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ARTICLE

RE-ENVISIONING THE LOS ANGELES RIVER: AN NGO AND ACADEMIC INSTITUTE INFLUENCE THE POLICY DISCOURSE

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INTRODUCTION: RIVER STORIES

“Landscapes tell stories,” filmmaker Wim Wenders declared, “and the Los Angeles River tells a story of violence and danger.”¹ Wenders made these remarks during one of the sessions of the Re-Envisioning the L.A. River program, a year-long

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¹ Videotape: *Hollywood Looks at the River* (CBS Studio City 2000) (on file with authors). During the discussion, Wenders also commented that “landscapes ask for their own stories to be told. The L.A. River, as it now exists as a cemented river, has a story of aggression to tell.”

series hosted by the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College. Wenders' comments were made during a panel discussion on how Hollywood films presented the Los Angeles River as a backdrop for the stories those films told. The Hollywood panel was one of 40 "Re-Envisioning the L.A. River" events and activities during 1999-2000.² This year-long program was organized to explore how the discourse about the River could be changed to reorient the policy framework regarding the management and future design of this heavily engineered and reconstructed urban waterway and the related land use considerations for the areas bordering it.³

The landscapes that Wenders referred to were from a film montage entitled *River Madness* that was edited to include various L.A. River scenes from such Hollywood movies as *Grease*, *Terminator 2*, *Repo Man*, and *Them*.⁴ The latter, a classic 1950s science fiction film which depicted giant irradiated ants crawling out of the storm drains that fed into the L.A. River, had been filmed at a point in time when the "declaration of war on the L.A. River," as one Army Corps of Engineers ("Army Corps") official characterized it, was reaching a conclusion.⁵ By the 1950s, a new landscape had been constructed; a channelized river that served as a passageway for unwanted floodwaters and scattered debris.⁶ This new river, or flood channel "freeway," told a story of a dangerous, polluted and fragmented Los Angeles, a place barren of the softer, more inclusive landscapes of green and open space often associated with images of non-urban Rivers.⁷

During the past decade, the L.A. River has become a subject of intense re-examination, a major topic of policy debate,

² Robert Gottlieb & Andrea Azuma, *Re-Envisioning the Los Angeles River: A Program of Community and Ecological Revitalization*, Council for the Humanities, available at <http://organizations.oxy.edu/lariver/publications/Re-envisioning%20the%20LA%River%20Community%20and%20Eco%20Revitalization.pdf> (Aug. 2001).

³ *Id.*

⁴ *GREASE* (Paramount Pictures 1978); *TERMINATOR 2* (Carolco Pictures, Inc. 1991); *REPO MAN* (Edge City 1984); *THEM* (Warner Brothers 1954).

⁵ Andrew Boone, *River Rebuilt to Control Floods*, *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN*, November 1939, at 265. See also, *Flood Control Program for Los Angeles*, *WESTERN CONSTRUCTION NEWS*, November 1939, at 148. The *RIVER MADNESS* film was produced by Dana Plays

⁶ JARED ORSI, *HAZARDOUS METROPOLIS: FLOODING AND URBAN ECOLOGY IN LOS ANGELES 101-02* (2004).

⁷ Gottlieb & Azuma, *supra* note 2, at 2.

and a new kind of environmental icon. It has increasingly come to symbolize the quest to transform the built *urban* environment from a place seen as representing violence and hostility for communities and for Nature, to one of rebirth and opportunity.⁸ To re-envision the Los Angeles River as a place of community and ecological revitalization rather than an exclusive and dangerous flood channel fenced off from the communities that surround it provides a powerful message of renewal for urban rivers and the quality of urban life.⁹ It also provides lessons of how institutional and policy changes can be influenced by the ability to frame an issue, whether in relation to its historical context, its environmental and economic aspects, or its relationship to the broader discussion of land use at the local and regional level.¹⁰

This article explores some of the influences on that process of reexamination. It includes a discussion of the roles of a community-oriented academic entity (the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute) and a non-profit organization (the Friends of the Los Angeles River) whose long-standing mission has been to enable policymakers and residents alike to rediscover this urban River. We also reflect on how the changing discourse around the River helped advocates mobilize support and influence policies in support of community and ecological revitalization.

I. "THE RIVER WE BUILT": HOW THE LOS ANGELES RIVER WAS TRANSFORMED

In 1985, *Los Angeles Times* writer Dick Roraback embarked on an exploration to find the Los Angeles River.¹¹ The intent of this 20-part series, published over the course of several months, was to travel along the route of the River from its mouth to its source.¹² This rather unusual reverse process of discovery (one would presumably start from the source instead of the mouth) was designed in part to answer the questions

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Dick Roraback, *Up a Lazy River, Seeking the Source Your Explorer Follows in Footsteps of Gaspar de Portola*, L.A. TIMES, October 20, 1985. The series ran intermittently between October 20, 1985 and January 30, 1986.

