

Historic Contingency in Dolgeville, Los Angeles 1903-1910: Establishment of the Suburban Socioeconomic Condition

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Abstract

The socioeconomic divide in American cities can be better understood through the lens of contingency. At the start of the twentieth century, speculative developers began capitalizing on suburban land. “Manufacturing suburbs” were made possible through the migration of production and labor. Many worker towns have been razed, exemplified by the case of Dolgeville in Los Angeles. Imagined as a workingman’s Eden, Dolgeville was publicized as a socialist failure seven years later. This essay challenges assumptions of failure by exploring contingent affairs which influenced the design of Dolgeville. Worker housing was contingent upon infrastructure and politics, as much as workers’ wages. The geometry of Dolgeville, a financial proposition readily adapted to changes in market demand, was its own contingency plan. Wealthy suburbs with curved streets and landscaped parks remain, while worker towns have been replaced by commerce and industry.

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As cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles faced the repercussions of industrialization, concerns of overcrowding and disease amassed.

One reason I am anxious to have the Dolgeville enterprise prove an actual success and a substantial one, commercially speaking, is on account of the example it would exhibit to the world of possibilities doubted in many skeptical quarters (Henry E. Huntington, 1904).

The American Suburbs' Socioeconomic and Geometric Composition

Suburban development was a relatively new practice at the start of the twentieth century in America. Amidst growing labor and class disputes, debates ensued as to whether certain models of housing could promote a harmonious society. As cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles faced the repercussions of industrialization, concerns of overcrowding and disease amassed. In an article for the 1900 Paris Exposition, W.E.B. Du Bois communicated the relationship between “political unrest,” the “rise of the new industrialism” and the “valuation of town and city property owned by Georgia Negroes,” illustrating the deep entanglement between monetary value and geographically-based racial and social biases in American cities. Initially, peripheral lands were only attainable by the upper-class with excess funds. Mortgage lending would not become common practice for many years, and speculators looking to invest in land had almost no financial security. Regardless, employers grew more reliant upon a localized labor force, and vacant lands were sparse near the city center. In the absence of municipal regulation, wealthy individuals and employers experimented in developing worker towns along the railways in city outskirts. Scholars such as Robert Lewis (2004), Becky Nicolaides (2002) and Greg Hise (2001) have expanded the historiography of the suburbs beyond middle-class focuses, showing how locations of manufacture and industry were directly tied to working-class suburban development. The disparity between middle- and working-class housing development was distinct. The lack of political or civic cohesion in the city of Los Angeles, for example, resulted in fragmented development and increased tensions between city and suburbs, rich and poor, and white and black (Fogelson, 1993). As the demand for labor grew, so did the struggle for workers’ rights. Followers of Henry George supported state taxation



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and the limitation of unbridled progress experienced by landowners. George advocated for the lessening of the wealth gap and the expansion of public works, as did those aligned with the Socialist Party. The Progressive Party, on the other hand, opposed worker organization and municipal oversight, in support of securing entrepreneurial autonomy for private development. Margaret Crawford (1995) and Dolores Hayden (2003) have categorized the suburban models built during this period, wherein certain geometries were selected to minimize costs, mitigate risk and quell worker unrest. Worker-housing was perceived as high-risk, therefore requiring the most governance. One case in particular exemplifies the evolution of working-class housing in America at the turn of the century. Dolgevillle in Los Angeles County was conceived as a single-family worker town in 1903, promoted as a “workingman’s Eden” to contain “beautiful residences, spacious lawns, lovely gardens and magnificent boulevards” (“Idealist Plans to Build a Town” *Los Angeles Herald*, June 1903). Published drawings of the town featured the company’s mills, warehouses and shops, surrounded by lush lawns, gardens and tree-lined streets (Figure 1). While the factory was portrayed in a Garden City setting within the Southern

Fig. 1 - Alfred Dolge Felt Company Publication (1909), showing the factory at the former San Gabriel Winery Property, fronted by the Southern Pacific Railroad and the Pacific Electric Railroad. Source: Huntington Library Archives.

