

Lakewood, California

Postwar Suburbia in the 21st Century

Anna Read
CRP 6052
Prof. Forsyth
May 6, 2009

Introduction

In 1950, the Lakewood Park Corporation purchased 3,500 acres of land in Los Angeles County from the Montana Land Company for \$8.9 million. Within three years the land, formerly bean and sugar beet fields, would have 17,500 homes ranging in size from 800 to 1,100 square feet, and nearly 80,000 people (Baker, et al. 2004, 29). Branded “Tomorrow’s City Today,” the new city, with its small and reasonably priced homes (mortgage payments could be as low as \$43 a month, down payments as low as \$195 for veterans), appealed to young, first-time homeowners, many of whom were veterans of World War II and the Korean War. It was the largest and fastest built of the post-war suburbs, with a house completed roughly every 7.5 minutes for the first six months of construction. The houses were built in “thirteen basic floor plans in the first phase of development and four variations of each, offering homebuyers a total of fifty-two different exteriors, for which there were thirty-nine different color combinations” (Baker, et al. 2004, 41). The city was centered around what was, at the time, the world’s largest regional shopping center (Baker 1999).

In the half century since it was developed, Lakewood has undergone significant changes, perhaps most clearly evidenced by the controversy surrounding the “Spur Posse,” a gang of high school boys accused of a number of crimes, which drew significant attention to Lakewood in 1993 (Didion 1993). It is no longer young, white, working class families (Didion 2003; Waldie 1996; Census 2000). This paper argues that, despite the changes in population, Lakewood, with its new motto “Times Change, Values Don’t,” has struggled to maintain this predictability as well as a place identity that is defined by the value set used to construct the original image of the suburb in the early 1950s. Attempting to maintain a community image and place identity based around values of a very different population and time period poses a significant challenge to Lakewood and its future. This paper examines the construction of Lakewood’s identity in the 1950s and how the city has struggled to maintain this image as the community continues to change. It finds that Lakewood is, in fact, a community that is changing, becoming both older and more diverse and, as a result, it is a community that is struggling to reconcile the old with the new, the conflict between the community’s image and its present day reality.

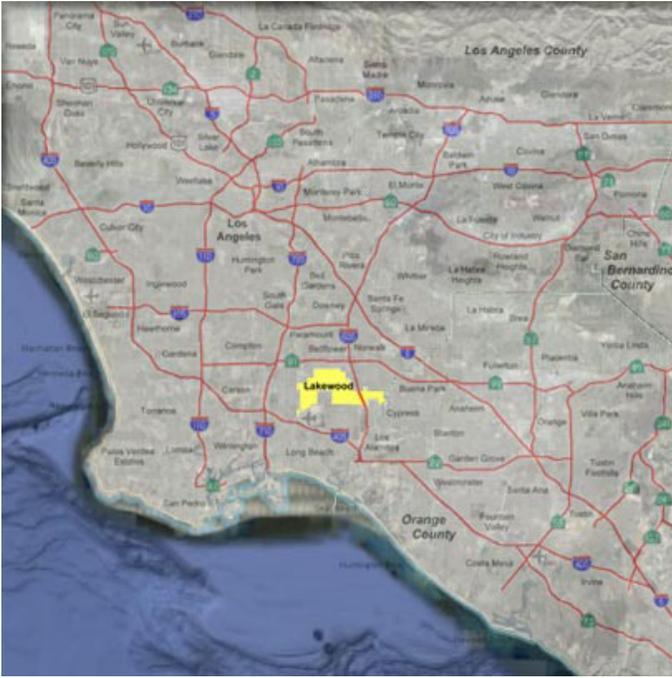
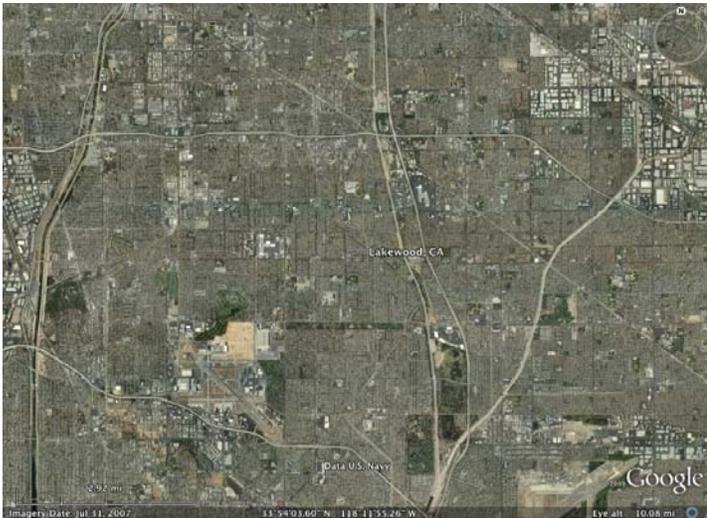


Image 1. Lakewood is located on an alluvial floodplain between the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers in Los Angeles County. It is bordered by Long Beach to the west and south, Bellflower to the north, and Cerritos to the east. Image: City of Lakewood and GoogleEarth.



Images 2,3, and 4. These images show Lakewood at 10 miles, 10,000 feet, and 5,000 feet. It is built on a on 3,500 acres of completely flat land. The average grade across Lakewood is less than one percent (Waldie 1996). The city is centered around a large regional shopping mall. Images: GoogleEarth.

A Brief History of Lakewood

Lakewood's original homes were built in the early 1940s (Image 6). Lakewood Village, as it was called, provided 1,100 houses for employees of the Douglas Aircraft manufacturing plant in Long Beach (Waldie 1996, 45). The village, located just two miles from the Douglas plant, was bordered by agricultural land owned by the Montana Land Company. In 1950, three men — Louis Boyar, S. Mark Taper, and Ben Weingart — founded the Lakewood Park Corporation and purchased this land from the Montana Land Company to build “The \$250 million Planned Community” (Baker, et al. 2004).

Lakewood was very much a product of its time. Lakewood, like Levittown before it, was part of a broader cultural transition in the postwar period. Joan Didion describes it as

the perfect synergy of time and place, the seamless confluence of World War II and the Korean War and the G.I. Bill and the defense contracts that began to flood Southern California as the Cold War set in. Here on this raw acreage on the floodplain between the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers was where two powerfully conceived national interests, that of keeping the economic engine running and that of creating an enlarged middle or consumer class, could be seen to converge (Didion 2003, 104).

