

Citing urban concerns (“People are living on top of each other”), privacy concerns (“People are always peering at us”), environmentalism (“Greenery should never be cut down”), safety concerns (“Our children can no longer play in the streets and must stay in the yard”), and of course property rights, many home owners, unaware of the restriction, grew hedges in their front yards and walled themselves off from the city. However, not everybody in Santa Monica was unaware of the ordinance or agreed with the resulting change in community character. Some complained that city ordinances should be enforced. When the issue was brought to city officials, the city acknowledged and then enforced its laws; it issued citations to several property owners and eventually cut down some of the offending greenery.

City workers cutting down hedges on private property of course outraged hedge owners. Others were put off by city rationales—“The law is the law”—as well as the seeming rudeness of city council members who in public meetings initially dismissed the issue as a nuisance impacting only a few. The hedge owners organized and broadcast a critique of the city’s leadership and policies. A new leader emerged, Bobby Shriver, the nephew of the late Robert F. Kennedy. Shriver promised to forge a compromise that allows people to keep their hedges and announced that he was running for Santa Monica City Council.

Hedge policy was debated at city council meetings leading up to the general election. At one meeting, statements on the traditions of American townscape, the beauty of Latin-inspired courtyard housing, the sanctity of green lawns—in short a compendium of design logics—were introduced into the record. Several councilpersons, four of whom were up for election, apologized in public for their and the city’s culpability in fanning the controversy and further resolved to study the situation and develop new guidelines for hedges. Notwithstanding this gesture, Shriver was the top vote-getter in the recent election, changing the political landscape of the council and ultimately the design details of this city. Tall hedges in front yards will no doubt now become a common part of the Santa Monica scene.

Santa Monica hedges, the Americana at Brand, and the expansion of LAX—what these situations have in common is the intensity and comprehensiveness of the public discourse surrounding their planning. They well illustrate processes now typical in most American communities. No doubt they are in part expressions of both fear of change and desires to preserve myopic and selfish interests. But the