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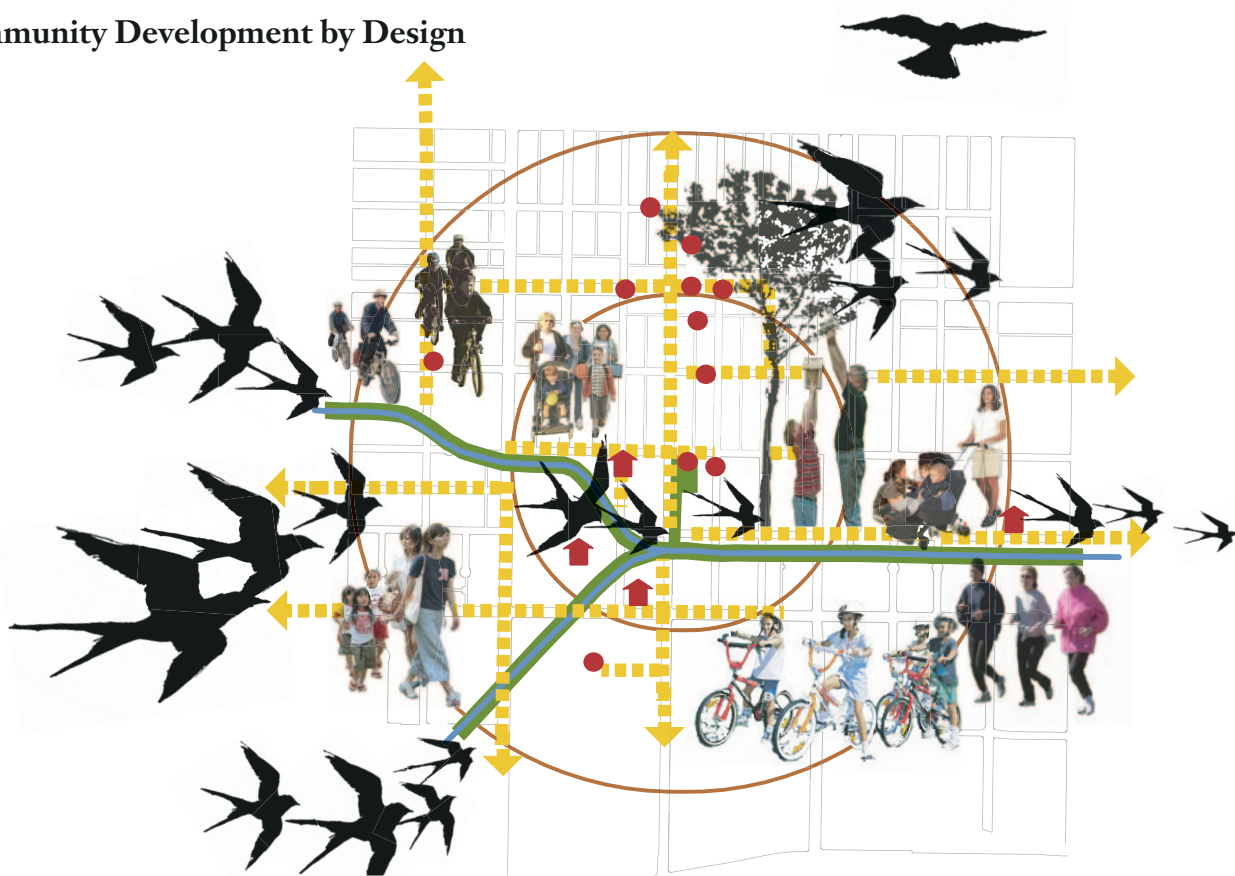
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Los Angeles River Urban Wildlife Refuge: A Vision for Parks, Habitat, and Urban Runoff

Community Development by Design



Los Angeles, the second most populous urban region in the third most populous nation in the world, is a global city of unquestioned importance. It is also a city that for years people of supposedly good taste were expected to loathe. Los Angeles was William Whyte’s “Exploding Metropolis,” David Rieff’s “Capital of the Third World,” and Mike Davis’s “City of Quartz.” Yet this home of so many daunting urban problems has also become a hotbed of original urban problem-solving—that is, when time has been taken to understand it as a place.

