can move through the city by walking. Indeed, just as the seemingly secondary nature of the sidewalk is embedded in its name, the act of walking is even more clearly embedded in the word “sidewalk” itself. But this assumption of on-foot mobility ignores the city’s many elderly and disabled residents, who move through the city with the aid of walkers, canes, crutches, scooters, or wheelchairs. Does the sidewalk not belong to them, too?

These issues have become so pressing in Los Angeles because of a series of poor planning decisions in creating the city’s urban forest. A concrete sidewalk should have a lifespan of fifty to eighty years, as long as nothing causes it to crack. But when the city of Los Angeles began experiencing a real estate boom, developers decided to plant trees that grew both faster and taller than the region’s primary native tree, the California live oak. And so, they turned to non-native species of trees — like the Southern Magnolia, Evergreen Ash, and the Indian Laurel Fig (also known as the ficus) — that grow fast and tall, providing enough shade and greenery to fool newly-arrived Angelenos into thinking that they did not live in a semiarid climate (Stephens 2015). In this way, developers used trees to create a feeling of verdant nature in the otherwise relentless sameness of the Los Angeles cityscape. As architect Warren Techentin notes, “Lacking

other ‘natural’ features, developers actively deployed — and continue to deploy — trees to give presence, history, and a sense of luxury” (2008, 137).

The problem is that while the non-native trees grew tall, their roots grew shallow, flaring out at the base of the tree rather than diving into the ground. And not even concrete is strong enough to slow the roots’ inexorable, sidewalk-breaking progress. In many of these broken places, the tree roots themselves are invisible: the sidewalk simply rises out of the ground to form an unexpected crest. But in many spots across the city, one can take a ringside seat to the slow-moving fight between natural and built environment. Along Manchester Avenue, on the border of Westchester and Inglewood, snaking tree roots undulate between the curb and the sidewalk. Wild and riotous, the roots reach out from a buried archaeology, grasping for the surface. They press and push their way aboveground, heedless of anything that might stand in their way. Once so perfectly controlled, the sidewalk no longer lies in level squares, carefully designed and poured by human hands. Instead, four-inch-thick slabs of concrete loft into the air, their edges haphazardly protruding into space, freed from their traditional flattened setting. In this way, nonhuman nature exerts itself upon the built environment from below, as the trees defy the human expectation that they would grow in a docile way — an expectation not grounded in any respect for or knowledge of the species planted. By literally uprooting the human attempt to cover them over, the trees remind us that they, too, are a living presence in the city.

In 2015, the city of Los Angeles settled the lawsuit, agreeing to spend more than \$1.3 billion over the next thirty years to fix its broken sidewalks. It seems an uncontested good that the sidewalks get fixed — that they become, once again, welcoming to all humans. But current plans to repair the sidewalks have not resolved the future of the trees themselves. The city has to address the underlying root problem, or its \$1.3 billion of repairs will, eventually, face the exact

same problem again. But trimming the roots of the trees risks destabilizing their structure enough that the trees will not be able to stand on their own and will either fall or need to be taken down. Other options are possible: sidewalks can be rebuilt to curve around tree trunks and roots, or can be built as elevated walkways that soar over the tree roots, leaving them undisturbed (Cavanaugh 2015). More worrisome is the possibility that the city's big trees will be removed entirely, or replaced with purely decorative trees or shrubs.

The aesthetic value of trees should not be underestimated, but trees — especially big trees — have far more than a cosmetic benefit for the city. In the heat and sun of L.A., trees provide necessary shade, as well as a cooling effect. They also absorb carbon dioxide and generate oxygen, remove toxins in the atmosphere and soil, reduce water run-off into storm sewers, help prevent soil erosion, and provide valuable habitats for nonhuman animals in the city (Techentin 2008, 138). In addition to these environmental benefits, trees have health benefits for humans. In 2015, researchers published a paper showing what many of us might already have strongly suspected: that living among trees is good for human health, with benefits for both psychological (depression, anxiety) and cardio-metabolic (heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity) conditions. Importantly, the study also found that street trees — or “public” trees, as the study's co-author Marc Berman put it — have a greater effect than private or backyard trees (Mooney 2015).

