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Nature Big and Small

Landscape Planning in the Wilds of Los Angeles

Marcia J. McNally

ABSTRACT This article reflects on 23 years of participatory professional practice, university teaching, and applied research conducted in Los Angeles at various and increasing scales with a wide range of participants. It describes the players and techniques used to engage them in the material and speculates as to the need for the practice to refocus as the region's population changes. The piece concludes with a discussion of the *de facto* adaptive participation process to illustrate how community design and planning require many modes of practice.

KEYWORDS Nature, scale, adaptive planning, listening

STEP-BY-STEP COMMUNITY DESIGN

Since 1982 Randy Hester and I have worked in partnership on planning and design projects at every conceivable scale. Our participatory approach originally focused on “how to design small spaces close to home with the people who live there” (Hester 1982, 135). We articulated our approach by reflecting on the process used in the town plan for Manteo, North Carolina, including a number of techniques and steps producing particularly good results. The process was iterative and required establishing a big idea for the design (a gestalt) informed and inspired by social and site data. As the idea advanced in the community process, we tested it against planning and design norms (archetypes), playing them off local idiosyncrasies. The intention in writing out a step-by-step method was educative—Hester wanted to show design students how this can be done.

We have also used this approach in professional practice; this paper describes how we have applied the process to three open space projects in Los Angeles. While we undertook these projects as professional design contracts, they reflect the flexible problem solving implied by Stokols's model of transdisciplinary action research (TDAR), which forefronts nature and landscape across human and political imprecision and change over time and scale (2006). The action portion of Stokols's model also recommends a constant discourse and recalibration between what is “known” in the academic literature on participation and practice and what can be observed or demonstrated on the ground (Forstyth and Crewe 2004). The process outcomes suggest

that the cross-checking notion of “getting meta and staying grounded” is a useful framework for diagnosing projects already completed and for framing new best practices (Thering 2007). Reflection on the work, and indeed the work itself, suggests that a primary responsibility of a participatory designer is the creation of activities that bring forth visions with tangible connections that bind citizens to landscapes, to nature big and small. Indeed, such creation is the cross-scale imperative of these projects.

NATURE FIRST AND FOREMOST

In 1985 the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks asked us to bid on the creation of a master plan for Runyon Canyon Park. The city had acquired in 1984 the 133-acre space fiercely guarded by some neighbors for decades. It had already conducted an unsuccessful search for consultants to prepare the plan, but fortunately for us, city staff members had, after the fact, come across an article in *Landscape Architecture* about our approach (Hester 1985). Staff thought that by hiring us it would be able to satisfy the community and acquire institutional understanding of community design.

We threw the contents of our office (a camera, an IBM Selectric, two sawhorses, and a door-cum-drafting table) into the back of our pickup and moved to Hollywood to work on the plan. We began with a work-start meeting in Wattles Garden, our summer headquarters. Probably 20 people, roughly half city staff, attended; the other attendees consisted of our appointed advisory committee members. For the meeting we prepared a handout to explain the steps in our process, when there would be a product, and when we would be counting on city staff and advisory committee participation (Figure 1). This process framework was easy to create because in defining the scope of the project, the City had put us through the paces.

We were unprepared for the upfront costs of the project and had to pay our staff from our own pockets

