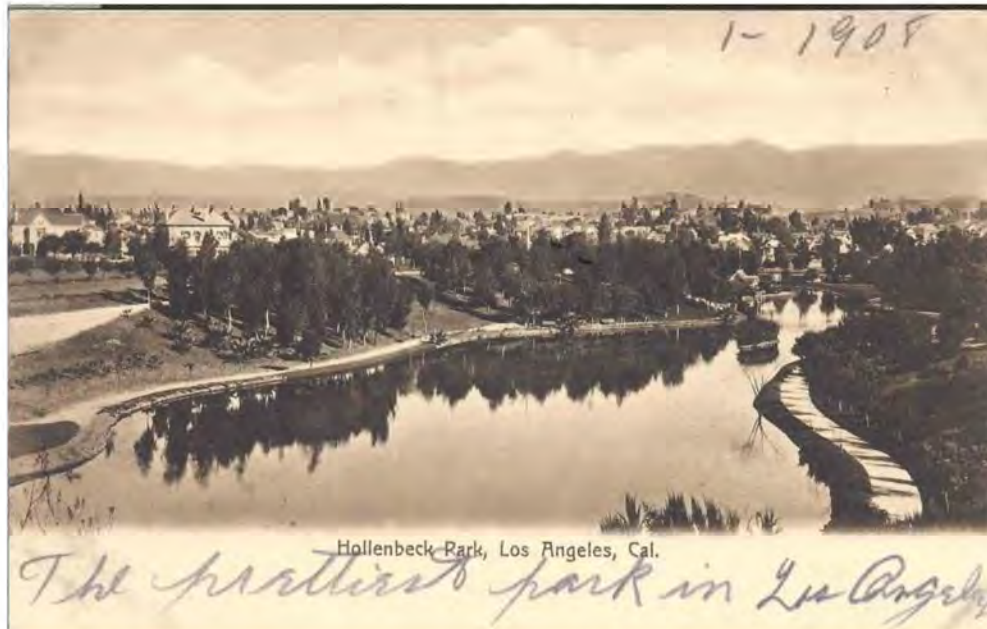


'The prettiest park in Los Angeles' and why a freeway runs through it

[latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-hollenbeck-park-freeway-20150810-column.html](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-hollenbeck-park-freeway-20150810-column.html)

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A vintage postcard showing Hollenbeck Park in Boyle Heights at the turn of the 20th century, “the prettiest park in Los Angeles.” The 5 Freeway now runs through the park’s lagoon.

(Charles C. Pierce)

Freeways are brutal structures. And they have been dropped into many communities — especially poor ones — in often indiscriminate ways. Exits from the 101 spill out onto quiet residential streets in Silver Lake. The monumental stacks of the 105 and the 110 lord over single-family homes in South L.A.

And all over town you find homes and businesses tucked into the noisy, inhospitable curves of a freeway access ramp. There is Offramp Gallery, a contemporary art space in Pasadena, which lies within the roar of the 210, and the Psychic Center of Los Angeles, sandwiched between a towering freeway wall and an onramp on the southbound 5. (Freeway noise aside, they do excellent readings.)

But the craziest freeway placement I’ve seen in Los Angeles to date is in Boyle Heights. In this historic Los Angeles community, full of Craftsman bungalows and Victorian homes, city planners saw fit to run a stretch of the 5 Freeway right through Hollenbeck Park in 1960 (despite a petition against it bearing an estimated 15,000 signatures and the dissent of then

Councilman Edward Roybal). The result is a dissonant juxtaposition of urban planning elements: a bucolic city park, with fountains and quacking ducks, paired with the grinding gears of stop-and-go traffic on the 5, which runs right overhead.

The park, for the record, was there first. Poking around an online vintage postcard shop, I located an early view of Hollenbeck, shown at the top of this post, that may have been taken sometime around 1898. (The image is also part of a historic photography database at USC.) It shows a lovely lagoon ringed by trees. The person who owned the card took the trouble to hand write “The prettiest park in Los Angeles” along the bottom edge.

That lagoon now has a freeway running through it.

In Los Angeles, traffic is the dragon we slay every day. And the freeway is the arena in which the slaying is most frequently done. But it’s an arena that is looking pretty worn out, from the point of view of design as well as concept.

Freeways have filleted communities like Boyle Heights, which has the 5, the 101, the 60 and the 10 crossing through it. This may have “eased” traffic elsewhere, making it more convenient, for example, to get from Beverly Hills to Palm Springs. But it devastated the neighborhood’s urban fabric, isolating residential pockets from each other with massive freeway berms.

It also resulted in a high degree of street congestion, since those berms have the effect of pushing all traffic onto one of a handful of major thoroughfares. Spend some quality time in the vicinity of Soto Street at rush hour and you’ll see what I mean.

In the past couple of weeks, Times architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne has been tackling the topic of freeways. He began with a review of the \$1.14-billion widening of the 405 — a patchwork of mismatching roadway and landscape designs that seems to raise the very obvious question of why all the money wasn’t spent on a train. (Imagine, a train from Northridge to LAX!)

And late last week, he kicked off what will be a semi-regular series about the freeway, with a piece that provides a freeway state-of-the-union. And that union is not good. As part of it, he discusses the way in which the various freeways have chopped up Boyle Heights.

As various communities debate the merits (or better yet, the demerits) of extending the 710 through South Pasadena and Alhambra, this discussion about freeways couldn’t be more poignant. How many other parks will be destroyed and neighborhoods shredded by freeways? Well, that’s up to us.