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Dolgeville in Los Angeles County was conceived as a single-family worker town in 1903, promoted as a “workingman’s Eden”.

California landscape, worker housing was not illustrated. Despite projected visions for the town, Dolgeville was laid out with closely spaced streets and repetitive, baron lots. Ultimately, homes were not constructed by employees as hoped, and lots were turned over to industrial and commercial enterprises. The few historians who have written about Dolgeville focus on the cause of its failure, concluding with assertions like “by 1910 only 191 households, slightly less than 1,000 people, had relocated to Dolgeville” (Phelps, 1998: 164). The assumption of failure in Dolgeville deserves further scrutiny. The discrepancy between the promotion and implementation of Dolgeville was not due to the failure of socialist plans, but rather, to the success of progressivist ones. The gridiron subdivision aligned with Progressive politics, as did the entrepreneurial nature of suburban development in LA at the beginning of the century. While workers were economically and geographically disadvantaged, developers were incentivized to sell land however they could. Substantial investments were only justified for those wealthier subdivisions perceived as economically and socially reliable. Streets lined with bespoke lots would not allow for a change of use, and would therefore be sequestered for wealthy, white homeowners with financial and social partiality. The site planning of Dolgeville was a contingency plan in itself; if the working-class housing model did not result in sales as expected, it could be reconfigured. Grids could be adapted more readily to changes in market demand. A different version of Dolgeville succeeded, attuned not to the needs of the worker, but to the financial profiteering of its developer. This paper examines the financial and political contingencies present in the conception, development and adaptation of Dolgeville, by posing this case study within the series of debates surrounding worker-towns at the time. Although a relatively small faction of Los Angeles’ history, the creation and dissolution of Dolgeville captures a highly transitional time in the city and the nation at large. While upper-class housing built in the first decade of the twentieth century remains virtually untouched to this day, working-class housing has been expropriated. By examining historical contingency in the formation of Dolgeville, an alternative explanation can be provided as to why one model came to dominate the American landscape.

The Suburban Imaginary, as Deployed in the Worker Town of Dolgeville, Los Angeles

Dolgeville was planned as an ecosystem comprised of the felt manufacturing plant, single-family housing and financial speculation. Surrounding the factory, 400 acres were to be laid out to house 1,000 workers. Henry Huntington, railroad magnate and Los Angeles developer, purchased the San Gabriel Winery and surrounding San Marino Ranch in 1900. The bank had assumed ownership over the land from one of the region's founders, James Shorb, after the soil proved untenable for the cultivation of a vineyard. Beyond Huntington's attunement to the housing market, was his engagement with land acquisition and infrastructural profiteering. Migrating west with fortunes from his uncle's eastern empire, Huntington controlled almost all the electric, rail and water infrastructure of Los Angeles by the start of the twentieth century (Hayden, 2009). Establishing new suburban towns came with the absence of local regulation and produced value for Huntington's infrastructural projects. Alfred Dolge approached Huntington in 1903 with his proposition for Dolgeville. With arguably the best reputation in the felt business, Dolge had proven his worth while in New York. He supplied 80% of the piano trade, receiving top accolades from world exhibitions. Dolge's proposal was tabulated meticulously, containing references from Kimball, Baldwin and French pledging their continued desire for felt supply. The trade was worth more than two million dollars annually, and by locally sourcing wool, fuel and other production costs would be minimized. Chamber of Commerce head Frank Wiggins supported Dolge's concept as a booster project for LA climate-seekers. Felt typically finished under mechanized dryers could be laid out under the Southern California sun to dry. The two-million-dollar venture was measured against projected land and felt sales, as well as stocks and bonds (Dolge Felt Company Papers, 1903). Huntington sold Dolge the winery buildings and the surrounding twenty acres to be converted for the felt mill. With four additional directors appointed from Huntington's Land Improvement Company, they chartered the formation of the Dolgeville Land Company and the Alfred Dolge Manufacturing Company in 1903.