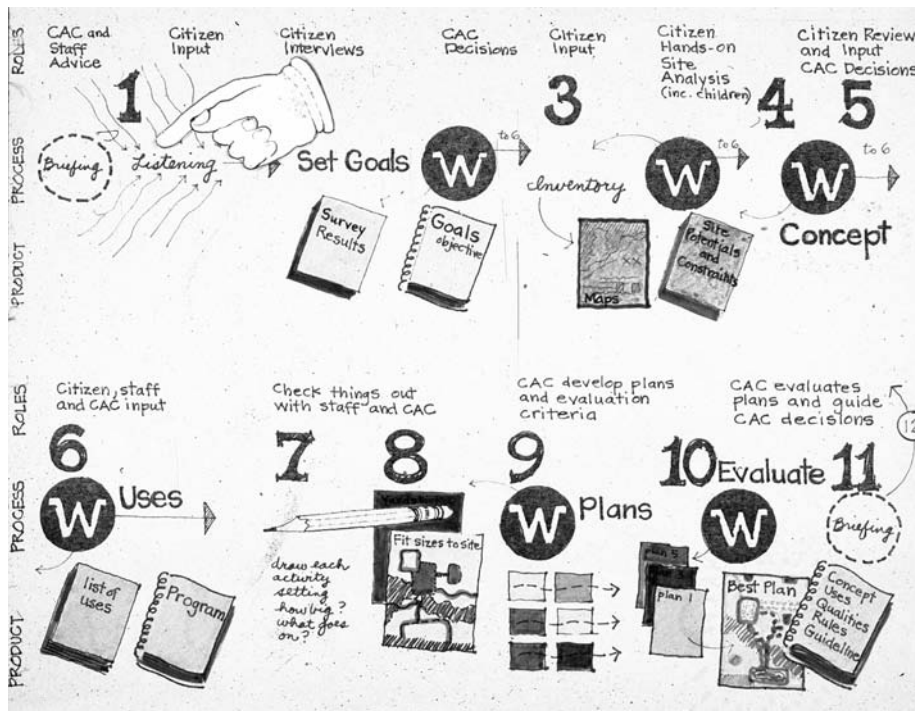


Figure 1. Runyon Canyon master plan process handout, step-by-step.

and make blueprints, letterhead, and business cards while waiting 30 days after invoicing to be paid ourselves. Only our complete lack of understanding of how unprepared citizens would be to participate matched our total lack of business acumen. For such a “fiercely guarded” site, few at that first meeting seemed to know anything about Runyon Canyon or even to ever have been there. In the surrounding neighborhood, as far as we could tell, no one had ever nodded to a neighbor while retrieving a newspaper, walking a dog, or getting in a car—it was a Robert Putnam landscape writ large (1995).

Neither were we prepared for our indoctrination into the culture of Hollywood. I remember our surprise when we saw faces of the participants on the front page of *National Enquirer* while waiting in a checkout line, the strange names of their jobs in the entertainment industry (“key grip,” for instance), and when we heard their unbelievable life stories (“My children grew up in Rome—we were on location for *Cleopatra*.”).

Randy likes to tell the story of how, through the engaging and open process conducted in Runyon Canyon, people got to know their neighbors (Hester 2006). Over the course of planning, we noticed that people came to the meetings earlier and earlier, to talk to each other over coffee and cookies. We set the tone for this intimacy through Step One in our process, what we call “Listening.” In some ways this is little more than

one-on-one interviewing (Hester 1975). We figure out who is involved, who should be involved, and we meet with them to find out what their engagement with the site has been in the past, what their concerns are, and what their visions for the future might be. Listening also serves other purposes. It opens a dialogue. It makes out-of-town consultants seem like accessible human beings. It establishes trust. We learn the social and environmental terrain rapidly, from the inside out.

As mentioned, our appointed citizen committee knew little about the canyon to start. But in doing fieldwork we met people walking dogs, hiking, wandering around in search of Errol Flynn,¹ and hanging out. So we posted fliers throughout the canyon, with pulltags noting our phone number (Figure 2). Over time, 50 people responded to our plea: “If you use this canyon, we need you.” All told, we interviewed about 80 citizens and met with a number of community groups and a range of government officials, each of whom shared their knowledge, memories, reservations, and dreams.

Through listening, we confirmed our initial take on the canyon—the people who used it were hikers and dog walkers and valued it for its rustic state, juxtaposed against the city. Their strongest preference was to keep it natural, but they were equally concerned about fire and crime. We also catalogued subtle but useful details built into the plan’s gestalt and spatially expressed them in the master plan. For example, the canyon



Figure 2. Simple poster used to recruit Runyon Canyon users for listening interviews.

connected residents of Hollywood's bygone era, when it was a small company town, to the present high-density transit hub in the making. Runyon Canyon Park was to be that old-fashioned kind of face-to-face place—but with a twist: wild, in the natural sense, and urbane.