¹² *Id.*

“What is the L.A. River?” as well as “Where does it begin?”¹³ The language of the article was part comic relief, part ironic juxtaposition. It was written in the form of a third person narrative, with Roraback characterizing himself as “the Explorer.”¹⁴

Roraback began his series at the mouth of the River in Long Beach.¹⁵ With its soft bottom area not fully channelized, Roraback suggested that a River might in fact exist.¹⁶ “For a last time, the Explorer looks south, at the real Los Angeles River. A heron-like bird, easily four feet tall, stands motionless in the stream, graceful and haughty,” Roraback wrote, as he headed upstream.¹⁷ But as the bed changed to flat, concrete sides, and Roraback crossed the old industrial section southeast of downtown Los Angeles consisting of some of the densest communities in the region, the *L.A. Times* writer described a “desolate vista, a wasteland... just a threadbare coat of unspeakable slime.”¹⁸ Drawing on river analogies and poking fun at every opportunity about the degraded River and its nearly non-existent flow, Roraback asked, “Is ‘Old Man River’ in drag? Is the ‘Beautiful Blue Danube’ in a mudpack?”¹⁹ When he finally reached what he assumed was the source, he complained that he never really did find what could be considered a river, since, “It hasn’t any whitecaps. It hasn’t any fish...Just to see one ripple would be my fondest wish.”²⁰ Instead, the Explorer moaned, the L.A. River “just hauls its load of sad debris from the sewage pipes to the mighty sea.” “Ooze on, L.A. River, ooze on,” Roraback concluded his ironic homage to this forgotten and bleak part of the Los Angeles landscape.²¹

When Dick Roraback undertook his journey, the L.A. River, as a free-standing river, had become more memory than

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Dick Roraback, *The L.A. River Practices Own Trickle-Down Theory Series: In Search of the L.A. River*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 27, 1985. See *supra* note 11.

¹⁸ Dick Roraback, *Bridging the Gap on the L.A. River With a Song in His Heart and a Yolk on His Shoe Series: In Search of the L.A. River*, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 7, 1985. See *supra* note 11.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ Dick Roraback, *From Basin Camp, the Final Assault Series: In Search of the L.A. River*, L.A. TIMES, Jan. 30, 1986. See *supra* note 11.

²¹ *Id.*

reality.²² The L.A. River in fact has experienced multiple lives over different eras, from the Pueblo that became the boom town and eventually became a continually expanding urban land mass.²³ “Making the river a critical part of the landscape made sense in the early days of the little village’s history,” historian William Deverell wrote of the Pueblo period during the 18th and 19th centuries.²⁴ “Local knowledge, based on lived experience in the Los Angeles basin, incorporated the river into the rhythms of everyday life. Los Angeles needed no more water than the river could provide, and it was an especially prominent landscape feature along with other local markers such as the Pacific Ocean or the San Gabriel Mountains.”²⁵

Today, L.A. River restoration advocates seek to invoke the historical image of a free flowing river filled with willows, cottonwoods, watercress and duckweed that was “a very lush and pleasing spot, in every respect,” as its first Spanish chronicler Father Juan Crespi wrote in his diaries back in 1769.²⁶ But the River also served the communities that grew up around it. This included its use as irrigation source for agricultural land (including during flood episodes) through much of the 19th century.²⁷ Subsequently, in the early part of the 20th century, the River became available for discharges from the industrial plants that settled along its edge as part of the East Side industrial corridor.²⁸ And in 1930, it became the centerpiece of a Chamber of Commerce commissioned study by Harlan Bartholomew and Frederick Law Olmsted.²⁹ This study included a vision of greenbelts, parkways, and new park lands; a study that became as forgotten as the L.A. River itself until revived and republished by Hise and Deverell 70 years later.³⁰ Most significantly, through much of the early 20th century, the L.A.

²² ORSI, *supra* note 6, at 102.

²³ WILLIAM DEVERELL, *WHITEWASHED ADOBE: THE RISE OF LOS ANGELES AND THE REMAKING OF ITS MEXICAN PAST* 99 (2004).

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ BLAKE GUMPRECHT, *THE LOS ANGELES RIVER: ITS LIFE, DEATH, AND POSSIBLE REBIRTH* 38 (1999).

²⁷ *Id.* at 142

²⁸ Greg Hise, *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, in *INDUSTRY AND IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHIES* 40 (Tom Sitton & William Deverell eds., 2001).

²⁹ GREG HISE & WILLIAM DEVERELL, *EDEN BY DESIGN: THE 1930 OLMSTED-BARTHOLOMEW PLAN FOR THE LOS ANGELES REGION* 52 (2000).

³⁰ *Id.* at 52.

River came to be seen as a barrier for existing and future residential and industrial development along its path, due to its propensity to carry rapid flowing flood waters during occasional but quite fierce storms that inevitably and periodically occurred.³¹ Two major storms in 1934 and 1938 helped facilitate the entry of federal dollars (part of a broader New Deal job creation strategy associated with public works projects) to initiate a wide range of construction projects to effectively (and finally) manage the River in order to prevent future flooding.³²

From 1938, when the Army Corps began to more permanently straighten the River that included constructing a channel along much of its 51 miles, through the 1980s when Dick Roraback set out to find his lost River, the River became transformed into a flood control throughway.³³ Similar to the flood control projects that also sought to reconfigure urban streams and rivers around the country during this same period, the now channelized L.A. River essentially redefined the urban landscape along a north-south axis.³⁴ Areas surrounding the River were now fenced off, a forbidden territory that effectively belonged to the engineering agencies.³⁵ For these flood control managers, this was now “the River we built,” as one Army Corps engineer described it.³⁶

II. “BRING THE RIVER BACK TO LIFE”: FRIENDS OF THE L.A. RIVER

At the same time that Dick Roraback was publishing his 20-part series, a poet and performance artist named Lewis MacAdams sought to make a very different kind of discovery about the River through his poetry and art.³⁷ In an act that was part theater and partly an action designed to spur organiz-

³¹ ORSI, *supra* note 6, at 88-92.

³² ROBERT GOTTLIEB, ENVIRONMENTALISM UNBOUND: EXPLORING NEW PATHWAYS FOR CHANGE 18 (2001).

³³ ORSI, *supra* note 6, at 102.