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obtained, beginning the industrial era of Southern California.” Grasping at vague but popular language used in various other development schemes, the article acted as a marketing ploy. Exactly how “not the ordinary 4x4 cottage” would be attainable by the “workingman,” was left for guesswork. If felt sales were profitable enough, perhaps wages could be set above national standards, encouraging working men to build or purchase more “comfortable” homes near the factory. Nevertheless, by fall of 1904, grading on a gridiron subdivision was underway instead of the radial plan. The land company took responsibility in grading, installing sidewalks and curbs, and extending electrical and water lines. George Patton, appointed manager of the Dolgeville development, assured Huntington just months after it opened to market that sales were going well (Huntington Personal Correspondence, 1903). Sponsored ads appeared in railcars and local papers, asking \$350 for inside lots, “an ideal location for a home” (Los Angeles Herald, 1905). By July of that year, *The Los Angeles Times* announced that over 306 lots were sold, and forty houses and ten business buildings were under construction. The worker town appeared infallible when weighed against Dolge’s reputable felt business, a migrating labor population and Huntington’s development prowess.

Despite the appearance of early success, most land sales were made on payment plans backed by company stocks and bonds. Felt operating costs proved higher than anticipated, as exemplified by Dolge’s request for an additional \$50,000 to get the factory fully up and running in 1904. Huntington’s irritation with the “imbecile” Dolge, who “failed utterly to sell stock as expected,” was made apparent in a series of letters exchanged between he and Patton through the following years (Huntington Personal Correspondence, 24 June 1904). Huntington’s Land Improvement Company took over as majority stockholder of the Dolgeville Land Company in 1905, subsequently raising prices. After the national financial panic of 1907, the company’s debt became irreparable in its current state. Huntington and Patton arranged a meeting with Dolge in February of that year to investigate the “fate of present management at Dolgeville” (“Investigate Dolgeville” *Los Angeles Times*, 1907). Huntington and his lawyers

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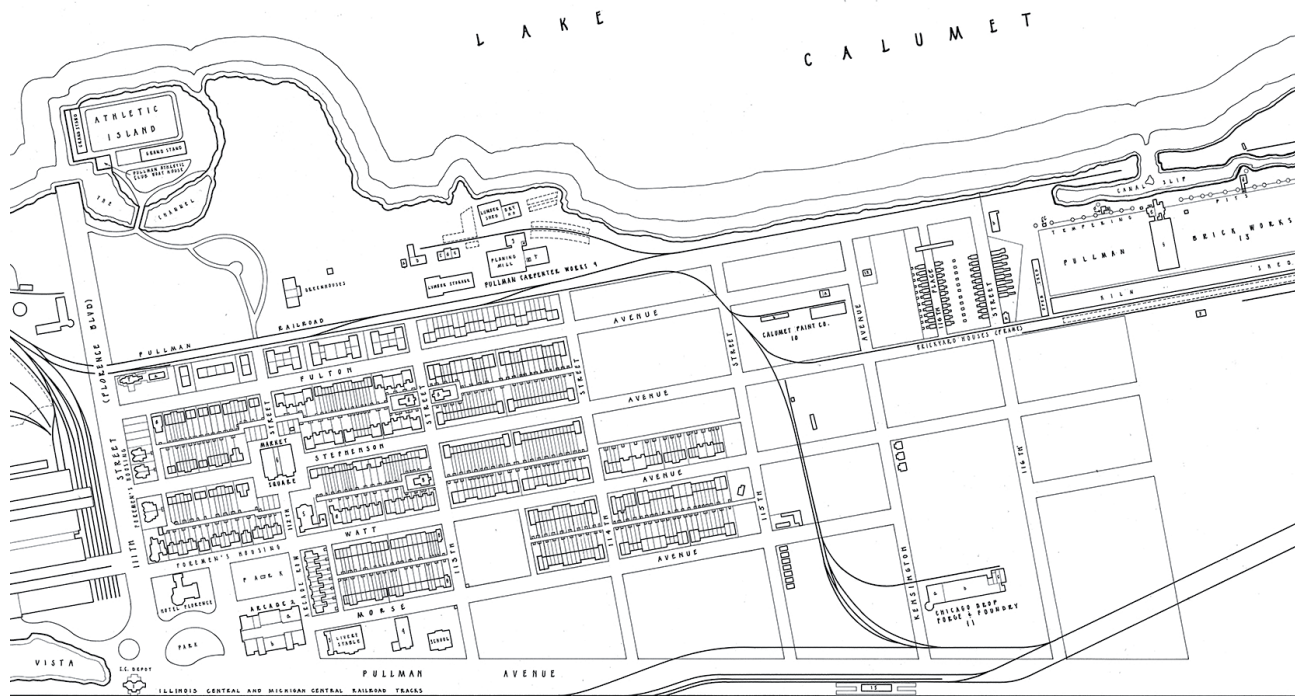
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convinced 50% of the bondholders to surrender their shares, allowing them to reorganize into a “new” company with the ability to obtain additional funding from the bank. Dolge would not give his official resignation until the following year, but in the company’s annual report to stockholders, it was clear already that his felt business was to be closely monitored, and subsequently transferred over to Huntington. Sales from the year of 1907 amounted to \$279,252, while plant and equipment costs amounted to double that. Slowing Dolgeville land sales were not enough to make up for the factory’s losses. In 1908, Huntington and his team lobbied for annexation. Alhambra issued \$68,000 in bonds, incorporating Dolgeville into its tax base. By 1910, Dolge had officially resigned from the Felt Manufacturing Company. The *LA Times* hypothesized that Dolge’s resignation may be “owing to the apparent friction in management (or) that the business (had) probably run at a loss right along” (May 1910). If considering Dolgeville at face value, the story ends with a relatively tidy conclusion: Dolge’s vision was not profitable, and was destined for demise, especially under the firm grip of Huntington. However, there were several influences in the development of Dolgeville, outside of its immediate archive, which cannot be explained by this conclusion, illuminating a deeper understanding of early twentieth century urban development as a contingent economic proposition.