Over a nine-month period we worked through our process with the community, which grew in number to nearly 500 participants. Many were affluent and white; some were not. The part of the project I focus on here, however, is a constant in all of our projects in Los Angeles—that at some point citizens must face the native landscape, no matter how terrifying. Los Angeles is a place where natural forces are always barely in check, are always part of the imagination (Davis 1998). Oddly enough, there is a nexus among natural disaster, park planning, and big vision. Some of the most desired and contested would-be park sites are in chaparral canyons,

along the ridges, and next to watercourses—in other words, unstable landscapes waiting to burn, slide, or flood. For us to work collaboratively with citizens, we found, they must be grounded in knowledge of their turf (Orr 1992).

That meant we had to ground them. Like citizens in almost every place I have worked, Runyon Canyon neighbors were alarmingly uninformed about their native landscape. As we learned by listening, Runyon Canyon's community was initially unwilling to accept the threat posed by the canyon's natural ecosystem. The memory of fire in 1984 was still fresh—the barren hillsides were vivid reminders of mudslides, injuries, and property damage. We knew that if we were not able to break out of this way of thinking about the canyon, the City, with neighborhood support, would build retaining walls and pave paths to a point of natural sterility. To



Figure 3. Bringing people to experience Los Angeles nature first hand.

make the change, we adapted the scope of our work, devising a series of walking tours to teach residents about the chaparral cycle (Figure 3).² Through these events, citizens learned the nuances of holding eroding slopes with native plants, rerouting stormwater so as to make use of it on site, and celebrating the presence of red-tailed hawks, rabbits, and swallowtail butterflies in the heart of one of America's most populated cities. Living with deer eating their roses and drinking out of their swimming pools was part of keeping the canyon natural that became a joy, not a nuisance. The tours were a first step in teaching the community to embrace the existence of a volatile backyard wilderness in the city (*Landscape Architecture* 1987).

PUTTING THE BIG IN THE WILD

Thus began an irresistible, gravitational pull towards a practice of planning in Los Angeles that involved increasing degrees of difficulty and growing units of analysis, requiring constant professional retooling and suppleness and an ability to work with others seemingly outside our field of vision. It required scaling up our process to that of nature.

As it turned out, Runyon Canyon was a training ground, an intense but relatively small-scale introduction to the impressive wildness that is part of Los Angeles (Figure 4). The canyon is a prized piece of property, and one of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy's (the conservancy's) early acquisitions within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area,

its legislated zone of interest. A state agency charged with acquiring lands in the Los Angeles region for open space and ecosystem preservation, the conservancy is a "big landscape" operation.

While the canyon was turned over to the City of Los Angeles, the conservancy had residual proprietary feelings about Runyon. Early in the master-plan process, the city park staff called a session with the conservancy staff so that we could present our approach and invite the agency to participate in the process. Getting out of the gate at that meeting was difficult because the conservancy's executive director, Joe Edmiston, believed our careful, participatory (read: academic, Berkeley) style would be a political disaster. Only after firmly asking him to stop interrupting were we able to make a case for how our 12-step process would yield community buy-in and a visionary plan. He heard us out; the meeting concluding with Edmiston conceding, "When I first heard there were consultants coming down from Berkeley, all I could imagine was Birkenstocks and blue jeans. Now I see that Runyon is in good hands."

Since the Runyon Canyon project, we have worked as consultants on several projects with the conservancy, taught courses at the University of California, Berkeley, focusing on Los Angeles open-space planning issues, and in the process forged a strong friendship with the agency's staff and board of directors. Los Angeles ecosystems, wildlife, and the human relationships with them weave the fabric of our relationship with the conservancy—our growing interest in and knowledge

