‘Bridging’ the Divide

Concrete Divisions, Living Wounds

Though poured as concrete and justified in traffic counts, freeway systems are rarely ever “just”. They shape cities with lasting consequences for who is connected, who is displaced, and who is excluded. In San Diego, the I-5 stands not merely as a transportation corridor but as a spatial instrument of division: carving through several neighborhoods. We’ll be looking at Logan Heights and Barrio Logan, where generations were and still are relatively severed from opportunity, embedding physical segregation into the city’s very foundation.

The scars left by infrastructure are not accidental. They are engineered — calibrated by zoning, justified under the veil of modernist urban planning, and sustained by civic inaction. These neighborhoods, once unified and culturally vibrant, were not simply interrupted by the I-5; they were fractured. In the name of progress, the freeway displaced families, buried homes beneath asphalt, and injected pollutants into lungs that had no say in the process. Such violence hides behind the language of development, but its impact is slow, daily, and structural.

To speak of “mobility” without recognizing who is forced to stay still — blocked, boxed-in, or priced out — is to remain complicit in the infrastructures of oppression. The freeway, a supposed symbol of connectivity, here functions as a spatial border: hard, elevated, and indifferent. It silences community voices beneath its roar and erases agency through its shadow. This is not just a road. It is a line of power — drawn to separate.

The social fragmentation created by the I-5 echoes in these neighborhoods today: in the pedestrian disconnect between families, the health disparities driven by pollution, the lack of access to waterfront space, and even the visual dominance of gray over green. It is a space that forces residents to navigate around absence — absence of continuity, of clean air, of belonging.

To spatialize justice in Logan Heights and Barrio Logan demands more than mitigation. It demands repair. It demands new languages of design that acknowledge trauma and imagine reconnection. It requires us to see the underside of the freeway not as wasted space, but as a contested field of potential: a site for communal reclaiming, for stitching together what concrete divided. Justice begins not with demolition, but with confrontation — of the systems that justify this harm and the neutral tones that conceal it.

The road may be paved, but its consequences are not. And there is no excuse to keep driving past the damage.

Barrio Logan & Logan Heights: A History of Division

In the early 20th century, Logan Heights was one of San Diego's most diverse and dynamic neighborhoods — home to Mexican, Black, Filipino, and Japanese communities. After the Mexican Revolution, many refugees settled there, forming the heart of what would become Barrio Logan. The neighborhood developed a strong Chicanx identity rooted in family, labor, and cultural resilience. By the mid-century, however, a series of infrastructural interventions would unravel its fabric, redrawing the landscape in concrete.

The construction of Interstate 5 in the 1960s bisected the community without consent. It sliced across Logan Heights and severed Barrio Logan from its waterfront. Homes were demolished, businesses shuttered, and residents were displaced — not because of natural disaster or necessity, but due to planning priorities that placed vehicular flow over human livelihood. The community became boxed in: bordered by the freeway above, heavy industry at the harbor's edge, and the Coronado Bridge looming overhead like a skeletal canopy of neglect.

This was not simply an act of poor planning. It was a spatial manifestation of the racial and economic hierarchies embedded in urban policy. While wealthier, whiter neighborhoods remained protected, Logan Heights and Barrio Logan became sacrifice zones — neighborhoods made to bear the burdens of infrastructure without receiving its benefits.

Yet the community did not sit silent. In 1970, when promised green space was once again denied, residents and activists occupied the land beneath the Coronado Bridge and created Chicano Park — a landmark of resistance and cultural affirmation. Through murals, performances, and protest, they transformed a wound into a canvas. But even as the park stands as a powerful symbol of reclamation, the surrounding conditions have remained structurally unequal. Pollution from idling trucks, lack of pedestrian infrastructure, and the freeway's ever-present noise continue to undermine health and cohesion.

Logan Heights and Barrio Logan remind us that resistance is not always enough when the systems remain intact. The freeway didn't just displace — it lingered. It cast a long shadow over everything that followed. And beneath its pillars lies not only lost space but a question: What does repair look like?

Stitching the Scar

If the freeway fractured Logan Heights and Barrio Logan, then justice begins with a stitch — not symbolic, but spatial. “Stitching the Scar” reimagines the land beneath and around the I-5 not as dead space or leftover infrastructure, but as an active terrain of reconnection. My proposed solution is a network of community-oriented interventions under and along the freeway corridor — transforming zones of division into connective tissue.

The plan is simple: reclaim freeway-adjacent voids and transform them into civic assets. Imagine the underpasses not as dark voids but as illuminated public forums — filled with community gardens, cultural installations, outdoor play areas, food markets, performance spaces, shaded recreation zones, and health clinics. These are not beautification projects; they are reparative gestures. Each intervention reflects a claim: that these neighborhoods are not marginal, but central to our city’s cultural and political life.

