

From the “Concrete River” to an “Urban Oasis”: An Analysis of the Appropriation of Environmental Language in the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan

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New York, Boston, Paris, Tokyo and Los Angeles—each has one distinct river running through the city flowing into a bay. A Google search on the rivers in those cities generates strikingly identical images: boats cruising down a waterway, couples strolling on the river bank or other aesthetically pleasing scenes where the river is the center of the landscape—except in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles River (the LA River)—named after the city itself—stands as a mere remnant in a rapidly urbanized semi-desert city and has been described by Los Angeles writer Luis Rodriguez as a “Concrete River.” As such, it no longer fits the conventional image of a river often imagined as a symbol of freedom and renewal. Instead, the waterless LA River is a target of ridicule. Scott Bryson, in his essay “Surf, Sagebrush, and Cement Rivers: Reimagining Nature in Los Angeles,” writes: “[The river’s] very existence has become the butt of many a local joke: Mark Twain once said that he had fallen into a California river and ‘come out all dusty’” (169). If Twain shared this jest with present-day Angelenos, most would ask, “What river?” This response represents the locals’ understanding of the river in general as “the once meandering and bifurcating river . . . has been turned into a large concrete ditch taking an almost straight course from the valley to the ocean . . .” (Browne & Keil 173).

This “dusty concrete river,” however, is now about to be transformed by the city that aims to revitalize it and improve its surroundings. Subtitled “Our River, Our Future,” The City’s Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP) touts the project as an effort to “Green the Neighborhoods.” Drawing from such language as community building to sustainability, the plan appropriates multiple social discourses popular in the 21st century. On the city’s website designated specifically for the revitalization plan, Mayor Eric Garcetti, after reflecting on the history of the river, states: “We now value

[the river] for its potential to reconnect neighborhoods, revitalize communities, and reemerge as a cherished natural and cultural resource” (*lariver.org*). The images in the master plan’s graphic composites portray a river with running water situated in a lush landscape complete with people immersed in the natural setting—a total transformation from its current appearance as a concrete river. Aesthetically pleasing as the images may be, they also implicitly project sizable expenses such an ambitious plan would require for Los Angeles. In fact, the river revitalization has now ballooned to a billion dollar multifaceted project. Traditionally a plan with this monetary commitment tends to elicit a certain level of criticism, but the critics are strikingly absent at this point because in part, I would argue, that the master plan has co-opted the language of environmentalism, using such words as “nature” and “greening” to promote its agenda. The master plan, however, raises more questions that need to be addressed and answered. How did this forgotten river turned flood channel become so important to Los Angeles? Will the revitalized river truly benefit both the river and humans as a project that translates promising environmental concepts into tangible programs? Treating the LA River’s revitalization as a case study, this essay attempts to examine historical discursive shifts in the description of the river from a nostalgic symbol of loss, to a potential threat, to a vision of renewal. It will also closely analyze the master plan’s language as it reflects the trends in the nation’s environmental movement.

The Loss of the River

Contemporary views of the LA River are often shaped by a discourse of loss. For instance, Patt Morrison, in her book *Rio L.A.: Tales from the Los Angeles River*, describes, with nostalgia, the indigenous people’s life by the LA River during the pre-European era: “As the modern city depends on the freeway, the ancient one depended on the river. The water fed the creatures that fed the Gabrieleño [the name given by the Spanish settlers to the Tongva people]. . . . In its shallows grew the brush to build huts and sweat lodges . . . where warriors purified themselves” (38). River historian Blake Gumprecht describes the river’s distant past: “[S]o lush was this landscape and so unusual was it in the dry country that the river was a focus of settlement long before the

first white man set foot in the area” (2). Morrison continues: “[On] August 2, 1769, . . . the Spanish came crashing out of the brush and thickets to the east” (40) and “[they] REGARDED THE RIVER . . . something in need of civilizing” (45). Browne and Keil see this invasion as a “[reflection] of a tradition of colonization and hegemony of European values” (173). The process of civilization meant the river’s undergoing intervention, exploitation, and manipulation of nature by humans as a result of industrialization. In Los Angeles, the river was pumped dry to meet the needs of the rapidly growing population. An Edenic image of the river began to dissipate as its surrounding environment saw the loss of nature.

