

**The USC Village:
What Did \$700 Million Accomplish?**

By: Julianne Vu

In the midst of a pandemic, USC Village is unnervingly empty and quiet. Under any other circumstances, as summer goes out in a blaze of heat and leaves behind the milder temperatures of autumn, this time in the semester would find students clogging the crosswalks, a whirling mess of students on foot, bikes, skateboards, and the occasional URB-E. They'd be preparing for midterms, grabbing something to eat between classes, or just meeting up with friends and enjoying a warm afternoon. Its architecture is a mix of the old and new. The red-bricked, Gothic facade, with the clock tower's spire rising above the sprawl of dorms and businesses, gives the space a traditional feel that links it back to the campus, but all the restaurants and shops have been tastefully decorated, and have the smell, look, and feel of modernity. This image of the Village is its most pleasant one, and when the project was passed with an unanimous vote from the Los Angeles City Council in 2012, former USC President C.L. Max Nikias envisioned it as a space that would not only "profoundly enrich our University Park Campus" but also act as "a tremendous boon for our surrounding neighborhoods, and for all Los Angeles."¹ But, three years after its opening, can we say this is true?

In the official contract signed between Los Angeles and USC, there were a number of stipulations that held USC responsible for the project's impact on the surrounding community. For example, the university would have to give up to a total of twenty million in funds towards affordable housing programs, construct a new fire station, partner with local schools to fund extracurricular activities, and make a sizable donation to the L.A. Parks Foundation.² These investments were aimed at minimizing the disruption that the construction of the Village would have caused and enriching the community around USC. Furthermore, the work would be done by local workers, with the university pledging to have at least thirty percent of their workforce

composed of people from the area, with ten percent of all jobs going to those considered “Disadvantaged Workers.”³ Presented in this way, the Village seems to come at the benefit of many: the school, the neighborhood, small businesses, USC students, local residents. But it turns out these provisions were hard-won. SAJE, or Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, fought to get the university to make these commitments. Joe Donlin, director of equitable development at SAJE, explained how it was a “coalition of community groups” that pushed for the aforementioned conditions, and that not enough credit has been given to them.⁴ The actions USC has taken in developing the Village feels more like appeasement and less like a genuine effort to nourish and invigorate the area around it.

Lil Bill’s Bike Shop, which has been operating in and around the University Park Campus for over forty years, is a concrete example of the way USC has failed to put into effect its promises for those who were impacted by the construction of the Village. With the opening of the Village in 2017, Lil Bill’s Bike Shop was forced to relocate off of USC property, after the university agreed to a non-compete clause with the bike shop that is currently found in the village, Solé Bicycles.⁵ In an interview with *Daily Trojan*, Aaron Flournoy, current owner of the shop, expressed how the uprooting of his business has left him uncertain. He communicates his love and loyalty to the campus and its students and says that “for USC to tell [him] to go, or that [he’s] no longer needed or welcome, [he] think[s] is an injustice.”⁶ Flournoy’s bike shop, which he wanted to carry on after his father—the business’s namesake—retired from running it, has provided affordable and fast bicycle repairs and services for many USC students.

The university’s actions in regards to this issue seem to alienate the campus from its surrounding neighborhood, despite their stated mission to protect and uplift small businesses and

community members. According to 2018 Census Bureau information, the area around USC's campus was inhabited largely by Black and Hispanic populations, with a median household income of \$41,509.⁷ In comparison, another study looking at economic diversity at USC, found that the median family income of a student was \$161,400, with over sixty percent of its student population coming from the top twenty percent.⁸ There's a huge disparity here, one that is reflected in and around the campus. You only have to think about the gates that run around campus and the Village, with its few checkpoints and many DPS officers. You only need a moment to think about it before the large gap between bougie college life and the displaced lives of those outside of that bubble becomes apparent.

The Village was built with the intention of reaching as deep into students' pockets as possible. In the summer of 2019, two restaurants closed their doors to the students and the public after filing lawsuits against the university. BBCM and Rance's Chicago Pizza both leveled claims of "promissory fraud, misrepresentation and breach of contract" against USC, saying that the school falsely claimed Village tenants would be allowed to accept dining dollars—which was untrue—and that they had not been informed of the Village Dining Hall's presence.⁹ The promise of being able to use dining dollars at The Village would have incentivized businesses to move in and students to patronize those businesses. But even though that didn't turn out to be true, there is no lack of willing customers; during the lunch rush, you can see the line extending out of CAVA and Dulce. At the end of the day, USC continues to do business with the intention of maximizing profit, rather than creating a connected and welcoming environment for everyone.

The \$700 million sprawl might have given the area a nice face lift, but it did little to

alleviate stress put on individuals and local businesses caused by rising rent costs and competition from bigger chain stores. In a place as rich in history and culture as Los Angeles is, the goal should be to highlight and preserve those cultural landmarks, rather than drive them out or shut them down. The Village should have served as a bridge between the university and its surrounding communities, rather than the extension of a privileged, exclusive, and expensive lifestyle that came at the expense of the disadvantaged.

Notes:

1. Carl Marziali, "USC Village approved by LA City Council." *USC News*, December 11, 2012, <https://news.usc.edu/44892/usc-village-approved-by-la-city-council/>.
2. Recorder's Office, Los Angeles County, California, *Development Contract*, The City of Los Angeles and the University of Southern California, April 1, 2013, 10-13.
3. *Ibid.*, 16.
4. Hillel Aron, "Is USC's New "Village" Really for Everyone?" *LA Weekly*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.laweekly.com/is-uscs-new-village-really-for-everyone/>.
5. Sarah Chan, "With USC Village set to open, Lil Bill's Bike Shop told to leave campus." *Daily Trojan*, March 24, 2017, <https://dailytrojan.com/2017/03/24/usc-village-set-open-lil-bills-bike-shop-told-leave-campus/>.
6. *Ibid.*
7. "Census profile: Los Angeles County (South Central)--LA City (South Central/Watts) PUMA, CA." *Census Reporter*, 2018, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/79500US0603751-los-angeles-county-south-central-la-city-south-centralwatts-puma-ca/>.
8. "Economic diversity and student outcomes at the University of Southern California." *The Upshot*, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/university-of-southern-california>.
9. Andrea Klick, "BBCM closes in wake of USC Village restaurant lawsuits." *Daily Trojan*, August 29, 2019, <https://dailytrojan.com/2019/08/29/bbcm-closes-in-wake-of-usc-village-restaurant-lawsuits/>

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- Marziali, Carl. "Is USC's New "Village" Really for Everyone?" *LA Weekly*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.laweekly.com/is-uscs-new-village-really-for-everyone/>.
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