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Bringing local voices into community revitalization: engaged communication research in Urban planning

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ABSTRACT

The need to better engage low-income communities affected by revitalization of the built environment has been well documented in urban planning. Guided by communication infrastructure theory (CIT), this study presents a research project that made concerted efforts at engaging neighborhoods of Northeast Los Angeles that are experiencing rapid gentrification. The project was a partnership with a multi-sector collaborative working on the revitalization of the L.A. River and its surrounding communities. This paper specifically demonstrates how CIT's social ecological orientation was applied to seek input on L.A. River and community revitalization from storytelling networks made up of residents, small businesses, and local media. We also examine the impact of this engaged research on the organizational partners of the collaborative, and their views on community engagement in revitalization. Lastly, we discuss how the lessons learned broadly speak to future opportunities and challenges that aim for communicative planning approaches to urban revitalization.

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Introduction

Across cities nationwide, public and private efforts are being made to redevelop underutilized land into open space, recreational greenways, and natural habitats (Loughran, 2014; Wolch, Wilson, & Fehrenbach, 2005). Redevelopment efforts that focus on revitalizing urban areas have been criticized for not engaging local residents in the planning process, and intensifying fears of gentrification – the displacement of lower income communities that often leads to a change in a neighborhood's cultural character (Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2008; Zukin, 2009). Urban planning scholars have suggested that 'communicative planning' approaches that emphasize broader community engagement can shape policies that better align with the needs of residents (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002; Healey, 2003). In the context of revitalization along the Los Angeles River (L.A. River) and adjacent neighborhoods in Northeast Los Angeles (NELA), this engaged research project presents a communicative planning approach that is grounded in communication theory.

Environmentalists have advocated for the restoration of the natural habitat in the L.A. River area, since the 1938 Los Angeles Flood caused government agencies to channelize the River with concrete to prevent future flooding damage. In 2007, the L.A. River Revitalization Master Plan was launched, with regional support provided for the 51 miles of the River.¹ Revitalization plans included a particular, albeit limited, focus on the 10-mile stretch where the River could not be fully concretized; this is the study area for our engaged research project (see [Figure 1](#) for map). The outreach component of the 2007 master plan, however, was deemed insufficient on two counts: (1) outreach efforts did not focus enough on the 10-mile stretch that was designated as the prime area for natural habitat restoration; and (2) the efforts did not consider broader economic and community development policies to benefit low-income neighborhoods surrounding the River. As the forces of revitalization continue to concern residents of these neighborhoods, engagement methods that incorporate the visions of community stakeholders into planning processes are crucial.

Guided by communication infrastructure theory (CIT) (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001), a social ecological framework that is grounded in the notion that communities are discursively constructed, we examine the needs and visions of four types of community stakeholders in the NELA region: residents, small businesses, community organizations, and local media. As a theoretical framework, CIT's ecological orientation facilitates a textured, place-based investigation into the complex relationship between individuals and their environments. Methodologically, CIT encourages multi-method research, active fieldwork, and the establishment of academic-advocacy partnerships in order to meaningfully bridge research and practice.

Through this work we illustrate how communication theory and research can contribute an alternative to traditional top-down revitalization projects. Traditional urban planning executes mandatory outreach meetings designed to bring out locally concerned citizens to formal spaces within government buildings such as city hall (Healey, 1999). Our approach goes beyond the town-hall government sponsored meeting. This project goes out to the communities with the goal of integrating residents' and other community stakeholders' lived experiences and visions for their neighborhoods into urban planning processes.

We begin with a literature review on the communicative turn in planning and describe our approach guided by CIT. Next, we summarize the goals of the NELA Riverfront Collaborative project and the different roles and research methods within the collaborative. We discuss the findings that informed the planning goals of the collaborative, and conclude by discussing the implications of the findings for urban planning and policy, and communication research that is responsive to the needs of communities.

Urban revitalization and the communicative turn in planning

While urban revitalization stresses investment in underserved neighborhoods, scholars have critiqued the professional practices and outcomes of revitalization projects. Studies suggest that traditional revitalization practices are driven by the powerful elite of city governments and private developers (Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer, 2012; Stone, 1989). These studies point to elected officials and private developers who create a 'regime politics' of economic growth that broker real-estate deals beneficial to the power elite in cities