³⁴ ANN RILEY, RESTORING STREAMS IN CITIES: A GUIDE FOR PLANNERS, POLICYMAKERS AND CITIZENS 220-21 (1998).

³⁵ GOTTLIEB, *supra* note 32, at 19.

³⁶ Judith Coburn, *Whose River is it Anyway? More Concrete Versus More Nature: The Battle Over Flood Control on the Los Angeles River is Really a Fight for Its Soul*, LA TIMES, November 20, 1994.

³⁷ See, e.g., Lewis MacAdams, *Restoring the Los Angeles River: A Forty Year Art Project*, WHOLE EARTH REVIEW, Spring 1995, at 63.

ing, MacAdams, with three artist colleagues, cut through the fence at a location on the River just north of downtown Los Angeles close to where one of the soft bottom areas gave way to the concrete channel.³⁸ Entering the channel, he proclaimed that the River still lived below the concrete.³⁹ “We asked the river if we could speak for it in the human realm. We didn’t hear it say no,” MacAdams would later comment on his act on a number of occasions.⁴⁰

From this event, MacAdams formed a new organization, Friends of the L.A. River (hereinafter “FoLAR”), whose initial goal was to focus on language and symbols by insisting that the L.A. River was indeed a river.⁴¹ MacAdams, whose activist roots were more bound up with his identity as poet and affinity for imaginative 1960s-style protest than any specific environmental or River advocacy lineage, tended to attract like-minded artists, planners, architects, designers, and neighborhood activists in this quest to “bring the River back to life,” as he wrote in a letter to the editor of the *L.A. Times* in response to Roraback’s series.⁴² Roraback, who put a FoLAR bumper sticker on his car while undertaking his River journey, nevertheless identified as helpless the task of the group he called “Sons of the Ditch.”⁴³

For the engineer/managers in the L.A. County Department of Public Works and the Army Corps, the emergence of FoLAR was, at first, more of a nuisance than a significant challenge to the roles they had assumed as flood control managers.⁴⁴ Three sets of events, however, escalated what turned into a war of words and symbols that ultimately influenced the policy and institutional framework around River management and related land use issues.

The first event involved the flow of the River itself. In 1984, the City of Los Angeles’ Department of Water and Power

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² Lewis MacAdams, *Sharing Memories of the L.A. River*, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 28, 1985.

⁴³ Dick Roraback, *From Base Camp, the Final Assault Series: In Search of the L.A. River. Last in an Intermittent Series*, L.A. TIMES. See *supra* note 11.

⁴⁴ GUMPRECHT *supra* note 26, at 127, 246. Soft bottom areas of the river are unpaved because the groundwater table was sufficiently high that pouring concrete on the bottom of these sections was not deemed viable by engineer managers.

began operating its Donald A. Tillman Water Reclamation Plant north of the Sepulveda Dam near the mouth of the river and one of its three soft bottom areas. This tertiary sewage treatment plant discharged directly into the River.⁴⁶ Along with the releases of two other smaller treatment plants south of Tillman, these discharges provided a year round flow of water for the River.⁴⁶ As a consequence, it increased the vegetation growth and habitat along the soft bottom areas and reinforced the FoLAR argument that, at least in these stretches of the River, visually and functionally (in relation to a renewed eco-system), the L.A. River had become once again a free flowing River.⁴⁷ Even with the negative symbolism of treated sewage as its water source (a source nevertheless cleaner than the runoff flow, given the tertiary treatment process involved and the large pollutant loads in the runoff), this new River flow reinforced FoLAR's appeal about a living River.⁴⁸ "Come down to the River," became a constant refrain in talks by MacAdams and his FoLAR allies, an action they considered essential to legitimating their argument about the River.⁴⁹

The second event involved a concept put forth by then State Assembly member Richard Katz. In 1989, Katz proposed that the river, much of it channelized and lacking any human contact, could serve as a "bargain freeway" for trucks and automobile traffic.⁵⁰ The River Freeway concept was further explored through a \$100,000 L.A. County Transportation study that concluded that such a River freeway could result in a 20% reduction in congestion for two nearby freeways.⁵¹ Katz, who was a major advocate of water transfers and sought to appeal to environmental groups in his subsequent run for mayor and the State Senate, also spoke of greenbelts, bikeways, and adjacent parks; ideas that had been promoted by FoLAR and its allies.⁵² Katz' argument about a River freeway, never seriously pursued and eventually ridiculed by the media, nevertheless

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ GOTTLIEB, *supra* note 32, at 20.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ Interview with Lewis MacAdams, Founder, FRIENDS OF THE L.A. RIVER, Oct. 1998.

⁵⁰ GUMPRECHT, *supra* note 26, at 273-74.

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

created a new kind of focus on the River that FoLAR and its allies were able to exploit.⁵³ “Why not re-envision the L.A. River as an actual River?” the activists argued in documents and materials they generated, in events they hosted such as River clean-up days and kayak rides along the soft bottom areas of the River, and in the increasing number of press interviews and articles that identified the FoLAR vision of a living River.⁵⁴

The third event involved the protracted battle over the Army Corps’ proposal to raise the channel walls in the downstream segment of the River prior to its entering the Long Beach Harbor area; the same segment of the River that Dick Roraback had characterized as a “wasteland.”⁵⁵ In 1987, the Army Corps produced an update for its L.A. River master plan for the Los Angeles County Drainage Area (hereinafter “LACDA”) that included the warning that disastrous flooding could return to Los Angeles County.⁵⁶ The Corps proposed a series of measures to address a number of problems that had emerged post-channelization.⁵⁷ These included increased residential development along the River’s edge, debris flow concerns, and emerging fears about flood damage insurance for homeowners due to FEMA’s declaration of certain areas bordering the River as “flood hazard zones.”⁵⁸ Asserting that neighborhoods bordering the L.A. River, particularly those downstream in the “wasteland” areas, required protection from a 100 year flood, the Corps plan included a widening of the channel, modifying bridges, and, most controversially, constructing new parapet walls from two feet to as much as eight feet higher than their current height.⁵⁹

Almost immediately, the Army Corps’ LACDA proposal became a flash point for FoLAR and other River advocates who sought to challenge the Army Corps’ approach while identifying their own L.A. River “flood management” and restoration plan as a counterpoint to the raising of the walls.⁶⁰ The credibility of

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ GOTTLIEB, *supra* note 32, at 20.