Boyar, Taper, and Weingart capitalized on this “perfect synergy,” taking advantage of the New Deal era National Housing Act and G.I. Bill provisions. Section 213 of the National Housing Act provided financing for nonprofit cooperatives of up to 501 homes built on formerly rural lands. The developers then created cooperatives by having Lakewood Park Corporation employees buy homes. These cooperatives, which were disbanded after Section 213 financing was secured, then paid dummy corporations (200-300 of them) run by the developers. This system allowed the developers to both take advantage of this financing opportunity and make a sizeable profit (Baker, et al. 2004, Hayden 2004).

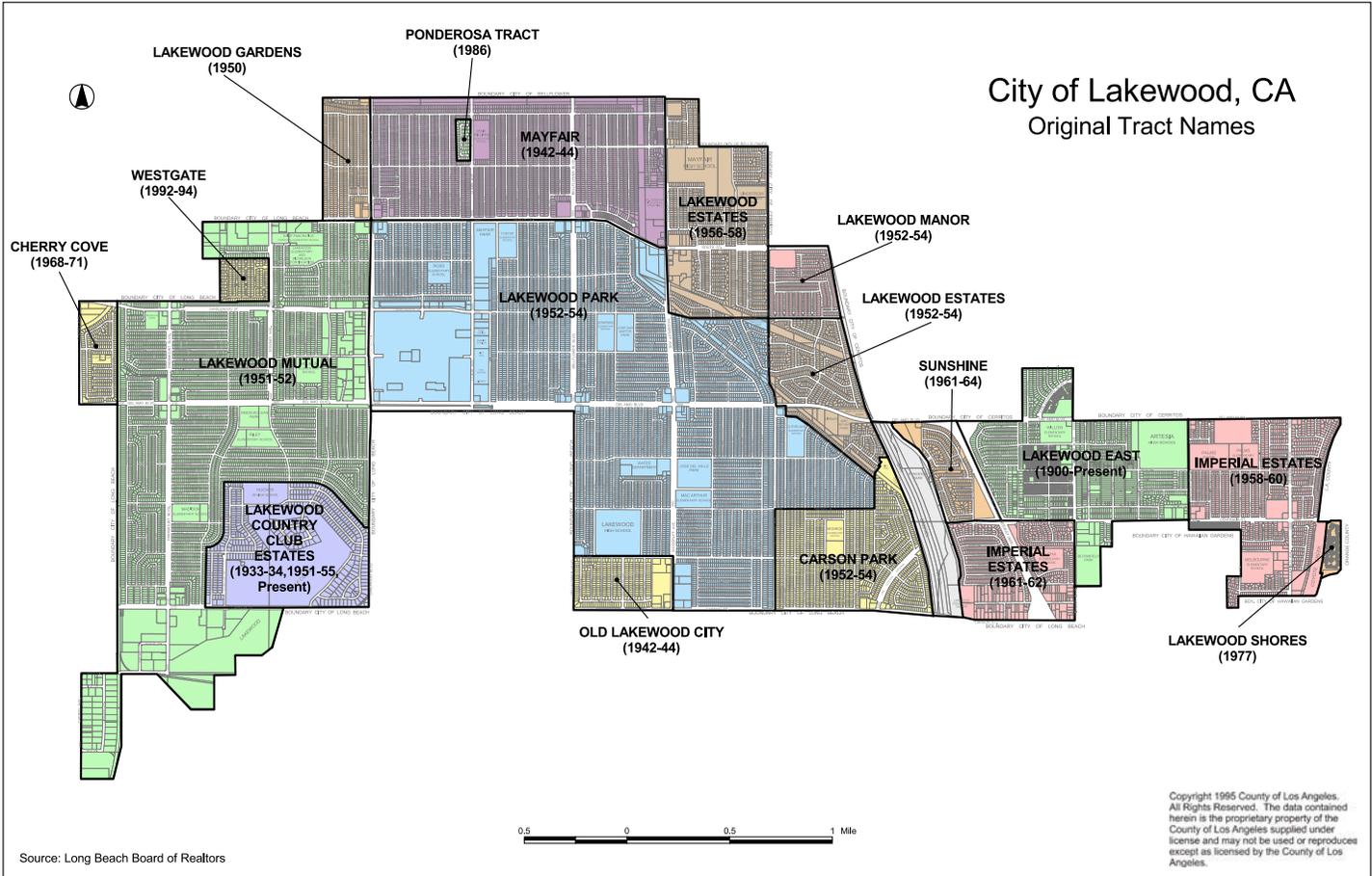
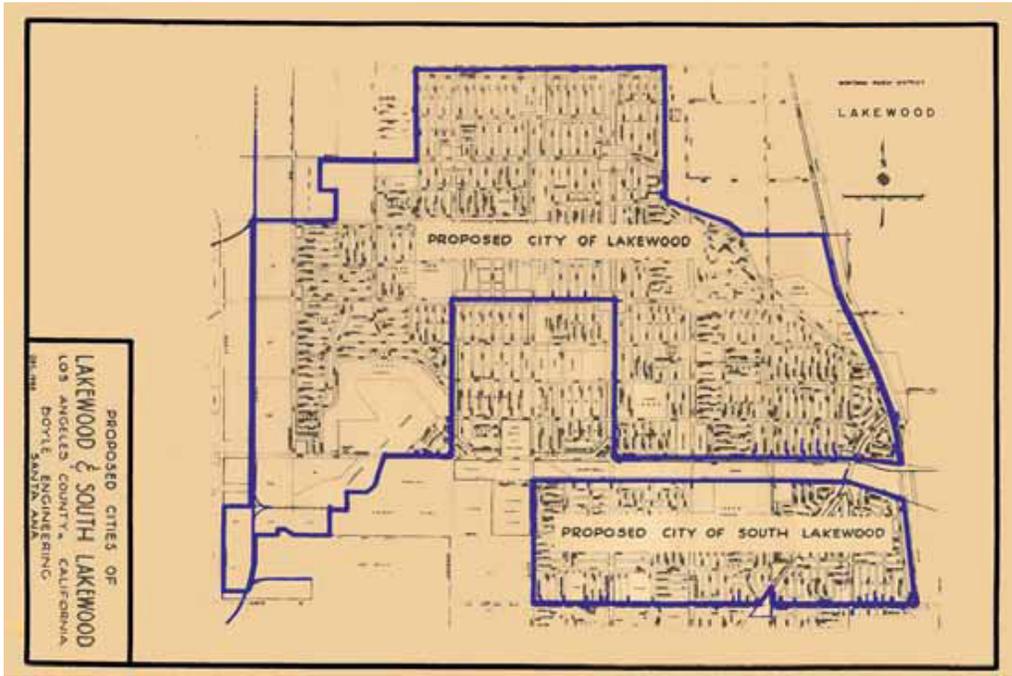


Image 5. (Top) This map shows Lakewood’s boundary when it was incorporated in 1954. The city has since annexed surrounding developments. It also shows the proposed City of South Lakewood, which was never incorporated. Source: Baker, et al. 2004.