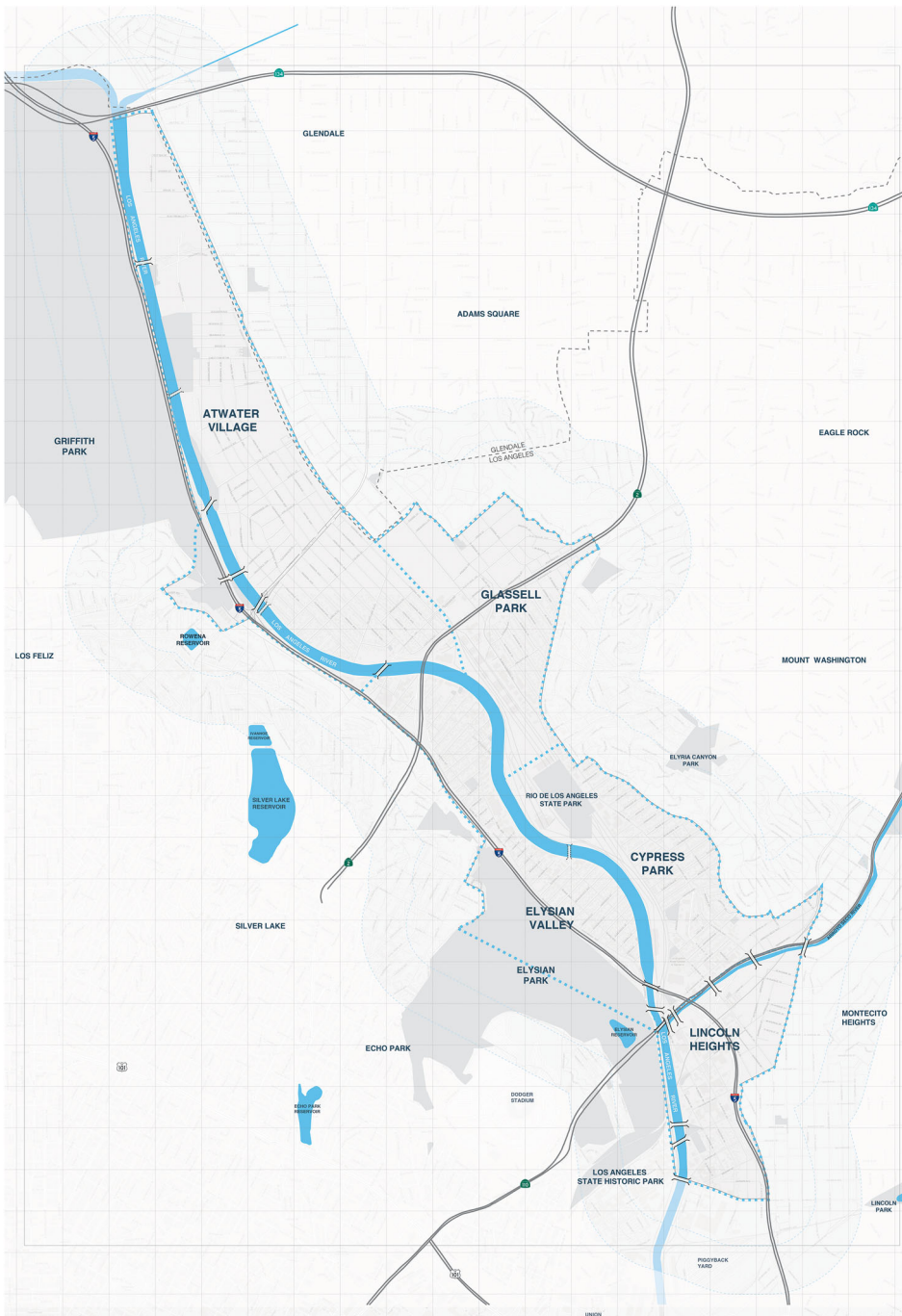


Figure 1. Map of the NELA Riverfront Collaborative study area. Source: Northeast Los Angeles Riverfront Collaborative Vision Plan.

(Stone, 1989). Moreover, the development projects in the targeted neighborhoods often reflect the private developer agendas that favor luxury market-rate housing instead of affordable housing that low-income communities often prefer (Brenner et al., 2012).

Such a political economic structure erodes the right for everyday citizens to benefit from planning and development projects.

Other critical voices have written about how urban revitalization and growth strategies can be socially inequitable to lower income multiethnic communities, thus leading to gentrification (Benner & Pastor, 2013; Pulido, 2000; Saito, 2009). The current literature proposes that better community engagement in the planning processes can promote urban revitalization that is more sensitive to the needs of targeted communities (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007; Wheeler & Beatley, 2009). These studies argue for urban planning approaches that focus on engaging everyday people in communities that are not typically part of outreach efforts. Calls for more community engagement in planning aim to stem local governments that attempt to expedite development projects because they do not want to face potential local pushback.

One way in which community engagement in urban environments has been explored is through a focus on communication. In the areas of 'urban communication' (Gumpert & Drucker, 2008) and 'communicative cities' (Hamelink, 2008), scholars and practitioners have pointed to the role of communication in shaping the urban environment of cities, the iterative co-construction of the physical and built environments, and the social experience of cities. Similarly, 'communicative planning' theorists have pointed to the different roles that planners can play in urban revitalization – for example, not only as facilitators of a network of diverse groups and stakeholders (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002; Healey, 1999) – but also as intermediaries to both educate communities about alternatives for the future and gather communities' input to shape planning visions.

The recent attention to communication in urban planning has roots in Jürgen Habermas' 'communicative action' theory that emphasizes the role of interaction between people and societal structures (Habermas, 1979, 1991). While the recent interest in 'communicative planning' approaches signifies the valuable contributions of communication theory and research in the work of urban revitalization, there is a lack of theory-driven cases illustrating how (1) communication processes may be observed in ways that highlight the socio-demographic complexity of urban cities, and (2) how such observations can inform revitalization planning projects that better engage affected communities.

Communication infrastructure theory

CIT has informed place-based studies in diverse urban communities, and particularly in Los Angeles (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Kim, Jung, & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Wilkin, Katz, & Ball-Rokeach, 2009). CIT proposes that urban communities are discursively constructed through storytelling and that this local communication infrastructure can be uncovered and studied. CIT is founded on two fundamental components. First is the local 'storytelling network' (STN) that consists of local residents, community organizations, and geo-ethnic media, defined as media that is aimed at a particular geography or ethnic group (Matsaganis, Katz, & Ball-Rokeach, 2011). The second component of CIT, also informed by Habermas's 'communicative action theory' (1979, 1991), is the 'communication action context' (CAC), or the communication environment that consists of physical and social conditions of a neighborhood that can facilitate or inhibit the storytelling network. Examples of the CAC are local aspects of the urban environment such as the presence of parks, the type of working conditions, and

perceptions of public safety. Past CIT studies have illustrated how ethnic communities in metropolitan Los Angeles demonstrate better civic engagement outcomes – sense of belonging, civic participation, and collective efficacy – when their STN nodes are strongly connected and communicating regularly with each other (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Ognyanova et al., 2013).

One of the strengths of CIT is the identification of the specific types of local media, community organizations, and interpersonal networks most conducive to the generation and sharing of information about particular aspects of the community. One application was the creation of *Alhambra Source*, a hyperlocal news website that aimed to connect multiethnic storytelling networks (Asians, Latinos, and Anglos), collaboratively produced by a research team, professional journalists and local residents (Chen, Dong, Ball-Rokeach, Parks, & Huang, 2012). Researchers conducted surveys and focus group research with the various ethnic storytelling networks to gather knowledge on what local journalism content (civic affairs, education matters, etc.) would make the *Alhambra Source* relevant to the diverse community.

