



A River for Los Angeles:
The Story of the
Los Angeles River Greenway

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Prologue

This April, the Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit conservation organization committed to preserving open space and parks in cities, released the startling results of a new report: a comparison of seven major U.S. cities had revealed that Los Angeles had devastatingly little park space for its children. While seventy-eight percent of Boston's children can walk to a neighborhood park, only thirty-four percent of Los Angeles' children can. Moreover, the bulk of the public green space in Los Angeles is concentrated in large parks far from the city's population centers, leaving many residents with no access to open space at all.¹

For many Californians, these statistics are both surprising and ironic: to much of the world, the vision of Los Angeles is one of low-density, sprawling suburban development, each home with a carefully-manicured lawn and a landscape dotted with green, even in the face of drought. The reality could not be farther from the truth, however. Los Angeles has, in fact, less public green space per capita—eight acres per 1,000 people, by one estimate—than any other large American city.² Moreover, only ten percent of the city is set aside as open space, according to another recent study by the Trust for Public Land, and Los Angeles ranks 48th of 55 major cities in its municipal spending on parks—hardly the “garden city” that exists in the imaginations of so many Americans.³

What happened to these landscapes? Many Angelenos—particularly the wealthier residents who first purchased many of the region's suburban homes—were initially drawn to the region a generation or two ago by the idyllic vistas and a desire to return to nature. Today, little of this nature is left; over the decades, the city has chosen to forego, for the most part, the creation of parks and the preservation of open space, and the Los Angeles River—once the center of the pueblo—has been buried and forgotten. What led to this abandonment of these natural elements? And, perhaps more importantly, can they be retrieved?

The timing of the Trust for Public Land's study on parks in Los Angeles could not have been more prophetic: even as the report was being prepared, plans were underway to re-envision one of the key elements of the Los Angeles landscape, the Los Angeles River, as an urban green space. The idea is not a new one, however; in fact, a riverside park alongside a revitalized river was first proposed almost a century ago, and for decades since then, pockets of city residents have been calling for implementation of just such a plan. What has changed in Los Angeles, then, that the city should finally get its river? Examining the birth of the Los Angeles River Greenway and the century-long gestation of the concept offers a unique window into the imaginations of the people of Los Angeles and the inimitable world of Southern Californian culture.

The River in Angeleno Culture

For most of modern Los Angeles' history, the Los Angeles River has been an inside joke; visitors may look for a beautiful Eastern-style river, but Californians know that in Los Angeles, "river" is merely the term for a glorified ditch. Except for periodic floods from the mountains above, the river has been dry for decades, much of the water diverted to irrigation and sanitation uses. What remains flows through a riverbed coated in concrete half a century ago to force the water into concession. This "pitiful creek laughably called the Los Angeles River"⁴ has been the butt of jokes, the subject of songs on the death of the city, and the symbol of a city that has all but forgotten nature. Over the years, it has been co-opted as a temporary site for shanty towns or as the backdrop for Hollywood car chases; during a real estate boom in the early part of the century, unsavory agents even went so far as to sell housing lots atop the riverbed to unsuspecting buyers during the dry months.⁵

"We built it," Army Corps engineers often say of the river. Indeed, the 58-mile concrete waterway is the world's most cemented river; the bulk of the river is also covered, making it nearly invisible to the city's residents.⁶ To the extent that city residents are aware of the river, it is as a danger zone, or, occasionally, as a skate park for thrill seekers. Newspapers periodically report the deaths of residents who have tumbled over the concrete banks into the dry riverbed; in the wet season, unsuspecting passersby occasionally fall over the edges and are swept away by the currents. In fact, there are so many problems along the riverbed that the city requires all schoolchildren to watch a video called "No Way Out" to drill in the dangers of the concrete riverbed and discourage children from biking or skateboarding along its banks.⁷

Today, the river does not even appear on many maps of the city; others inaccurately describe it as dry in its entirety, in spite of the fact that 80 million gallons of water flow along various segments of the channel each day.⁸ Over the years, Angelenos have come to view the river as a necessary evil of the city's urbanization, an eyesore that protects Los Angeles real estate against periodic flooding but serves no other real purpose. One city politician jokingly proposed that the concrete should, perhaps, be painted blue to evoke more of a river feel; others have proposed paving over it altogether to eliminate it from public view. Within the city limits, the concrete river banks are laden with graffiti and populated by teenagers skateboarding or surreptitiously drinking or by indigents seeking shelter for the night.⁹

A River's Story

Pre-1780: The Gabrielino

It was not always this way along the river. In its earliest days, the Los Angeles River flowed freely through marshlands and swamps along the base of the Santa Monica Mountains. The first large communities along the river were established by the Gabrielino, Native Americans who settled the Los Angeles

region nearly ten thousand years ago. The river that the Gabrielino knew was strikingly different from the river Angelenos know today: trees lined the waterway, and lush vegetation engulfed the floodplains, which overflowed each season as snowmelt from the mountains above rushed down into the riverbed. Berries, watercress, sage, wild celery, and yucca all grew in the floodplain, providing sustenance; wildlife also lived throughout the region, serving as another food source. The river was an integral part of Gabrielino life; even the stories passed on through the generations had roles for the water. However, the Gabrielino villages, while numerous, were not densely populated; not until the Spanish settled the region did the population begin to tax the water supply of the Los Angeles River.¹⁰



The Los Angeles River before development.