Image 6. (Bottom) This map shows the original neighborhoods of Lakewood and when they were built. The original development, Old Lakewood City, has 1,100 homes that were built for employees of the Douglas Aircraft plant. Lakewood Park is the primary area developed by Boyer, Weingart, and Taper under the Lakewood Park Corporation. Image: City of Lakewood.

In addition to capitalizing on Section 213 financing, the developers planned the community carefully, in a way that would support these national interests of keeping the economic engine going and enlarging the consumer class, centering their new development around Lakewood Center, a large regional shopping mall (Image 13). The mall, set on 256 acres, was anchored by May Co., a large department store, and had parking for 10,580 cars (Waldie 1996). The city was also planned with neighborhood schools (operated by the Long Beach Unified School District), thirty-seven community playgrounds, and ten larger parks throughout the city (Image 5). It also included sixteen small shopping centers in walking distance of the neighborhoods.

Prospective homebuyers flocked to the Lakewood sales office, which opened in April of 1950. Within a month, over 200,000 people had visited Lakewood, and 1,000 homes had been sold. The sales office was open from 9 am to 10 pm seven days a week, and the 35 salesmen averaged between 30 and 50 home sales a day, with a record of 107 in an hour (Image 11) (Baker, et al. 2004). Seventy-five percent of houses were sold to first-time homeowners (Waldie 1996, 38).

The houses were two to three bedrooms, on lots that were 50 by 100 feet. Each of the seven models was advertised as having a number of “luxury features,” including “oak floors, a glass-enclosed shower, a stainless-steel double sink, a garbage disposal unit,” and “scientifically determined storage space” (Image 15) (Didion 2003, 104; Baker, et al. 2004, 41).



Image 7. The Lakewood Park Corporation hired photographer William Garnett to take aerial photographs of construction. As one long-time Lakewood resident decried it, seeing the land transformed from bean fields to tract housing was “like seeing a fairy tale take shape in front of your eyes... you just couldn’t believe it went up that fast” (City TC Lakewood 2009). The photographs, intended to promote Lakewood, were instead used by critics to denounce the development and others like it. Source: Getty Museum.

The houses in Lakewood were built using “innovative mass-production construction techniques” (Baker, et al. 2004, 32). A sort of assembly line was set up. Pre-fabricated parts were delivered by truck and assembled by the 4,000 construction workers the Lakewood Park Corporation employed (Image 10). The houses are made of wood frames, draped with chicken wire, and covered with three coats of stucco that are, in total, about an inch thick (Waldie 1996, 43).

By 1953, the 17,500 homes the original plan called for had all been constructed (an additional 5,000 would eventually be built) and Lakewood had a growing population. Neighboring Long Beach began to express interest in annexing portions of Lakewood, particularly the neighborhood including and surrounding Lakewood Center. A 1953 study entitled “Should Lakewood Annex to Long Beach?” written by Long Beach’s assistant city manager concluded that annexation would be beneficial to both cities (Wentz 1952). However, both residents and Lakewood’s developers were opposed to annexation, and there were several hard fought political battles between the two cities. In order to resist future annexation pressure from Long Beach, Lakewood incorporated in 1954 (Image 18). There was some political opposition to incorporation, in large part, because Lakewood contracted with Los Angeles County for its public services and there was concern that, should the city incorporate, it would be unable to provide these services (Image 19) (City of Lakewood 2009b).



Image 8. Many of Lakewood’s early residents were veterans returning from World War II and Korea. Veterans were offered special deals on houses, including lower down payments. Source: Family photo.



Image 9. This Douglas F-3D fighter jet in Del Valle Park serves as a memorial to both the Korean and Vietnam wars, and as a symbol of Lakewood’s close relationship with the Long Beach McDonnell Douglas Plant. Source: http://activerain.com/image_store/uploads/



Image 10. Houses in Lakewood were built quickly, using new construction techniques. They were largely pre-fabricated and assembled on site. Source: City of Lakewood Image Archives.



Image 11. Prospective buyers visit the seven model homes in Lakewood in 1951. Houses sold very quickly, with an average of 30 to 50 new homes being sold per day. Source: City of Lakewood Image Archives.



Image 12. There were seven models of houses built in Lakewood. The houses 2 or 3 bedrooms and were between 800 and 1,100 square feet. Source: City of Lakewood Image Archives.



Image 13. Lakewood is centered around the Lakewood Center Mall, which was the largest shopping mall in the world in 1954 at 255 acres. Source: City of Lakewood Image Archives.

As a result, the Lakewood Plan was devised. Approved by voters in March of 1954, the Lakewood Plan allowed the city “to retain local control of its government, including the setting of policies and budgets, while contracting with Los Angeles County for existing services and remaining in existing special districts” (Baker, et al. 2004). Under the Lakewood Plan, which was the first plan of its kind, the city established a city government and a municipal water district, but continued to contract out police, fire, and waste management services, as well as its library and school district (Image 16). Today, similar plans are used by many cities in Southern California (City of Lakewood 2009).

The Lakewood Plan and the addition of the Sky Knight helicopter surveillance program (the first 24-hour helicopter surveillance system in the United States) in the 1960s helped play into Lakewood’s image as “Tomorrow’s City Today” (Images 20 and 21). Campaigns and propaganda for the incorporation, including the 1953 film, *The Lakewood Story*, reinforced the “strong community identity and pride” that Lakewood residents had (Baker 1999, 54). This strong community image had been carefully manufactured and constructed along with the 17,500 houses that lined Lakewood’s 133 miles of road. The creation of Lakewood’s image, and the difference between this image and the reality of daily life, will be further explored in the following section.



Image 14. This picture, staged by a Life Magazine photographer, shows families moving into their new homes in Lakewood. By the end of 1950, nearly half the homes in the new development had been purchased. Source: Baker, et al., 2004.



Image 15. Lakewood’s homes were advertised as having luxury features, but were fairly simple on the interior. Source: Family photo.