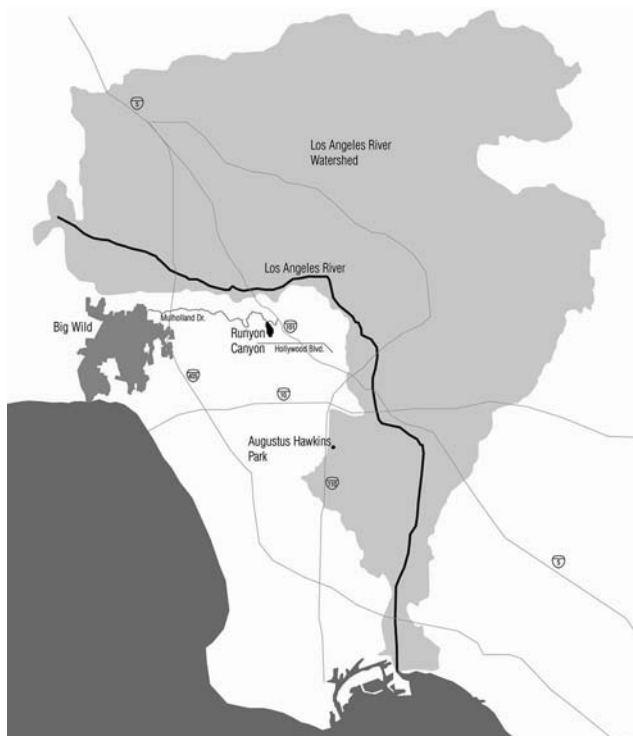


Figure 4. Map indicating the relative locations and sizes of Runyon Canyon, Big Wild and the Los Angeles River watershed.

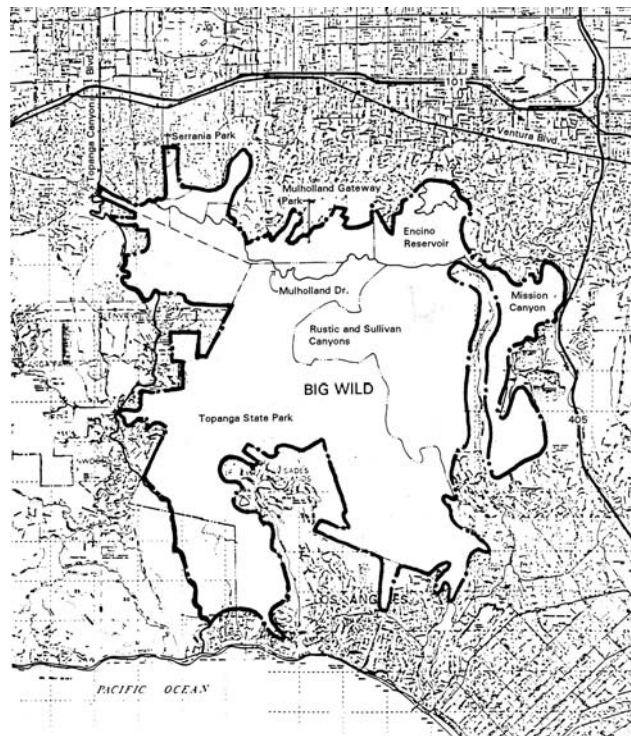


Figure 5. Stitching together the public lands surrounding Mulholland Gateway Park to "make" Big Wild.

of urban wilderness and the agency's evolution as the primary "nature maker" of the region.³

Our relationship with the agency and its board is a result of time and shared experience on tough projects. Three years after the adoption of the Runyon Canyon Plan, we received a call from Edmiston. Two days later we found ourselves in a helicopter, flying over thousands of acres of mountaintops being graded for suburban estates. Edmiston introduced us to "Mulholland Gateway Park"—1,081 acres in the mountains, acquired through the development process. We also did some ground travel, largely along Dirt Mulholland, a seven-mile stretch of the iconic, never paved, scenic drive (McNally 1995). The politics pertaining to our point of entry were a mess. The developer at the northern edge of the "park" was required to build a road to Dirt Mulholland, an extension of Reseda Boulevard once envisioned as the "Reseda-to-the-Sea" highway. Environmentalists had already chained themselves to bulldozers; fistfights over traffic had broken out at community meetings.

We wrote up a 12-steps-based scope and got started, listening to dozens of people including not only neighbors but also environmental organizations, state wildlife biologists, and staff members handling transportation and land-use issues in Los Angeles.