Just as the city's ecosystem requires the public space of the sidewalk, the city's health — both environmental and human — requires the public tree. The ADA settlement focuses solely on sidewalks and does not include any specifics for the city's trees, but, in announcing the settlement, Mayor Eric Garcetti said the city would create a comprehensive tree replacement plan to ensure that sidewalk repairs would not reduce the city's tree canopy, pledging to plant two

new trees for every tree that has to be removed. Still, many critics are doubtful that the city will uphold this promise. Even if the plan does go forward, other critics point out the environmental problems inherent in taking down the city's mature trees and replacing them with younger — and less environmentally beneficial — stock (Cavanaugh 2015). And so, as the city works to re-envision the future of the sidewalk, it remains to be seen whether the human can recover full mobility in the city without destroying — or, at least, temporarily handicapping — the nonhuman nature of the urban forest.

Does the sidewalk itself have any say in the matter? The sidewalk may seem like an inanimate object, one that exists only to be trampled underfoot — or under-wheel. But, through the lens of political theorist Jane Bennett (2010), we can also see the sidewalk as a material object with vitality: one of a multitude of nonhuman bodies that have the ability “not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). As part of the ecosystem of the city, the sidewalk can itself be seen as an actor: welcoming or excluding, housing, and, even, communicating.

Can the sidewalk itself speak? While chalking and otherwise marking the sidewalk may be illegal, all over Los Angeles the sidewalk shows traces of humans who — like me — feel the need to make a mark. On Milwood Avenue in Venice, a person has scratched a series of statements onto the curb: “LOVE IS! / I LOVE I AM / LOVE IS THE LAW / LOVE IS ALL.” On Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood, a person has stenciled: “PROTECT YO HEART,” an image I later see repeated both in Venice and downtown. Up and down Fairfax Avenue, the sidewalk outside skate shops is covered with stencils, from an image of a longhaired man

wearing a bandana and a cowboy hat with the text “YOU LOVE THE MAN” to a mock-electric outlet that momentarily confuses the boundaries of indoor and outdoor space.

While these stencils originally come from a human hand, the way they live on the sidewalk make it seem as though the sidewalk itself is speaking. These words and images come with no human signature or attribution, unmooring them from their original human frame and reorienting them as a kind of language of the sidewalk, a language that itself is most frequently one of either love or political subversion.

The sidewalk may be often overlooked, but it is never silent. One afternoon, as I ran to Runyon Canyon from my apartment, I tried to pay greater attention to the ground beneath my feet. From Hayworth, where the sidewalk is shaded by jacaranda trees, I turned right onto Fountain, where the sidewalk is obstructed by a telephone pole and an overgrown hedge, pushing me, momentarily, out into the street. After two blocks on Fountain, I turned left onto Orange Grove for a quick block, where the sidewalk is covered with the fuchsia petals of a redbud tree, before a right onto De Longpre, where a bird hopped along the pavement in front of me, undisturbed by my footsteps. As I got ready to turn left onto Gardner and head up into the hills, I again looked down at my feet. There, at the corner, someone had stenciled a pair of band-aids over a crack in the sidewalk. It was not, by any measure, one of the most wounded spots I had crossed. If the sidewalk were a human body, this crack would be only a paper cut. But on the human body, paper cuts, too, cause pain; paper cuts, too, require attention. In the place where I was standing, the sidewalk had spoken, and someone had heard.

#### **Note**

1. Compounding the problem of poor urban forestry planning is the problem of poor financial planning. In 1911, the California State Legislature passed a statute saying that property owners

were responsible for maintaining the sidewalk adjacent to their homes. But in 1973, after an influx of federal money, the city of Los Angeles passed its own ordinance that returned responsibility for L.A.'s sidewalk maintenance to the city. Inevitably, the federal funding that Los Angeles was relying on ran out, and, for years, the city let the sidewalks languish, contesting its financial responsibility (Stephens 2015). Today, the majority of cities in the state of California still abide by the 1911 statute making sidewalk maintenance the responsibility of the individual property owner. As part of the city's plans to comply with the ADA settlement, the city is proposing a "fix and release" program, which would return responsibility for sidewalk maintenance to private property owners after initial repairs have been completed. This "fix and release" program is, not surprisingly, extremely contentious (Poston and Menezes 2015).

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