The Los Angeles River Urban Wildlife Refuge: A Vision for Parks, Habitat, and Urban Runoff study is a prime example of how achieving a deeper understanding of a region can lead to innovative solutions. To the jury, this document was no less than “amazing” as an example of the type of strategic thinking that could signal a major turning point for the Los Angeles River.

At first glance, the client and planning team for the study appear to be the picture of contrast, and the goals of the project are a seeming object lesson in contradiction. The client, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, is a landscape-scale state agency. Created in 1980, it has helped preserve more than 60,000 acres of parkland and improve more than 114 public facilities in Southern California, with the goal of creating “an interlinking system of

urban, rural and river parks, open space, trails, and wildlife habitats that are easily accessible to the general public.”¹ The planning team, on the other hand, was led by Community Development by Design, a small Northern California firm that, in the words of its project director Marcia McNally, usually takes on only a few clients and “works with them for decades.”²

Together, this professional pairing set out to create an internal vision plan that would demonstrate how an agency focused on mountains can also care for a river, and how the densely developed Los Angeles region can simultaneously become home to a “Big Wild.” The basis of that vision is a single, bold proposal: to create an urban wildlife refuge centered on the long-mistreated Los Angeles River that may one day be entered into the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The study notes there is presently no refuge “that is a riparian corridor stretching through a large city.” But it then asks, “What better place to begin...than along the Los Angeles River?”

How the team arrived at such a proposal, and how the document suggests the Conservancy address the challenge, are both a product of place.



The Beginning

Flowing from the western end of the San Fernando Valley to the Pacific Ocean at Long Beach, the Los Angeles River carries runoff from mountain ranges north and east of the city. During the nineteenth century it was a major natural feature, providing drinking and irrigation water. Its tendency to flood and the pressures of twentieth-century urbanization caused local and state government to transform much of it into a concrete flood channel, and it may now best be known as the cinematically famous site of numerous car chases and the backdrop for countless noir movie deeds.

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy has been working with Community Development by Design on projects related to its mountain lands since 1985. But this most recent collaboration began in 2003 when the state acquired two large riverside properties, the Cornfields in Chinatown and Taylor Yard in Cypress Park.

When the Conservancy took over these former railroad properties, it was immediately besieged by groups with competing agendas. The Los Angeles River watershed is home to almost three million park-starved people, and some 110,000 Angelinos live within a quarter-mile of its main stem. Many in the neighborhoods adjacent to the new properties saw them as places to satisfy a pressing need for recreational space, particularly new soccer fields. But for others, such as the Conservancy, the properties also



held the potential to be part of a larger ecological network of green spaces linking the Santa Monica Mountains to the sea. It was a classic planning conundrum: how does one plan for diverse local concerns in a way that can also serve a regional goal?

In search of an answer to these larger questions, McNally spent three years leading twenty-three neighborhood studies within the Los Angeles River watershed. With her students from the University of California, Berkeley, where she is an associate adjunct professor of in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning, she surveyed neighborhood after neighborhood, collecting data, creating field guides, and working to understand the area. Eventually, the research led upriver from the Cornfields and Taylor Yard sites, to the river's source, and resulted in work that is truly comprehensive.

Re-envisioning

Composed of four sections—Vision, Logic, Application, and Implementation—the study proposes a course of action that extends from the vision of broad hopes to the practicalities of local execution. The ideal “is to re-envision the watershed...as an urban wildlife refuge,” and thereby accommodate the wide differences of scale addressed in the proposal.

Opposite: A green vision for L.A.'s Canoga Park neighborhood.

Above left: The L.A. River drainage and the location of the headwaters management area.

Above right: The L.A. River in aerial perspective.



Methodologically, it begins with the conceptual division of the watershed into separate units, each small enough to engage individual communities and address neighborhood and site-specific issues (such as those in Chinatown and Cypress Park), yet large enough theoretically to be home to a top-level predator (used as a guide for the amount of land necessary for a fully-functioning ecosystem). The result of this re-envisioning is a series of twelve 20,000-acre units along the main stem of the river.

