

DESERTIFICATION IN THE CENTRAL CITY: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE IN PHOENIX AZ

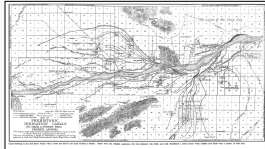
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Background

Hohokam Indians settled in the Phoenix region until the mid 15th century where they devised an extensive series of irrigation networks, consisting of nearly 200 miles of canals.

- Allowed the cultivation of thousands of acres of arable land.
- Served as a model for Europeans settling in the area in the 19th century.



Phoenix was the largest and until recently the fastest growing city in the Southwest of the U.S., with about 3.5 million people sprawling over more than 2000 sq. km of former Sonoran desert (Bolin et al. 2005).

Research Goal and Approach

The goal of this research is to document how urbanization processes, water resource development, industrial development and concomitant land use and land cover changes beginning in the early 20th Century produced a zone of environmental injustice characterized as a low income, racially segregated region that was denuded of trees and green space.

Using archival sources (e.g. photos, government documents, business records etc.) and interviews, we examined:

- The development of water resources, water law, and agriculture in the Phoenix basin.
- The connection of agriculture to both early race relations and to development of the city's water infrastructure in the 1800s and early 1900s.
- The urbanization and land use changes in historic barrios in the central city that produced pronounced environmental inequities in historic South Phoenix.

References

- Bolin, B., S. Grineski, & T. Collins. 2005. The geography of despair: Environmental racism and the making of South Phoenix, Arizona, USA. *Human Ecology Review* 12(2): 156-168.
- Luckingham, B. 1989. *Phoenix: the history of a southwestern metropolis*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press.
- Salt River Project Annual Report (1964)
- Photo Sources: SRP
- Map Sources: Joseph Tuccillo
- Quotes: Taken from interviews conducted by Katelyn Parady

Land Use and Urbanization in South Phoenix – 1939-2000

"...the basis of any city is its industry, the thing which provides a living for its people. The developing industries of Phoenix must be taken into vital consideration." –Phoenix Chamber of Commerce

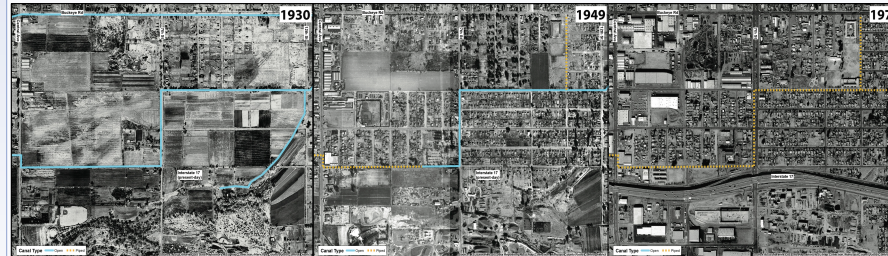
Railroads: Transacted the city creating a "north-south" divide with industries concentrated in ethnic minority neighborhoods in the South where the land values were lower than in the affluent, white northern region.

Vehicles: Changed the urban landscape of Phoenix through infrastructure development, like the Papago Freeway in the 1970s, which runs right through the minority, disadvantaged south central Phoenix.

Sky Harbor Airport: Destroyed adjacent neighborhoods including the Hispanic Golden Gate Barrio. Moreover, the toxic fumes and high decibel noise created a degraded environment for the minorities surrounding the airport.



Economic Incentives: Changes to the state tax structure and zoning laws were used to entice industrial development to Phoenix.

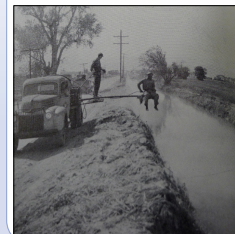
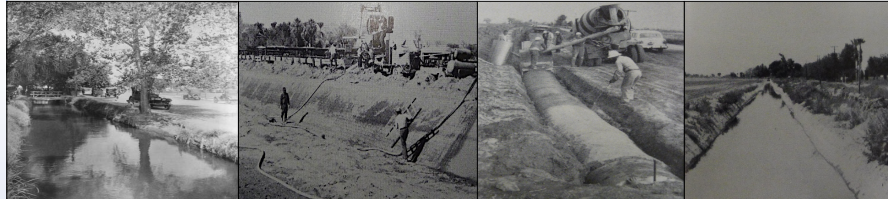


Take Away: These changes in agriculture and urbanization reinforced a long-held feeling that the neglected and often ignored minority groups in Phoenix had enjoyed little success against the Anglo establishment (Luckingham 1989).

Water Policies

Salt River Project (SRP), established in 1903, was the first multipurpose reclamation project to provide an adequate supply of low-cost water.

Water conservation included tree removal (2,900 trees in 1964), weed eradication, and the straightening, lining, or piping underground of laterals and canals (SRP Annual Report 1964).



M: "I met people [in Sherman Park] when I first bought in. I met a lady that was 87 years old. She would tell me about this area that used to have irrigation, where the alleys are at. They used to be like those little irrigation canals, and it was a neighborly thing. So in the morning everybody would get up and have coffee outside and you would meet your neighbors. And it was green, and it was beautiful. And it was 100% (pause) a place you wanted to be at...For some reason or other they cut off the water. So all that—the beautiful canals, and they'd have the trees—all of that started going away. So people started—just stopped..."



Politically Institutionalized Racism

- Environmental racism includes intentional acts (overt) and institutional practices (overt or implicit) of discrimination against people of color.
- "White privilege" is a hegemonic form of racism that (re) produces white advantage across time and space in which economic and social benefits are given to people by the virtue of their whiteness (Pulido 2000).
- Historically, Phoenix was governed by a "ward system."
- In 1913 a Commission-City Manager form of government replaced current ward system.
- The intent of the Commission-City Manager form of government was to reduce factionalization and increase accountability of public officials to the whole electorate.
- Significance:** The new system politically disenfranchised the South Central Phoenix minority groups (Luckingham 1989).

Final Thoughts

- Historical geographical processes have produced a region of pronounced environmental injustices due to industrial and transportation pollution, growing urban heat, and dearth of public green space.
- The ways overt and implicit racism was institutionalized over time contributed to the injustices in these minority neighborhoods of South Central Phoenix.

The following quote from an interview captures the sense of disenfranchisement felt by the residents of South Phoenix.

K: Can you describe what your ideal place to live would be like?

C: "Ohh yea!! Beautiful trees. Like on the North side of town, over there like off of Thomas and like 36th street, there's this neighborhood that I've drove by. And I mean there's lots of trees and the grass is so green, I mean everybody's yard is nice and pretty, but most of all a lot of tall trees, that it just shades the whole neighborhood. You know the whole block with nice trees and flowers. Oh, I tell you, every time I go down that way it's just beautiful just to see how tall those trees are and the shade that's through there. That would be my idea of the neighborhood, yes!! With a lot of trees you know, nice and greenery."

Acknowledgements

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