The spine of the strategy is spatial continuity. We propose walkable corridors with cultural symbolism in the form of street vendors, pop-ups, and art. that bridge the disconnected eastern and western halves of the neighborhood — pedestrian and cyclist routes that cut across what was once impassable. These connective bands would not only allow for physical mobility but also function symbolically: stitching back the narratives and identities severed by mid-century planning.

Green infrastructure would play a central role, too. Living walls, urban tree canopies, and pollution-buffering vegetation would be used to cleanse the air, soften the grey visuals, and dampen the noise pollution that currently overwhelms the area. These environmental additions are not decorative — they are essential. Health equity is inseparable from spatial equity, and clean air is a form of justice.

But physical interventions alone are not enough. The vision must be maintained, stewarded, and shaped by those who live there. That’s why the ‘intervention model’ centers around community organizations, youth councils, and cultural coalitions — local power structures capable of managing programming, stewardship, and design iteration. Bottom-up governance ensures the space is not just reclaimed, but redefined.

“Stitching the Scar” doesn’t seek to erase the freeway. It acknowledges its presence while refusing its dominance. By activating the space it occupies, we convert exclusion into expression, harm into healing, and asphalt into agency. We don’t remove the line — we write over it.



blue lines = walking + cycling corridors

green clouds = tree canopies + living walls

purple spots = underpass hubs for community gatherings

Below, I have 3 AI-generated images representing these ideas



Exhibit 1

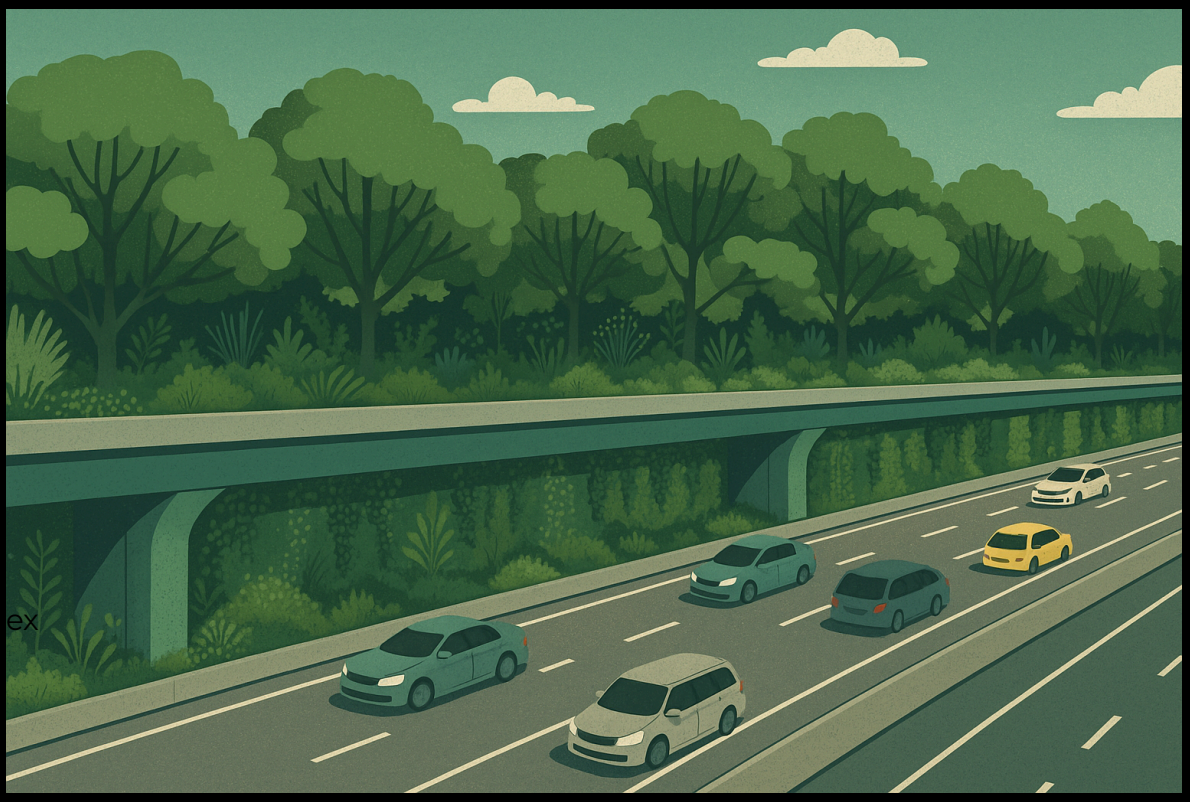

Exhibit 2



Exhibit 3