With its water source stripped, the once vital LA River became useless and neglected until it reminded humans of the consequence of urbanization. Heavy storms have never been the norm in Los Angeles but when it happened, the river caused catastrophic floods because much of the surfaces in Los Angeles had become impermeable as a result of urban sprawl. The river’s wrath was depicted in literary works; according to Bryson, “LA authors have made frequent symbolic use of the river, sensing in it a modern-day Greek myth about a whimsical and powerful water god shackled by humanity and its technology” (170). With the river’s threatening propensity to flooding, the city sought to “tame” the river to avoid further damage to the city’s infrastructure and human lives. Thus the work by the Army Corps of Engineers—pouring concrete in the river, widening and altering its waterways—to channelize the river began. For the city, the channelization was perceived as a human engineering triumph over nature. In his book *Reinventing Los Angeles: Nature and Community in the Global City*, Robert Gottlieb states that “the new mission” was defined as “a declaration of war on the river” (141). Similarly, Morrison speaks of the “combat metaphor” in the local media: “The Corps, the paper trumpeted, was acting with ‘the typical, clearly defined exactness and certainty with which Uncle Sam’s Army engineers prepare against any enemy’” (74). The enemy, the LA River, was configured to be of service to Angelenos for the coming years. Now “areas surrounding the river became fenced off, a forbidden territory that effectively belonged to the engineering agencies,” who saw it as “the river [they] built” (Gottlieb 141). In his authoritative accounts of the Los Angeles River’s

history— “*The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*” —Gumprecht declares that “nothing symbolizes the role of human beings in changing the face of the earth more than the exploitation and transformation of the Los Angeles River” (3).

The Western world, as Benjamin Kline explains in his book, *First Along the River*, philosophically assumed the human right to dominate nature. Throughout history, humans have manipulated, managed, and controlled nature by the advancement of science and technology, prioritizing human needs. Gottlieb observes how the word “nature” has multiple significations, citing Raymond Williams’s argument: “Nature is the most complex word in the English language. . . . Nature is not just in the eye of the beholder but also in the language used to describe what one sees” (20). As the Corps was taming the river, Los Angeles was also undergoing a process of urban development, in which nature—undeveloped land—was seen as a commodity with economic potential. Thus, whether land or river, the city made nature subservient to human needs in order to preserve the life style of urban cities.

The public, failing to be stewards of the environment, simply lost the river—now a concrete flood channel and dumping ground. People tend either to ignore the unseemly or to “hide it from view with cinder block walls and tall shrubs” (Gumprecht 3). The loss of the LA River was made apparent in many ways through social discourses. Hollywood films perpetuated the public’s negative or indifferent attitude toward the river from the ways in which the river was “featured.” From the drag race scene in *Grease* to the big rig car chase in *Terminator 2*, Gottlieb explains that the LA River has represented an isolating, dangerous and hostile place (158). Politicians made no excuse about being indifferent to or ignorant about the river; in fact, Bryson notes that the river is “often used as a metaphor for city leaders’ historic myopia and mismanagement” (169), and rightly so. A state assembly member once publicly suggested the idea that “the river, much of it channelized . . . could serve as a ‘bargain freeway’” (Gottlieb 143) to ease the traffic. Another senior government official was not aware that the river ran through his town until he was asked about it (Gumprecht 1). The combination of its altered appearance, the degraded “ruins,” and the negative images helped plant the idea of the loss of the river in people’s consciousness, and if people speak of the river they typically regard it

with nostalgia. With many world-famous attractions in Los Angeles, many citizens and policy makers forgot the river; however, the emerging grassroots environmentalist movement would act as a catalyst to bring back its past.

The Revitalization Movement

Although the LA River seemed to have disappeared, it did not. In certain areas where the river bottom was not paved, its water has been nourishing local fauna and flora. Locals, seeing this proof of green life, were inspired to restore the river's natural characteristics and bring back the lost wilderness along the river. Among them was a poet and activist Lewis MacAdams, and although he was not an engineer, landscape architect, biologist, or city planner, he proved significant in constructing the river's revitalization plan. MacAdams attempted to awaken the public through his artistic expressions both as an artist and poet. His effort led to the "fledgling movement to green the river" (Gumprecht 250) and culminated in the formation of "Friends of the Los Angeles River or FoLAR" in 1986. Personifying the river, MacAdams wrote: "The scene (the downtown area of the LA River) was a latter-day urban hell. We asked the river if we could speak for it in the human realm. We did not hear it say no, and that was how Friends of the Los Angeles River began" (Gumprecht 252). In her article "Remaking American Environmentalism: On the banks of L.A. River," Jennifer Price describes how officials perceived their restoration plan: "The city commits no interest or money to the idea, and the new group . . . [FoLAR] is mostly dismissed as a quixotic bunch of wide-eyed tree-huggers" (561). Simultaneously, *the Los Angeles Times* writer Dick Roraback had been humorously writing a third-person journal account depicting the LA River in its entire 51 miles corridor and the people by the river. His amusing narratives as an "Explorer" worked to awaken the public to the consequences of environmental degradation. The series began with:

Shall we gather at the river, [sic] The beautiful, beautiful river, Gather with the saints at the river [sic] That flows by the throne of God. — Ancient hymn

In Long Beach, they go with the flow. On no other stretch of the alleged Los Angeles River do more people gather to frolic on its shores, test its tepid trickle, slither on its slime.

Saints they may be, appearances to the contrary. Or at least saintlets: For the young, rivers, even fake ones, have an irresistible allure. (Roraback)

According to Gumprecht, “the series was extremely popular and opened the eyes of more than a few Angelenos to the river in their midst” (254). The popularity is attributable to the fact that environmentalism has effected a shift in how humans related to nature.

With the publication of the consciousness-altering *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in the 1960s and the inauguration of Earth Day in 1970, environmentalism was on its way to become a mainstream ideology. It was, at the beginning, an effort largely dominated by national organizations such as the Sierra Club to protect pristine wilderness and endangered species through political advocacy. Eventually, the movement became localized and grassroots movements started emerging. In their article “How to Save the Earth: The Greening of Instrumental Discourse,” M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer describe how people had begun to yearn for what they lost—“environmental amenities—good and plentiful water, clean air . . . [and they had reached a] “fearful recognition: The industrial system that feathered the nest threatened to foul it as well” (387). FoLAR’s restoration movement gave many Los Angeles environmentalists a cause to support. Underlining FoLAR’s action and approach is the nature-first philosophy, which was embodied in MacAdams’s following statement: “When the yellow-billed cuckoo is singing in the sycamores’ . . . ‘our work will be done” (Gumprecht 256).

MacAdams’s statement reflects nature’s elevated status and his yearning to return to an idealized past, a restoration to a natural world. FoLAR’s nature first principle coincided with a national trend. With an increasing number of consumers drawn to “all natural” products, their stance created a synergy with people who began to lament the destruction of nature. FoLAR began to increase its membership to the extent that its voice and influence reached the minds of policy makers. Mayor Tom Bradley created

the Los Angeles River Task Force following his pledge to “make the river one of the top priorities of his fifth term” (Gumprecht 275) in 1989. With the increasing number and variety of advocates for river renewal, Gumprecht states that “the priorities of revitalization efforts have taken on a decidedly more mainstream flavor . . . evolv[ing] into a campaign to embellish its edges” (293). Furthermore, FoLAR and the municipal engineering agencies faced “‘discourse battles’ . . . pitting the language of river renewal against the sixty year history of flood control . . .” (Gottlieb 148). In illuminating their fundamental differences, Gumprecht describes verbal exchanges that took place between MacAdams and the head of Los Angeles County Public Works who kept referring to the river as the flood control channel. In each instant, “MacAdmas interrupted and interjected the word ‘river’” (298). Eventually, the level of their disagreements subsided, but FoLAR still remains committed to restoring the river while the revitalization plan communicates the importance of the river as a flood channel.

Despite the ideological differences, Price claims, “[The] campaign to bring [the river] back to life has quickly become the most ambitious, well-funded, and widely supported vision to revitalize the quality and equality of life in Los Angeles” (542). FoLAR drafted a restoration plan; the Los Angeles City Council established a new Ad Hoc Committee on the LA River; and, eventually, the city’s Revitalization Master Plan was adopted in 2007. In 2014, as the peak outcome of the river restoration effort, the city announced a major victory celebrating the Army Corps of Engineers’ adopting more elaborated restoration plan with an increased budget as a result of the city’s lobbying efforts. Quoting the Mayor, the *Los Angeles Times* reported: “If all goes according to plan, [Garcetti] said, ‘we might begin to see some funding allocated for this effort next year, and jackhammers on concrete not long after that’” (Sahagun). Humans who took away the river’s life are giving back its life in the form of “an urban oasis for recreation and an inviting locale for new commercial and residential development” (Sahagun). With the long history of urban sprawl through the development of housing, freeways and public transit systems, that the river restoration became the city’s project alone is significant as Bryson explains, “The terms *urban and nature* have been set up in our cultural imagination as opposites that necessarily deny each other” (167).