Then we called the process to a halt. It hadn't taken us long to figure out that Mulholland Gateway Park wasn't a place but rather an unsuspecting witness to a 30-year battle to keep Los Angeles development from plowing its way west. Its four noncontiguous parcels were merely the indicator of something much bigger, more fundamental, and more ominous. We learned that extending Reseda Boulevard as required would open thousands of acres of then-unspoiled native mountain landscape to development. We also learned that lines in the sand had long since been drawn, with no room for compromise. There were no fresh ideas; there was no willingness—let alone interest—in coming together to plan cooperatively.

So we scrapped a neighborhood survey step and switched to science. In Runyon Canyon we had met two members of the conservancy board who were also locally renowned naturalists specializing in plants of the chaparral. They recommended we contact Paul Edelman (then a consultant, now the chief of natural resources and planning for the conservancy), who was puzzling through a proposal for a wildlife corridor program. We met Edelman on site; he showed us local habitat fragmentation and told us about recent mountain-lion sightings in and around the park. We learned that some

of the most innocuous-seeming land had valuable riparian and walnut plant communities and grassland. It was slated for development.

We expanded our field mapping. Then we held an in-house charrette, during which Big Wild was first imagined.

Our firm's policy is to hold a charrette among ourselves before we go public, to be sure we understand what we know and to establish a starting point for the place narrative. This is crucial for the fourth step in our process, called "Introducing the Community to Itself."⁴ This particular charrette was my first solo attempt at design: I was nervous, and I tried to avoid any form making. I outlined the large properties adjacent to the site but far beyond the scope of the project. Then I stopped. It dawned on me that I could erase the lines, because most of the parcels were publicly owned—they were just owned by different agencies. I was looking at the proper scale of analysis from a habitat perspective. It was just 20 times larger than what we had contracted to work on (Figure 5).

After the team discussed the idea of zooming out to an area of roughly 20,000 acres, it realized that the defense of this landscape-based strategy lay in the answers to two questions about mobility and the ecology of roads:

1. Would widening and extending Reseda Boulevard and paving Dirt Mulholland create enough capacity to alleviate cut-through traffic in nearby neighborhoods?
2. What would be the impact on wildlife of paving dirt roads?⁵

To answer these questions, we hired a transportation planner and a team of biologists from the University of California, Davis, Wildlife Resources Group. The traffic study confirmed that the neighborhoods affected by traffic had legitimate concerns. Two-thirds of the homes fronted on streets functioning as commute-hour shortcuts. Our consultant predicted, however, that extending Reseda and paving Dirt Mulholland would not solve the

problem; it would be only a matter of time before the new roads reached gridlock. This projected outlook was bleak for these residents.

Meanwhile, the biologists established that what we had started calling "Big Wild" provided an essential wildlife buffer from highly developed areas and protection from road-associated impacts. Using ground surveys, they identified pieces of habitat that a paved road would fragment but concluded that, as long as Dirt Mulholland remained unpaved, it would serve as a wildlife corridor, providing a connection to open spaces east of Interstate 405, west to Malibu, and north to the national forest. Calculating that Big Wild's mountain lions needed 640,000 acres of relatively remote land to sustain a healthy gene pool, we came to see this corridor as critical. In effect, we had to scale up our thinking again.

Compelling evidence for the argument against paved roads was not enough. There had to be political will to reverse the developer's requirement. Convincing the conservancy to increase the study area to 20,000 acres was not a problem, but we also had to wow the lay public with the power of Big Wild. Several steps were necessary.

First, we had to wrest control from the entrenched factions and open the debate to citizens of Los Angeles who had no known vested interest but who might support protecting this place for its recreational potential and natural resource values.