Furthermore, CIT has been applied to participatory mapping field applications between university communication researchers and Promotoras (‘community health workers’ translated from Spanish). Researchers trained community members to map ‘communication assets’ or local communicative spaces in low-income communities that can be utilized for social change and healthy communities initiatives (Villanueva, Broad, Gonzalez, Ball-Rokeach, & Murphy, 2016). This study demonstrated how spaces within the communication action context could be harnessed to promote healthy communities when researchers foster the interaction between Promotoras and the built environment.

Informed by this line of engaged communication research, we apply CIT for the first time to a multi-sector urban planning project in collaboration with government, private, and non-profit sectors. We posit that CIT-guided research can be applied in urban revitalization projects, and that it has the potential to better engage stakeholders in a way that can shape equitable planning processes grounded in the lives of actual communities. Specifically, we explore how CIT is utilized to surface, and then to integrate, the actual stories generated by various community actors into the storytelling network of an urban planning process. CIT provides a method of observation of the key community actors and the local communication dynamics of communities that are constantly shaping discourse on the urban environment. Our application of CIT in this current work informs how planning processes can be both sensitive to but also leverage the local context of large urban communities with respect to how the community itself envisions its future.

Thus, in the context of the planning project’s goal of engaging local communities in the revitalization of the L.A. River and NE LA neighborhoods, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How can CIT drive engaged communication research that responds to the community engagement needs of an urban planning process?

RQ2: In what ways can the lessons learned from this project demonstrate opportunities and challenges for integrating engaged communication research into a collaborative urban planning process?

Study context: the NELA Riverfront Collaborative

This study was part of a larger federally funded project² called the NELA Riverfront Collaborative (from here on referred to as ‘the project’) that consisted of an interdisciplinary 15-member partnership made up of city departments, non-profit organizations dedicated to L.A. River revitalization, university research centers, public media, economic development firms, and urban design agencies (see Table 1). As part of the project’s community engagement goals, our university research team worked with the collaborative partners to design and administer community-based research activities that informed the development of the NELA Riverfront District Vision Plan and Economic Development Strategy (Vision Plan), a policy document that explored the needs and desires of the neighborhoods surrounding the L.A. River.

The L.A. River has experienced a renaissance of public and private revitalization attention since the 1980s (Gumprecht, 2001; Price, 2008). Environmental advocates have been successful in raising awareness to restore parts of the river’s natural habitat from its concrete channelization. The project study area (Figure 1) chosen to explore the riverfront district is the approximately 10-mile River stretch in Northeast L.A. that is also known as the Glendale Narrows section of the L.A. River. The stretch also includes the Interstate 5 Freeway that runs along the River. Unlike the majority of the 51 miles of the L.A. River, the NELA study area possesses a segment of the river with a ‘softer bottom reach’ that could not be completely channelized with concrete, thereby supporting a lush habitat and wildlife. This portion of the river is adjacent to the NELA neighborhoods of Atwater Village, Cypress Park, Elysian Valley, Glassell Park, and Lincoln Heights. The study area has been the focus of many recent initiatives for ecosystem revitalization and recreational use by multiple government agencies. Such revitalization efforts have also brought concerns about neighborhood changes such as displacement, gentrification, and public space conflicts. Given these concerns and interest in the physical land assets

Table 1. Partner organizations that made up the NELA Riverfront Collaborative.

Organization	Sector	Collaborative role
L.A. City Economic and Workforce Development Department	Public government	Economic and workforce development
L.A. City Department of City Planning	Public government	Land-use and transportation planning
L.A. City Bureau of Engineering	Public government	Public works and civil engineering
National Park Service	Federal government	Public parks and environment
Los Angeles Conservation Corps	Non-profit	Environment and youth workforce development
Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation	Non-profit	Economic development and market studies
Los Angeles River Revitalization Corporation (Now River LA)	Non-profit	Economic development and community engagement
LA-Más	Non-profit	Urban design and placemaking
Tierra West Advisors	Private	Economic development
The Robert Group	Private	Public affairs and outreach
Mia Lehrer & Associates	Private	Urban design and placemaking
Dake + Luna Consultants	Private	Urban design and placemaking
KCET Departures	Public media	Local media storytelling and community engagement
Urban Environmental Policy Institute, Occidental College	University	Food policy research
Metamorphosis Project, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism	University	Community engagement research

of the area, the city chose the area as the site for the place-based planning efforts of the project.

Engaged communication research development

Engaged scholars as community storytelling actors

As suggested by previous CIT-informed projects that were built on university-community partnerships (Broad et al., 2013; Villanueva et al., 2016), communication scholars play a role in the community storytelling network. The university research team was integrated within the study area's storytelling network, and actively engaged with the other storytelling actors in an urban planning initiative. This integration is consistent with Matsaganis, Golden, and Scott (2014) work which described their university-community research project as an 'interstitial actor' within a storytelling network (p. 1495). In their project, the interstitial work involved the connection of residents in an upstate New York community to meso-level community organizational actors looking to deliver health services to appropriate communities of need.

In our project, this interstitial work involved our leadership roles as we guided the collaborative partners through an engaged communication research design. Our own roles as engaged communication scholars meant first understanding, and then connecting the various fields of expertise of collaborative partners (Table 1). The partners were traditionally accustomed to working within the professional silos of their fields and had limited multidisciplinary experience working across their own competencies. We underscore that embedding ourselves within this storytelling network was in the service of the planning goals of the larger collaborative project. Hence, our collaboration with project partners informed the community-based research questions and community storytelling actors we studied. Our work emphasizes the fertile exchange between theory and practice when communication scholars immerse themselves within practitioner groups and organizations (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008).

Methods

Driven by CIT's identification of community storytelling actors, our procedures consisted of various research methods that we utilized to engage the NELA communities in the urban planning project. Figure 2 demonstrates a comprehensive outline of the storytelling actors we engaged, the data collection methods and purposes behind each method, and the sample characteristics of the research participants.