⁵⁵ Roraback, *supra* note 11.

⁵⁶ ORSI, *supra* note 6, at 148-52. *See also*, GUMPRECHT, *supra* note 26, at 279

⁵⁷ ORSI, *supra* note 6, at 151.

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

the River advocates was also subsequently enhanced by their participation in a Los Angeles River Task Force, established in 1990 by L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley to “articulate a vision for the River.”⁶¹ Through the early 1990s, the LACDA fight became the centerpiece of the debates over the future of the River.⁶² On the one hand, the engineering agencies (the Army Corps and the L.A. County Department of Public Works) argued that the LACDA proposal was simply an extension of their mission as flood control managers and that to call the River a “river” was a misnomer.⁶³ The River, they declared, served just two purposes – to keep flood waters from destroying property and lives (“a killer [that was now] encased in a concrete straight jacket,” as one water agency publication put it), and to manage the discharges from the sewage treatment plants.⁶⁴ FoLAR countered with a series of alternative management strategies that included the twin concepts of “restoration” (tearing up the concrete where feasible) and “flood management.”⁶⁵

In one memorable encounter, described by Blake Gumprecht in his history of the L.A. River, Jim Noyes, the chief deputy director of the L.A. County Public Works Department, got into a sharp exchange with FoLAR’s MacAdams, over what term to use when describing the River.⁶⁶ Each time Noyes used the term “flood control channel” as part of a presentation he was making, MacAdams would interrupt to declare “you mean ‘River’.”⁶⁷ This happened again and again, with Noyes insisting on using the term “flood control channel” and MacAdams interrupting each time to assert “River!” MacAdams later recalled the incident as turning “really ugly,” with Noyes becoming more and more furious.⁶⁸ “I saw him a couple of days later,” MacAdams told Gumprecht, “and he wouldn’t even speak to

⁶¹ See ROBERT GOTTLIEB, MARK VALLIANATOS, REGINA FREER & PETER DREIER, *THE NEXT LOS ANGELES: THE STRUGGLE FOR A LIVABLE CITY* (2005).

⁶² GUMPRECHT, *supra* note 26, at 297-98.

⁶³ *Id.* at 298-99.

⁶⁴ Christopher Kroll, *Changing Views of the River*, CALIFORNIA COAST AND OCEAN, Summer 1993, at 32.

⁶⁵ RILEY, *supra* note 34. FoLAR’s notion of flood management, influenced in part by Riley, was distinguished from “flood control” and included plantings, spreading grounds, and other strategies to slow down the flow of the River.

⁶⁶ GUMPRECHT, *supra* note 26, at 298.

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*

me.⁶⁹ Despite FoLAR's newly established visibility and the increased interest by policymakers and the media in a "renewed" L.A. River, the County Board of Supervisors in 1995 voted 4 to 1 to allow the LACDA plan to proceed.⁷⁰ Given the changing discourse around the River and the focus on the limits of traditional flood control strategies as well as concerns about community blight, the LACDA plan was modified to the extent that in some areas levees were raised and walls were not built.⁷¹ In addition, adjacent bike paths were maintained, and more plantings and vegetation were added to counter the "urban blight" and "wasteland" characterization of the engineering approach.⁷² And although FoLAR had lost a battle, it continued to make inroads in how the River was to be defined and how it might ultimately be managed and renewed.⁷³ "I always saw [the LACDA fight] as a symbolic issue," MacAdams recalled, arguing that the war of words was in fact "a battle over the definition of the river, and what the river is going to be."⁷⁴

III. "A VERY PRETTY DUCK": THE RE-ENVISIONING PROGRAM

In the Fall of 1998, one year after the L.A. County Board of Supervisors vote on LACDA, Lewis MacAdams came to Occidental College to speak to an "Environment and Society" class about the history of the L.A. River.⁷⁵ In the course of the discussion with the students, MacAdams commented that a key dimension of FoLAR's approach was changing the image of the River, an image, MacAdams speculated, that might have been shaped in part by its portrayal in Hollywood films.⁷⁶ MacAdams argued that research was needed regarding how such images and the language about the River gets formed, as well as research on how the River evolved historically, how it could be re-engineered differently, and how planning could be fo-

⁶⁹ GUMPRECHT, *supra* note 26, at 298.

⁷⁰ Duke Helfand, *Controversial LA River Project Okd*, L.A. TIMES, Apr. 7, 1995.

⁷¹ GUMPRECHT, *supra* note 26, at 283.

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ ORSI, *supra* note 6, at 156.

⁷⁴ GUMPRECHT, *supra* note 26 at 283; *See also* Kroll, *supra* note 63, at 26.

⁷⁵ Lewis MacAdams, Founder, FRIENDS OF THE L.A. RIVER, address at Occidental College Environment and Society Class (Oct. 28, 1998).