Economic, Political and Spatial Contingency in the Development of Dolgeville

The Dolgeville narrative can be expanded by examining Huntington and Dolge’s contingent economic and labor policies and practices of the time. Those practices demonstrate the multidimensional financial strategies that are masked by terms like “working-class housing.” Beyond the direct sale of land or the construction of houses, strategies for producing a worker town included wage garnishment and indentured labor. Dolge pioneered the pension and life-insurance policy movements before moving to Los Angeles, arguing that unionization was unnecessary if the “right” economic benefits were offered (Dolge, 1896). Employees paying into pension funds could only extract benefits after twenty-five years of employment, and they would need their wages to make mortgage payments



in a single-family worker town. By putting these policies into action at the Dolge Manufacturing Company, Dolge believed that a symbiotic worker town would succeed. Labor union debates dominated the media at the end of the nineteenth century, especially in response to the Pullman Company Town uprising in Illinois (Crawford, 1995: 37-45). News of Pullman, as well as tangible effects of the strike, reached Los Angeles. Huntington responded by hiring the LAPD to monitor railcars and forcefully stop anyone trying to protest. In addition to using methods of force, Huntington offered employee welfare programs, like those theorized and implemented by Dolge. Huntington wrote to realtor S.J. White at the start of the venture stating, “One reason I am anxious to have the Dolgeville enterprise prove an actual success and a substantial one, commercially speaking, is on account of the example it would exhibit to the world of possibilities doubted in many skeptical quarters” (HEH Personal Correspondence, July 1904). Dolge and Huntington each stood to benefit from an anti-union model. Public skepticism was growing in response to the increasingly visible economic and social instability surrounding worker towns. The Pullman model was believed to inspire worker unrest not just ideologically, but physically. The map of Pullman (Figure 3), il-

Fig. 3 - Site plan of the 1885 Pullman Industrial Town, south of Chicago in Illinois, showing rental homes set in generous lawns, accompanied by a playground, public square, arcade and athletic course. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Huntington's design for Dolgeville allowed for further adaptability.