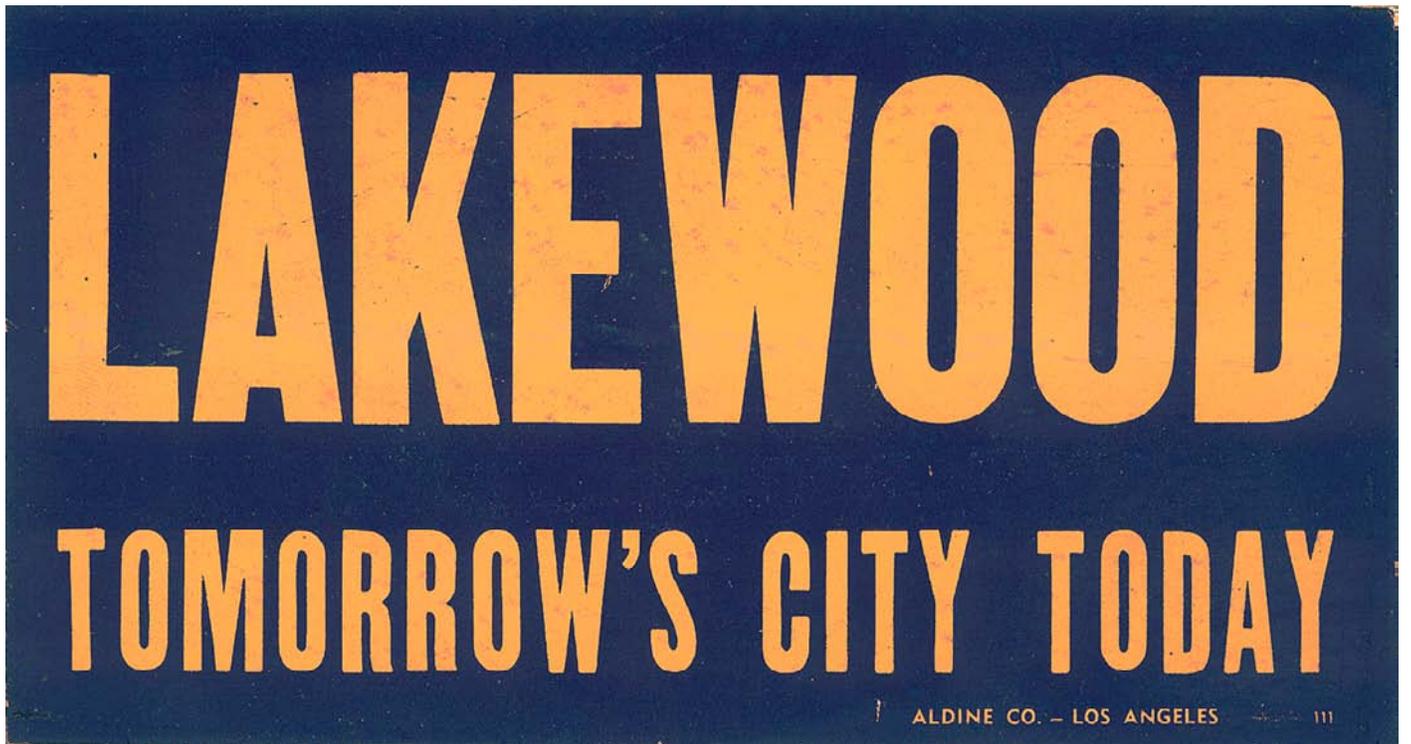


Image 16. “Tomorrow’s City Today” was used as a pro-incorporation slogan, replacing, “the city as new as tomorrow.” This 1954 bumper sticker was used to show support for the Lakewood Plan. Source: City of Lakewood.

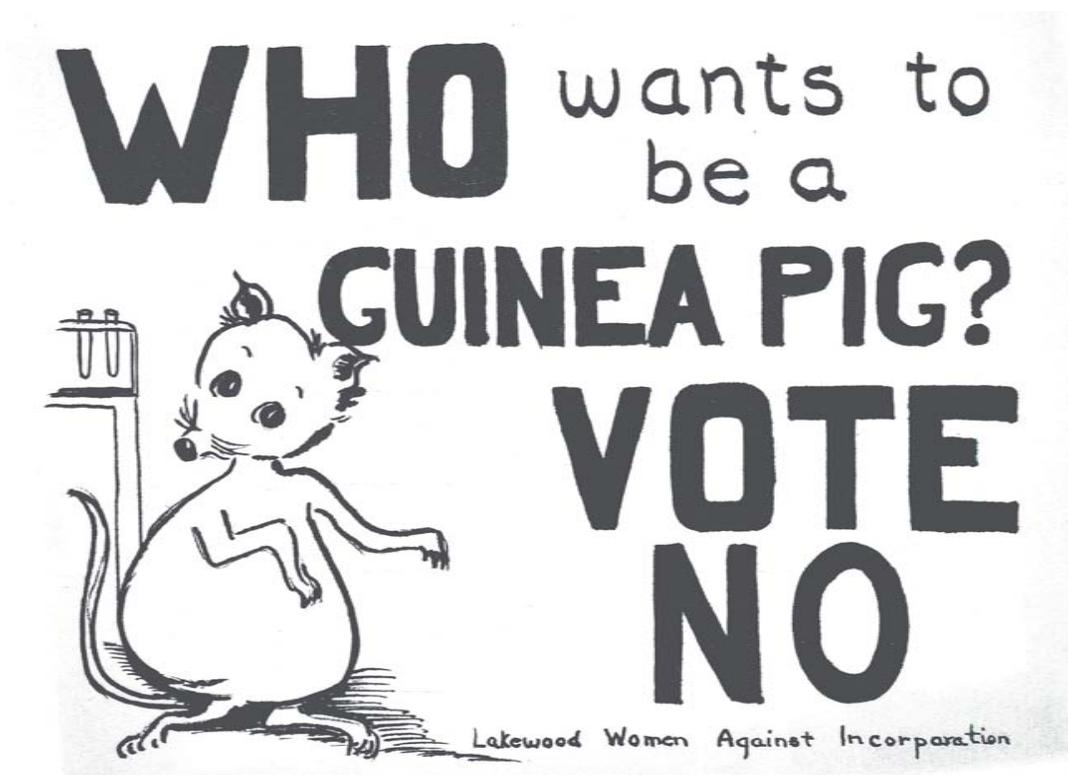


Image 17. The incorporation process was not without opposition. The ballot measure to incorporate passed by some 2000 votes. Source: City of Lakewood.



Image 18. This newspaper headline celebrates Lakewood's incorporation in March of 1954, following a battle over annexation with neighboring Long Beach. Source: City of Lakewood Image Archives.