Our research methods and analyses were performed in collaboration with the project partners during a 21-month span between 2012 and 2014. This collaborative approach is consistent with the views of scholars who point to engagement as a driving force for successful university-community research partnerships (Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2010; Minkler, Vásquez, Tajik, & Petersen, 2008). As Fitzgerald et al. (2010) describe, the application of engaged research 'generates new questions, which in turn demands new knowledge generation' (p. 14). Collaboration with local partners thus facilitates the development and implementation of research that builds theory and is responsive to the needs of individuals and communities.

Storytelling Network Actor	Data Collection Methods and Purpose	Sample Characteristics
Residents	The research team conducted in-person surveys and focus groups to gather data on residents' visions and concerns for the revitalization of their neighborhoods and the L.A. River. We investigated residents' concerns about how their neighborhoods are changing and their suggestions for how specific improvements can make their neighborhoods and the L.A. River more welcoming spaces.	<p><u>Surveys (N=666)</u></p> <p>Gender</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 53% female • 64% Latino/Hispanic <p>Age</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 to 92 (range) • 17% Caucasian/White • 10% Asian <p>Residential tenure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 39 years (median) • Home ownership • 17 years (median) • 56% renters <p><u>Focus Groups (N=2)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fourteen residents of varying demographics and NELA neighborhoods who also participated in the survey
Small Businesses	The research team conducted in-person surveys and a focus group to gather data on small business owners' visions and concerns for revitalization of the NELA neighborhoods and the L.A. River. We investigated key challenges faced by business owners, and identified top priorities of small businesses regarding NELA and the L.A. River revitalization project.	<p><u>Surveys (N=75)</u></p> <p>Size</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small businesses were identified as those with 15 or fewer employees and not part of national chains <p>Neighborhood tenure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23 years (median) • 35% operating in the neighborhood for more than 10 years <p><u>Focus Group (N=1)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six owners with small businesses in various NELA neighborhoods who also participated in the survey
Local Media	The research team conducted a media monitoring study of online news sources to identify the media discourse of urban development in NELA and the L.A. River. A focus group was held with local media producers to further examine whether the media coverage was building a sense of community in the study area and the challenges faced by media professionals in producing local stories.	<p><u>Media Monitoring</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 265 stories coded • Published between February 2013 to January 2014 <p><u>Focus Group (N=1)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six local media producers: one editor of a public media online site, two writers of online media sites, one writer of a local blog, one editor of a local community newspaper, one writer of a local community newspaper
Collaborative Partners	As participant observers and an organizational partner in the collaborative, the research team participated in various stages of the project, including: grant writing, developing project goals, and project implementation. We also conducted a focus group with the collaborative partners to investigate perceptual changes of the NELA study area as a result of their participation, their assessment of the collaborative's community engagement, and lessons learned from this multi-sector partnership.	<p><u>Participant observation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six members of the USC Metamorphosis research team <p><u>Focus Group (N=1)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ten partners: three government agencies, two non-profits, one economic development private firm, three university partners, and one public media.

Figure 2. NELA Riverfront Collaborative project storytelling network actors; data collection methods and purpose; and sample characteristics.

As a partner in the project, we were participant–observers of the grant writing process, the program design and implementation, Vision Plan formation and publication, and bi-monthly collaborative meetings. We also attended and observed dozens of community events and city meetings during the project's life. The participant observation helped us design our engaged research methods, administer the research, and contextualize our interpretations of the findings. As elaborated by Matsaganis (2016), a multi-method design can be beneficial to nuanced studies of complex phenomenon and storytelling networks in cities.

Individual residents

Individual residents situated in their social networks operate at the micro level of a neighborhood's storytelling network. In the context of urban revitalization, resident perspectives are critical in identifying the collective needs and concerns of a community in order to develop planning recommendations that speak to those needs. We identified surveys and focus groups as the most appropriate method of capturing resident perspectives and visions. The resident survey questionnaire was developed with NELA RC partners in order to better inform the project's policy and planning recommendations. The survey included questions about their experiences with/at the River specifically (e.g. how much time they spend near the River, where they access it, and what activities they do there) and more general questions about their neighborhood (e.g. what the biggest problems are, what they are most proud of, and what physical improvements they would like to see), among others. Through door-to-door recruitment, the research

team conducted 666 in-person surveys with NELA residents over a period of 10 weeks. To assist in the administration of our in-person surveys, we recruited and trained a cohort of 13 college student interns. Two groups of six to eight residents recruited from the survey respondents were invited to return for focus groups about themes and issues that emerged in the surveys. Our resident reach was more inclusive than is generally the case in that we had bilingual capacities that reflected the two most spoken languages in the study area, English and Spanish.

Small businesses

Similarly, the small business research served as community input that informed the collaborative project's knowledge of the area and guided specific planning recommendations. Following previous research (Wilkin, Stringer, O'Quin, Montgomery, & Hunt, 2011; Wilson, 2001) that proposes the inclusion of a wide array of local organizations, we treated small businesses and partner organizations as community organization nodes of the local STN. Because our project was situated in the context of urban planning and economic revitalization, it was critical to gather input from small businesses that may be affected by revitalization plans. When small businesses are connected to larger community conversations on the future revitalization of neighborhoods, there will likely be more investment and planning recommendations that speak to the improvement of neighborhood conditions for local commerce. We identified surveys and a focus group as the most appropriate method of capturing business owner perspectives and visions. Our business survey and focus group aimed to identify the biggest challenges faced by small business owners regarding conducting business in the study area, and their priorities for revitalization. Through door-to-door recruitment, the research team conducted 75 in-person surveys with NELA small business owners over a period of 10 weeks. Six business owners recruited from the survey respondents returned for a focus group discussion about themes and issues that emerged in the surveys.