Second, we had to get everyone onto the land. Our Runyon Canyon experience told us that a site tour was the ticket, but covering 20,000 acres and inviting citizens unidentified beyond known stakeholders posed some challenges. We invited newspaper reporters for a preview; they wrote articles extolling the virtues of Big Wild and advertised the tour. We arranged for schoolbuses and one weekend drove 253 people to seven prescribed stops. Participants received a "score sheet" survey to fill out at each stop (Figure 6). They were asked to reflect on their most memorable wildlife experiences in LA, on whether they had ever driven through the neighborhood as a shortcut, and the like. The impact was overwhelming; people were excited. During the weekend

Stop Four

1. What do you think about trying to maintain this 16,000 acre area as urban wilderness?

2. Looking to the south over Rustic Canyon, what is your opinion of what should happen to this area?

3. Using the checklist below, please indicate what you would recommend for this section of the Santa Monica Mountains. (check all that apply)

- a ☐ this area should provide the user with a wilderness experience
- b ☐ we have to protect the Big Wild
- c ☐ Rustic, Sullivan and Mission Canyons should not be developed
- d ☐ this property should be developed for housing
- e ☐ this property should be used as a dump site



- f ☐ the State should buy these canyons to add to the urban wilderness if the County puts them up for sale
- g ☐ provide for low impact uses only; such as walking, hiking, bicycling and horseback riding
- h ☐ new multi-use trails should be developed
- i ☐ new single use trails should be developed
- j ☐ there should be marked, self-guided trails
- k ☐ no more trails should be developed
- l ☐ trails should connect to Topanga State Park and other public lands if possible
- m ☐ there should be docent or ranger-led hikes in this area
- n ☐ there should be motorized carts for rent for those who do not want to hike
- o ☐ a viewing spot should be developed in this location
- p ☐ I know something interesting about this area that should be shared with other park users:
- q ☐ other activities should be provided in this area for those who do not want to hike such as:
- r ☐ I am part of a group that has special open space needs and would use this area if there were:
- s ☐ don't do anything to it
- t ☐ don't tell anyone about it
- v ☐ other policy ideas:

Figure 6. A bus tour of Big Wild included a survey score sheet to focus the discussion while on site.

we heard comments such as “I’ve lived here all my life, and I never knew this existed” and “It’s like I’m a million miles from LA—this is fantastic.” The results of the survey were stunning:

Leave Corbin Canyon natural.	90%
Leave it [the whole area] natural.	90%
Preserve the wildlife corridors.	87%
This area should provide the user with a wilderness experience.	81%
We have to protect Big Wild.	81%
(CDBD 1991)	

We pressed on with our ever-evolving process. We introduced Big Wild and the findings of the traffic study to “the community,” by now an ad hoc collection of freshly minted participants and other stakeholders, and we held a community charrette to develop plan alternatives for the entire 20,000 acres. We presented a draft plan to the conservancy board, and the *Los Angeles Times* ran a long article announcing “‘Big Wild’ Access Plan Unveiled.” The idea was taking hold.

Then a funny thing happened. The city councilperson for the district, Marvin Braude, asked us to meet with him. To the meeting we brought a 20-foot-long, pastel rendering expressing our overarching ideas for the plan, not knowing they embodied the vision he had

for Los Angeles when he first ran for councilman in the 1960s (Figure 7). He was impressed but said we had overemphasized the preservation of the area for biodiversity. “You need to serve the broad public interest,” he admonished. Still, he was so taken with Big Wild that he was willing to reverse the developer’s requirement to extend Reseda Boulevard to Dirt Mulholland.

This put the project on a fast track. A state assemblyman looking for a local issue to position him for future election agreed to introduce a bill that would preempt the road requirement in a determination that Big Wild was of statewide significance. Dodging thinly veiled, last-minute attempts by developers to stop it in the California State Legislature, the governor signed AB1152 in 1991. Dirt Mulholland was retired as a road and became an unpaved trail. Two gateway parks were built at key Big Wild access points.⁶

In some ways, working on Big Wild was reminiscent of scenes from the movie *Chinatown*. On occasion we met with Edmiston in remote state facilities to talk strategy out of earshot. We made power maps tracking the mercurial politics. We convinced the conservancy to enjoin the road construction on Reseda, which it did at a press conference. At one point I staged a fit at a meeting with the developers, their lawyers, city representatives, and an attorney with the state attorney general’s office so as to put on record that the width of



Figure 7. Larger-than-life pastel renderings have facilitated big scale envisioning

the Reseda extension implied by the grading plan was that of a highway. The grading plan masked the city's intention to continue the road over the ridge, through a state park, and down to Sunset Boulevard. To solve a 30-year-old problem, we had to bump things up a scale and play it fast and loose, albeit while fundamentally grounded.

