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Without a name, former 'South Central' L.A. has become almost invisible

The South L.A. area was once a thriving hub of jazz and African American culture. Now its residents can hardly describe where they are.

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Vivian Bowers works in a neighborhood that has gone undercover.

"Are there still businesses over there?" people ask when she mentions her dry-cleaning shop on South Central Avenue near East Adams Boulevard.

Five years ago, the city expunged the name "South Central" from its maps and replaced it with the more general "South Los Angeles." The change was meant to erase the stigma of riots and blight that marred an area south of the 10 Freeway and along Central Avenue, a place renowned in the 1940s for its thriving black culture -- restaurants, jazz clubs and businesses.

But an unintended consequence was to make core neighborhoods around Central Avenue disappear from Angelenos' mental map -- arguably none so much as Newton, a patch of nowhere east of the Harbor Freeway.

Now Bowers and others trying to revive this place are finding their first challenge is to explain where it is. "I try to make it 50 words or less," said Capt. Dennis Cremins of LAPD's Newton station.

"Namelessness matters," said Josh Sides, professor of California history at Cal State Northridge. "A nameless place doesn't exist. . . . Speculators, developers, want to invest in a place that exists."

Government workers say it is more difficult to organize people who aren't unified by a geographic name. Advocates say lack of identity makes it more difficult to attract resources and develop services. A developer said it's one reason this area is a kind of last frontier for new construction.

"Don' nobody wanna come this side of town no more," said Lloyd Robertson, 71, who has lived at East 27th Street and Naomi Avenue since 1937. "It's just like nothin' over here."

The words "South Los Angeles" are used to refer to anything from the Crenshaw district to Carson and sometimes beyond. South L.A. sprawls over at least 50 square miles and contains three-quarters of a million people.

Many areas have become lost in this vastness, especially the part bordered by the 10 Freeway, the Harbor Freeway, Alameda Street and East Florence Avenue.

Patrolled by the Newton Station, the area has the highest poverty rate of all Los Angeles Police Department divisions and is typically among LAPD's top four divisions in homicides. The population is about 14% black and 83% Latino, largely Spanish-speaking and ethnically Mexican.

The area is home to century-old homes in the Queen Anne style, many of them hidden beneath a slather of stucco.

It feels isolated from the city's commercial mainstream. But it is not empty or blighted, just working-class and jumbled. Bus stops are crowded at rush hour. There are *panaderías*
and 99-cent stores. People sell CDs, T-shirts and caged pigeons on street corners. Sidewalk taco stands have folding tables and bright umbrellas.

"You have streets and alleys here that haven't been paved since World War II, houses next to plating plants," Cremins said.

This same area was once called "The Avenue." It was L.A.'s Harlem, "the black main street of Los Angeles," said R.J. Smith, author of a history of the area in the 1940s. "It was a place where you could see Louis Armstrong . . . Joe Louis . . . Count Basie."

"South Central" meant something bigger than a place, Sides said. "It was synonymous with sense of black progress and accomplishment -- a physical manifestation of blacks' progress in the American West."

As segregation eased in the 1950s and '60s, blacks moved out and the population became more transitory. Malaise set in. Riots and economic forces battered the area, and youth gangs proliferated. The name "South Central" began being used outside of the black community in Los Angeles -- with a different connotation. "It became a loose way of describing everywhere that there were black people," Sides said.

As the name fell out of favor among residents, the proud and storied neighborhood became a prepositional phrase. "Over there," is how it is commonly referred to now, Bowers said.

Few remnants of the area's older days remain. There is the Dunbar Hotel, the childhood home of Nobel Laureate Ralph Bunche and the Lincoln Theater -- which now houses a Spanish-speaking congregation. "*Iglesia de Jesucristo, Sur Central*," reads the Lincoln's marquee.

Bowers and others are trying to spark a renaissance. Her 9-month-old booster group is called the Central Avenue Business Assn. Three new mixed-use affordable housing projects are in the works, along with a new city services building and a Central Avenue beautification project.

City Councilwoman Jan Perry, who represents the area, has tried to foster a sense of identity in recent years by giving names to three small chunks of Newton. Signs reading "Menlo Park" cover a three-by-seven-block area between Washington and Adams boulevards. The other two chunks are labeled the Gider and Dow's Adams Street Tract and the Nadeau Orange Tract.

Perry, who supported the removal of "South Central," says smaller neighborhood identities are needed. A name "has do with access, with whether a community is empowered," she said.

It remains to be seen whether the tract names will catch on. Meanwhile, the area as a whole remains largely anonymous. Newton "is very amorphous," said Cremins, the police captain. "It does not have a distinct geographic feature. Not even a Watts Towers."

People grasp for ways to describe it. They say "South Central," the "Eastside" or sometimes *"La Newton*," after the police station (though the station has moved from its former location on Newton Street).

"South Central -- but not the *bad* South Central," said Velissa Williams, 37, who lives near Central and 25th.

"The place formerly known as South Central," said Kevin Sved, co-director of The Accelerated School, a charter at Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Main Street.

"Kids here would just say, 'the hood.' " said Juan Flecha, principal of Jefferson High School.

Even residents who use "South Central" are not sure what it means. Asked to describe its boundaries, Jesus Flores, who lives on 43rd Street just east of the Harbor Freeway, waved a hand southward. "From here," he said, "to San Pedro."

"Eastside" is similarly problematic. That name is still used by people all over South L.A., especially blacks. It means east of Main Street. But its use has drifted well south of Florence Avenue. And to much of the rest of the city, "Eastside" suggests East L.A. or Boyle Heights.

So often, people punt; they use streets and distant landmarks to explain where they are. They say, "south of Staples Center," or, "east of the Coliseum." They triangulate and wave their arms.

"We refer to it as 'south of the Santa Monica Freeway," said Oscar Ixco, assistant project manager for the Community Redevelopment Agency. "And then people think it's by USC, and we say, 'No, it's *east* of the 110 Freeway.' "

The fate of nameless Newton contrasts sharply with that of another famous seat of black urban culture -- Harlem in New York City. Through more than 300 years of shifting fortunes, Harlem has kept its identity intact. Harlem "has brand equity that is recognized worldwide," said Leon Wynter, spokesman for the Harlem Community Development Corp. Harlem's name also has carried "negative associations" over the years, Wynter said. But it still gives the area "a central and cohesive identity."

Harlem's boundaries are generally agreed upon -- its name is sanctioned in both official documents and common usage -- and it is contained within a single congressional district.

By contrast, the Newton area "is very fragmented," Cremins said. It is split between two congressional districts, one of which includes distant Mt. Washington.

The Los Angeles Times calls it "South Los Angeles." The police department places it within its Central Bureau, not its South Bureau. The Los Angeles Unified School District puts much of it in its East Los Angeles district, along with Boyle Heights. The city Planning Department calls Newton "southeast Los Angeles," along with Watts.

People who identify with only a single street or intersection are limited politically, officials say. Simple questions, such as how to label a flier for a community meeting, become puzzles, said Faisal Roble, a city planner for the South L.A. area.

John Huskey, president of Meta Housing Co., said namelessness may have subtly stalled development. His company is about to

break ground on a mixed-use affordable housing project with a Fresh & Easy grocery store at Adams and Central.

Huskey said a name makes a place "easier to talk about," which is a key factor because real-estate development often starts with buzz among investors.

Many residents said they feel their area has been forgotten. But even if they could not say for sure what that area was, they expressed strong feelings about its future.

"It's not that they don't want a name," said Bowers, the Central Avenue shopkeeper. "If you gave them a name, they would wear it with pride."

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