lustrated a town of small cottages situated within generously sized lawns, lined along private streets. The residential district, complete with an athletic course, playground, public square, arcade, church, market house, stable and school, was self-sufficient, conveniently located across the main boulevard from the Pullman Car Works' lumber yards and shops. Parks, amenities and cottages provided at Pullman were supported by high rental prices, which workers could not afford. As a result, the public was growing suspicious toward paternalistic arrangements, where employers served as landlords. Lots offered for purchase were more efficient, less costly, and promoted individuality. Huntington's desire to follow suit was made clear in his response to the *LA Herald* article published in 1903. Complaining of Dolge's naivete in promising a "workingman's Eden," Huntington assured Patton that it would not be implemented. Huntington's model, clearly gridded speculative land-platting, left the responsibility of development to the purchaser. It is likely that Huntington believed Dolgeville unworthy of the curved streets and extensive landscaping which he included in his wealthier subdivisions. Able to pawn off a considerable portion of the cheap ranch land to Dolge, Huntington was trapped with a factory at the center of town. Wealthier persons had the means to live away from the factory, and Dolgeville could not accommodate this demographic. Worker housing would be a suitable use and would require relatively little in the way of improvement. A gridded, repetitive plan was more efficient for land sales, and utilities were easier to connect perpendicular to the street. Workers would not have Huntington to blame for financial burden as they did Pullman, because an external party, Dolge, controlled their wages, and they themselves were responsible for the cost of building a home.

Huntington's design for Dolgeville allowed for further adaptability, if workers did not purchase lots as expected or hoped. Since Dolgeville was conveniently located along the Pacific Electric Railway, workers had the option to live in cheap tenements a few stations away, or to build a home on the outskirts where land was even cheaper. Huntington's openness to a variety of purchasers is exemplified by Dolgeville advertisements appearing in LA newspapers from

1904-1908. For example, the *Los Angeles Herald* promoted “Dolgeville: The Manufacturing Suburb of Los Angeles,” encouraging “bona-fide investments for non-residents. A fine opportunity for good hotel men and builders” in April 1904. In his wealthier subdivisions, Huntington limited industrial or commercial uses near residential ones. At Dolgeville, surrounding residences were already subject to the pollutant winds from felt production. Purchasers commonly bought multiple plots to suit the dimensional requirements of commercial and industrial uses. A school, bank, office building, hotel and two tenement houses were built in Dolgeville. The Garden City model would not have been as resilient when faced with a dip in the housing market. The geometry of Dolgeville was suited to the production of capital and profit, flexible to shifting demands in market interest.

A dominating municipal interest reveals itself in the By Laws of the Dolgeville Land Company, formed:

to engage in buying, improving, subdividing, renting and selling lands, and also buying, acquiring, improving, developing waters, water rights, ditches, canals and pipelines and of selling the same or of distributing the same for such uses as may arise or present themselves (Dolgeville Land Company Papers, 1903).

Dolgeville was situated between the Owens Valley River, perceived to be the city’s best hope for fresh water supply, and Downtown Los Angeles. The directors appointed for Dolgeville were well-suited to this initiative. William G. Kerkhoff was involved in hydroelectric endeavors from the 1890s, founding the San Gabriel Power Company in 1900. Henry O’Melveny and R.H. Variel, also named Dolgeville directors, were attorneys specializing in hydroelectric power, land and water rights. Dolgeville’s profitability was contingent upon Huntington’s ability to channel water from the Owens Valley River. In this endeavor, Huntington was joined by Harrison Gray Otis, Politician and Publisher for the *LA Times*. Otis and Huntington both lobbied for the elimination of union oversight in their Owens Valley Water project. Otis expressed to Huntington in 1902 “I have been at pains to provide my men with all they could possibly need. Yet they are unwilling to settle down - something else must be done” (Laslett,

