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Author:

[Rogers, Will](#)

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Reimagining the Los Angeles River as a Linear Park

Will Rogers



Perhaps no park-imagining effort in the U.S. today is as audacious as that to turn the Los Angeles River into a greenway. From its source in the San Fernando Valley, the river flows fifty-one miles through thirteen communities to the Pacific Ocean at Long Beach. For much of this journey it has been reduced to a concrete ditch, running with treated sewage, fenced off from the city, littered with rusting shopping carts and trash.

For railroads the L.A. River channel has provided an efficient track corridor; for nearby businesses it has been a dump; for hotrodders it has served as a drag strip; and for Hollywood it has offered a convenient film set for chase scenes and sci-fi showdowns. In the 1980s one legislator even proposed converting the river to an expressway during dry months to relieve traffic congestion.

Today, even those who understand that a river once flowed through Los Angeles — indeed, that a river was once its reason for being — have a hard time imagining anything natural there. But why not try to reimagine such a damaged urban landscape as a linear park, especially when it has been reimaged so many times before?

In 1769 explorer Juan Crespi described what would come to be known as the Los Angeles River as a “good sized, full flowing river,” and he wrote of building an agricultural pueblo along its banks. For the next 150 years the river did water the region’s crops and support its stupendous growth. But diversions for homes and agriculture eventually dried up its flow, while during winter storms it continued to flood, changing course in ways that made city-building difficult.

To remedy such unpredictability, early in the twentieth century engineers began imagining the L.A. River as a concrete flood-control channel. When city fathers bought into their vision, they added wire fencing to keep the concrete ditch safe from intruders.

Not everyone has imagined the river this way. Perhaps most famously, in the late 1920s the urban designers Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Harland Bartholomew calculated that less than half a percent of the city south of the

Above: An L.A. River park could be a tremendous asset for a park-starved region. Photo by Matt O’Brien (courtesy of the Trust for Public Lands).



Santa Monica Mountains had been set aside as parkland. As part of their plan to increase park coverage to 7.5 percent, they proposed parkways wide enough to absorb seasonal floods along 17.6 miles of the L.A. River — reducing the need for more concrete, while producing “a sense of spaciousness and seclusion.”¹

L.A.’s failure to adopt the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan was not due to any weakness of vision; instead, it was doomed by the kind of practical concerns that often impede greatness. Most notable were complicated jurisdictional issues and an anticipated price tag of \$230 million — equal to the entire L.A. city budget for 1930, one of the first years of the Great Depression.

It wasn’t until after World War II that L.A. was again ready to plan new parks. But by then a new regional boom was consuming land that might otherwise have been used. And thousands of people had already settled where the river’s braided channels had once roamed.

Now comes the latest reimagining. In 1985 writer and performance artist Lewis MacAdams founded the Friends of the Los Angeles River. And as the decade of the 1990s

unfolded, a cacophony of voices urged everything from the river’s “restoration” to something more like a “re-engineering” — reestablishing a more natural look along certain stretches of the river while providing recreation and outdoor access for a park-starved city.

The 1990s also saw creation of a 642-page L.A. County Master Plan, filled with ideas for riverside parks, trails, landscaping and recreation — and containing the proposal for a 51-mile Los Angeles River Greenway. Just as importantly, the county and state passed a series of measures to help fund the trails and parks. Partnerships were also forged between community groups, government agencies, and nonprofits to do the hard work of coordinating funding, negotiating transactions, remediating contamination, getting spaces designed and built, and planning for stewardship.

This is where the conservation organization I work for comes in. At the Trust for Public Land, we help communities create visions of the possible. We often start with improbable — even impossible — ideas. But then we help imagine the possible: the exact shape of a vision; where the money will come from, or how it may be raised; how land may be pieced together; how partnerships can overcome political obstacles; how diverse neighborhoods can become more unified by creating public parks.

To date, the Trust has helped create — or is helping to create — a half-dozen parks along the L.A. River: in Elysian Valley, where the river runs free of concrete and a bike trail and walkway thread along its banks; in Maywood, where new space along the river may double the amount of parkland in an otherwise parks-poor community; and in Bell Gardens, where a park will serve as a gateway to a river bikeway. Near downtown Los Angeles the Trust recently helped acquire a 32-acre former riverside railyard for the city’s first state park.

Who is to say a Los Angeles River Greenway is impossible if we tackle it one park at a time? If we are successful, the payoff will be great. Extra parkland will be a wonderful asset to the most crowded portions of the city. And, of course, it might help create links among the region’s diverse communities and neighborhoods.

Finally, other, less tangible benefits may also accrue from the effort. In accomplishing “impossible” visions, communities often internalize notions of hope and possibility. Parks born of such a vision are possibility made manifest — possibility you can walk on.

Notes

1. See Greg Hise and William Deverell, *Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).