Local media

Local media also play an important role in the neighborhood storytelling network, as local media content can identify key issues and changes in the social and physical environment. In the context of urban planning, local media storytelling can potentially connect residents to small and large efforts underway in the community that are either shaping or responding to city revitalization initiatives. In addition, local media professionals can play an advocacy role when they give voice to the concerns and needs of residents who are linguistically isolated and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged – those who are most likely to be affected by the economic and environmental changes that come with revitalization. CIT points to local media's engagement with community organizations working on River revitalization as a key aspect of creating a communicatively 'well-integrated' community. We identified local media content or story monitoring and a focus group with local media producers as the most appropriate methods to investigate media discourse about the L.A. River and its surrounding neighborhoods.

Partner organizations

Finally, we conducted a focus group with the partner organizations to explore lessons learned from the planning process and observations of how the engaged communication

research informed the project and their own work. This step sought to address the paucity of studies that document how community partners and participants experience university-community collaborations (Nyden & Percy, 2010; Stoecker, Beckman, & Min, 2010). The focus group gave us insight into how organizations directly involved in River and neighborhood revitalization can see the opportunities and challenges of engaged research on community storytelling. Focus group participants included representatives from the partner organizations that made up the collaborative (Table 1).

Given the different stages of the project and multiple methods deployed, data analysis was guided by the constant comparative method of grounded theory (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Holton, 2007). Boeije (2002) describes the analysis method as a way for researchers to decide ‘what data will be gathered next and where to find them on the basis of provisional theoretical ideas’ (p. 393). This iterative process allows for new or previously unexplored questions to arise from preliminary data, subsequently guiding the evolution of the project. In the following, we report on how various methods generated perspectives of multiple community storytellers in order to shape and inform planning processes.

Findings

In the following sections, we report what we learned about visions regarding community revitalization from the perspective of three neighborhood storytelling actors (RQ1). We also describe our results from the focus group with our project partners, assessing the lessons learned from our particular case of engaged communication research (RQ2). Lastly, in the discussion, we present implications of the study on the integration of community engagement into urban planning processes, with an eye toward the contributions of communication research.

Resident surveys and focus groups

The resident data collected from the survey and focus groups pointed to salient issues for community improvement and concerns that the collaborative project considered during the vision planning process (see Table 2). When asked about the biggest problem in their neighborhood, 36% of the residents mentioned gangs and crime, 16% answered graffiti, and 13% said the biggest problem was lack of cleanliness. As such, residents expressed being most concerned about the safety and general appearance of their neighborhood. This concern, however, became more nuanced when it comes to safety; while 74% of residents felt that it was very or completely safe to walk around their neighborhood during daytime, only 29% felt that it was so after dark. In the focus groups, residents described how their neighborhood had changed over the years; some felt that their neighbors were more invested in appearance by manicuring their lawns regularly, while others worried that new housing developments were making the local area denser and potentially unsafe.

Almost half of all residents reported that there were infrastructure problems in their neighborhood that needed attention. These often included poor lighting in residential streets, potholes, broken sidewalks, traffic, and other physical aspects of the built environment. Approximately 13% of residents also wanted to see their neighborhood cleaned up, either by the city or by residents working together, and 10% wanted to see more parks in

their neighborhood. Regarding resources, 62% of residents reported that there were businesses or services missing from their local area. In follow up focus groups, residents mentioned the need for quality sit-down restaurants to bring family and guests to versus having to drive to the neighboring cities of Pasadena and Glendale just outside of NELA that they perceived as having nicer restaurants.

In regards to the L.A. River specifically, approximately 61% of NELA residents reported spending time at least some time by the River; this usually meant walking or riding along the riverfront bike path, visiting the small parks along the River, or attending events (e.g. performances, festivals, rallies, and cleanup efforts). In the focus groups, some residents who grew up in the area described a sense of nostalgia for the times when the River was a cleaner, safer natural resource for the community:

Since I grew up in North Atwater on Bimas, and my uncle used to on Saturday mornings, come and pick my brothers and my sisters and I and walk us over to the river, and I guess the river was pretty clean, because we used to just get into the river and actually build dams ... Oh and when we grew up and we were teenagers, we would walk down from North Atwater down to where the horses are, and walk down to the river, and then go to Griffith Park swimming. So it was our little- what was that adventure- Tom Sawyer thing, you know? And then we would spend all afternoon at the park and walk all the way back up. So it was, it was cool. You can't do that now. (3-08-14-FG)

When asked what improvements would make them want to spend more time by the L.A. River, 40% of residents surveyed reported that they would like the area to be cleaner and 20% felt that the area could be safer. Other improvements suggested to make the area more welcoming included more events and activities for families, better lighting, more security patrolling (especially during the evenings), better signage for entry points, and improved access to the River and its surrounding amenities. Confusion about where and how to access the River safely seemed to deter some residents from exploring the riverfront more frequently:

Unfortunately, I don't know, I don't even know where I would enter through to be honest with you. I see a lot of bike riding going on, I'm not sure how narrow or how wide it is, I don't know if I would feel safe taking my children but I'd have to see it, and be there to understand a little more so I'm not too familiar with it but if I knew a little bit more, if there were activities going on, I enjoy taking my children to like the farmer's market or city activities, different things like that. (3-08-14-FG)

In both the surveys and the focus groups, residents noted that beautification efforts should be accompanied by family-friendly outdoor activities programed by the city. Residents in the groups were aware that the city could do things to be responsive to residents,

Table 2. A summary of key resident survey responses regarding improvements to the physical neighborhood and those that would make residents spend more time by the River.

Top five physical neighborhood improvements identified by residents	Top five improvements that would encourage residents to spend more time by the River
Infrastructure (41%)	Cleanliness (40%)
Trees and plants (14%)	Safety (20%)
Cleanliness (13%)	Better access (8%)
Parks (10%)	Shops (4%)
Education facilities (8%)	Events (3%)

but noted that they were never asked these questions in any formal capacity. These particular findings were examples of community-sourced resident input gathered through the research that informed the collaborative project's knowledge of the area and their vision planning recommendations.