Image 19. Under the Lakewood Plan, the city had its own government and retains control of policies and budgets, but contracts with Los Angeles County for most of its public services. This 1959 picture shows sheriff's deputies at the Lakewood Sheriff's Station. Source: City of Lakewood Image Archives.



Images 20 and 21. The Sky Knight surveillance program has been providing Lakewood with 24-hour helicopter surveillance since 1966. Many people believe that it reduces crime and makes Lakewood a safer place to live. Source: City of Lakewood Image Archives.

Tomorrow's City Today: Creating an Iconic Post-War Suburb

In 1951, the Lakewood Park Corporation's sales manager famously described Lakewood, saying "We sell happiness in homes" (Waldie 1996, 49). Buying a home in Lakewood — 1,100 square feet on an eighth of an acre — was more than just buying a house. New homeowners were also sold a way of life, a carefully constructed community identity. Lakewood was portrayed as the ideal city for young families and first time homeowners, for veterans returning from World War II and Korea. New residents described themselves as "pioneers at the suburban frontier," and the city was marketed with slogans like "Dreaming of the Good Life?...Living in Beautiful Lakewood is More than Owning a Home...It is a New and Better Way of Living." The Lakewood Park Corporation sold "tight-knit neighborhoods and a small-town sense of community" (Baker, et al. 2004, 39-40; 42).

This community identity was carefully created and marketed around "values" and what Allison Baker, a historian who conducted extensive interviews with Lakewood's original residents and their children, calls "the recreational good life." She defines this as "a set of ideals associated with postwar suburban living — among them, economic prosperity, family togetherness, ownership of a single family home, and a leisured lifestyle" (1999, 5). These ideals or values were frequently brought up in her discussions with Lakewood residents, who noted that the community was unified around raising children, the commonalities residents shared as young parents and veterans, and the city parks and the recreational programs that accompanied them. Baker argues that organized recreation, and the "team-spirit" mentality that accompanies it, played a particularly central role in the creation of Lakewood's community identity:

This "team-spirit" mentality was built on the ideal of a racially and socioeconomically homogeneous community of white, middle-class homeowners and based on the image of Lakewood as a model planned community with plentiful parks and recreation facilities, the ideal setting for the recreational Good Life (1999, 55).



Image 22. This sign advertises the Lakewood sales office. The image of the cowboy plays to the idea of “pioneers at the suburban frontier.” Source: Baker, et al. 2004.

Due to the number of World War II and Korean War veterans who had settled in Lakewood, many of whom were employed by Douglas Aircraft or other Southern California defense manufacturers, there was also a certain patriotism inherent to the local culture. Homeownership came to be seen as “part of the reward for wartime service to the country (Kelly 1993, 16). This patriotism played into the idea of Lakewood as the “all-American town,” the perfect place for the young, newly middle-class family looking to buy a piece of the American dream (Image 23). As Alida Brill puts it in her article, “Lakewood: ‘Tomorrowland’ at 40,” “Lakewood was a town deeply invested in the notion that it was the perfect family town, whose planners had apparently thought of everything... If Lakewood were not the modern utopian community, it would have to do until the real thing came along” (Brill 1996, 99).

The anti-annexation campaign in 1953 and the subsequent incorporation campaign in 1954 both played a large role in the shaping of Lakewood’s image. The Lakewood Story, a 1953 pro-incorporation film, depicted Lakewood as “the Southern California suburban incarnation of the American dream.” It promoted the ideals Baker describes in defining the “recreational good life,” and warned that annexation could fundamentally alter the nature of the community (Baker 1999, 53). The incorporation campaign rallied residents around the image of Lakewood as the ideal Southern California town, helping to create a strong community identity and strengthen the vision of Lakewood as the developers had always intended it.

For many of the young families, who came primarily from the Midwest and the South, Lakewood did represent a kind of utopian ideal. It offered them homes they could afford, a safe place for their children to play, and “the California dream of year-round outdoor living” (Baker, et al. 2004). It was in close proximity to the industries where many of the men worked, including the McDonnell Douglas Plant and the Long Beach Naval Complex. The experiences of many new residents “reinforce[d] the conviction that economic and social mobility worked exclusively upward” (Didion 2003, 106). This, in turn, helped perpetuate Lakewood’s value-based image and cultural mythology.



Image 23. Lakewood was sold as the perfect community for young families and first-time homeowners. Source: Family photo.

The reality of living in Lakewood differed from the image of the city that new residents were buying. In the first few lines of *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*, DJ Waldie writes “He thought of them as middle class even though 1,100 square foot tract houses meeting at right angles are not middle class at all. Middle-class houses are the homes of people who would not live here” (1996, 1). Barbara Kelly, in her book *Expanding the American Dream*, describes 1,100 square foot tract houses: “the houses were a reduction of the pre-war middle-class house to a culturally acceptable minimum that made it affordable for a market that was younger and less affluent than its pre-war home-owning counterpart” (Kelly 1993, 11).

Lakewood was, in every way, a suburb for the new consumer class. As Didion puts it, “Lakewood exists because at a given time in a different economy it seemed an efficient idea to provide population density for the mall and a labor pool for the Douglas plant.” She goes on to describe Lakewood and similar towns in Southern California, saying “when times were good and there was money to spread around, these were the towns that proved Marx wrong, that managed to increase the proletariat and simultaneously, by calling it the middle class, to co-opt it” (1993, 64).

Lakewood came under scrutiny for many of the same problems of other suburbs of its time, including Levittown. In Lakewood as in Levittown, Whyte’s criticism of suburbs as a new social institution can be applied. By advertising a way of life in addition to a home (selling not just housing, but happiness), Whyte argues that these suburbs produce a more communal way of life than anything before it. At some point, Whyte says, this idea of a communal existence becomes conformity (Whyte 1956).

Kelly, like Whyte, discusses the conformity of life in tract housing suburbs, arguing that the design of the houses, along with the marketing schemes supported “a return to traditional values” and “a traditional family life.” While she criticizes such developments for being designed to meet “the economic need for standardization and the political need for conformity,” she acknowledges that many veterans, just home from World War II or Korea, the conformity and uniformity was “not an uncomfortable fit,” but instead familiar and reassuring (Kelly 1993, 59; 63; 60).

Gans, focusing on Levittown, argues that the conformity so criticized by Whyte should instead be seen as compatibility. People are choosing to live with others with whom they have shared interests and experiences. He further counters Whyte, saying that the basic way of life is not changed by moving to the suburbs, but that people establish traditional communities and institutions within an environment that is physically new (Gans 1967). In Lakewood, the reestablishment of traditional institutions and values manifested itself largely in the recreational culture and organized sports activity.

