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**The Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan -
At the Confluence of Theory and Practice**

The Los Angeles River is a perfect problem. What do you do with a blighted open storm drain that cuts a fifty-one-mile swath through the county's second largest city? It would be hard to find a less controversial topic than the benefits of improving the LA River.

Even still, I find the level of support for revitalizing the river impressive. As planners, we typically want to provide the types of social amenities that the river has the potential to afford—open space, recreation, natural habitat, etc.—but seldom have the opportunity to provide these without great struggle and compromise. And, dealing with a civic feature of such magnitude, cutting through so many political districts, makes implementation of any improvement cumbersome, if not impossible. Finally, tampering with a system designed to control natural disasters carries a significant liability risk for advocates and officials. Yet, in spite of these and many other challenges, the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP) enjoys wide support and offers some insights for planners hoping to make the jump from theory to practice. An investigation of the river and the master plan should provide some opportunities for speculation.

The earliest recorded settlers in the area, Native Americans, had open space—lots of open space. They lived near the river. They fished in the river and farmed its banks. They lived in lightweight, mobile structures that they moved close to the river when the river was low and farther away when it flooded. Concrete channels weren't an option for them. Later, Mexican settlers were invited by the king of Spain to occupy the area. They preferred to live a safe distance from the river and carry water in to their community. As American settlers took over, the area became more densely populated and every few years the floods would come and wash away buildings and people. When the city ultimately turned to the Army Corps of Engineers to solve the flooding problem, the fate of the river was sealed. The concrete came in and the river was tamed. The year was 1938. (1)

Time went by and the city grew up. It grew up like a Western town—fast, randomly, and with its back to the river. Why bother to pay attention to a concrete ditch?

But, some people realized things could be different. Other major cities had rivers running through them. In fact, didn't all cities have some type of river going through them? Isn't that part of the equation when people decide where to put a city? Where was L.A.'s river? In the 1980's, a group called Friends of the Los Angeles River decided to find out. (2) This grass-roots organization advocated restoring and improving the river. Over time, the idea caught on at several governmental levels, and led to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works' (LACDPW) Los Angeles River Master Plan (LARMP) IN 1996, and, later, the City of Los Angeles' 2007 Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan.

The goals of these documents are ambitious.

- Enhance flood storage
- Enhance water quality
- Enhance safe public access
- Restore a functional riparian ecosystem
- Create a continuous river greenway
- Connect neighborhoods to the river
- Extend open space and water quality features into the neighborhood
- Enhance river identity
- Enhance the use of art along the river (1)

It is difficult enough to implement these goals on a relatively small plot. Attempting to implement them through several miles of a developed corridor is daunting. But the plans are moving forward. I believe this is largely due to the clarity of the objectives and the clearly articulated community benefits. However, far more than a good idea is required to make things happen on such a large scale. Several agencies, including all critical agencies, must buy in to the idea. I believe this has been the real key to success in the creation of the river master plan and will factor heavily in its implementation.

The revitalization plan has involved several constituents. “Many nonprofit groups, including Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), Tree People, North East Trees, The River Project, the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council, the Trust for Public Land, and others have...worked tirelessly to raise public and civic awareness of the River’s potential and to implement revitalization projects.” (1) I find it telling that so many separate groups could make common cause around the issue of river revitalization. The goals of these advocacy groups have been advanced and supported by elected officials such as Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Councilmember Ed Reyes. Critical to the advancement of the river revitalization is the support of such agencies as the LACDWP (3) and the Army Corps of Engineers. To draft the plan, the

L.A. City Council's Ad Hoc River Committee commissioned private-sector consultants from a range of disciplines. Consultants included Tetra Tech, Civitas, Wenk Associates, HNTB Architecture, and Mia Lehrer + Associates. (4) So, what started at a grassroots/nonprofit level has grown through political will to involve government and public agency support and private-sector conceptual development. I believe this could not have happened without well-defined objectives and well-coordinated advocacy.