1780-1870: El Pueblo de la Reina de los Angeles

The earliest European settlements in the Los Angeles region, eight missions and three presidios established by Spain along the Pacific coast in the 1770s, floundered in their first years of existence, unable to farm the land and far from sources of fresh water. When Spain looked to the north to found a new settlement, then, water and arable land were crucial factors. The site chosen by Felipe de Neve, the first governor of California and founder of the pueblo that would eventually become the city of Los Angeles, sat alongside the Los Angeles River. Although the flow of the river was unpredictable even in the eighteenth century before levees and dams had been constructed upstream, the settlers of El Pueblo de la Reina de los Angeles successfully diverted enough water to irrigate their fields and sustain the small community.¹¹

One of the first tasks the pueblo settlers undertook was to construct a complex web of *zanjas*, or

ditches, to carry water from the river to the pueblo. The first *zanja*, the *Zanja Madre*, was completed in 1781; it was the first branch of what would effectively be one of the nation's first municipal water systems.¹²

In the years that followed the establishment of El Pueblo de la Reina de los Angeles, the community grew rapidly, spurred first by the successful grain industry, later by the expansion of lucrative vineyards throughout Southern California, and finally by the Sacramento gold rush of 1848. By 1835, Los Angeles had eclipsed San Francisco as the center of settlement in California.¹³ Settlers continued to flood the region throughout the decade that followed, and by the time California was granted statehood by the United States in 1849, the *zanja* system was providing water for a veritable city, irrigating more than 8,000 acres and bringing drinking water to thousands.¹⁴

1870–1910: A New Century

By the 1870s, America was changing rapidly. As the railroad stretched across the country, California became easily accessible to the East for the first time, spurring unprecedented population growth. The Southern Pacific Railroad, the first transcontinental railroad to reach Los Angeles, arrived in 1876; during that decade, the young city's population nearly doubled. When a second cross-country railway, the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe, opened in 1886, a series of fare wars began. At the peak of these battles, ticket prices to travel from the Midwest to Los Angeles were as low as one dollar, and Americans flocked to the Pacific, spurring a real estate boom that brought \$100 million and sixty new towns to Los Angeles County in 1887 alone.¹⁵

Much of this real estate was sold in Eastern cities to buyers who had never seen Los Angeles, however, and—while many promoters were honest with their clients—many others painted an idyllic view of the landscape, distributing images of the Los Angeles River as a full-flowing (and very blue) river reminiscent of the rivers of the East. Buyers arrived to discover, much to their distress, that the river was, in fact, only an ephemeral river, running dry in the summer months; it was the beginning of Angelenos' discontent with their water supply.¹⁶

The rapid population growth in the waning years of the nineteenth century created a critical need for a larger domestic water supply, and the Los Angeles City Water Company, the company that had managed the city's water since 1868, set out to secure existing water supplies and find new sources. The *zanjas* were quickly running dry: by 1902, there more than 128,000 Angelenos, each consuming, on average, 306 gallons of water each day, three times the average in many Eastern cities. Because the Los Angeles City Water Company did not meter most homes, residents saw little reason to conserve water, thrusting the city into a water crisis when, in 1904, drought struck.¹⁷

Even in the face of severe water shortages, however, Angelenos continued to consume water at extremely

high rates, watering lawns and gardens as the surrounding marshes were drained and water supplies in the Solano and Elysian Reservoirs, built in 1903 as part of Elysian Park and capable of holding 15.8 million gallons of water collectively, dwindled. A solution was needed—and in late 1904, one emerged.¹⁸



A house collapses into the riverbed following the 1914 floods. (Gumprecht)

1910–1930: Tapping the Owens Valley

The search for water ultimately brought the Los Angeles City Water Company, then headed by engineer William Mulholland, to the Owens Valley. Former Los Angeles Mayor Fred Eaton had been a proponent of looking to the Owens Valley for water for years, but the valley was more than two hundred miles from the city, and most had mocked Eaton's suggestion. After a trip to the region, however, Mulholland was sufficiently impressed that he initiated a more in-depth investigation into the possibility. The study revealed that constructing an aqueduct to carry water across the Mojave Desert and through the San Gabriel Mountains would cost the company upwards of \$23 million—an unheard of sum in 1904. But the valley was capable of supplying 325 million gallons of water a day, seven times what the Los Angeles River could provide.¹⁹

In spite of the price tag, the city moved forward with plans to build a 233-mile aqueduct between the Owens Valley and Los Angeles, although the plan was kept as quiet as possible to prevent potential backlash from residents of the Owens Valley area. Between 1905 and 1907, city voters approved nearly \$25 million in bonds to purchase land and water rights and construct the aqueduct, and the Mulholland slowly began to obtain the necessary real estate rights. Although the people of the