In the case of Lakewood, as with many other communities of the time, conformity and homogeneity were not just a result of lifestyle choices made by residents, but decisions made by the developers (Image 19). The Lakewood Park Corporation instructed salesmen to discourage prospective minority homeowners from buying in Lakewood and refused to sell to unmarried couples

(Baker, et al. 2004). These practices ensured that the developers could maintain a homogeneous community that would allow them to continue to sell an image of compatibility and community.

Lakewood has also come under criticism for being centered around private rather than public space (Hayden 2004). The Lakewood Center Mall was not only the physical center of the community, but a social one as well. It “offered the goods that new residents might need and drew in outside customers...a private mall became a public landmark, pointing to the direction real estate would soon take across the country” (Hayden 2004, 277). In addition to the mall serving as a primary public space, and despite Lakewood’s recreational culture, the parks were small (the developers had resisted putting in recreational amenities). Additional “public” space was provided in smaller shopping centers located within walking distance of all neighborhoods, and life was centered around the individual family home.

Baker argues that “recreation functioned as a means of mediating the contradictions between the images and the realities of living in Lakewood...the realities of economic struggles, exclusion and discrimination against racial and religious minorities, gender inequities, family and youth anxieties...” (Baker 1999, 55). Waldie states that “in a suburb that is not exactly middle class, the necessary illusion is predictability” (1996, 2). Recreation and the “good life” that surrounded it, along with the sense that life in Lakewood was predictable helped create a strong “cultural mythology” for the community (Images 24 and 25). This, in turn, created a sense of security among residents.



Image 24. Lakewood has been criticized for being homogenous and conformist. But, to many of its residents, this simply meant that they were living with people with whom they were compatible. This picture is of the Mayfair Park Square Dancers in 1956. Source: City of Lakewood Image Archives.



Image 25. The image of Lakewood as an all-American town was carefully cultivated by its founders. Recreational activities became important in creating this image. This 1958 picture shows the winner of an annual yo-yo contest. Source: City of Lakewood Image Archives.

Baker, Brill, and Joan Didion each discuss how the central role of recreational activities and patriotism, along with the close ties the community had with the defense manufacturing industry, had in the creation of Lakewood's community identity led to an engendered culture, or what Brill calls "Lakewood's mystique of masculinity" (Baker 1999; Brill 1996, 103; Didion 1993). As Didion puts it: "...the preferred resident was in fact an adolescent or postadolescent male, ideally one already married and mortgaged, in harness to the plant, a good worker, a steady consumer, a team player, someone who played ball, a good citizen" (1993, 64).

As a result of this same culture came the idea that the role of women was in the home, as wives and mothers. Their job was to raise the ideal citizen, the young men that were the future of the community. Baker, in speaking with Lakewood's original residents, found that "the mothers' significant roles as total volunteers and community networkers" was emphasized (1999, 56).

This view of women's roles was not unique to Lakewood and was forcefully critiqued by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan argues that the idea of the suburban housewife and its centrality in American cultural imagery combined with the isolating nature of the suburb led to a self-perpetuating suburban culture in which women felt that they had to live up to the image and were prevented "from doing the work of which they are capable" (Friedan 1963, 302).

While life in Lakewood often differed from the image of the ideal community so carefully crafted by Lakewood's developers, residents of Lakewood continued to buy into and believe in this image. Brill argues that Lakewood's image — its cultural mythology — and its residents' strong belief in this image, made Lakewood "the cultural accident waiting to happen" (Brill 1996, 99). The accident came in March 1993, nearly 40 years after Lakewood's original 17,500 houses were completed.

The Spur Posse: National Spotlight on Lakewood's Changing Image

In 1993, Lakewood was cast into the national spotlight with the arrests of the Spur Posse. The "Spurs," as they called themselves, were a group of between 20 and 30 current and former Lakewood High School students, many of them football players, who were charged with "ten counts of rape by intimidation, four counts of unlawful sexual intercourse, one count of forcible rape, one count of oral copulation, and one count of lewd conduct with an minor under the age of fourteen" (Didion 2003, 110). In addition to these charges, there were 31 felony charges, including burglary, theft, and check forging, brought against 15 of the Spurs, and incidents involving the harassment of girls and younger children, who were terrified of the Spur Posse members (Baker 1999, Didion 1993). The media descended upon Lakewood, and the members of the Spur Posse and their parents were invited to be guests on a number of talk shows.

The arrests of the Spur Posse generated a range of reactions in Lakewood. Residents were incensed that at the media, accusing them of blowing the incident out of proportion. Many in the media and in communities outside of Lakewood were questioning how this could happen in the perfect family town and how the parents of both the boys and the girls listed as victims could seem to condone the actions of the Spur Posse. Jane Gross, a New York Times reporter covering the incident, found parents of several of the Posse's members to be "downright boastful about their sons" (1993).

Baker argues that "the media seized upon the story as a symbol of the declining American community, proof that suburbia is a place of immorality, violence, and questionable "family values"" (1999, 1-2). This view, and the articles in national news sources portraying Lakewood as the epitome of suburban social problems and the decline of the American community sparked "self-examination and defensiveness among the community." Community members used "nostalgic contrasts," questioning what was happening and claiming it could never have happened in the Lakewood of the "good-old days." (Baker 1999, 2).

Didion, in her New Yorker essay "Letter from California: Trouble in Lakewood," writes that the community, in their comments and defenses of Spur Posse members "seemed to be referring to a

cultural misery apprehended only recently and then dimly...a sense of being besieged, set upon, by forces outside local control.” She goes on to say that the arrests of these boys, athletic standouts who were popular at Lakewood High School, brought about

a sense that something in town had gone wrong...Almost everyone agreed that this was a town in which what had been considered the definition of good parenting — the encouragement of assertive behavior in male children — had for some reason got badly out of hand (1993, 52).

The Spur Posse incident came on the heels of a large change in Lakewood. The defense manufacturing turned aerospace industry in Southern California was in decline, with jobs and manufacturing being relocated to states with lower wages and less stringent regulations. “The men of Lakewood are angry, unemployed or underemployed, and split apart by economic and racial tensions. The rise of the Spur Posse seemed to be an obvious outlet for an already damaged sense of self” (Brill 1996, 101).