As an example of local implementation, the document then focuses on one of these units, the Headwaters (where Bell Creek and Arroyo Calabasas join to form the river). This area is home to more than 220,000 people and a diversity of land uses. Tying this portion of the city to the river experientially, and then linking it ecologically to all the other units along the river, would require an approach that employed science, design, and close attention to public concerns and capabilities.

The Brilliance of Birds

The opportunity to link these varied concerns was found not in the river, but in the sky. Birds emerged as the prime indicator of ecological health, the organizing agent for proposed new land geometries, and the psychological link between the citizenry, the river, and the larger environment.

As the study notes, the San Gabriel and Los Angeles River watersheds together support 444 bird species. And the twelve Audubon Society chapters in the L.A. basin alone prove that birds and bird admirers are both abundant here. This use of birds as a basis for the plan's organizational logic was the breakthrough that most impressed the jury.

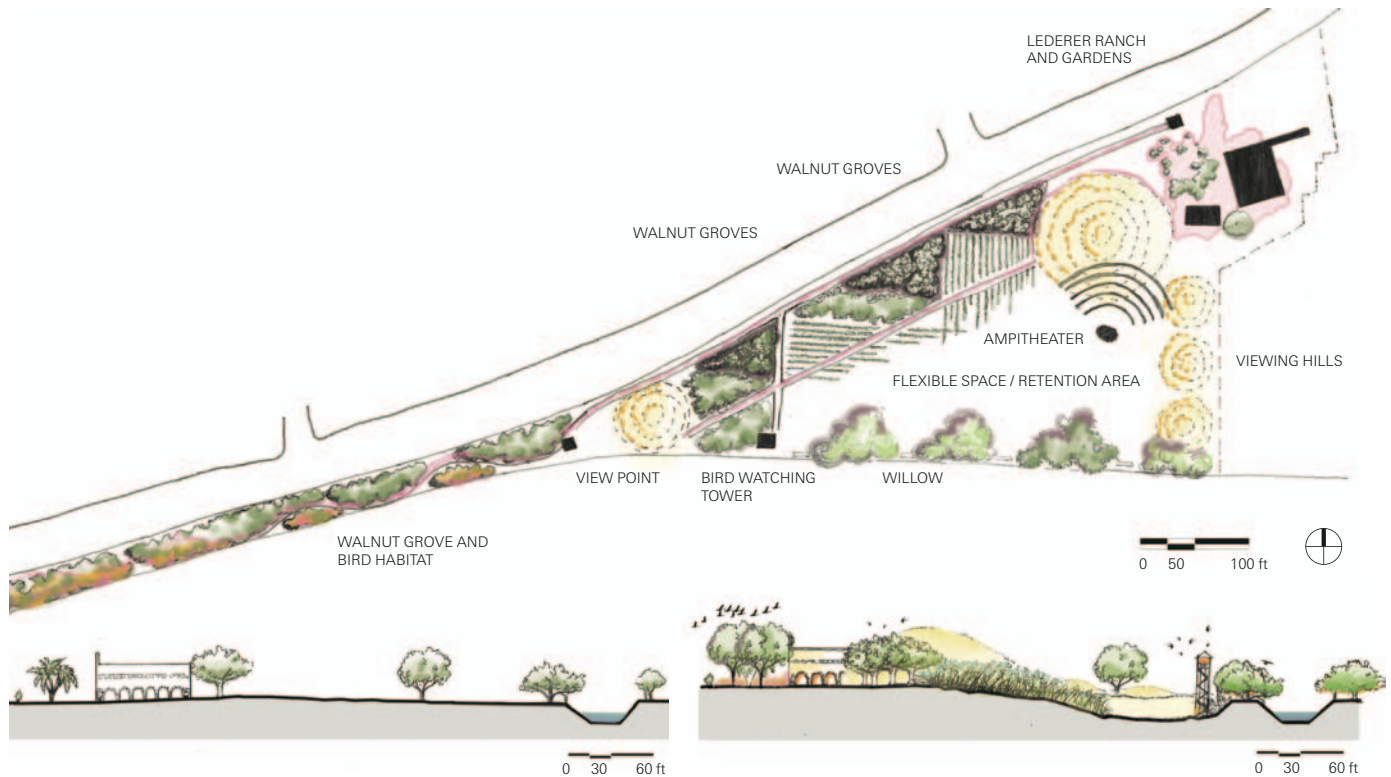
Conceptualizing the landscape from the perspective of avian species requires a simultaneous understanding of a whole bioregion as well as its individual component parts. Viewing it this way, McNally and her team realized that change that can be accomplished on individual, nonadjacent lots matters as much as that achieved on large swaths