Owens Valley protested the move vehemently when they heard—the morning that the plan was made public, the local newspaper, the *Inoyo Register*, ran a headline reading “Los Angeles Plots Destruction, Would Take Owens River, Lay Lands Waste, Ruin People, Homes and Communities,”²⁰ and residents attempted to physically block the construction, only to be overpowered by the machinery and political will of the big city—Owens Valley water began flowing to Los Angeles in 1913, averting a water crisis for growing metropolis. The political scandal surrounding the acquisition of the water would remain a part of Los Angeles lore for generations to come, however.²¹

Although the new aqueduct dwarfed the river in scale, the waterway would not be forgotten so easily. In the years immediately following the opening of the aqueduct, the riverbed was entirely dry; in fact, developers even began to site small new towns directly atop the riverbed, and General Petroleum Corporation opened a plant in the dry channel.²² A collective amnesia developed among Angelenos; few worried about or even remembered the floods of the 1880s.

The winter of 1913–1914 brought an especially intense El Niño season, however, and for the first time in decades, violent storms hit the Los Angeles region, dropping up to nineteen inches of rain in some areas. Every river in the region overflowed, flooding nearly twelve thousand acres of land and washing out bridges and levees all along the Los Angeles River. Railroad service was suspended for nearly a week, and the city was cut off from the rest of the country. Public outcry called for better flood control measures, and the battle to permanently tame the Los Angeles River began.²³

Throughout the 1920s, debates on flood control ensued. As the real estate boom began to wane, newcomers increasingly began to buy flood-prone land along the river’s floodplain, making flood protection even more critical.²⁴ Engineers initially proposed a series of stronger levees that would contain the river to a very narrow channel and open up land along the water’s edge for development—a boon in a county where land values were skyrocketing. Later plans focused on the mountains above the city, the source of much of the river’s flow; planned dams and reservoirs would contain the water, eliminating the need for improvements along the river in the city itself.²⁵

The 1930s: A Vision for Los Angeles

As county engineers produced plans to constrain the river and increase buildout in the metropolitan area, citizens began to take an active interest in the project for the first time. In 1927, the Chamber of Commerce, spurred by wealthy Angelenos who had moved to the region for its natural beauty and were increasingly concerned that new plans for the riverbed would destroy physical features of the landscape, convened a Citizens’ Committee on Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches to explore options for parks and open space within Los Angeles County.²⁶

The committee, composed primarily of high-profile residents from areas like Hollywood and Beverly

Hills, tasked the landscape architecture and city planning firms of Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts and Harland Bartholomew and Associates of St. Louis, Missouri with the creation of a plan to integrate the river modifications with a grander scheme for a Los Angeles parks system.

The Olmsted/Bartholomew plan sought to preserve the Los Angeles coastline—quickly becoming engulfed by development—and to create a network of parks and playgrounds to “improve health, reduce delinquency, and promote citizenship” in the city’s poorer neighborhoods.²⁷ The Olmsted Brothers (and Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., who had established the firm a generation earlier) had already created some of the nation’s most renowned park spaces: New York’s Central Park, Boston’s Emerald Necklace, Washington’s Rock Creek Park, Chicago’s South Parks, and numerous other urban parks across the country. Los Angeles, with its unique natural resources, presented a new challenge.

The plan, *Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region*, proposed dramatic changes to the landscape of Los Angeles County. Designed to provide open space for a steadily growing population—by the late 1920s, over 350 new Angelenos were arriving each day, and the population of the metropolitan area had swollen to 2.2 million—the plan included a network of parks along the coast and through the city of Los Angeles at a cost of nearly \$30 million.²⁸ The design would serve both as a flood control mechanism—using the riverbed and surrounding basins as recharge areas for the water table and protection against river overflows, much as Olmsted, Sr.’s plan for Boston’s Emerald Necklace had done—and as a last-ditch effort to purchase and preserve Southern California’s coastline and undeveloped green space.

This “‘Olmsted vision’ of open space,” as historian Mike Davis dubbed it,²⁹ met with disdain from all but a few of the committee members. The plan, presented just months after the devastating stock market crash of 1929, was a public works project well beyond the scope of what the city and county had imagined. In the late nineteenth century, social reform and public health movements had actively promoted parks projects as a tool for mitigating the effects of increased urbanization, and the City Beautiful movement had sparked interest in urban green space. But by the early 1930s, large-scale urban projects were becoming rarer and rarer; instead, federal and regional funds were increasingly directed towards power development and reclamation projects of a much grander scale. Moreover, the plan relied on a regional parks department that did not yet exist, and passing local bond issues to fund such an endeavor in an era of spreading unemployment, sacrifice, and poverty was nearly impossible.