⁷⁶ *Id.*

cused that reconfigured not just the River but its surrounding communities.⁷⁷ “Today, the research regarding the River serves as barrier rather than opportunity for renewal; can you help make that renewal possible?”⁷⁸ MacAdams challenged his audience.

MacAdams was also interested in a possible partnership with Occidental’s Urban and Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI).⁷⁹ It seemed a good fit. UEPI’s predecessor (an interdisciplinary environmental center first organized in 1991 at UCLA that linked the Departments of Chemical Engineering, Public Health and Urban Planning) not only drew on the technical and research capacity of the different disciplines but was also established as an “action research” program designed to help develop new public policies and establish linkages with key stakeholders, including community-based organizations.⁸⁰

In 1997, Gottlieb along with three project managers from the UCLA Center shifted from UCLA to Occidental College and brought with them the projects and programs of the Center. Occidental is a small, highly diverse liberal arts college located in the heart of Los Angeles, not far from the area where the L.A. River begins to enter downtown Los Angeles. While the work of the Center at UCLA had been innovative and productive with a strong community emphasis, it often found itself operating at the margins or outside the academic program. At Occidental, however, the Environmental Center was renamed and expanded its focus to become the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute (hereinafter “UEPI”). UEPI in turn became a centerpiece of Occidental’s own commitment to community engagement and “learning by doing.”⁸¹ Thus, while UEPI was located directly within an academic program (Urban and Environmental Policy), it at the same time strengthened and significantly expanded its community emphasis. It also sought to define itself as a multifaceted, social change-oriented Institute that provided a place where faculty, students, organizers, community partners, researchers, and policy analysts could collaborate. Its mission – “to help create a more just, liv-

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ *Id.*

⁸⁰ *Id.*

⁸¹ Occidental College, *Learning By Doing*, at <http://www.oxy.edu/x676.xml>.

able, and democratic region” – became the backdrop for bringing together community groups and researchers.⁸² It therefore saw itself as a cross between an academic center with strong community ties and a community-based organization with a strong research and policy development capacity.

By 1999, UEPI and FoLAR decided to pull together a broad-based program of events, activities, forums, and research under the heading: “Re-Envisioning the L.A. River.” More than 40 programs were scheduled, ranging from a forum on the History of the River, a dialogue between the engineer managers of the Army Corps and L.A. County Public Works and alternative and environmentally-oriented “flood management” engineers and advocates, a presentation about possibilities for River renewal by the two leading environmental officials in California (Mary Nichols, Secretary of the California Resources Agency, and Felicia Marcus, the Administrator of Region IX of U.S. EPA), and a meeting hosted by the mayor of the city of South Gate to discuss river renewal and community issues south of downtown in what were called the Gateway communities (Dick Roraback’s wasteland areas).⁸³ There was also a poetry reading organized in conjunction with the Getty Research Institute (seven leading L.A. poets commissioned to write about the River), an art installation along the concrete walls in the area where Lewis MacAdams had proclaimed fifteen years earlier that a River still lived beneath that concrete, a bike ride along the River co-hosted by the L.A. County Bike Coalition, and the “Hollywood Looks at the River” forum where the “River Madness” montage was screened and Wim Wenders spoke of the impact of the River as a landscape of violence and danger.⁸⁴

The research that was generated by the “Re-Envisioning the L.A. River” series included an historical reconstruction of the ecology of the Arroyo Seco, a 22-mile stream and sub-watershed that feeds into the L.A. River watershed; research designed to place in context any stream restoration strategy and the limits and opportunities available based on that his-

⁸² Urban & Environmental Policy Institute, at <http://departments.oxi.edu/uepi/about/index.htm>.

⁸³ Gottlieb & Azuma, *supra* note 2, at 10-11, 6-9, 4-5, 24-25.

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 12-14, 8-9, 25-26, 22.

torical information.⁸⁵ It also included client-based research where a group of UCLA urban planning graduate students worked in conjunction with UEPI (as the client) to provide a community and planning profile of the “Cornfield.”⁸⁶ This hotly-contested area just north of downtown Los Angeles was slated for warehouse development, much to the dismay of River activists and area residents, and the UCLA report outlined strategies and alternative scenarios for future development.⁸⁷ The battle over the fate of the Cornfield, another key topic of the “Re-Envisioning the L.A. River” program, was just emerging during 1999-2000 as the first major debate over the fate of the River and its surrounding areas since the protracted battle over LACDA and the raising of the walls that had occurred during the early and mid 1990s.⁸⁸

The opening session of the Re-Envisioning program on October 1, 1999, included the talks by environmental officials Nichols and Marcus. Nichols spoke of the role of forums like the Re-Envisioning series in focusing the attention of policymakers regarding open space and River revitalization as community issues as well as environmental concerns.⁸⁹ Marcus in turn talked of the importance of combining vision with the ability to act in a practical and sometimes incremental manner, praising the Re-Envisioning series as capable of developing those kinds of links.⁹⁰ She further spoke of the need to establish new management paradigms while recognizing and gently pursuing a shift in the traditional agendas of the engineers and water industry and flood control actors that had managed the River for more than six decades.⁹¹ While the River might not be “the [trumpeter] swan in L.A.’s future,” Marcus summed up the event’s message, “it could be a very, very pretty duck,” citing *Los Angeles Weekly* writer Jennifer Price’s compelling meta-

⁸⁵ Robert Gottlieb, Elizabeth Braker, and Robin Craggs. Expanding the Opportunities and Broadening the Constituency for Interdisciplinary Environmental Education. Report to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. April 15, 2003.