So, will the plan be implemented or will it fade away? Although the river was concretized in only a few years, the process leading up to this solution was decades in the making. (1) We would likewise expect that a reversal of this condition would take several decades to complete. (5)(6) But, some progress is already underway. The LARRMP (page 6) identified several opportunity areas along the river which could receive immediate attention and act as model developments. (1) Among these is the Cornfields development. On November 17, the California State Department of Parks and Recreation announced that it had chosen Hargreaves Associates and Michael Maltzan Architecture to design the first state park in Los Angeles on this site. (7) This development will integrate closely with the goals of the LARRMP. For most of the river areas, a River Improvement Overlay (RIO) District is in place to coordinate development along the river according to LARRMP guidelines, and has authority to enforce these on new development. So, implementation is well underway and seems likely to succeed. How then, did the river plan become so successful? How did it move from theory to practice?

I will mostly address this question with speculation, since, even if we could exhaustively list all of the steps taken by all of the persons involved, we wouldn't

specifically prove causality. I think it may be more productive to understand the various players and how they advance their causes. For example, the nonprofit groups likely engaged in radical/advocacy planning to make their goals known to local communities and elected officials. These communities, or members within the communities, may have been receptive to these goals and either lent their support or withheld their reservations. The elected officials may have been convinced that the causes associated with the river revitalization could be politically advantageous and relatively inexpensive. They could advocate for providing recreational space without taking away prime real estate from private development.

Municipal agencies could fulfill their mandate with popular projects that would add a sense of pride to their employees, boosting moral, without fighting any political currents or coming under harsh public criticism. Public agencies, such as the Ad Hoc Committee on the Los Angeles River, held public workshops that drew thousands of people to comment on the river revitalization. (1, letter from Ed Reyes) And technical specialists, whether from the Army Corps or from private practice could inform the discussion by lending their expertise to the discussion to show how the river plans goals could be met. Thus, the success of the projects implementation has relied upon several facets of planning, ranging from grass-roots organizing to political lobbying to expert advice. I believe that, on a project of this scale, all of these aspects of planning are necessary.

If true, this sets an important lesson for advocates of any single approach to planning activity. For example, members of Tree People and employees of the Department of Public Works may not attend the same social functions, but they can

recognize common goals with respect to river revitalization and collaborate by bringing their respective assets to bear on these goals. Likewise, elected officials and private consultant can work together to make sure that their message is not only technically feasible, but heard by the right people. But, again, the thread that ties all of these approaches together is the big idea. As Victor Hugo said, “There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come.” When the idea clicks, the activists will protest and canvass, the politicians will stump, the bureaucrats will fill out the requisite forms, the academics will pontificate, and the experts will find a way. And anyone who thinks he doesn’t need the others is a fool.

Daniel Burnham is credited with the advocacy to “make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood.” I believe this is also critical to turning theory into practice, ideas into reality, and drawings into buildings. Academics can spend their days thinking of obscure names for unclear concepts, but, until ideas are profound and fundamental enough to reach both the intelligentsia and the masses with equivalent force, all we have are theorists trying to impress rival theorists. But, when an idea’s time has come, people will show up with the tools they have--and get the job done.

1. Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan, May 3, 2007
2. "Team chosen to help revive Los Angeles River," Millionis, Allison. Architectural Record, July 1, 2005.
3. "LA's smelly ditch to become river of dreams," Elsworth, Catherine. The Daily Telegraph (London), October 20, 2005
4. "L.A. River plan inching slowly forward," Millonis, Allison. Architectural Record, May 1, 2006
5. "California redevelopments move forward," Lubell, Sam. Architectural Record, July 1, 2007
6. "Fervor flowing as L.A. looks to revive river; Walled waterway gaining attention," Kasindorf, Martin. USA Today, April 17, 2006
7. "In response to densification, L.A. sprouts news parks," Millonis, Allison. Architectural Record, January 1, 2007