Not surprisingly, then, the Olmsted/Bartholomew plan was resoundingly rejected. The price tag and overwhelming size of the project doomed it; the committee and the Chamber of Commerce even opted to refrain from printing copies for city officials and members of the committee, as they had initially planned to do. “[T]his thing has taken of my own time and the time of the committee to



The original Olmsted/Bartholomew plan for Los Angeles. (Hise and Deverell)

such an extent here that I can't afford to give more time to it," Chamber of Commerce director J. Hill declared. "If you want to kill this thing, let's kill it. Let's not let it die a long death...Let's kill it now and get it out of the way...Let's kill it and get a vote on it."³⁰ The proposal was summarily rejected, and Los Angeles' hopes for a park system were tabled indefinitely; the plan would become "a window into a lost future," buried for decades.³¹

The years following the rejection of the Olmsted/Bartholomew plan saw a wholesale transformation of the Los Angeles landscape, and especially of the city's waterways. The industrial revolution had firmly established itself in Southern California, and factories along the riverfront siphoned off water for their own uses, reducing the flow to a trickle along many parts of the riverbed. Like so many of the Eastern rivers, the Los Angeles River quickly became severely polluted—a quality that was exacerbated by the fact that water only flowed intermittently through many areas.

Two devastating floods—the first in 1934, the second in 1938—also dealt tremendous blows to Angelenos' perceptions of the river. Even today, Los Angeles is waging a war against the elements; as

development encroaches on the base of the mountains and pulls at the trees and vegetation, the soil is disrupted and the natural landscape altered. When summer brings fires, the developed areas burn more readily, leading to mudslides and floods when the winter rains come. The cycle erodes the earth along the coast and at the bases of the mountains; slowly, Southern California is crumbling into the sea.³² In many respects, it is not a region that nature intended for human development, as Angelenos discovered during the 1930s. Floods washed away homes, took lives, destroyed the bridges and railways that men had labored to build. Cries rose up to tame the river and constrain it to its banks to protect the real estate at its edges.

Beginning in 1935, that is exactly what transpired. The federal government stepped in with a \$13.9 million allocation from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers set to work conquering the San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers. After the Flood Control Act of 1936 expanded the Corps' authority, the group took full control of the river. Initial surveys found many faults in Los Angeles County's planning and construction process, but rather than rebuild the endangered infrastructure, the Corps opted to contain the Los Angeles River to a narrow channel. Because much of the river's floodplain had already been subdivided and sold for residences, the Corps felt obligated to protect present and future homes, even at the cost of the natural water system. Concrete was poured along fifty-one miles of river, boxing the water in; only a few miles of the waterway were left with "soft" ground—necessary in some areas because water needed to seep back into the underground water table, and in others because bedrock beneath the river threatened to interfere with the concrete.³³

The "Great Storm" of 1938, which brought 26 inches of rain to the Los Angeles region, killed hundreds of people, and destroyed nearly 5,000 homes, contaminated the city's water supplies, forcing many Angelenos to wait for supplies to be dropped in by air as the city declared a state of martial law.³⁴ Although work on the river was already underway, the 1938 floods reasserted the importance, in residents' minds, of the process; the Corps' work enjoyed tremendous public support.

Work on the channelization of the river continued through the Second World War and throughout the 1950s; by the time the Corps completed the work in 1959, the river had been transformed into a series of flood control reservoirs, debris basins, and concrete streams.³⁵ For all practical purposes, the Los Angeles River vanished from the psyches of Southern Californians.

Re-Envisioning a River

For the next several decades, very little was spoken about the Los Angeles River or its place in the city's urban landscape. Although utopian writers and environmentalists periodically bemoaned the river's loss—Garrett Eckbo's 1949 work *Landscape for the Living* and the planning firm EDAW's 1965 report,

Urban Metropolitan Open Space Study, both extolled the values of green space and the waterway³⁶—the conversation was largely muted.

In 1983, however, things began to change. In Owens Valley, where residents who remembered the valley's last stand in the 1920s were still deeply resentful of Los Angeles, citizens voted to take back control of the valley's ground water, which at the time provided eight percent of Los Angeles' water supply. Runoff from the valley provided another sixty-five percent, making any attempt on the part of valley residents to regain control of the water potentially devastating for Los Angeles.

“We want them to get to know these water rights are not unlimited,” said Cindy O'Connor, a member of the Inyo County water commission helping lead the uprising against Los Angeles.³⁷ In the years since Los Angeles began to pump water out of Owens Valley, the region had gone from a sea of orchards, vineyards, and farms to a graveyard of dead trees resembling “dried brown porridge at the bottom of a white porcelain bowl,” in the words of *Washington Post* writer Jay Mathews. Although little came of the Owens Valley residents' assertion of their water rights, Los Angeles County took notice. The already-strained water supply was a point of contention, especially since water from Washington and Oregon was increasingly limited; for the first time, the city recognized that a long-term plan would be necessary to plan for the region's twenty-first century water needs.

A River Freeway

In the wake of the Owens Valley dispute came one of the most dramatic proposals yet to reshape Angelenos' visions of water: transportation planners in Los Angeles County proposed turning the dry concrete riverbed into an alternate freeway route to relieve congestion along the city's overburdened roads. The project, endorsed by California State Assemblyman Richard Katz, proposed building carpool lanes along the riverbed to accommodate traffic volume during the dry seasons. In 1989, county officials recommended that the county Transportation Commission authorize a \$100,000 expenditure to formally explore the idea.³⁸ The notion behind this “river road” was that the river channel—typically dry for as many as 300 days each year—was already so far removed from its natural state that it would serve the city better as a roadway than as a waterway.³⁹

The idea was not entirely new: during the Second World War, trucks transported munitions along the channel, and for decades Hollywood has filmed chase scenes along the concrete floor. “An L.A. River commute would be the ultimate off-road experience, something for every native southern California driver to savor, except during flash floods,” wrote Jay Mathews, relishing the idea.⁴⁰ The California Transportation Department extolled the virtues of such a model, telling stories of an elevated highway system that could span the length of the river through Los Angeles to provide additional travel lanes.