Sample Juror Comments—L.A. River

Anne Whiston Spirn: For me the strategic thinking was how to help the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. They have been very successful getting space in the mountains. But now they have decided to look at the L.A. River, at the city itself. And they were stumped. What they did was figure out how to transfer the Conservancy's successes from the mountains to the river. And they did that partly by talking about birds and the birds' need for habitat.

Buzz Yudell: This discussion about transforming the L.A. River has been going on for quite a few years. This has been seen by almost everybody as beyond hope. At one point it wasn't even worth talking about. Then it was worth talking about, but it was still impossible. Then in just the last couple of years it has actually gotten traction in terms of multiple initiatives, lots of attention. The mayor is behind it. This kind of thing is an important key. This is really regional.

Anne Whiston Spirn: This is an in-house document for the state agency to help them to completely rethink their strategy. They are taking good ecological research in terms of thinking about patches and reserves and corridors, and they are looking at little places. They are saying that there is not enough local open space now, and this would increase it considerably. There is also thinking about flood storage. If we're going to take away concrete, how do we keep as much water from



of land. The study notes that in the past thirty years the National Wildlife Federation's Backyard Wildlife Habitat program has certified more than 35,000 backyard habitats, and now includes schools and larger communities. So many individual backyards add up over time.

The cumulative benefits of such lot-by-lot change extend well beyond the realm of birds. For example, the collective effect of many individual property improvements can lead to an enhanced hydrological cycle, which in turn provides the opportunity for broad-based habitat restoration within portions of the Los Angeles River channel. With half of all rainfall in the city falling onto impervious surfaces such as parking lots and being channeled directly out to sea, concern for bird habitat will inevitably translate into more water percolating into the ground; and if more water percolates through the soil instead of running off immediately into the river, the need for large-scale concrete bank protections will be reduced. Through integrative

planning such as this, the regional ecological goals of the Conservancy can be realized through coordinated efforts on numerous individual sites within a variety of neighborhoods.

The plan's vision, then, is of a program of coordinated but noncontiguous actions aimed at benefiting residents, wildlife, and the general hydrological cycle—with the health of local bird populations as an index and direct measure of success. Programmatically as well as geographi-

Opposite left: Birdwatchers at the mouth of the L.A. River. Photo by Randy Hester.

Opposite right: A heavy rainstorm in 1938 was the inducement to begin channelization of the L.A. River. Following the storm, a reporter and a photographer from the *L.A. Herald-Express* attempted a humorous boat journey from Hyperion Ave to Long Beach. From the collection of the L.A. Public Library.

Above: Within the headwaters area, the illustrative Lederer Ranch site plan proposes decorative gardens that double as habitat and river nature-park facilities. The left section shows the site as it exists. The right shows it with the proposal implemented.

coming in? They are saying, "We've got to look at the entire watershed." It's amazing.

Buzz Yudell: Somehow being able to communicate something that complex into something this legible is really fabulous.

Anne Whiston Spirn: I think the birds were key. Because other sets of folks would have been talking about fish, squirrels. It's the birds! It's the birds! And look at the beautiful graphics!

Buzz Yudell: Its very accessible, but it's also well

written and not patronizing. Putting a very complex story together in a way that is accessible is a huge part of the success of this project.