Wrapping My Arms Around a Watershed

In late 2002 we got another call from Edmiston: "It's time to get started on the river." The Los Angeles River, he meant. We took another of the by-then-familiar field trips of the area, during which Edmiston drove us around in circles and told us the political lay of the land. He knew the conservancy was missing opportunities to buy key urban lands but did not know where to begin. We wrote an open-ended scope loosely modeled on the Big Wild experience—it would adapt as we acquired the knowledge—and we got started.

That first day on the river was disorienting, just as the first year of our work on it proved to be. I would have been better prepared had I remembered my *Image of the City* (Lynch 1960). In the 1950s, while developing his ideas on place imaginability, Kevin Lynch (1960, 14–15) and his team tested them in Los Angeles. Through interviews they found that while the city generally seemed without a landmark-based identity to residents, the region had points of orientation that resonated:

When asked to describe or symbolize the city as a whole, the subjects used certain standard words: "spread-out," "spacious," "formless," "without centers." Los Angeles seemed to be hard to envision or conceptualize as a whole . . . But there was some evidence that orientation at the regional scale was not too difficult. The apparatus of regional orientation included the ocean, the mountains and hills . . . the valley regions . . . the major freeway and boulevard system. (Lynch 1960, 40–41)

The Los Angeles River, however, was not in their list of identifiers. And though we had worked in the region for more than 15 years and felt we knew well its geography, the river was not on our list either. The Los Angeles River is a concrete corridor often with little or no visible water. Indeed, it is a 51-mile flood-control channel running through an 834-square-mile urban watershed, a political concept with a spatial reality that, until recently, virtually no one has completely understood (Figure 8). I found all kinds of maps exhibiting the purview of various agencies but none delineating the natural lay of the river's landscape. To start, I taped together three AAA maps to figure out where we were working, and I bought the 2003 *Thomas Guide Los Angeles*, a 344-page document covering roughly 1,368 square miles (Rand McNally 2003). Its main appeal lies in the 8-inch × 10-inch map pages covering three-by-four-mile sections of Los Angeles in detail. Neither the AAA maps nor the *Thomas Guide* helped fix an image of the watershed



Figure 8. The Los Angeles River at the Narrows, looking upstream, with Griffith Park to the left (photograph courtesy Natalie Pollard).

in my mind. Mapping the river required crossing scales from the site specificity of the adjacent neighborhoods to the engineering of the river channel and its tributaries, to the entire watershed. “Getting meta” was a challenge (Thering 2007), but cartography was only part of it. Our normal mode was on-site investigation—impossible at that scale as it would have taken forever—and the natural factors layers of GIS data were not yet available. Existing planning documentation was voluminous for a few sub-areas of the river but thin in terms of the whole watershed.

Lucky for us, local scholarship on Los Angeles bloomed during this time. A significant portion of it grew from river advocacy, the absence of parks in certain neighborhoods, and the need for tenure. Though I met only a few of the authors of the works upon whom I came to rely, I felt they were all participants in our river planning in the same way that local people contribute native wisdom to small-scale projects (Hester 2006). Whether they knew it or not, we became indebted to Greg Hise, Bill Deverell, Blake Gumprecht, Mike Davis, Peter Harnik, and several local journalists (Davis 1992; Gumprecht 1999; Harnik 2000; Hise 1997; Hise and Deverell 2000; Morrison and Lamonica 2001; Price 2005).

The river owes Lewis MacAdams as well; I would not be talking about the Los Angeles River if not for him. From the time of his first attention-grabbing art installation in the river channel, he has been a tireless, generous, intelligent booster of the river. Several years ago I asked him, “How did you do it?” His prescription was deceptively simple: “You try to get everyone to see things that aren’t there and move forward as though they are realities” (2006). During the early years he wrote poetry about the river, and he too found the challenges of

the work required flexibility, as noted in his poem, “On Pennsylvania Ave” (in part):

After the endless supplications to the Senator,
the office rows of accordion files
are there to remind me that
after everything changes everything
is still the same, so why can’t I
be just a little less impatient?

