

Epitaph for Edward W. Soja

December 17, 2015 By [Jonathan P. Bell](#)



Professor Edward W. Soja (1940-2015). Courtesy of UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs

We lost a legend with the [passing of Professor Edward W. Soja](#) last month in Los Angeles. Soja's [contributions to the spatial disciplines](#) are as innumerable and diverse as the students he influenced. From 2003 to 2005, I was lucky to be one of his students. I never told Ed about the profound influence he had on me. In commemoration of Ed's life and work, I'd like to share that story with you.

I first read Soja during my brief stint at SCI-Arc in 1998. His work on [space, postmodernism, and Los Angeles](#) were core readings in history and theory classes, and even found their way into my 2nd-year design studio. I kept Ed's ideas close to heart after switching majors and transferring to CSULA to study political science.

When I finished undergrad at Cal State, I started thinking about how I could "bring it all together" at the graduate level. There seemed to be a trajectory in my move from architecture to politics, a pivot away from buildings to a broader interest in space and justice. Many frustrating weeks of serious soul searching eventually looped me back to Ed's [Postmodern Geographies](#). The book provided the inspiration I needed. His analysis of the "emancipatory insight" of space was invigorating, and it helped me uncover my passions as a budding planner. I wanted to study the politics of cities and urbanism — to truly understand space, people, and communities — through urban planning graduate studies under Soja at UCLA.

Knowing grad school admissions would be competitive, I applied to UCLA and another L.A.-area planning school. The first acceptance letter came from the other university, along with a partial scholarship to cover first-year costs. I met with students and faculty at the campus. The program was solid and I was grateful. But I wouldn't be learning *with* Soja. It didn't feel right. The scholarship seemed inconsequential compared to the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study under a luminary like Ed.

I delayed, and it paid off. UCLA's acceptance letter arrived a week later.

Getting into UCLA Urban Planning was one of the happiest moments in my life. During my adolescent years, never, ever, did I imagine pursuing a master's degree, let alone at UCLA. After all, I was a former graffiti writer from Montebello with police run-ins on record. I avoided college prep classes, didn't take the SAT, and finished high school with a "C" average. Now I was the first person in my family going to graduate school, and I'd be one of Soja's students! UCLA's offer didn't come with funding, but I didn't care. I would find a way. I declined a scholarship at another university to study urban planning under Edward Soja at UCLA. That's how important Ed was to me.

My three classes with Soja were rigorous, stimulating, and altogether inspiring. The first class was Political Economy of Urbanization, for which Ed wrote [Postmetropolis](#), the inaugural treatise on critical urban studies. The second was Introduction to Regional Planning. (A year after graduating from UCLA I became a regional planner for the County of Los Angeles: credit that to Soja.) The third class was a dissertation development seminar. I was the sole master's student. Ed graciously allowed me to join and learn from urban planning PhD candidates while working on my master's capstone proposal. He was a supportive, compassionate, and embracing educator.

Ed chaired my master's capstone on crime prevention planning in Los Angeles. The thesis synthesized my longstanding interests in space, urban design, and public policy. On Ed's direction, I included a critical literature review, documentation and analysis of an actual crime-ridden "test street" in L.A., and policy recommendations. I remember sitting in Ed's office nervously watching him read the first draft. Much red ink was spilled over my half-baked arguments and initial overemphasis on Foucault's theories of space and power in a policy document. Ed even critiqued the font sizes! That project would become the basis of my first professional planning report to the County on the potential use of [defensible space](#) in unincorporated South Central Los Angeles. My grad school culminating experience was challenging and meaningful, thanks to Soja.

Soja taught me that [space is active, congregative, and people-centered](#). This spatial awareness is helping me build more spatially just communities in Los Angeles. Today, as a practicing planner, whether preparing policy documents, writing about cities, or working in partnership with communities to improve quality of life, I remain ever faithful to Soja's simple rule: "Put space first."

Professor Edward W. Soja left a positive and indelible mark on me. I am incredibly and eternally grateful. I will miss Ed dearly.

His legacy lives on in us.

A celebration of Edward Soja's life and work will be held Monday, January 25, 2016, from 4pm to 6pm at the UCLA Faculty Center, Sequoia Room.

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About Jonathan P. Bell

Jonathan Pacheco Bell is a proud public sector professional with over 17 years of diversified experience spanning the fields of urban planning, architecture, and information/library science. Since 2006, Jonathan has worked as an urban planner for a large municipal planning department in Los Angeles County. He has extensive experience in countywide zoning enforcement and community planning in South Central Los Angeles. Jonathan received his M.A. in Urban Planning from the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and studied political science and architecture as an undergraduate. He is currently completing an MLIS with an emphasis in public libraries through the San Jose State University iSchool.

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