⁸⁶ *Cornfield of Dreams: A Resource Guide of Facts, Issues and Principles*, available at <http://www.sppsr.ucla.edu/dup/research/main.html>.

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 19-20.

⁸⁸ Robert Gottlieb, *Rediscovering the River*, ORION AFIELD, Spring 2002, at 32.

⁸⁹ Lecture Series, *Re-Envisioning the L.A. River*, (Oct. 1, 1999).

⁹⁰ *Id.*

⁹¹ *Id.*

phor of a re-envisioned River in an article about the series that had appeared shortly before the Nichols/Marcus talk.⁹²

IV. NEW BATTLEFIELDS: FROM DISCOURSE TO ACTION

Later that evening, after the initial session with Mary Nichols and Felicia Marcus, a group of FoLAR activists, UEPI staff, and Nichols and Marcus sat down at an Eagle Rock restaurant to talk about the future of the River. In the course of the discussion, the FoLAR and UEPI participants informed Nichols and Marcus about an emerging conflict regarding the Cornfield site. A year earlier, FoLAR had hosted “The River Through Downtown,” a conference involving urban architects and designers, participants from the Chinatown community, and various River advocates.⁹³ FoLAR had been excited about the community involvement that had come out of the process, facilitated in part by a Chinatown activist named Chi Mui, who then was State Senator Richard Polanco’s Chinatown field deputy. Mui, who had his own activist roots but was not at the time a River advocate nor focused on environmental issues, nevertheless came to see the development of the Cornfield, a 40-acre site then owned by the Union Pacific railroad near the Chinatown and Latino Lincoln Heights neighborhoods north of downtown, as a major opportunity to address a wide range of community needs.⁹⁴ Through discussions with community members and through the design and envisioning process from The River Through Downtown conference and its aftermath, FoLAR, Chi Mui, and a number of community participants came up with a plan for schools, housing, bike paths, recreational facilities, and a park, along with a concept of a more extensive River front development that could be ultimately tied to the broader vision of River renewal.⁹⁵

But both FoLAR and the Chinatown activists soon discovered that the process they had launched would be undercut due to a very different kind of development that had been proposed

⁹² Gottlieb & Azuma, *supra* note 2, at 5.

⁹³ Friends of the L.A. River, *The River Through Downtown*, at <http://www.folar.org/about.html> (last visited January 19, 2005)

⁹⁴ Personal communication with Chi Mui, L.A. Chinatown Activist, and Robert Gottlieb (Dec. 11, 2001).

⁹⁵ *Id.*

by a large developer, Majestic Realty, for 32 of the acres of the Cornfield site. Majestic was considered among the most connected and politically powerful developers in the region. It had worked out a deal with Union Pacific (whose owner also had an interest in the development) to take over the land and effectively turn the site into a new warehouse and light industrial district.⁹⁶ Majestic also had ties and the strong support of then Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan.⁹⁷ As a consequence its development plan was on a fast track to get the project through the city and the federal government's review process as well as obtain subsidies to sweeten the deal.⁹⁸

Neither Nichols nor Marcus had heard about Majestic's warehouse development that had largely been pursued under the public radar.⁹⁹ Despite the increasing ability of the River advocates to stimulate interest in River renewal, the FoLAR/community plan seemed dead in its tracks, given the forces pushing the Majestic Realty plan. When Nichols and Marcus heard about this possible new battleground, they warned the River advocates that by taking on some formidable powers, they needed, in Nichols' words, to "slay the King, if they were going to win the battle."¹⁰⁰

The Cornfield battle did in fact identify a new stage in the advocacy around River renewal. Enlisting the support of a wide range of community and environmental organizations, evoking historical and cultural arguments about the significance of the site, and employing a range of legal and lobbying strategies to block Majestic's fast track to development, the River advocates displayed a new level of sophistication and capacity to act.¹⁰¹ The conflict, it was argued, was an environmental *and* commu-

⁹⁶ Paul Stanton Kibel, *Los Angeles' Cornfield: An Old Blueprint for New Green-space*, 23 Stan. Envtl. L.J. 275, 308 (2004).

⁹⁷ Gottlieb, *supra* note 88, at 31.

⁹⁸ *Id.*

⁹⁹ Lewis MacAdams had first learned about Majestic's plans when he overheard a conversation in City Council member Mike Hernandez's office, to the effect that Majestic was moving quickly to obtain a Mitigated Negative Declaration in order to proceed with their warehouse plans. MacAdams immediately called environmental attorney Jan Chatten-Brown to delay the proceedings in order to give time for FoLAR and other River advocates to mobilize around the issue. The discussion with Nichols and Marcus occurred soon after. Personal communication from Lewis MacAdams, founder of Friends of the LA River, to Robert Gottlieb (Dec. 11, 2001).

¹⁰⁰ Meeting at Eagle Rock Restaurant, (Oct. 1, 1999). (Quote from memory of occasion, Gottlieb).