The community was unable to reconcile the incidents related to the Spur Posse with its long-standing image of itself, an image Brill calls “so deeply cherished in the contemporary reality that it is difficult to comprehend” (Didion 1993; Brill 1996, 99). The Spur Posse challenged this identity, and it did so on a national stage. It brought problems to light that could no longer be overlooked or ignored, and it made it clear that Lakewood was no longer a safe small town, but a contemporary city that was changing and struggling to reconcile the dissonance between its image of itself as an idealized version of 1950s Americana and the reality of a 1990s community facing real challenges.

Times Change, Values Don't: An Identity Crisis in a Changing Community

Brill, in describing the view that many residents of Lakewood hold of their community says that "Many residents simply refuse to move beyond the entrenched mythology" (1996, 99). She continues saying

More than 40 years after its incorporation as an independent city, the prongs of Lakewood's ethos, both cultural and economic, remain focused on values relevant in the 1950s — families and children, the safety of parks...and the expectations of a variety of middle-class entitlements...Lakewood remains most obsessed with its borders, hoping that it will somehow preserve its largely homogeneous, not racially or ethnically diverse, population or residents (Brill 1996, 100-101).

In Holy Land, Waldie writes "Most things here are close enough for comfort." He says "the houses are close enough that you might hear, if you listened, a neighbor's baby cry, a father arguing with a teenage son, or a television playing early on a summer night" (1996, 134). Here, Waldie captures one of the essential problems. As Lakewood changes, things are becoming too close for comfort for many of the Lakewood's residents, who cling to an image of a city of another era.



Image 26. In the 1950s and 1960s, nearly half of Lakewood's population was under the age of 19. The average block had over 100 children under the age of 18 (Baker, et al. 2004). Source: Family Photo.

Baker argues that at the beginning of the 20th Century, the primary challenge that Lakewood faces is not one of decline, as many residents perceive it to be, but instead it is the challenge “of a community coming to terms with the tensions in its recreational good life which have been buried beneath the community’s extraordinarily well-developed mythology and team spirit-mentality” (1999, 51). She found that many residents in Lakewood raised concerns over “economic decline, increasing crime, the decline of the physical environment, and most of all, the sense of being invaded by outsiders, particularly nonwhites” (1999, 354).

In the 1950s, the community was almost entirely white (the 1960 census reported it to be 98.5 percent white). The average age of men was thirty-two years old and of women 26. The average block had nearly 100 children under the age of 18 (or as one resident described it “children galore”) (Waldie 1996; Baker, et al. 2004; City of Lakewood 2004). Over a quarter of the population in 1953 was under the age of 10, and nearly half were under the age of 19 (Image 21). The mean income was \$5,100 a year, \$2,000 above the national average (Waldie 1996).Lakewood’s population has become increasingly less homogeneous.

By 1990, only 72 percent of Lakewood’s 73,577 residents were white. The Hispanic population had grown to 15 percent of the total, while the African American population remained relatively low, at 4 percent (Waldie 1996, 158). By 2000, Lakewood was only 62.7 percent white, with nearly 23 percent of the population being of Hispanic origin. Nineteen percent of the population was foreign born and 15.5 percent spoke Spanish at home.

Table 1. Lakewood Population Profile, 1950s-2000

	1950-1960	1980	1990	2000
Total Population	67,126	74,654	73,577	79,345
White Population	98.5%	81.8%	72.0%	62.7%
Black Population	1.5%	2.0%	3.5%	7.3%
Hispanic Population	0.0%	11.6%	14.6%	23.0%
Median Age	29	31	33.8	35.3
Children under 19	45.0%	30.9%	27.3%	30.1%
Median Income	\$5,100	\$24,752	\$48,519	\$58,214
National Median Income	\$2,000	\$17,710	\$29,943	\$47,493

Sources: California Department of Finance, 2009; Waldie, 1996; Baker, et al. 2004; City of Lakewood (d) 2009; Census 2000; US Census Bureau.

The population is also aging, as many of Lakewood’s original residents and their children continue to live in the city. By 2000, the median age had increased to 35.3 years, and the percentage of the population under the age of 19 had dropped from nearly half to just over 30 percent. Children under the age of 10 had declined from 25 percent of the population to 15 percent. Meanwhile, people over the age of 60 have grown to 15.3 percent of the total population and nearly 22 percent of householders are over the age of 65 (Census 2000). Just over 34 percent of the population was not in the labor force, and only 20.6 percent had a college degree or higher, compared to a national average of nearly 25 percent (Census 2000). The median income remains above the national average at \$58,214 per year, compared to \$47,493 nationally (Census 2000).

In addition to changes in population, Lakewood has seen significant changes as a result of the downsizing of Southern California’s defense and aerospace industries. At its peak in 1987, the aerospace industry represented only two percent of all employment in the US, and 10 percent of all manufacturing jobs. In the Los Angeles area, aerospace accounted for 28 percent of the manufacturing jobs. But in the early 1990s, with a decrease in defense spending, the aerospace industry saw steep decline. Between 1990 and 1994, aerospace jobs in California declined by 40 percent. The Los Angeles area saw the number of aerospace manufacturing jobs reduced by nearly half, from 239,000 in 1987 to 121,000 in 1994 (Schoeni, et al. 1996).

The McDonnell Douglas plant, a long-time employer of Lakewood residents, began large layoffs at its Long Beach plant. Between 1990 and 1994, the Douglas Corporation reduced its workforce in Long Beach from 50,000 to 25,000, with almost 18,000 jobs lost in 1993 alone (Holmes 1996; Didion 2003). McDonnell Douglas merged with Boeing in 1997, resulting in a further reduction of its Long Beach operations (Boeing 2009). The Long Beach Naval Station and Shipyard, both part of the Long Beach Naval Complex, another major employer, were closed as part of the 1991 and 1995 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) rounds (DoD 2009). The closure of the Station and Shipyard resulted in the loss of 13,000 jobs between them. Along with the closure of other nearby military installations, the total job resulting from BRAC was nearly 27,000 jobs (Didion 2003; Sterngold, 1996).



Image 27. An aerial view of what remains of the McDonnell Douglas plant on the corner of Lakewood Boulevard and Carson Street. Source: GoogleEarth.

In 1999, Rockwell, a large aerospace company located in Orange County, relocated to the Midwest. The company, which had employed 40,000 people at its peak, including many Lakewood residents, closed its Southern California operations, eliminating the remaining 2,000 jobs (Huffstutter 1999). The downsizing of these jobs in a city that was built to support these very industries has had a profound effect on Lakewood. As Didion describes it, “people in Lakewood have defined their lives as Douglas” (1993, 65). Much of the Douglas plant was demolished the late 1990s and is now a field of rubble along Lakewood Boulevard (Image 27).