Small business surveys and focus groups

The data collected from small business owners regarding their concerns and revitalization priorities directly informed the vision planning process. First, we examined the biggest problems or issues facing the neighborhood as perceived by the small business owners. Second, we sought to identify if and how small business owners felt that the revitalization efforts might affect their businesses (see [Table 3](#)). In response to the main challenges facing small businesses in the NELA region, the top issues were most notably graffiti and trash, crime and gang activity in the area, and the lack of foot traffic that could potentially bring in more business. Regarding how the L.A. River revitalization project might affect local businesses, the majority of owners expressed that revitalization priorities should be focused on attracting new customers to the area, making beautification improvements, and making the area safer.

The follow up focus group validated these desires for environmental improvement but also indicated some potential concerns. This included concerns of exacerbated traffic, parking problems, and higher storefront rents that may result from increased public investment and revitalization efforts. As one of the small businesses owners commented about current revitalization interests in the NELA River study area during the focus group:

[Developers] want to use the public investment money to make it more like a part of all these environmental features in big global capitals. I see a big pay day for those people and a way for [the city] council office to have their way. This will turn commercial and residential real estate into a recreational destination that will be a tourist destination. Small property owners and people that live in this community now really don't have the organization, the voice, or the understanding of these issues in the community to really do anything about [the real estate speculation] other than just to go. (6-26-14-FG)

This small business owner foresaw the potential benefits of River revitalization that could turn the NELA study area into a tourist destination, but recognized that the existing community of low-income residents and small businesses were ill equipped to be the beneficiaries of this investment. This reveals the contradiction of well-intentioned urban revitalization in the current political and economic climate in cities – residents and small businesses wanted the investment in their neighborhoods but felt disenfranchised in the actual process of planning and development that local governments direct.

Table 3. A summary of key small businesses survey responses regarding neighborhood issues and revitalization project impact.

Top five neighborhood improvement issues identified by small businesses (%)	Ways small businesses perceived the effect of River and neighborhood revitalization (%)
Graffiti (21)	More customers (20)
Crime, gangs, and vandalism (16)	Improved physical infrastructure (11)
Lack of foot traffic/ bike lanes (8)	Improved public safety (7)
Trash (7)	Increasing rents (3)
Homelessness (5)	Parking problems (1)

Local media monitoring and media producer focus groups

Through media monitoring and thematic analyses, characteristics of the stories and themes associated with the L.A. River and the NELA region were systematically identified. Through Google Alerts, a sample of stories published between February 2013 and January 2014 was obtained, using the key words presented in Table 3. The same table also listed top story themes identified in the 265 stories coded. Online media storytelling about the NELA study area occurred across a variety of media outlets, some more locally focused than others. Among the 265 stories that were coded for media outlets, the top two media were locally focused outlets and the third was the project's public media partner (Table 4).

The focus group with media producers allowed us to more deeply investigate whether the increased media coverage of the L.A. River contributed to a growing sense of community in the NELA region. The discussion covered the following topics: participants' professional relationship to NELA and the L.A. River; perceptions of pressing issues affecting the area; and their experiences and challenges of writing, editing, and producing stories. We found that all of the participants wrote consistently about the L.A. River, and specifically the developments taking place in NELA due to the increased public attention. As one participant expressed:

I think learning about the river, you get to learn about the history of the city, and also about the possibilities of the city through river. And opening up, I guess kind of connecting all the rivers, through the possibilities of having public river space. It's pretty fascinating. (3-06-14-FG)

With regards to pressing issues affecting the area, media producer participants pointed to the pressure of gentrification on the low-income communities and small businesses, specifically the real-estate speculation that drove up rents along the River. One participant's comments touched upon this particular concern:

And so now, living in this area, and interacting with the various businesses that are open in Elysian Valley, and the potential that that area has, as well as Glassell Park and Cypress Park. People talk about how cool Highland Park is- oh, you're not going to be able to touch that area in five years. It's going to be like through the roof, with so much business and so much growth and revitalization. I mean, it's just evident' (3-06-14-FG)

When writing, editing, and producing stories about the L.A. River and NELA the media participants highlighted challenges such as an overreliance on sourcing the vocal public officials and community leaders about L.A. River developments. Focus group participants

Table 4. A summary of key words and story themes from media monitoring.

Online search key words	Top story themes
Los Angeles River	Progress in planning and development (26%)
LA River	Local politicians (23%)
Northeast Los Angeles	Modes of transportation (22%)
NELA	Recognition of local businesses (21%)
Los Angeles Riverfront	Local environment (20%)
Atwater Village	City services and maintenance (18%)
Elysian Valley	Problems about safety (17%)
Cypress Park	Local public policies (16%)
Glassell Park	
Lincoln Heights	

acknowledged the need for their media outlets to engage in practices that sourced information directly from the community residents who were most affected by the increasing development activity, and the importance of ‘gaining trust with the community.’

Partner organizations focus group

One prospect that the research opened up for the collaborative partners was the ability to gain a more grounded understanding of the communities that actually live and work by the River. This was illustrated in particular by one of the non-profit economic development partners who stated:

I think when you get down there and you’re walking in one of the communities, you get a very different point of view ... I found out a lot more detail about what’s impacting the area.’ (03-03-14-FG)

Similarly, the second university partner within the collaborative that worked specifically on the local food development aspect of the project spoke of increased community knowledge when this university partner reflected about ‘definitely not realizing beforehand all of the different neighborhoods and communities on each side [of the River].’ (03-03-14-FG)

Our local government partners in particular found the engaged communication research beneficial because they were directly involved in a community-based process and were able to learn from interdisciplinary practitioners focused on urban revitalization. They valued the opportunity to learn from residents, small businesses, and community organizations in the study area. The benefits of hearing from local residents and small businesses through the community-based research were illustrated by one collaborative partner:

The survey was a really awesome part because you get to reach a lot of people that would probably not necessarily come to an event ... At least for our purposes, it produced hard data – at least to have research data for grants and things and to be able to come back to the community. (03-03-14-FG)

The research in the neighborhoods allowed multiple storytelling actor visions to be heard and subsequently inform the planning process. This is a key potential opportunity that communicative approaches to planning and research can provide in communities that face drastic neighborhood change because of revitalization investments.