Ann Forsyth: What was nice also was how it took a fairly large plan down to detailed design. Their prototype park designs are very nicely done, very evocative. They are designs for small parks that you can imagine. They call them nature parks, but they also allow for human use.

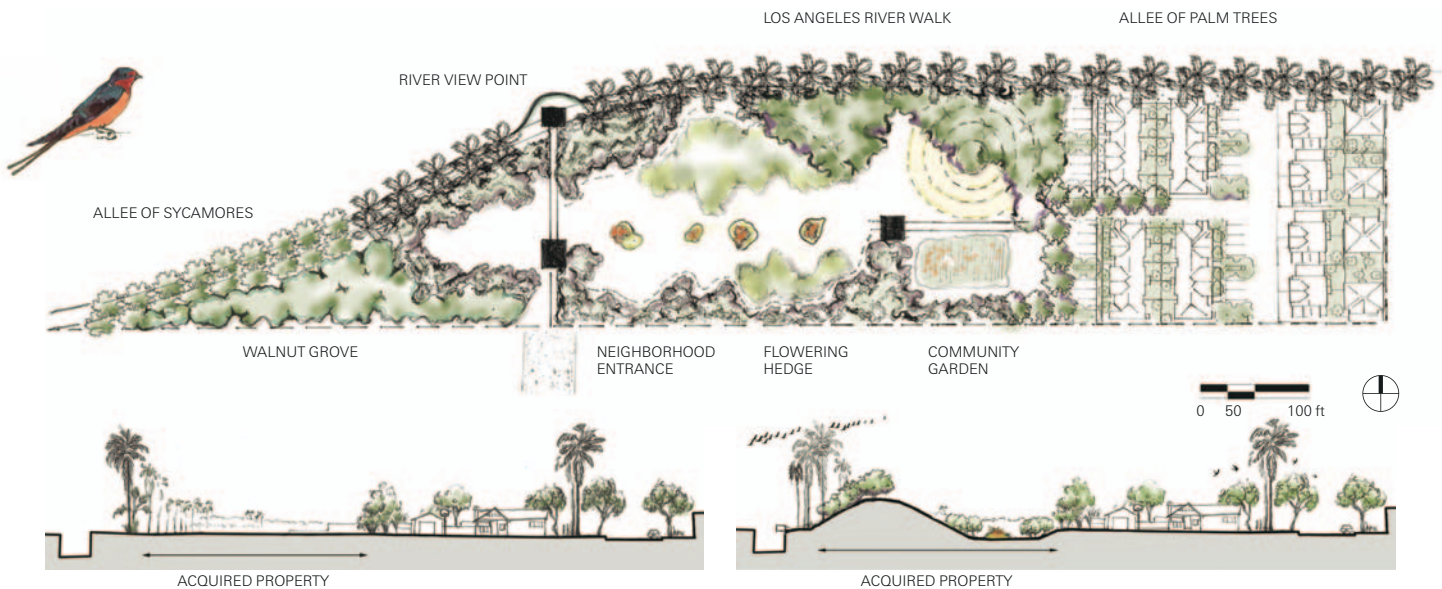
Anne Whiston Spirn: The designs are not sophisticated

by any means—they are diagrammatic. But I think that's as it should be, because it is not overly prescriptive.

Buzz Yudell: And they connect them back to the region. I think we are going to look back, when the L.A. River does start getting transformed, on it as a major turning point for the whole metropolitan region.

Anne Whiston Spirn: They are saying, collectively, these small parks are going to add up to the habitat that you need.

Roberta Feldman: And that's what is particularly



cally wide-reaching, it imagines interventions across property types (from public to private, and from residential to industrial), and across uses (from roads to storm drains to the riverbed itself). These may potentially include everything from the construction of swales, wetlands and rain gardens, to programs to educate and reward the public for efforts at backyard stewardship.

Above: Working with a developer, the second illustrative park plan shows how infill housing and habitat can coexist along the L.A. River. The left section shows the site as it exists. The right shows it with proposed swales, hills and vegetation to create a riverside amenity.