Modern California culture—at least in Southern California—revolves around the automobile, and

even the threat of flash floods did little to deter Californians from the notion that opening the Los Angeles River bed to traffic might, at some level, save them from themselves. Plans to add a second deck to the Harbor Freeway had been abandoned after the 1989 San Francisco earthquake wreaked havoc on a similar roadway in Oakland, California; suddenly, the solidly-grounded riverbed seemed a viable option.⁴¹

If Angelenos were waiting for a rallying cry, the freeway proposition was it. When the proposal was made public, residents all over the city—from schoolchildren to retirees to planners to the mayor himself—spoke out against it. As the community mobilized, a collective vision for the river began to emerge for the first time.

“A Mad Vision”: Bradley’s vista

Out of this chaos stepped the man some dubbed the savior of the river. Tom Bradley, mayor of Los Angeles from 1973 to 1993, was among the strongest advocates of a restored river, envisioning an “oasis of beauty and opportunity” modeled after similar initiatives in cities like San Antonio, Texas.⁴² Bradley’s image of a riverwalk, bike trails, and picnic areas called to mind many of the elements of the original Olmsted/Bartholomew plan for the region: carefully-planned open spaces that simultaneously served the recreational needs of the city and evoked visions of nature that the concrete riverbed lacked. It was to be, in the words of one journalist, “one of those watery flowing things with green banks, willow trees and fish swimming in it...you know, a real river.”⁴³

Bradley’s vision was an unheard of proposal for a river that the city had all but forgotten, and in the fifth year of one of the region’s longest droughts, Angelenos greeted the concept with skepticism, in spite of their desire to save the riverbed from becoming a sea of traffic. To begin with, such a revolutionary change in the Los Angeles River would have necessitated a fundamental change in lifestyle for those who lived along it. In the early 1990s, businesses routinely dumped wastewater—suds from laundromats, noxious chemicals, and other toxins that would be illegal to dump in almost any other American river—into the river channel, where the pollutants would trickle along the concrete until the sun dried them. In other areas of the riverbed, teenagers skateboarded along the walls, and homeless men and women slept against the concrete.

Bradley persisted, however, and eventually the City of Los Angeles created a citizens committee and city task force to explore options for the river and propose potential plans. The city found an unlikely ally in the process: the poet Lewis MacAdams and his river preservation organization, Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR). FoLAR, created in 1985 as an artists’ celebration of the river that once was, had grown over the years into coalition of ardent river advocates, many of whom had highly-politicized, antagonistic relationships with the city. FoLAR advocated a complete renaturalization of

the river—a far cry from Bradley’s vision of a recreational waterway and park. However, the two groups shared a common enough vision to open a dialogue; in the years to come, both would be instrumental to the river revitalization process.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, Katz continued to push for further consideration of the expressway plan, which had been temporarily stymied by Bradley’s counterproposal and jurisdictional issues surrounding ownership of the riverbed. “It may not be an ideal answer, but anything that will reduce traffic congestion by twenty percent, you’ve got to take a look at,” Katz argued.⁴⁵ The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, skeptical of all of the proposed plans, debated the viability of uses that did not explicitly deal with flood control. However, their proposed alternative, extending the river’s concrete walls even further to prevent overflows, met with great opposition from both groups. “I want this to be a river,” MacAdams said of the Corps’ plan. “...Los Angeles already has enough concrete.”⁴⁶

Even among restoration advocates, however, there were conflicts: should the river be restored to its natural condition and allowed to re-vegetate and flow freely each season? What would become of the communities—hundreds of them—that sat within the river’s natural floodplain? Would a more viable option be to create a parks system of recreational green space that might coexist with the concrete flood control mechanisms?

“Just calling it what it was, a river, that seemed like a radical act,” says MacAdams of the early days of FoLAR.⁴⁷ “...I thought the basic task was to convince people how much better the river could be. But then I realized: I first had to convince people that there was a river.”⁴⁸ The initial makeup of the group—artists, poets, and writers—was critical to its early success because, he explained, “you had to [be able] to see something that wasn’t there.”⁴⁹ Other environmental groups agreed, noting that the river revitalization was as much about process as about preservation. Tree People, a Los Angeles organization focused on renaturalizing the river and cleaning the city air, found that river cleanups could be powerful tools in engaging youth in the process; other groups had similar experiences organizing neighborhoods around new visions of the landscape.⁵⁰