When participants were asked what challenges the project faced, there was agreement that a more established integration of local schools would have improved the project’s effectiveness in the community. Several participants expressed this sentiment; the city planning agency partner, for example, stated that those are ‘the kids that are going to grow up and show respect for the river.’ Likewise, the public media partner expressed how schools could be a ‘huge gateway for us, to reach parents through their children, whether it’s a language barrier, or just having them be accessible.’ (03-03-14-FG)

Another challenge related to the resident and small business survey administration in the field was the lack of a dedicated space in the community for this research activity. One of the non-profit organization partners’ offices in the NELA study area served as the staging ground for the weekly student intern coordination before and after the interns went out into the neighborhoods to administer the surveys. Referring to this intern work set-up as a challenge, the non-profit partner expressed that ‘everything was ran

out of our offices and it was just hectic at some times, because we are also very small.’ This was echoed by our research team participants in this partner organization focus group as they reflected on the potential value that a dedicated space for researchers and interns in the study area could have added to the overall field logistics of the engaged communication research process.

Discussion

CIT explicitly identifies neighborhood actors (residents, businesses, local media, and local organizations) for community engagement processes that are often necessary but absent in traditional urban planning initiatives. CIT provided a particularly valuable theoretical and methodological framework that guided engaged communication research within the current collaborative urban planning project. The research identified community priorities, concerns, and local media discourse, and thus facilitated gathering community input on the planning project from the different neighborhoods in NELA adjacent to the River. CIT therefore grounded the research in the power dynamics between major revitalization players and the communities at issue.

The community-based research was evidenced to be a catalyst for dynamic exchanges between residents and community organizations about neighborhood change generally, and planning recommendations specifically. Project partners noted that the incorporation of community-level data into the planning process contrasted the top-down planning processes traditionally practiced by government and economic development agencies. The organizations we worked with also called our attention to the challenge of building organizational capacity into community engagement and community-based research efforts. Robust community engagement in urban planning processes, especially communicative approaches that connect multiple storytelling actors, require significant staffing, time, and space.

With the above lessons in mind, we discuss two important implications that can inform future communicative approaches to community engagement in urban planning. One implication that became increasingly apparent from our research is the need for future studies that examine the impact of increased urban development in historically underserved communities. From both academic literature and public discussion, we were well aware of the gentrification concerns that emerged in areas that are targeted for urban revitalization. Similar to the above-mentioned small business fears of rising rents due to revitalization interests, we listened to residents as they voiced strong concerns about rising costs of living in their neighborhoods. As an example, one NELA resident’s comments during a focus group illustrates a common sentiment about gentrification in the area:

Even though I don’t really like all the hipsters moving in, it has improved the neighborhood, which is good. But I feel like it’s improving because they’re moving in, and no one else can afford it. Whereas, people who have lived there, like his [other resident in the focus group] parents for thirty years – if they tried to buy a house in Atwater Village again, it would be impossible. (03-08-14-FG)

This resident worries that ‘hipsters’ – understood as a younger, creative class who are moving into gentrifying neighborhoods (Slater, 2006) – will benefit from the improving conditions of the NELA neighborhoods. This concern is coupled with the idea that

hipsters will become the population that developers will now cater to because of the greater purchasing capital that gentrifiers are perceived to possess. As expressed by our field conversations with NELA community members, there is a fear that residents will not benefit from the new investment in their neighborhoods that is catalyzed by the River. As such, these concerns suggest that natural habitat restoration of the river cannot be the sole development policy of the government if they desire to be socially equitable to the people who already live and work in the area. Revitalization policies that are attuned to the social needs and visions of the existent populations must also be considered.

In response to shaping future policy change, public and private developers along the L.A. River and in the NELA neighborhoods will need to consider ‘social equity’ strategies. These are policies that address income equality and greater opportunity for lower income communities to benefit from potential sites for economic growth (Benner & Pastor, 2013). Policies of social equity have been deployed in the past in Los Angeles, evidenced through the revitalization of the LA Live complex in Downtown LA that resulted in a coalition of economic justice organizations negotiating affordable housing, local hiring policies, and living wage policies with a private developer (Saito & Truong, 2015; Soja, 2014).

Influenced by what we learned about the concerns of gentrification from multiple groups in the NELA RC research process, we worked with the collaborative to include a set of social equity recommendations in the Vision Plan. In this case, the engaged communication research we spearheaded in the communities brought to light concerns, such as the increased real-estate speculation in the study area. Because many of the resident and small business owners were from the low-income communities, the research informed the collaborative policy recommendations with equity in mind. These recommendations include the creation of affordable housing opportunities, local hiring policies, and a land trust formation that transfers real-estate properties for non-market objectives such as local homeownership and community amenities development. Also important is the need to develop a local social equity-focused advocacy organization in the community that can engage local neighborhood storytelling networks to make public and private developers more accountable to existing low-income communities.

Another implication is how engaged communication scholars can promote the cross-sector collaboration and community engagement that ‘communicative planning’ proponents (e.g. Healey, 1999) have pushed for as an alternative to top-down city government planning. Our work helped to connect different actors of the storytelling networks of the NELA study area and integrate their visions into the planning process. In this sense, our intervention served as *communicative tissue* between storytelling actors, especially policy practitioners who often operate in isolation from other agencies. The project helped bridge storytelling networks within the NELA study area through research and engagement activities that directly involved residents and small businesses in the five different NELA neighborhoods. We are not making the case that the study area had never been referred to as NELA in the past; but that our work as part of the collaborative helped connect the five neighborhoods and form a NELA riverfront regional identity for the purposes of the policy goals of the collaborative. Furthermore, the research on local media content and its producers helped triangulate our findings and bridge the discourse of the five NELA neighborhoods. Aligning with past CIT-informed university-community projects, the ability to build bridges among multiple actors as demonstrated in this

work highlights the role of university-community projects as important interstitial actors. (Matsaganis et al., 2014; Villanueva et al., 2016).

