



...AND ANOTHER ONE bites the dust. Another balcony tumbles down the coveted Isla Vista bluffs, crumbling from its foundations and dragging everything with it into the water. The same deck on the 65 block of Del Playa that sunset chasers flocked to during golden hour has fallen victim to erosion, leaving desolate concrete posts, broken wooden planks, and cracked tile in its place.

On a typical Sunday afternoon in 2017, this unpredictable reality hit Annie Wong's oceanside home. Wong, then a junior at UCSB, was working away at her assignments when a loud rumble interrupted her concentration.

"I'm from Los Angeles, so I was like, 'Oh, okay, it's probably just an earthquake,'" she recalled through nervous laughter. "Then I start hearing screaming outside, and I'm like, 'Why the fuck are you screaming—it's like 5 p.m. There's no reason for you guys to be this hysterical over a sunset.'"

Wong sounded unfazed—cracking jokes, even—as she told me how an entire chunk of the cliff supporting her apartment had fallen into the ocean, grazing a foundational pole bearing a balcony upstairs and barely missing the entryway

of a bottom unit. A beer die table and the white fence that surrounded the perimeter of the deck lay shattered on the rocks.

"It was a gloomy day, but it was really scary because one of my friends lived downstairs, and her entranceway was a lot closer than ours," Wong said. Luckily, there were no injuries, but she was forced to move out and find another home within the week.

Incidents like Wong's are regulated and overseen by Santa Barbara County's Building and Safety Division in the Department of Planning and Development. In 2004, the county established the Isla Vista Bluff Policy to "mitigate hazards posed by bluff erosion on buildings and their occupants along Del Playa Road."

"It was based on the assumption that the maximum bit of bluff that can dislodge and collapse is about five feet," County Building and Safety Manager Massoud Abolhoda stated. However, in 2017, the greatest single bluff collapse in IV history occurred mid-66 block—the failure was estimated between 10 and 16 feet wide and unexpectedly undermined existing policy.

As of January 2020, a revised plan presents a three-point trigger action plan





that requires county and owner action if the bluff erodes within 20, 15, and 10 feet of the building's foundations instead of 15, 10, and five feet. When the distance of the foundation is within 15 to 20 feet, the county requires the owner to hire a geotechnical engineer to establish maximum collapse width. If no action is taken and the bluff retreats—leaving 10 to 15 feet from the edge—a Notice of Violation is issued, and the owner must conduct a geotechnical study to conclude maximum collapse width for an event within six months. The last warning is when the cliff retreats to less than 10 feet, and a notice to vacate the affected structure within the 10 feet range is enacted.

Ideally, property owners would take precautions to “cut back the building to give a bigger buffer between the bluff and the face of the foundation,” Abolhoda noted. Other options include structural alterations to strengthen the building.

Isla Vista is the product of thousands of years of sedimentary uplift due to its proximity to the active More Ranch Fault. According to the county's geotechnical evaluation report released in 2019, the current average bluff retreat rate is in

the range of six inches per year—bluff failures, however, are single events that lie outside of this range. Additionally, the study claimed IV-specific methods of failure to include intense wave-impacted action, bluff collapse due to shallow sloughing (soil loss), slumping of the lower bedrock, and rising sea levels. Due to the geologically active nature of the cliffs, bluff retreats are essentially inevitable.

“Erosion is a natural process,” environmental restorationist Andy Lanes acknowledged, as we walked through Manzanita Village on a sunny morning. “It’s happening all the time, constantly, every day.” Over the last 10 years, Lanes has been working for UCSB’s Cheadle Center for Biodiversity and Ecological Restoration, primarily managing the Manzanita Village restoration site. He’s been keeping a close eye on the erosion of the stretch of cliff lining the bike path and boardwalk right off of Del Playa.

When the interview concluded, Lanes enthusiastically offered to show me some directly impacted sites, so we hopped into his golf cart and headed towards the cliffs. As we approached the bike path connecting the campus to Del



Playa, Lanes pointed out the black fence lining the bluffs—it barely clung onto the edge. “Even in the 10 years that I’ve been working out here, that fence has been moved back three or four times, three or four feet at a time, to keep it from falling off,” he told me.

I asked Lanes whether he thinks Manzanita Village will one day face the same issues as oceanside houses. “It’s not an if, but when,” he responded bluntly. “You can put in revetments, but those are usually damaging to ecology, disrupting the littoral flow of sand down the beach and changing our beaches.”

Even with the omnipresent threat of bluff failure, students are not deterred from claiming a home with an oceanside view. Claire Blodget lives on 67 Del Playa, and her deck also gave way to nature’s plans in December 2019.

“All the houses around us had been red-zoned, but ours hadn’t,” Blodget said. “There was a part of the deck hanging off, and that is the part that fell off, but it also took away a side chunk. It’s not all gone, but this table on the end is in this crevice where the cliff fell off.” Blodget is planning to rent another oceanside home next year but is taking extra precautions to make sure the unit is safe and at a lesser risk. Previous experiences have not deterred Wong either, and she emphasized living oceanside as a status symbol and necessary part of the Isla Vista experience.

“Despite all of that, I still wanted to go

back,” she decided. “The only thing that I can do is not live oceanside if I don’t want to fall down the cliff. I feel like if you don’t live there, someone else will.”

According to Abolhoda, verifying the safety of the property and taking necessary action is always the responsibility of the owner.

“We have written policy of what they need to do,” he remarked. “If property owners follow the program and act proactively to cut back the building when the bluff is too close to the building, then the building will have the same level of safety as other buildings.” Lanes stated that when these measures are not prioritized, landlords are irresponsibly renting out property.

“Don’t put people in danger, especially where it’s the most desirable place to live in the most cramped conditions,” he said. Abolhoda agreed, emphasizing that if owners fail to comply with the actions items the county has in place, at-risk portions of properties could potentially jeopardize occupant lives.

Given the tumultuous, changing nature of Isla Vista, Abolhoda believes that the community shouldn’t turn a blind eye to the geological changes of their home. I asked him what he thought the community should do to stay safe.

Other than abiding by existing regulations in place, Abolhoda gave a lasting warning: “This is not an exact science—nature can play differently.” **W**