Opposite left: Permeability of land areas in Canoga Park near the L.A. River headwaters, from open space (white) to industrial (black).

Opposite right: Existing Canoga Park destinations near the L.A. River headwaters. The circles indicate one- and two-mile radii.

Application and Implementation

The Application and Implementation sections of the document demonstrate how this vision can be turned into on-the-ground projects by the Conservancy and other public agencies.

Focusing on the Headwaters region, the plan, first, calls for the creation of three new nature parks, each intended to bring neighborhoods closer to the river. The first, Lederer Ranch (6.15 acres) will include a bird-viewing stand, new habitat, and decorative gardens along the river. The second (3.5 acres) will provide a water retention area, a riverwalk, and a community garden, with approximately the same amount of land designated for affordable housing. The third, in the Canoga Park neighborhood, will be one block from the river's headwaters. A site plan for each park is included in the document, as are proposals for environmentally friendly details, such as building eaves that can accommodate barn-swallow nests.

remarkable about this project. Most conservancy projects involve big pieces of land. This is a political shift, an environmental shift, a design shift, a cultural shift to a different model. To organize around the idea of small pieces of land is quite remarkable. This is a political feat as well as a design model.

Anne Whiston Spirn: And the birds are part of that too. There's a bird-watching tradition, so they bring in bird counts and flyways, and that's another way of linking the scale of the small pieces to a larger scale that's continental.

Birds can fly, so they are not limited like fish to water, or other mammals to traveling across the ground.

Roberta Feldman: What's so interesting is this link between an ecological phenomenon and also getting financing for the project.

Buzz Yudell: And changing people's understanding of where they live and how it is connected to the greater system. Part of the success of groups like the Santa Monica Conservancy financially has been that often very wealthy people understand or find it appealing to

save a big chunk of pristine land. The same people have typically not understood or found it appealing to put money into degraded areas, or small urban areas, and this somehow makes that connection.

Roberta Feldman: It has all the ingredients of a good plan. It has involved the public in a way that gets the buy-in. It has careful research to back up the plan. It understands the political system involved and the change in politics from large areas that are not populated to areas that are.



Second, the document proposes a comprehensive twenty-year plan specifically for Canoga Park, a scenario that starts with the last of the three small parks but builds into something much more comprehensive. A “healthy river walk” network will connect river parks and other neighborhood destinations. “Wet habitat” sites will be developed at the end of roads and runoff will be controlled and reused. Cooperative management of vegetation across property lines will be instituted and a wildlife refuge neighborhood certification program will be implemented.

Third, the study proposes a series of larger initiatives across the watershed. The refuge idea will be launched with a science-based conference. A database will be created for further research. Partnerships between multiple agencies will be developed. A rivershed policy zone, extending a quarter-mile on either side of the river, will be established by the city. And a full process of neighborhood certification will be developed.

An Accessible Vision

The jury noted that in addition to containing a compelling vision, the document worked well to engage all readers, regardless of their education. Regional history and historic photographs are combined with maps, information on local bird species, indexes of possible interventions in the neighborhood landscape, and renderings of potential



park designs. Thus, just as its vision calls for building an ecologically healthier region by acting on as many individual, small portions of the landscape as possible, the document itself, through a layout and organization, is directed to as wide an audience as possible—building support one reader at a time.

The message it communicates, the approach to place planning it demonstrates, and the end goal it envisions were all reasons the jury proclaimed this EDRA/Places award-winner to be “amazing.” The approaches place in a way that is holistic yet specific, and in doing so presents the citizens of Los Angeles with a goal, a methodology, and a plan. This is a concept *for* place and *of* place—a place that may have a great deal more to teach the rest of the country.

—Jason Alexander Hayter



Notes

1. See: <http://smmc.ca.gov/>. The website further explains the Conservancy works, “[t]hrough direct action, alliances, partnerships, and joint powers authorities...to strategically buy back, preserve, protect, restore, and enhance treasured pieces of Southern California.”
2. For example, the firm has worked since 1980 for the small Outer Banks town of Manteo, North Carolina. They are currently working together on a third town plan.

All drawings by Community Development by Design.