¹⁰¹ Gottlieb, *supra* note 88, at 33

nity issue as opposed to a development plan that would bring more pollution and poor land use planning to an area that had enormous needs.¹⁰²

The Re-Envisioning the L.A. River program also played a role in the unfolding Cornfield dispute. The UCLA/UEPI research report that evaluated the competing visions about the past and future of the Cornfield helped provide documentation about the needs of the surrounding communities and the negative impacts associated with the Majestic proposal.¹⁰³ In September 2000, the final event in the Re-Envisioning series, a mayoral candidates' debate about the L.A. River and the urban environment, witnessed animated discussion about the Majestic Realty project and alternative scenarios about the site – as well as River renewal issues more broadly.¹⁰⁴ Each of the candidates present either declared opposition to the project or sought to slow down the fast track approach (either by seeking to have the federal government's Housing and Urban Development (HUD) agency require an environmental review or through a mediated dialogue between FoLAR and Majestic). The mayoral candidates debate in turn suggested that the political climate around the project had significantly changed. "It is hard to adjust to the fact that the L.A. River has become a kind of mom and apple pie issue," MacAdams commented to Gottlieb right after the debate.¹⁰⁵

In the course of the next several months after the September 2000 debate, negotiations took place between the developer and state of California officials over the price and conditions of a sale of the Cornfield property to the state.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, a deal was reached, significantly benefiting the developer in terms of the final price, but also making available undeveloped property along the edge of the River to be transformed into a state park.¹⁰⁷ Though the different plans that were subsequently proposed (with a final decision still pending) did not fully coincide with the vision of the River advocates, in just four

¹⁰² Lewis MacAdams & Robert Gottlieb, *Changing a River's Course: A Greenbelt versus Warehouses*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 3, 1999.

¹⁰³ *Cornfield of Dreams*, *supra* note 86, at 114-5.

¹⁰⁴ Gottlieb & Azuma, *supra* note 2, at 30.

¹⁰⁵ Personal communication from Lewis MacAdams, Founder, FRIENDS OF THE LA RIVER, to Robert Gottlieb (Sept. 14, 2000).

¹⁰⁶ Kibel, *supra* note 84, at 325-30.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.* at 330.

years (from the vote on the LACDA proposal to the resolution of the Cornfield battle), the power of the River advocates had grown to the point where they were now able to cross the line from discourse to action.¹⁰⁸

V. CONTINUING CHALLENGES: SOUTH OF DOWNTOWN

In developing the Re-Envisioning the L.A. River program, it became clear that part of the difficulty for the River advocates was the potential north-south divide that had been a major factor in the LACDA fight. Although some of the communities north of downtown, including those impacted by the Cornfield issue, were diverse in terms of demographics and included a number of low-income neighborhoods, the River advocates were at times put on the political defensive as middle class advocates seeking to increase environmental amenities along the River.¹⁰⁹ These amenities were made possible by the images of renewal associated with the soft bottom areas. The call to “come down to the River” provided an important organizing tool in those communities, in part because it was possible to actually enter the River’s edge and imagine a more robust, free-flowing River. Strategies for River restoration also seemed more viable in these areas. One program highlighted during the Re-Envisioning program included a panel that evaluated a program that had established a recreated stream along the Arroyo Seco subwatershed.¹¹⁰ This type of “reinvented Nature” (to use environmental historian William Cronon’s suggestive phrase) had been made possible two years earlier by mitigation funds from a landfill developer.¹¹¹ The panel’s discussion of the recreated Arroyo Seco diverted stream pointed to the significant challenges but very real opportunities tied to Felicia Marcus’ call for practical, incremental steps in order to establish new River “management paradigms.”¹¹² These opportunities, however, seemed limited if not non-existent in the Southern part of the North-South divide, particularly in the areas where

¹⁰⁸ Gottlieb, *supra* note 88, at 33.

¹⁰⁹ ORSI, *supra* note 6, at 156-7.

¹¹⁰ Gottlieb & Azuma, *supra* note 2, at 20.

¹¹¹ *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (William Cronon ed., 1996).

¹¹² Gottlieb & Azuma, *supra* note 2, at 20.

the walls had been raised.¹¹³ To re-envision the channelized River in this more desolate landscape seemed a near impossible task.

However, a number of events and political shifts that were unfolding at the time of the Re-Envisioning program suggested new openings that had not previously been available. In March 2000 and again in 2002, two bonds for park land acquisition and water quality improvement projects provided for the first time significant funding for urban park and recreational development.¹¹⁴ Both bonds passed with large majorities of Latino and African-American voters, whose support exceeded that of white voters as well.¹¹⁵ Funds from the March 2000 bond measure were subsequently used to acquire the Cornfield property. In late 1999, legislation was also passed that established the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy.¹¹⁶ This new entity provided potential resources as well as research and planning opportunities for the segment of the River south and east of downtown Los Angeles as well as for the San Gabriel River and Rio Hondo subwatershed that joined the L.A. River in the city of South Gate.¹¹⁷ One of the Re-Envisioning events, hosted by State Senator Hilda Solis who was preparing for a successful run for Congress, had focused on the San Gabriel River.¹¹⁸ Similar to other Re-Envisioning the L.A. River discussions, this event addressed the parallel issues of River renewal, community needs for open space and recreation, and broader land use strategies that extended beyond the River's edge.¹¹⁹ These events, and other indications of an emerging community-based environmentalism that identified strong Latino, African-American, and Asian-American interest

¹¹³ D.J. Waldie, *Changing the River's Course in Pursuit of Public Spaces*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 3, 1999.

¹¹⁴ Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act (2000), available at <http://primary2000.ss.ca.gov/returns/prop/00.htm>; Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act (2002) available at <http://vote2002.ss.ca.gov/Returns/prop/00.htm>.

¹¹⁵ Robert Gottlieb, *Expanding Environmental Horizons*, L.A. TIMES, Apr. 16, 2000.

¹¹⁶ Los Angeles, Cal., Public Resources Code 32600-32602 at <http://leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=prc&group=32001-33000&file=32600-32602>

¹¹⁷ Gottlieb & Azuma, *supra* note 2, at 15.