This is not the first time, however, that someone attempted to restore the river, transforming the language of opposition between nature and city into a discourse of co-existence. In 1930 urban designers Frederick Law Olmstead Jr. and Harland Bartholomew submitted the legendary plan to build parks and greenways along the LA River in their attempt to incorporate nature into the city landscape. Influential city critic “Mike Davis praises the program as ‘heroic’, ‘a stinging critique of the giddy twenties’, an ‘elegant design’ developed with ‘considerable acuity’” (Young 337). Their plan failed to capture the policy makers’ attention partly because their “non-engineering” approach did not sufficiently address the danger of flooding. Mainly, the population perceived nature as untamed wilderness as Gottlieb states, “Urban places had long been considered the antithesis of the natural” (26). The public deemed parks and greenery along the river in urbanized Los Angeles as unnecessary. Moreover, at that time, Gumprecht explains, “[The river] was rarely [viewed] as an asset or a thing of beauty, as something to be saved. . . . [It] was an occasional hazard that had to be contained” (270). The untimely plan then resurfaced three quarters of a century later and now meets the new environmentally-minded audience who wants to free the river from its concrete encasement.

Green to Sustainability

The impact of the first Earth Day in 1970 was so great that almost twenty years later, it even changed the political climate. Republican George Bush claimed himself an environmentalist; Killingsworth and Palmer articulate its significance: “He has created a noteworthy moment in rhetorical history by certifying environmentalist values as a valid component of the presidential ethos” (388). Referring to an event to mark the twenty year anniversary of Earth Day, Kline’s observation foreshadows what environmentalism was to become in the twenty-first century: “The event triggered a frenzy of corporate green marketing and was heralded as the beginning of another green decade. . . . For many environmentalists, the movement had become diluted by its own popularity, becoming trendy and corporate . . .” (109). Price’s following passage illuminates this dilution:

At this very moment, we are smack in the midst of an eco-frenzy without precedent. Environmentalism is in fact going mainstream as never before. It's impossible to open up the *Los Angeles Times* or *New York Times*, or *Vogue* or *Entertainment Weekly*—or to turn on the TV—without finding out that another someone or something has gone green, or organic, or carbon-free, or lower-footprint, or LEED-certified: Wal-Mart, some major oil companies, furniture, cosmetics, downtown L.A., Santa Monica, the Oscars, yoga mats, Trader Joe's, the car wash, UCLA, business in America. (539)

The public has become more receptive to green rhetoric. Recycling has become the norm; more hybrid cars are seen on the road; the popularity of organic food is soaring; and the term “ecology” or the prefix “eco” has become a household word.

A recent addition to the green rhetoric is the word sustainability. The word and its adjective and adverb modifiers, sustainable and sustainably, have become the most trendy environmental words used to signify one's, company's, school's and government's commitment to promoting the wellbeing of Mother Earth. In fact, a trade journal, *Advertising Age*, selected the word as “one of the Jargoniest Jargon” in 2010 claiming that “[it is] a good concept gone bad by mis- and overuse. It's come to be a squishy, feel-good catchall for doing the right thing.” Many consumer products come with the “sustainability label” such as “sustainably raised/fished,” “sustainably managed/produced,” or “sustainable packaging.” If asked to explain the term, many would turn to Wikipedia for a definition and application to society because of the word's nebulous nature. As the majority of the word's appearances take place in the environmental context, one could discern the word signifies a certain requirement for actions or programs to be deemed environmental but there are few documents that explicitly describe the practical application of the concept. The word's role appears to be primarily to produce legitimacy in the environmental discourse; thus, its definition can remain vague. In the US Environmental Protection Agency's website sustainability is defined in the following manner:

Sustainability is based on a simple principle: Everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either directly or indirectly, on our natural environment. Sustainability creates and maintains the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permit fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations. (*epa.gov*)