The Flood of 1992

Los Angeles’ war against the land escalated in early 1992, hitting a new crescendo as floodwaters swept through the city in mid-February. The pattern of fires, floods, and mudslides has plagued the region for over a century, but Angelenos have a remarkable ability to forget the disasters, be they floods, earthquakes, or droughts. “The decay rate of the memory of a flood is very rapid,” Brigadier General Gerald Galloway, an Army engineer working on flood control, said in an interview. “Every time we have a flood we are reminded how we have ignored the lessons of the past.”⁵¹ The flash floods of 1992 brought the reality of the river back into the Los Angeles psyche with a dramatic rush as the

Los Angeles River overflowed not once, but twice, and then-Governor Pete Wilson declared a state of emergency in the county.⁵²

The storm, one of the worst Los Angeles had seen in a century⁵³, brought over nine inches of rain to parts of the city in only two days—more precipitation than the region had seen in all five years of drought.⁵⁴ Falling rocks and mudslides destroyed homes and cars outside of the city limits, and seven deaths were linked to the rains, including several Angelenos who fell into or made the mistake of playing in the concrete river channel and were swept away by floodwaters.⁵⁵

The 1992 floods prompted a heated discussion on the politics of flood control. For nearly a century, the federal government had been insuring and compensating homeowners for flood damage, even when homes had been built in established floodplains; time and time again, buildings on those floodplains were rebuilt, only to be destroyed by the next flood. Over the decades, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had attempted to mitigate flood damage along the Western rivers by constructing dams and levees to regulate the flow of water. Along the Mississippi River, however, a similar process had failed to contain the river, and ultimately the Corps permanently moved residents to higher ground and allowed the river to retake over 35,000 acres of its original floodplain at a cost of \$6 billion. In California, however, development had not only failed to move away from the floodplain, but in fact had increasingly infringed upon it, with compensated flood losses nearly doubling between 1951 and 1992.⁵⁶ “The market is saying you’re nuts to live in a flood plain, but the Federal Government is saying it’s not only okay, but we’ll make it affordable,” said Scott Faber, director of the flood plains program for American Rivers.⁵⁷ For the first time, residents began to speak out about the risks and costs of building a city in a floodplain; it was the first step towards a resolution.

While the logical solution might have been to move Los Angeles residents away from the river’s floodplain, the Corps acknowledged at the time that such a move was unlikely in a city that values space and real estate so highly. Instead, the Corps planned to raise the river’s concrete walls even higher at a taxpayer cost of nearly half a billion dollars.⁵⁸ The Los Angeles County Drainage Area Project was designed to protect property along the river, but it relied on older mechanisms of flood control, and failed to limit new development in the floodplain, perpetuating problems with flood risk.⁵⁹ The future of the river, perennially in limbo, became more and more prevalent in Angelenos’ minds.

An endangered river

In 1993, American Rivers, a river conservation organization, released its annual “endangered rivers” list and identified the Los Angeles River as the most endangered urban waterway in the country—a devastating, if unsurprising, blow for the city that bolstered public support for a master planning process for the river. Over the next year, the Corps’ plans for the waterway became public, and abruptly,

the pockets of mobilized citizens began to come together with a collective voice.

Plans for the new river walls provoked violent reactions from the many conservation groups that had been fighting to save the river.⁶⁰ Environmentalists warned that higher walls would drive property values down, contribute to urban blight, and—most significantly—have only a minimal impact on the channel’s ability to contain flooding. But cities and towns along the river, including Los Angeles, saw the extended walls as much-needed flood insurance. As the battle between the proponents and adversaries of the flood control plan escalated, others jumped into the fray. The Los Angeles *Times* decried the plan, declaring that “the battle over flood control on the Los Angeles River is really a fight for its soul.”⁶¹ A slew of editorials, all scathingly negative, followed over the next year, and public opinion swayed towards FoLAR and their allies.

By the mid-1990s, only two stretches of natural waterway remained along the Los Angeles River; FoLAR had pressed the county to extend these natural zones into the surrounding floodplains to allow water to flow through the region unbounded by concrete. The return to nature, FoLAR argued, would encourage wildlife to return to Los Angeles region. Moreover, restoring the natural riparian habitat could protect the steelhead trout who were found only in that small stretch of the Los Angeles River; the trout had not been able to complete their migration to the Pacific Ocean since 1940, the last year the path was not entirely cemented.⁶²

Stopping the Corps’ plan to extend the river walls was not a simple matter, however. The conservation organizations—or “creek freaks” as many Angelenos has taken to calling them—ultimately filed a lawsuit against Los Angeles County, alleging that the county was in violation of California’s environmental regulations because it had failed to consider alternative plans for the river. As the suit, filed in Los Angeles County Superior Court, dragged on, however, construction on the project began.

In July 1996, much to the surprise of all of the players, the Superior Court found in favor of FoLAR, ordering the county’s Board of Supervisors to reexamine whether the environmental impact report had, in fact, met state standards. The board immediately found the report adequate, however, and the only discernible outcomes of the case were the creation of a Los Angeles River Watershed Task Force and the hiring of an independent consultant, who was given a year to produce an alternate plan for the river.⁶³ In other regards, the victory was fruitless for FoLAR: construction continued on the riverbed during the year the consultant worked on a new plan, making it unlikely that any alternate plan would be adopted.

