USC Roski X 3rd LA

Beyond Land Acknowledgement:

New Models of Support and Reparation for Indigenous Communities

DES 530 Co-Lab

2021.01-2021.05

USC x The 3rd LA Project:
AR Postcard Documentation

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OVERVIEW

This project was developed as part of the 2021 Spring course "Design Studio Co-Lab" at USC Roski School of Art and Design, in collaboration with The 3rd LA Project, led by Christopher Hawthorne, Chief Design Officer of the City of Los Angeles. The 3rd LA Project envisions the future of Los Angeles through themes of connectivity, public space, housing, and transit, encouraging creative responses to evolving urban conditions.

Students were invited to explore these themes critically and creatively. The course was conducted as a team-based studio, consisting of six different project groups. Among these, only two teams were selected to present their work during the public forum. Our team's project was chosen and showcased during the live Zoom event, reaching a broad public audience.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Our project involved creating an AR-enhanced postcard featuring El Aliso, a sycamore tree of great cultural and spiritual significance to the Indigenous Tongva people of Los Angeles. Once a gathering place, El Aliso stood for centuries before being erased by industrial development.

The postcard includes a redesigned, digitally illustrated image of El Aliso as the central visual element. When scanned with a smartphone, the postcard activates an augmented reality experience that presents a three-dimensional, interactive animation depicting the historical and symbolic transformation of the site.

This immersive storytelling format was chosen to offer an engaging and reflective experience—one that encourages viewers to connect more deeply with Indigenous history and place memory than a traditional static postcard might allow.

Forum Context

The project was tied to the public Zoom forum held on May 13, 2021, titled "Beyond Land Acknowledgement: New Models of Support and Reparation for Indigenous Communities." This forum encouraged participants to go beyond symbolic gestures and explore more actionable, spatial, and visual models of support.

The forum featured four leading Tongva voices discussing how Los Angeles and other cities can meaningfully support Indigenous communities. While land acknowledgement statements have become more common in recent years, many Native leaders emphasize that such gestures must be accompanied by substantive reparative action, including land conservancy, co-management, and land return.

This event also marked the first public engagement opportunity for Past Due: Report and Recommendations of the Los Angeles Mayor's Office Civic Memory Working Group, a document that included guidelines for Indigenous land acknowledgement, land return, and civic memory infrastructure. The forum, and the report it introduced, served as critical references for our design team.