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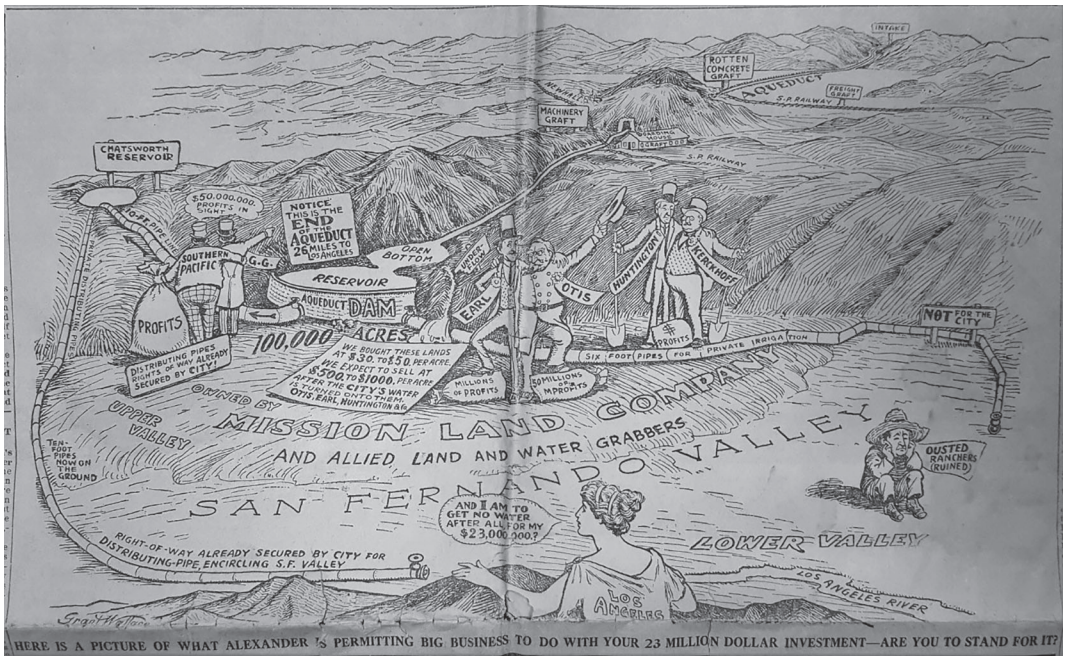


Fig. 4 - The effects of corporate control over public investment, exemplified by figures Otis and Huntington, "Allied land and water grabbers." Source: *Aqueduct Facts Expose Huge Jobbery*, "The Coming Victory", 25 November 1911. The Homestead Museum Collection.

2012: 30). If Huntington and Otis acquired the land that they wished to extend the aqueduct through, there would be less opportunity for outside control. Given this, developing a successful worker town in Dolgeville was likely secondary to governing the land for the future LA Aqueduct development. Otis and Huntington were opposed by Job Harriman, politician and voice of the Socialist Party in Los Angeles, who campaigned for the redistribution of water rights to the people. Debates between Progressivist and Socialist party politics were heightened surrounding the development of water and power infrastructure in LA. A cartoon titled "Aqueduct Facts Expose Huge Jobbery" from the November 1911 issue of *The Coming Victory* illustrated this discourse (Figure 4). Water from the aqueduct was shown to funnel entirely to private investors like Otis and Huntington through private irrigation and distribution pipes, leaving the city of Los Angeles and "ousted ranchers" with nothing. Millions of dollars in profit were to be gained by Otis and Huntington in the resale of land "after the city's water (was) turned onto them." The cartoon echoed the sentiments of Harriman, campaigning for LA Mayor under the Socialist Party ticket. If Harriman was to prevail, Hun-

tington would no longer reap the land improvement benefits secured by his private development and sale of water. Fortunately for Huntington, Harriman was destroyed in the public imaginary during his run for mayor in 1910. Two labor union advocates were charged with bombing the LA Times building just before the election, and Harriman, naïve to their guilt, backed their defense in trial. Following their conviction, Harriman and the Socialist Party's reputation were irrevocably tarnished. As a result, George Alexander won the seat for LA Mayor under the Progressive Party ticket, protecting utilities for corporate, private interest. With secured rights in developing the LA Aqueduct, Dolgeville could be annexed to Alhambra and Huntington could move on to his next venture.