Lakewood is obviously changing, and these changes have been met with resistance by many community members. For its 50th anniversary in 2004, the city asked residents to write essays about their best memories of living in Lakewood. Many of these essays reflect, often implicitly, this resistance to change, a desire to keep Lakewood as it was, or at least to continue to view it in that light. A long-time Lakewood resident wrote “My husband...and I are greatly blessed and so proud to be residents of the beautiful city of Lakewood and we want to keep it that way” (City of Lakewood 2004).

Many residents, in these short essays, mentioned safety, and Lakewood’s small town feel. One resident reflected “I’m very happy to see that residents of Lakewood are still taking care of their homes, making Lakewood a safe and beautiful place to live.” Another says “The City of Lakewood is a place for raising a family...We hope future generations will be able to experience neighborhood togetherness and raising families in safe environments.” Recalling his childhood playing in Del Valle Park, where the Spur Posse had its “headquarters,” a resident wrote “there were no gangs in those days...just kids being kids and having a lot of fun. Our safety was never a concern to our parents” (City of Lakewood 2004).

Others reflected on the continued sense of belonging to a community or being part of something. Brill describes the importance of community in Lakewood, and the way residents perceived this community, saying that “perhaps because all of Lakewood began at the same time, it has the feeling of a club — the feeling that because everyone started out together, residents are entitled to lifetime ‘charter membership’” (1996, 107). One resident wrote “Lakewood has maintained...the feeling of belong to someplace special.” Another described this same idea of belonging, saying “Lakewood has continued to grow...but the spirit of brotherhood is as strong as ever.”

These responses and reflections by residents show this underlying tension between the past and the present. Baker argues that the recreational “Good Life” plays as significant a role in the community’s resistance to change as it did in the creation of the original community identity in the 1950s. Community events and celebrations, such as the annual Pan American Fiesta, “reinforce Lakewood’s community spirit and values in the context of its recreational culture” (1999, 356). She further states that “Lakewoodian’s team spirit functions to maintain the status quo and the 1950s values on which the community was founded, protecting the community from outside forces and outsiders.” This, combined with a fear that as the original residents of Lakewood die and relocate that “the original spirit of Lakewood is disappearing, allows the community to “den[y] the realities of change” (1999, 371; 358).

Waldie believes that “the community cannot be sustained if we continue as we are to be one group and one race. Lakewood will not continue as an all-white community; it cannot. Our survival depends on our ability to integrate with others” (Waldie as quoted in Brill 1999, 105). But, as Brill points out, this is not a predominant view: “Many see neither the inevitability nor the desirability of diversity” (1999, 105). The adoption of a new motto to in 2004 to celebrate the city’s 50th anniversary is perhaps the best evidence of this struggle. The new motto — “Times Change, Values Don’t” — indicates an attempt to cling to the traditional family and recreational values that defined the “good life” and were so central to the image of the community that the original residents were buying (Image 28). It shows a resistance to the changing population and shifting culture of Lakewood.

This change is only part of a larger public relations strategy by the city, which still uses values and community pride to portray and image of Lakewood as the ideal family community (Baker 1999, 363). This is evident, both on the city’s website and in the book, *The Lakewood Story: History, Tradition, Values*, published in 2004 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of incorporation.

This book states that while Lakewood faces the challenges of the 21st century and many of the problems afflicting other post-war Southern California suburbs, it has “entered its fiftieth year in 2004 with its community values largely intact, its civic traditions alive, and its shared stories ready for retelling to a new generation of residents.” It says that Lakewood never was and never will be “some kind of utopia,” but that the sense of place felt by residents is “durable enough to pass on habits of community involvement from parents who coached their sons and daughters in youth sports to those sons and daughters who are now coaching another generation” (Baker, et al. 2004, 207; 208). While this book recognizes some of the challenges facing Lakewood today, it argues that “history and community traditions,” along with values, have helped the community navigate problems in the past, including “cycles of recession, state government turmoil, and industrial downsizing that began in the 1970s.” (Baker, et al. 2004, 180). However, now in its 55th year, Lakewood may find that the community has changed significantly enough that looking to the past to address current challenges will create more problems than it solves.



Image 28. Signs on entrance to Lakewood display the city’s new motto. Source: City of Lakewood.

Conclusion

Now, as it celebrates its 55th anniversary, Lakewood is faced with challenges that it must confront as a community. It is no longer the community it was in 1954, yet it still clings to the cultural values of a bygone era. The community image created around these values was carefully crafted by Lakewood's developers and further developed during the 1954 incorporation campaign. Advertised as a "new way of living," buying a house in Lakewood was more than just buying a new home. New residents were also buying the community values and way of life that Lakewood offered, their individual piece of the American dream.

Though life in Lakewood was frequently at odds with its image as an ideal community for the young, middle-class family, the image has persisted. This has caused tensions in a city that has a changing population, one that is both aging and becoming more heterogeneous. In addition to a changing population, the defense manufacturing industries to which Lakewood was so closely tied, have slowly moved away, relocating to Seattle, St. Louis, and overseas.

These tensions between how the community defines itself and the realities of life in Lakewood were perhaps best displayed by the Spur Posse incident in 1993. The reporters commenting on the incident describe a sense that something had gone wrong, an attempt to assign blame to sources outside local control, and a general dissonance between how community members described Lakewood and the events that were unfolding (Didion 1993; Gross 1993).

Despite changes in the community, and the fact that these changes were discussed in the national spotlight, Lakewood has continued to cling to its image of itself as a small, all-American, family town, going so far as to change its slogan from "Tomorrow's City Today," to "Times Change, Values Don't." However, the values ascribed to the community are no longer relevant, yet they continue to define community life.

The changes Lakewood is facing are not atypical of communities in Southern California, which are rapidly becoming more diverse and aging. These cities are highly indicative of larger national trends and changes. As a result, it is increasingly important for Lakewood, as a community, to look beyond the city limits to address the complex issues currently facing it (Baker 1999).

The future of Lakewood is dependent upon reconciling a community identity rooted firmly in the past with the realities of the present.

Bibliographic Note

This paper draws heavily from historical information and data on Lakewood, both past and present, available on the City of Lakewood's website. Lakewood's website has impressive image and video archives, which were very useful, especially for information on Lakewood's history. This paper also looked at several local histories of Lakewood, including one published by the city for its 50th Anniversary in 2004, and several more critical histories, including Joan Didion's essays on Lakewood and DJ Waldie's memoir. It also uses census data and data on the defense manufacturing industry in Southern California to analyze and illustrate the changes that Lakewood has undergone in the last 55 years.

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