Conceptual Direction

EL ALISO

Our project took this challenge seriously by asking: "What does it mean to remember a place that has been erased?" We aimed to move beyond symbolic recognition by creating a site-specific, augmented reality intervention that not only remembered El Aliso but also reimagined its presence in the current urban landscape. Through this approach, we explored how immersive storytelling can participate in broader reparative narratives.
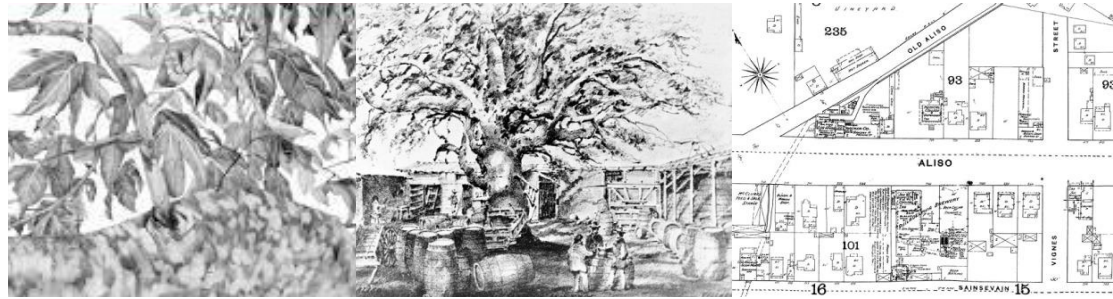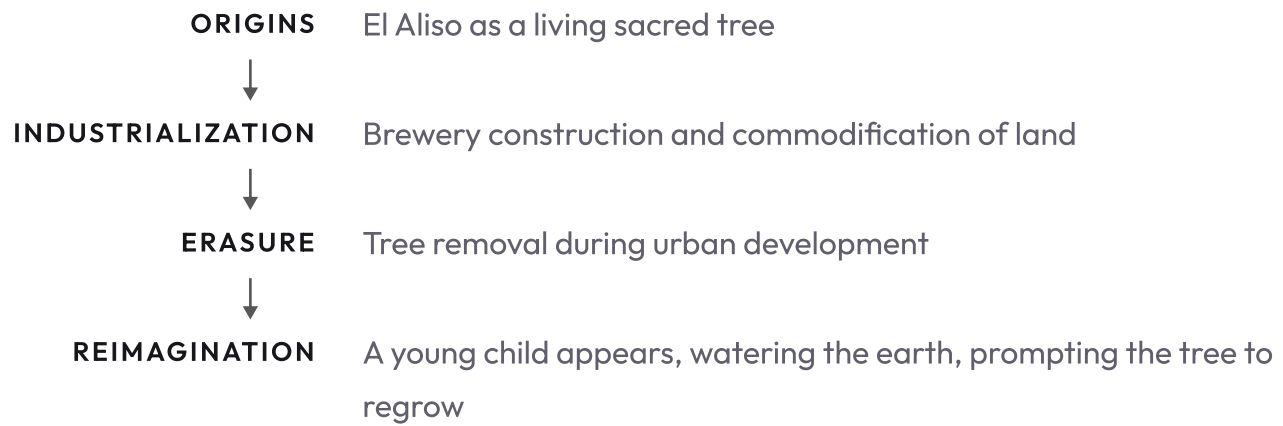

ON-SITE DEMO

To strengthen the emotional connection between audience and site, we visited the exact location where El Aliso once stood, capturing video footage and conducting an on-site AR postcard demonstration. This performative action of placing a memory back into its original location was central to our narrative framework.

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AR Narrative & Visual Design

ORIGINS
↓
El Aliso as a living sacred tree

INDUSTRIALIZATION
↓
Brewery construction and commodification of land

ERASURE
↓
Tree removal during urban development

REIMAGINATION
A young child appears, watering the earth, prompting the tree to regrow

This sequence was illustrated using hand-drawn digital animations, designed to evoke both poetic and historical tones. The user, by scanning the postcard through their mobile device, experiences this layered visual narrative directly at the site of loss.

Tools & Technical Implementation

In preparation for the public Zoom event, we produced and distributed printed copies of our AR postcards to participants and faculty members. By scanning the postcard using the Adobe Aero mobile application, viewers were able to experience the immersive AR animation in real time as part of the live presentation. This demonstration highlighted the accessibility and emotional impact of site-specific augmented storytelling.

HOW IT WORKS

The AR postcard was prototyped using Adobe Aero, with illustrations produced in Procreate and motion graphics refined in After Effects. The AR marker was embedded in the printed postcard, enabling an intuitive on-site interaction.

This hybrid approach bridged physical and digital design, allowing us to prototype a speculative method of public memory-making and place-based storytelling.

Step 1 — Download the Adobe Aero application on your smart device.

Step 2 — Print out a copy of the El Aliso postcard, and place your printed postcard down on a flat surface.

Step 3 — Open the link with your smart device and scan the postcard.

Step 4 — Watch your postcard come to life! Be sure to have your device's sound on to get the full experience!

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Reflections & Significance

This project demonstrates how immersive media can serve as a tool for cultural remembrance and critical spatial practice. By reconnecting audiences to a lost landmark through participatory AR storytelling, we explored the role of design in restorative narrative and decolonial spatial thinking.

More than a symbolic tribute, our project enacted a micro-intervention—an invitation to see the city not just as it is, but as it holds traces of what has been and what could be reimagined.

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