The Dolgeville archives tell a complex story which destabilizes the newspaper's initial promotion, and eventual blame of failure, of the worker town. Dolgeville proves to be a speculative real estate investment wrapped around infrastructural development, industry, factory workers and their housing. What was promoted as an experiment in worker housing, was an integral component in a political and social scheme. The working class could not be incorporated into the single-family housing model at Dolgeville, as exemplified by the lack of purchasing by felt mill employees. However, Huntington's contingent practices suggest that he was never interested in ensuring occupation by this demographic. Instead, the worker town imaginary and its associated Garden City sketch was used to entice speculative workers, who were easily dismissed when the failing felt mill could not support Huntington's interests.

Dolgeville's "Failure" and the Foreclosure of Worker Town Imaginaries

Rather than the Utopia suggested by Dolge's promotional article, Dolgeville proves to be a security in Huntington's larger development plan. James Thorpe wrote in his biography of Huntington "Alas, Dolgeville did not succeed, despite (Huntington's) continued support and encouragement. Dolge proved to be a slick operator who promised a great deal but delivered very little" (Thorpe, 1994: 211). Thorpe portrayed Dolge as the mastermind, pulling one over on an unsuspecting Huntington. Considering its context, what became of Dolgeville was largely due to Hun-

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Fig. 5 - From left to right: Dolgeville 1904, indicating “sold” lots in red; West Alhambra 1927, post-annexation, indicating lot grouping; Alhambra, 2019. Source: Huntington Library Archives.

tington’s ambitions, not Dolge’s. Regardless, if success is to be weighed by the delivery of homes, Dolgeville was in fact a failure as Thorpe and others have asserted. Dolge had promised “a town inhabited by men who have earned and saved the money to build their homes while working with us.” Dolge predicted the internal contingencies between land and felt sales by continuing with the assertion “just as our factory stands on a solid rock foundation so will the town stand on the most solid foundation if it is built up by that class of men” (Dolge, 1896: 53). If the felt mill faced decline, so would the worker town. Huntington was not willing to invest enough to guarantee homes for the working class. He may have never desired to fulfill Dolge’s vision, but simply needed to sell the San Marino Ranch and San Gabriel winery property, and Dolge made a pretty convincing case as to how he might do so. Historians and the media have deliberated as to the cause of neglect for Dolge’s quasi-utopia, declaring that “his factories are gone, his homes were never built, his name is forgotten” (Rasmussen, 1993). What has actually been forgotten continues to be obstructed by statements like these. Opposers of the Socialist Party such as Huntington advocated for the suppression of labor organization and public housing.

Calling Dolge a Socialist was instrumental to deflect blame from Huntington and place it on the opposing party. Meanwhile, Huntington was predicting and defining the market, securing corporate interest for his own development and for the future development of Los Angeles.

A map of the former site of Dolgeville shows a concentration of big-box retail stores, commercial buildings and parking lots, where housing was once imagined (Figure 5). In 1904, the map of Dolgeville showed a series of single lot subdivisions surrounding the factory. By 1927, many of the single lots were redrawn as grouped, especially in the northeast and southwest corners of the site, and by 2019, almost all the lots south of the former felt factory were occupied by commercial uses. This is drastically different from the Garden City plan initially published in the *LA Herald*, and yet, this type of reconfiguration was made possible in part through the usage of this vision. Lots were left open to workers willing to purchase and build homes themselves. When this practice slowed, lot groupings were available for commercial and industrial takeover. Decisions made in laying out Dolgeville were predictive of this trend. Subdivisions restricted to wealthy white purchasers, with their wide frontages and restrictive monetary minimums, were not subject to these transformations. Businessmen justified their act in segregating the market with Progressive ideology. Worker housing, on the other hand, was foreclosed as a “socialist” experiment that most often “failed.” This case illustrates a series of contingencies influential in the transformation of working-class suburbs. Perhaps the most influential given the outcome, however, was Huntington’s contemporaneous control over political and economic drivers in Los Angeles. The plan’s geometry ensured economic viability in a fluid market situation. Worker towns, however absent from the American landscape today, were incidental to the formation of the suburbs. If it were not for Huntington’s concurrent infrastructural control, barely improved land would not have earned him such profits, and the geometry and land use of the suburbs may have looked significantly different. Suburban realities, a physical embodiment of economic, political and social change, continue to be occluded by the apparent rigidity of land use patterns.

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