The current research provides implications on how community-driven planning processes can gather input on whether elected officials and the general public support revitalization plans. Indeed, as we observed at the completion of the final Vision Plan document, representatives of the lead grant applicant city agency (Economic and Workforce Development Department) highlighted the amount of NELA community members that were engaged through the community-based research as a selling point. We were brought in as researchers to discuss our community engagement and research results at various LA City Council committee meetings during the life of the project and the at the final Vision Plan presentation.

Literature suggests that multi-sector collaborative approaches to community-based research will continue to grow (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Other grantees nationwide that received the Federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities grant for their projects were made up of a multi-sector collaborative that included university research team partners. What made our university collaboration unique, however, was the integration of our communication research team and community-based research informed by CIT. Our participation as communication scholars embedded our research team in the grant writing stage, the project design, implementation activities in the community, and public policy document formation through the final Vision Plan. We suggest that communication scholars who seek to practice engaged scholarship should participate as collaborative partners with government, non-profit, and private sectors if they aim to have greater influence on impacting urban planning outcomes.

Limitations and future directions

One limitation is that our purposive sampling of key community groups limited the representation of other types of local actors. Many residents pointed to the importance of youth and churches to their neighborhoods' community wellbeing. Given that our study did not focus on the collection of data from individuals under 18 years of age or local church leaders, future research would benefit from more involvement of these groups. A local L.A. Unified School District representative could have enhanced the study's exploration of the role that youth, schools, teachers, and education administrators can play within the future development policy efforts in the study area.

To the effect of promoting better community engagement in urban revitalization, our collaborative project produced different deliverables that we hope future communicative planning efforts can model and build from. One deliverable was the aforementioned Vision Plan with over 77 policy recommendations sourced from the collaborative community engagement process. The plan was officially approved by the 15-member City Council and contributes to the ongoing L.A. River revitalization discourse and implementation activities by different government agencies and community organizations. The second deliverable was a NELA Riverfront Collaborative Lessons Learned and Community Engagement Toolkit (Toolkit) that we produced so that other collaborative planning efforts could have a resource.³ In the Toolkit, 10 lessons learned from our multi-partner planning collaborative are offered (e.g. insights into recognizing organizational self-interest tensions and how best to respect each organization's interest in a collaborative

project), in the hopes of improving interdisciplinary collaboration. Additionally, the Toolkit highlights 12 community engagement activities that the collaborative used in the project. The activities, ranging from the different community-based research methods described in this current work to policy education workshops, community mapping activities, online/offline outreach platforms, and participatory design competitions, serve as suggested community engagement methods for planning projects and list key takeaways to consider when implementing such engagement activities.

Future research should also consider the impact of the recommendations put forth by the Vision Plan. Revitalization of the L.A. River and the NELA neighborhoods continues to take place, so it is important to evaluate whether development by the city and the private sector are responsive to the neighborhood voices highlighted by the collaborative project.

In conclusion, this collaborative project brought together multiple community actors in urban planning processes and guided research development that promoted cross-section collaboration. City governments nationwide are looking at similar place-based urban development strategies to revitalize lower income communities (including stretches of the L.A. River that run through low-income communities in other cities). A CIT framework that investigates multiple neighborhood storytelling actors and their relationship to conditions of their local urban environments can equip researchers and practitioners to develop community-informed urban development policies.

Postscript

The 51-mile L.A. River, and in particular the segment in NELA, continues to receive revitalization interest. In July of 2016, both the L.A. City Council and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recommended to the federal government a natural ecosystem restoration plan of the habitat in the NELA area totaling close to \$1 billion of implementation money. It is undetermined whether this implementation will be approved as the city and its partners continue lobbying the federal government to approve the funds. Of more controversial matters is the recent involvement of world-renowned L.A. architect Frank Gehry, whose team is creating a new master plan for the landscape development of the entire 51-mile stretch. L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti and the non-profit organization River L.A. (formerly known as the L.A. River Revitalization Corporation) brought Gehry's firm into the fold. The move has been characterized as a top-down tactic by long-time River community advocates, who were left wondering why there was no public process similar to previous planning projects. Mainstream media caught wind of this controversy as the *L.A. Times*, *New York Times*, and *The Nation* ran stories following the announcement of Gehry's involvement. The stories acknowledged the elevated profile that Gehry would add to revitalization efforts but also raised important concerns about why his involvement was kept secret and how such efforts can promote the 'land grabbing' that can potentially lead to negative aspects of gentrification along the riverfront communities.

These recent developments return our focus to the NELA Riverfront Collaborative project. With the ending of the federal grant that funded the multiyear planning project, the collaborative no longer exists as a formal entity. Some recommendations from the Vision Plan are in process (such as efforts to establish an enhanced infrastructure financing district, food hub, and riverfront parks), but key actors are doing this work in isolation from another. Furthermore, the regional community engagement that drove

the NELA planning efforts is not in place as there is no structure and communicative tissue to continue the regional community-based efforts. These conditions impact the potential realization of social equity policies benefitting existing NELA communities that we referred to in this manuscript. Without funding structures that maintain collaboration amongst different revitalization players and a commitment to intentional community-driven planning, the NELA Riverfront neighborhoods are likely to see gentrification that is not responsive to the interests of the existing low-income communities in the area.

Notes

1. The L.A. Revitalization Master Plan was a result of the work of the L.A. City Council's Ad Hoc Committee on the Los Angeles River (created in 2002). In 2005, the Ad Hoc Committee secured funding from the L.A. Department of Water and Power and the Department of Public Works-Bureau of Engineering to conduct an 18-month revitalization planning process. The goal of the process was to establish initial revitalization opportunities for the entire 51 miles of the L.A. River (with a specific focus on the 32-mile stretch within the City of Los Angeles).
2. The NELA RC was funded by a Partnership for Sustainable Communities grant administered by the Housing and Urban Development department, in partnership with the Department of Transportation and Environmental Protection Agency. The City of Los Angeles's Economic Workforce and Development Department was the local lead applicant agency for the collaborative partnership and work.
3. The toolkit can be accessed at <http://metaconnects.org/findings/northeast-los-angeles-riverfront-collaborative-2>.

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