Even the government’s agency’s definition leaves much ambiguity that is open for different interpretations. In the case of the LA River, one could even interpret the words as suggesting that after the river’s channelization, “humans and nature” have been in productive “harmony,” as the human engineering mitigated the natural danger and made the creation of the megalopolis possible. Because of a lack of its clear definition and its increased popularity, social entities—particularly government and business—have begun to add the word in their literature in communicating with constituents or consumers to suggest their institutions are socially responsible. Doug King, in his article “Why the Word ‘Sustainability’ Should be Banned,” criticizes the word as corrupted and meaningless: “We have reached the point of ‘Sustainability Accounting.’ Rather than recognising that all human activity has impacts and taking responsibility for them, sustainability accounting uses a limited set of performance indicators which can obscure the real issues.” King indicates that institutions such as corporations are really interested in linking the concept of sustainability to economic development; put another way, the word “sustainability” is used as if economic development creates sustainability, which is presented as an undefined goal in the environmental rhetoric but which, ironically, gives the rhetoric substance. Indeed the Master Plan insinuates the importance of economic development but the rhetoric of sustainability veils that core objectivity. Gottlieb explains, “Much of the sustainability discourse relied on a combination of technology and market forces in the pursuit of ‘ecological modernization’ strategies to achieve a state of sustainable development” (23-24). According to Browne and Keil, “Ecological modernization has now become somewhat of a catchphrase for a wide variety of scholarly approaches, policy processes, and green politics to overcome perceived environment-economy contradictions” (163).

The Revitalization Master Plan

Unlike many rivers in other urban cities in the nation and the world, the LA River has almost disappeared from the city's landscape for more than a quarter of a century; now the city wants to bring it back to the center and they reveal their reasons for doing so. In their RFP (Request for Proposal) descriptions, the city states that it wishes to hire agencies that would "make the Los Angeles River a 'front door' to the City, and support a multitude of civic joint activities." Attractive promotional visuals resemble the scenery of other typical cities that are built around their rivers as a central aesthetic point marked by a river-front development. The first goals stated in the plan is to "establish environmentally sensitive urban design guidelines, land use guidelines, and development guidelines for the River zone that will create economic development opportunities to enhance and improve River-adjacent communities by providing open space, housing, retail spaces such as restaurants and cafes, educational facilities, and places for other public institutions" (LARRMP). Clearly, the ultimate goal is economic development with environmental improvements as a facilitator to that goal. In appearance, the riverfront development would satisfy the needs of not only humans but also nature, perhaps improving the river's health itself. But again the city officials state that one of the aims of the planning process is to leverage economic development after listing a series of environmental benefits. Furthermore, under the heading of "Foster Economic Development," it reads: "A revitalized river corridor is a local and regional destination; and as such can contribute to the economic vitality of the city and the region. River projects should encourage and enhance appropriate sustainable economic development, adding value to underutilized areas and communities" (LARRMP). Traditionally, Gottlieb states, "The concept of 'economic benefits' implicitly assumed increasing real estate values" (168). Aside from the role as the city's flood channel, the LA River is expected to be a value-adding element in the city's economic development for "sustainability." In the master plan, the word repeatedly appears as if both the reader and writer shared the same definition of this undefined environmental jargon.

In the “Welcome” section the Mayor states, “The L.A. River and its watershed are central to making Los Angeles a *sustainable* city, and thousands of Angelenos have rallied to support its restoration.” Later, the master plan references the phrase “a catalyst for a *sustainable* environment” (*lariver.org*). In the revitalization master plan, under the heading “Capture Community Opportunities,” it reads: “Now the people of Los Angeles have the opportunity to enjoy the River as a safe, accessible, healthy and *sustainable* . . . place.” Along with other easily understood adjectives such as “safe, accessible and healthy,” the word “sustainable” modifies the noun “place.” In another section called “Creating Value: The Benefits of Revitalization,” the plan promises its readers that it will provide “opportunities to engage in development that leads to an improved natural environment while attracting investment that leads to new jobs, increased property values and . . . *sustainable* growth.” It also has a section under the heading, “*Sustainable* Economics,” that ends with “design standards and guidelines for development within the proposed River Improvement Overlay . . . will be established to support the Plan, so that reinvestment may occur in an environmentally-sensitive and *sustainable* manner” (LARRMP). Each version of the word “sustainability” mentioned appears to be primarily symbolic with little substance.