“It has happened before...”: Models for Los Angeles

Los Angeles is not the first city to return to its river roots, however. It is one of an increasing number

of cities across the United States (and beyond) who have begun to reclaim waterfronts once tainted by industry and cut off from communities by highways, railroads, industrial and commercial zones, and other trappings of civilization.

In Boston, where the Charles River long served as “a visual backdrop for Boston...a river to drive across, jog alongside, bicycle next to, sail upon and admire from the bank, but not, under any circumstances, a river whose waters anyone would dare touch, let alone swim in or, God forbid, drink,”⁶⁴ a similar renaissance had started in the late 1970s. For the first time, Bostonians started to recognize that much of the city’s character was defined by the river and the urban open space surrounding it—a stark change from the concepts of urbanism that had dominated Boston and other major American cities in the 1960s and early 1970s, when urban renewal efforts had focused on building newer, bigger buildings in the downtown areas.⁶⁵

In Massachusetts, the task of restoring the Charles River was nearly as daunting as in Los Angeles: city residents had to be taught to re-imagine the river, to visualize it as a green space free of the stigma that had come to symbolize the waterway. “Bostonians don’t understand the Charles the way Parisians understand the Seine and Londoners the Thames,” said Robert Zimmerman, then-head of the Charles River Waterfront Association. “All over the world, people have love affairs with rivers, but not the Charles. There’s an attitude against the Charles, and the only other river in the same category is in Los Angeles, where the river is in a concrete bunker. Maybe the problem with the Charles is that it’s been so manipulated. It was a sewer, and then Back Bay was constructed, and buildings on Beacon Street face inward, away from the Charles, because the river was a source of such stench nobody even wanted to look at it.”

Advocates of revitalizing the river had help in the form of the federal Clean Water Act and new state environmental legislation passed in the late 1970s that helped to clear the Charles of dangerous pollutants, and the Charles River Watershed Association, which had been founded a decade earlier with the restoration of the river as its mission, was growing rapidly. Over the next twenty years, the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC), then the governmental body overseeing the state’s parks and waterways, endeavored to regain control of land along the Charles River, buying back parcels from corporations or retailers who were operating alongside the water.⁶⁶

Building the Los Angeles River Greenway

Neither is Boston alone in its efforts to re-imagine a waterfront; the movement to restore parks and waterfronts spread across the nation in the late 1990s. San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park is awash with wildflower meadows where piles of hypodermic needles once sat neglected; the cities of St. Louis and Providence have both unearthed forgotten rivers of their own, restoring them to the

public consciousness and leveraging their redevelopment to spur economic growth in downtown districts. The unrivaled economic boom of the late 1990s played a large role in this ecological rebirth, jumpstarting revitalization of deindustrialized cities and spurring renewed interest in many of the private organizations that support the nation's parks and wilderness.⁶⁷

Change has been slow to come to the Los Angeles River; the political and legal battles that have raged since the mid-1990s have made the implementation of any plan, large or small, extraordinarily contentious. Moreover, it has been an uphill battle to reclaim the river's public image. "Landscapes tell stories," filmmaker Wim Wenders declared at a 1999 conference on revitalizing the river, "and the Los Angeles River tells a story of violence and danger."⁶⁸ Overcoming the river's reputation as a symbol of crime, vagrancy, homelessness, and disinvestment will be a long process.

In early 1999, however, the first sign of the city's new vision for the river emerged when Los Angeles announced a \$10 million plan to revitalize a stretch of the river upstream to create an urban greenbelt.⁶⁹ "It's finally starting to come together. I think we're starting to convince people that, yes, this is a real river, not a storm sewer," said Melanie Winter, current executive director of Friends of the Los Angeles River. "What does almost every community in L.A. share besides the freeways? They share a river."⁷⁰

Only a year later, California voters passed Propositions 12 and 13, earmarking \$2.1 billion for the creation and expansion of the state's parks, coastland, deserts, mountains, and open space and another

\$2 billion for the improvement of water quality and flood control. Proposition 12, the parks bond, is the largest in the state's history; the bond, which passed by a vote of nearly sixty-five percent, is targeted not only at wilderness areas, but at neighborhoods within the state's cities and towns that are in dire need of parks and playgrounds, goals vaguely reminiscent of Olmsted and Bartholomew's plan to create parks, playgrounds, and beaches in Southern California.⁷¹

The California state legislature then approved a record \$115 million—much of it funded by Proposition 12—to create a series of parks along the Los Angeles River, woven together by biking and walking paths that would stretch from the San Fernando Valley to Long Beach. Another \$45 million would go towards the purchase of sixty acres of land near Elysian Park; the land, formerly used by Union Pacific as the Taylor switching lands, would become the first state park to be created in over a generation.⁷² All of the parks, to be managed by the State Parks Department, will serve as both green space and flood control mechanisms. “With one fell swoop we're going to turn the Los Angeles River from an eyesore into a jewel running through the city,” said California State Assemblyman Antonio Villaraigosa.⁷³ Instrumental to the effort were the small areas that FoLAR had restored as models for what might be done were the entire river revitalized. In the years since FoLAR's creation, the organization's community cleanups have removed hundreds of tons of garbage from the riverbed, and affiliate organizations have planted over 10,000 sycamore trees along the water's edge. “It's important that we invest in communities that didn't have parks, and create open space and improve the quality of life in those neighborhoods that have been blighted,” Villaraigosa said.⁷⁴

