GOOD

Finding Tarzan at the Sanitation Department

by Nicola Twilley

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“We’d rather people forgot about us,” says Matthew Coolidge, Director of the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), when I call with what I think is good news: I’ve been assigned to write a feature on the CLUI for good.

CLUI’s deliberate inconspicuousness extends to its name, which sounds like a particularly fusty governmental bureau, as well as to its headquarters, an anonymous storefront next to the equally obscure Museum of Jurassic Technology, on Venice Boulevard in Los Angeles. Before the CLUI moved in, in 1996, the building was a medical forensic lab—apparently somewhat haphazardly dismantled, as its former tenants subsequently came back with a hazmat team to retrieve various body parts, including “Mr. Chin’s bowel.” Copies of the Forensic Examiner, a trade journal, still flop through the mailbox on a quarterly basis.

This all seems strangely appropriate, given that the CLUI’s work consists of the study and interpretation of frequently overlooked yet telling traces left by humans on the American landscape. Rather than fingerprints and ballistics analysis, though, the CLUI examines the physical marks made by waste disposal, parking, and petro-chemical processing, surveying and documenting features as ubiquitous as Jersey barriers and as singular as the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. Coolidge and his associates then select the most unusual or exemplary sites for entry into their ever-expanding Land Use Database, which serves as the basis for thematic exhibitions and epic bus tours that frequently sell out in less than 15 minutes.

To deflect my questions away from the CLUI itself, and redirect my attention onto the landscape where he believes it belongs, Coolidge allows me to tag along on an exploratory research expedition, the first stage in assembling a self-guided tour of the Center’s immediate urban context. We are joined by CLUI associates and collaborators Erik Knutzen and Ben Loescher.

Armed only with a manila folder stuffed full of clippings, archive photos, and annotated printouts from Wikimapia, our first stop is the median strip on the 9500 block of Venice Boulevard. With cars racing past on

either side, we negotiated our way through scrubby bushes and Styrofoam cups to find the site of one of the most lethal gasoline pipeline explosions in United States history. In June, 1976, a construction crew working on a road-widening project sliced through a Standard Oil petroleum pipeline that was 18 inches nearer the surface than expected. The resulting explosion, Coolidge explains, destroyed the north side of the block and killed nine people. In response to the disaster, California instituted its now-standard DigAlert system, a warning code whose red (electric), green (sewers), orange (communications), and yellow (gas) spray-paint markings are visible (although largely overlooked) on concrete and blacktop across the state, inscribing our subterranean infrastructure on Earth's surface.

The effect of this information is hard to describe. One minute I'm standing in a nondescript median, surrounded by six lanes of traffic and looking at the skinnier cousin of a fire hydrant; the next, I'm situated at the very center of some sort of infrastructural navel, from which a tangled tracery of colored lines, arrows, and numbers radiates outward across the streets of California.

CLUI specializes in this brand of perceptual revelation, in which a previously overlooked site is made not only visible, but also legible as a guide to understanding larger, nationwide systems. In a recent exhibition on the oil fields of Los Angeles, the CLUI documented active derricks camouflaged behind sound-absorbing floral jackets in high-school grounds and artificial drilling islands designed by a Disney theme park engineer and named after dead astronauts; taken as a whole, the system sucks 28 million barrels of crude out from under the city each year. By simply presenting its straight-forward documentary descriptions and photographs of the city's pumpjacks and well heads, the CLUI is not only inviting us to marvel at the vast and ingenious petrochemical infrastructure our society has built, but also to consider more nuanced ideas: the ways in which the price of a barrel of oil physically reshapes the landscape; the irony that Los Angeles' crude is too sticky and thick to use for much else than making yet more asphalt; the decision-making apparatus that allows us to simply discard chunks of land as environmental sacrifice zones; and the perceptual adaptation that allows us, for the most part, to ignore oil-field methane vents disguised as bollards in a Ross parking lot.

Continuing south, Coolidge, Knutzen, Loescher, and I cross the other half of Venice and arrive at Culver City's Main Street—said to be the shortest in the world at just 320 feet. Coolidge directs our attention to the double-yellow centerline. For two-thirds of the street, the line is shiny and freshly painted, while on the third nearest Venice Boulevard, it's a colorless ghost of its former self. The shift is abrupt and, Coolidge explains, marks the border between the City of Culver City and the City of Los Angeles. We spend the next couple of hours tracing the overlapping and disputed operational boundaries of the two cities, collecting evidence of parking-meter differentiation, a borderline telecommunications switching office, and a post-office landgrab.

Such confusions are common in Los Angeles, where an investigation by LAist, in 2007, showed that only two out of the city's 15 council members could provide a map of the official boundaries of the neighborhoods in their districts, and one of those maps came with the disclaimer that is was for "historical reference" only. For the CLUI, however, these discrepancies are not something to be resolved, but relished: The lines we draw around the edges of a place often provide the clearest view of the framework we are using to define it. In the same vein, their Centers of the USA exhibit is a mobile trailer that is currently in transit between the geographic center of the contiguous United States, north of Lebanon, Kansas, and the new population center of the United States, near Plato, Missouri. Inside, various displays depict and describe several of the other "Centers" of the nation, such as the geodetic center, in Lucas, Kansas, and the geographic center of the entire country, near Belle Fourche, South Dakota. The overall effect is to prompt a pleasant sense of wonderment at the various ways we have developed to mark and measure the national landscape, and the blind spots, biases, and priorities necessarily embedded in each.

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Finally, we wander down to the Ballona Creek, an overgrown concrete storm drain that used to be one of the Los Angeles River's channels until the river changed course during a major flood in 1825. Coolidge points out the Culver City Sanitation Department's transfer station, which sits atop the former site of Tarzan's jungle. Gone with the Wind, Rebecca, Hogan's Heroes, and the original King Kong were also all filmed "on location" on cheap, flood-prone land next to the Ballona Creek, although the sets are long gone, having been replaced in 1976 by an industrial park (in a lovely twist, the remnants of the set of Tara were shipped "back" to their fictional point of origin, in Atlanta, Georgia). The CLUI has a long-standing research interest in documenting places that stand in for other places, as well as the models and sets we construct to mimic other, "real" places, for the insights these sites offer into how we, collectively and cinematically, imagine the world to be (as opposed to how it actually is).

As we circle back to the CLUI's headquarters, we discuss the first dam failure captured live on TV, Michael Jackson, and a fevered masterplan drawn by Los Angeles' 1950s Transportation Department that shows a series of never-built freeways—encountering each through the traces they have left on the present-day landscape of Culver City. I feel as though a cloudy film has been stripped away from my eyeballs. An afternoon spent with the CLUI has recalibrated my perceptual apparatus, and suddenly I see everything—public art, manhole covers, and even the Krav Maga self-defense studio on the corner. The landscape pulses with potential meaning. This heightened sense of awareness—the ability to notice the marks we leave on Earth's surface and listen to the stories they can tell us—is the real goal of the CLUI's work.

Which, of course, is why Coolidge fooled me into writing about the CLUI by writing about the landscape around it.