In his article “A New Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Development,” Yosef Jabareen, drawing from several scholarly sources, demonstrates the term’s problematic ambiguity:

That there is disagreement over what should be sustained (Redclift, 1993; Sachs, 1999, p. 25; Satterthwaite, 1996, p. 32); that the concept is unclear in terms of emotional commitment (Solow, 1992); and that it “remains a confused topic” (Redclift, 1994, p. 17), “fraught with contradictions” (Redclift, 1987). There is no general agreement on how the concept should be translated into practice (Berke and Conroy, 2000) . . . [and] sustainable development is primarily symbolic rhetoric, with competing interests each redefining it to suit their own political agendas . . . (Andrews, 1997). (180)

Outlining a theoretical and conceptual understanding of the word and recognizing that “a clear tension between the goals of economic development and environmental protection” exists (182), Jabareen concludes that “the concept of equity represents the social aspects of SD (sustainability development). It encompasses different concepts such as environmental, social and economic justice, social equity, quality of life, freedom, democracy, participation and empowerment. Broadly, sustainability is seen as a matter of distributional equity, about sharing the capacity for well-being between current and future generations of people” (188). If this is the meaning of sustainability in the revitalization plan, then the LA River could truly bring together communities who are separated from one another by the freeways and the concrete flood channel that act as dividing lines; it could help realize Price’s ideal principle of not simply “managing” nature, but finding an equitable way to do so (553). Price is optimistic about the revitalization effort for the effect it could have on not just the community but environmentalism as an ideology. Price states: “What more perfect, symbolically resonant icon could we possibly find for an environmentalism that pays close attention to how equitably and sustainably we use nature in our everyday lives” (549). But a newly built residential complex named “RiverPark” which is beyond the reach of the income demographics of the surrounding neighborhood does not fulfill the promise of equity. The owners of this “housing development” are expanding to build additional condominiums and apartments along the master plan’s prioritized eleven-mile stretch along the river. With the prospect of commercial facilities stated in the developer’s brochure, the city definitely would capture “economic opportunities” as indicated in the master plan. Gottlieb states: “Part of the motivation continued to be driven by the recognition that river redevelopment enhance[s] the value of river front properties, both residential and commercial, with the potential for a rapid jump in property value and a transformation through gentrification of the adjacent neighborhood” (166). Indeed, though not prominently heard, these concerns are being raised by several voices. *The Los Angeles Times* reports: “However, environmentalists and communities along the river, many of them working-class, have raised concerns that development interests will take over the process. They fear that public access and environmental concerns will be

subsumed beneath a desire to give wealthier Angelenos pleasant places to live, work and shop” (Sahagun). The sentiment expressed by the potentially affected communities contradicts the Master Plan’s grand guiding principles: “Our River presents opportunities to revitalize our neighborhoods . . . to bring nature to people, and to enhance our quality of life” (LARRMP). Would the plan connect people beyond racial and socio-economic divisions under the one banner of “our neighborhoods”? Referring to the failed 1930s Olmstead/Bartholomew greenery proposal in his article “Moral Order, Language and the Failure of the 1930 Recreation Plan for Los Angeles County,” Terence Young observes that although Americans have espoused the ideal—“the American myth of a nation where society is a spontaneous, organic community occupying a relatively homogeneous space”—in reality, the nation has had hierarchical “social-spatial divisions” (343). Nearly 100 years later, the divisions have not disappeared.

In a way, the revitalization and massive one billion dollar river restoration projects are seen as a solution to reconcile the social and spatial division with the revitalized river’s power to bind otherwise separated communities together as positively reported in the local media. The master plan includes success stories of other cities that have revitalized their respective river and implies that the city could follow their steps without considering the complexity of a megalopolis like Los Angeles. In that particular section, the plan states that “these cities have transformed their rivers into assets for their communities. These projects have invigorated tourism, created a better quality of life for residents, and helped produce vibrant economies” (LARRMP). Perceiving nature as an asset means to, in Browne and Keil’s words, “[integrate] nature into the paradigm of development by commodifications of environment” (168). There is always a potential for environmental degradation from increased “vibrancy” in tourism and an economy which will negate the idealized notion of sustainability as presented in Jabareen’s theory and communicated in Price’s aspiration for using the river in a sustainable way. Under the guise of the hyped sustainability rhetoric in an era of heightened environmental awareness, this multifaceted project could be another way for Los Angeles to capture economic opportunities, capitalizing on nature’s aesthetics.

This river restoration/revitalization project is expected to take a few decades or more for completion. We can only hope that the city along with other governmental agencies will abide by the values promoted in the master plan: “Environmental Responsibility” and “Social and Geographic Equity”—in order to bring back the lost memories of the beauty that the Los Angeles River once had.

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