¹¹⁸ *Id.*

¹¹⁹ *Id.*

in such issues as open space and recreational development in urban core areas, extended the potential base for a new approach and to engage broader constituencies around River renewal.¹²⁰

In recognition of these possibilities, FoLAR worked closely with a team from Harvard University's Department of Landscape Architecture to extend the vision of River renewal to the channelized segments through downtown Los Angeles and southward to the L.A. city limits at Vernon. The charge of the Harvard team was to create a "provocative vision of the Los Angeles River that challenges the viewer to imagine a dream-scape of beaches, new ecologies, and connections across the city." In doing so, the Harvard design team considered how River managers might be able to "bring back the habitat, clean the water, and make it a natural amenity, while maintaining flood protection," with the goal of transforming the River "from today's poor joke into the centerpiece of a great city."¹²¹

The Re-Envisioning the L.A. River series also sought to focus on the south of downtown segment of the River through a panel discussion and community forum co-hosted by the City of South Gate. In advance of this program, an Occidental College student, who grew up and went to school in South Gate, did presentations and outreach activities, through UEPI, with high school students in the area.¹²² She found an interested and receptive audience, largely unaware of the existence of the River at the edge of their City but interested in exploring a visioning process that could impact their neighborhood.¹²³ Nevertheless, the high school students informed the Occidental organizer they had no interest in the community forum, since it was "a city thing."¹²⁴ The community forum included the mayor of South Gate (himself a board member of the new Conservancy), an environmental consultant who provided information on the problems and extent of contamination at the different brown-field sites along the River's edge in the south of downtown region, and a sprinkling of public officials. Poorly attended (few

¹²⁰ *Id.* at 13-15; *See also* Gottlieb et al., *supra* note 61, at 108.

¹²¹ Dept. of Landscape Architecture, Harv. U. Graduate School of Design, L.A. River Studio Book, 21 (2002).

¹²² Gottlieb & Azuma *supra* note 2, at 24.

¹²³ *Id.*

¹²⁴ *Id.*

South Gate residents attended despite the efforts by UEPI and the City to generate an audience), the event suffered from a disconnect between the reality of a concrete river and a visioning process that up to then had little connection to the needs of those communities south of downtown.¹²⁵

VI. CONCLUSION: NGO AND ACADEMIC INFLUENCE ON THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

From 1985, when Dick Roraback took his expedition up-river and Lewis MacAdams undertook his performance art by entering the River channel, to the September 2000 mayoral debate as the concluding event in the Re-Envisioning the L.A. River series, the key to bringing about change in the River was the need to change the terms of the debate about how one viewed this highly engineered urban River. The debate and the actions that ensued essentially constituted a “discourse battle,” that is, conflicts over how language was used that in turn framed an issue, identified resources, and established new practices and policies. In that context, FoLAR, an NGO well equipped to influence the terms of that debate, became the leading actor in reorienting policy and institutional approaches. Similarly, UEPI, an academic entity that also functions in part as a community actor, could play a significant role in combining its research and educational functions, its cross-disciplinary approach that placed River issues in multiple contexts (e.g., historically, through poetry and art, as an engineering issue, and in relation to politics), and its community outreach and policy development functions. By 2000-2001, with the successful outcome in the Cornfield fight, it had become clear that the discourse battle had not only been joined, but that the terms of the debate had in fact changed.

One example of this shift in discourse was reflected in D.J. Waldie’s evocative commentaries about the L.A. River. Waldie, a novelist and city official for one of the cities south of downtown most impacted by floodwaters, frequently wrote about the River in the opinion pages of the *Los Angeles Times*. In a *LA Times* commentary written shortly before the opening event of the Re-Envisioning the L.A. River series, Waldie described the

¹²⁵ *Id.*

San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers as “problematic.”¹²⁶ “The gated and trespass-forbidden river channels seem superfluous, the ultimate ‘no place’ in notoriously placeless L.A.,” Waldie wrote.¹²⁷ Reflecting that shift in discourse around the River, Waldie’s position also evolved, reflected in another *L.A. Times* commentary soon after the Re-Envisioning the L.A. River series had concluded. “As we begin to encounter the river as a place, not an abstraction, we encounter each other,” Waldie wrote.¹²⁸ “The riverbank is not the perfect place for this meeting, but it’s the only place we have that extends the length of metropolitan Los Angeles and along nearly all the borders of our social divides. Think of the river we’re making as the anti-freeway-not dispersing L.A. but pulling it together.”¹²⁹

A few years later, Waldie, now a champion of River renewal, noted in a 2002 *New York Times* commentary that “recovering parks from industrial brownfields” wouldn’t “restore a lost Eden,” given that the greening of the Los Angeles River was “a sobering demonstration of the limits of environmental restoration in an urban landscape.”¹³⁰ But the major accomplishment of actors like FoLAR and UEPI had been to help start the process of enabling the engineers, policymakers, and community residents to change agendas and establish those new management paradigms, while seeking to reverse what had also seemed to be an inexorable outcome of closing the River and dividing a city and a region. “It has been the nature of Angelenos to be heedless about their landscape,” Waldie concluded in his *New York Times* commentary.¹³¹ “That’s changing, because it must, as we finally gather at the river.”¹³²

¹²⁶ Waldie, *supra* note 113.

¹²⁷ *Id.*

¹²⁸ D.J. Waldie, *As We Gather at the River*, L.A. TIMES, July 23, 2000.

¹²⁹ *Id.*

¹³⁰ D.J. Waldie, *Reclaiming a Lost River, Building a Community*, N.Y. TIMES, July 10, 2002.

¹³¹ *Id.*

¹³² *Id.*