The quest for parks is far from over for Los Angeles, however. Revitalizing the river will entail redirecting substantial quantities of groundwater or runoff if it is truly to be a viable waterway; currently, as much as ninety percent of the flow during the dry season comes from the city's treated sewage.⁷⁵ Critics of the greenway project also question how effectively—and at what price—the antiquated concrete channelization can truly be replaced with the newer methods of flood control that would make restoration of the river and floodplains possible.⁷⁶

What has caused this sudden change in Angelenos' perceptions of green space? Those who have watched this transformation take place have pondered this at length: is this indicative of a new fear of the suburban sprawl that has long dominated development in the Los Angeles region? Has frustration with out-of-control traffic congestion forced Californians to reconsider their predecessors' unilateral rejection of a parks system? Are people simply responding to growing concerns about quality of life in a city often stigmatized for its pollution and sprawl?

Whatever the reason, the shift towards greener thinking is evident in Angelenos' willingness to pay higher taxes to infuse the metropolitan region with more open space. “We're seeing a paradigm shift

in thinking,” said Corey Brown, a director of California’s chapter of Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit organization that has been instrumental in helping the state and local governments acquire and preserve park lands.⁷⁷ In the early 1990s, California’s policy towards preserving and creating open space was virtually nonexistent; budget crises tied the hands of the state government, and in 1996, California’s state land acquisition office was closed. There is a great deal of ground to be recovered with this new influx of capital, then, including nearly a decade of maintenance that was neglected or ignored during the lean recession years of the early 1990s.⁷⁸ The cause was bolstered in 2002, when a third bond measure, the *California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks, and Coastal Protection Act of 2002* (Proposition 40), secured an additional \$2.6 billion in state funds for the preservation and creation of parklands.⁷⁹ Called “the most elegant park bond” in California history by State Assemblyman Fred Keeley, Proposition 40 added critical resources to the state’s open space initiatives.⁸⁰

Taylor Yard and Chinatown Cornfields

With the new funding, the process of building the Los Angeles River Greenway—named for the parks system proposed by Olmsted and Batholomew—is finally beginning, albeit slowly. The first urban parks in the system are currently under construction at the edge of Chinatown. While the concrete banks of the river will be retained in this area to protect the homes in the working class communities along the edge of the water, community groups and city schoolchildren have come together to replant the land along the edge of the river barriers with native trees and vegetation.⁸¹

The city has also increased spending on street sweeping, trash pickup, and education on water cleanliness in order to meet county requirements that no garbage enter the Santa Monica Bay by 2015; today, mountains of trash are often swept into storm drains, into the Los Angeles River, and subsequently out into the bay. Los Angeles had initially joined 22 neighboring cities and towns in suing the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board over the policy, adopted in September 2001, on the grounds that it incurred dramatic costs for local communities. The regulation also requires municipalities to reduce trash by 10 percent each year. However, the city dropped out of the suit and reached an independent settlement that would both meet the board's requirements and contribute \$168 million

to cleaning up the Los Angeles River.⁸²

California's most recent land acquisition for the Los Angeles River Greenway, a 17.8-acre swath of land south of the Glendale Parkway, will ultimately connect the Taylor Yard State Park, which sits just north of downtown, to the river itself. Again, the funding for the purchase—\$10.5 million—comes from Proposition 12 monies. Unlike the stretch of river that runs through the heart of Los Angeles, however, the area south of Glendale Parkway is soft-bottom, free of concrete in order to allow water to seep into the ground and recharge the underground waterways. Its acquisition, then, is good news for environmentalists and other river advocates who would ultimately like to see the state restore links between the soft-bottom and concrete portions of the river

to allow wildlife to move freely throughout the greenway.⁸³

The vision does not end here, however. FoLAR, Unpaved LA, Tree People, and other conservation organizations in the Southern California region would one day like to see the Los Angeles River used not only as a flood control mechanism, but as a means of supplying the city with water. Impervious surfaces currently cover over seventy percent of Los Angeles; if rainfall and runoff could be collected by creating a pervious surface that could absorb the water and relay it into water tables, the city could meet nearly half of its water needs itself.⁸⁴

As the Los Angeles River re-emerges in the imaginations of Angelenos, the potential for the development of parks and other open spaces along its edges will only grow. In the few years since writer Mike Davis and historian Blake Gumprecht re-introduced Californians to the Olmsted/Bartholomew plan for Los Angeles' parks, interest in the proposal has grown astonishingly. The master plan for the river produced by the city in the late 1990s has also met with accolades from residents who are beginning to realize the ramifications of a center city without urban nature; as Los Angeles reflects on its past and re-envision its future, Angelenos may find that—surprisingly, and perhaps unexpectedly—a river still runs through the heart of the city.

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