... I set out to be a hero and
a legend, and ended up a lobbyist.

(MacAdams 2005)

KNOWING WHERE YOU ARE (OR AREN’T), WHERE YOU SHOULD (OR SHOULDN’T) BE

Lewis MacAdams also, in 1986, formed Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), which became the primary vehicle for pushing the river agenda. FoLAR’s theatrical politics have catalyzed other environmentalists, so that dozens of local organizations now claim a piece of the river action. These groups became the starting point for our listening when we began on the river. We interviewed more than 70 people, but this interview step differed from those on other Los Angeles projects. We did not interview many neighbors—our primary targets were agency representatives and environmental stakeholders. Most were not interested in sharing their long-held visions or in revealing their plans for future activities on the river—indeed one of the key listening findings was where *not* to work. These were not participants in a process of our making; rather they were wary defenders who wanted the conservancy to stay off their turf.



Figure 9. Birds, birders, and bird specialists were the key to linking Conservancy values to the Los Angeles River.

Getting traction on the river was daunting beyond the lack of good maps, real data, or a friendly community. The Los Angeles River watershed is just plain big. During its course from the mountains to the Pacific Ocean, eight major tributaries—the Burbank Western Channel, Pacoima Wash, Tujunga Wash, Verdugo Wash, the Arroyo Seco, Compton Creek, and Rio Hondo—feed the river. There are 22 lakes and numerous spreading grounds within the watershed boundaries. At last count it was home to 2,985,507 people in a region of nearly 10 million. The main stem alone is within a quarter of a mile of 109,429 citizens, and its “rivershed” constitutes nearly 17,000 acres.⁷ Given its location, the Los Angeles River rivershed is the place where the most people could be directly affected by the re-creation of nature in the city, which makes it the open-space opportunity of the next generation.

Its bigness and urbaness had mostly stumped the conservancy. Yet with the statewide need to simultaneously address urban open-space deficiencies, storm-water management, and water quality, it was high time for the region and therefore the conservancy to consider its agenda for the river strategically. The agency had been involved in river revitalization in the Glendale Narrows, Rio Hondo, and Tujunga Wash. The staff wanted us to start in the Narrows, where all manner of turf wars was underway. But we needed to work as planners envisioning the whole, not putting out fires. What was important to take forward from the Big Wild experience was the success of figuring out an operational scale and a

unit of decision making. We needed a unit that made sense from a habitat-protection, human-access, and agency-mandate point of view. By this time we understood that Los Angeles is a place continually envisioned and that in no place has this been truer than on the river.⁸ In envisioning the conservancy’s river agenda we knew we had to go back to the agency’s core values and reconfigure them. Wildlife corridors and nature parks had to mix in a new and snazzy way. We had, somehow, to connect large pieces of land in the mountains through the river. Yet finding a species to champion—one with habitat need and scientific legitimacy—was no easy feat. We ruled out creature after creature, seeing salmon as the obvious choice but recognizing the signs that this would never happen on the river. No one wanted mountain lions in schoolyards. Birds became the solution (Figure 9).

The Los Angeles River Urban Wildlife Refuge: A Vision for Parks, Habitat, and Urban Runoff is a plan for a wildlife refuge with the river as centerpiece (CDBD 2005a). The idea is that a refuge would connect existing, reclaimed, and new habitat from backyards, to neighborhoods, to urban cores, connecting corridors and eventually the Pacific Flyway. There are 444 bird species in the watershed so targets were important (Garrett 1993). With the help of bird experts (everyone from the local Audubon clubs to reservoir managers to ornithologists with the Los Angeles County Museum to consultants and nonprofit and public-agency wildlife specialists) and substantial existing research, we identified 24

imageable species, each linked to a key ecological habitat, from mountain ridge to river thalweg.

For example, in the listening process we learned that red-winged blackbirds nest in tiny wetland areas as small as an eighth of an acre. The birds were also found at some large open spaces, including Chatsworth Preserve and the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Refuge, in the upper watershed. While known to fly up to 50 miles in a day to forage, they traveled an average daily distance of 8.7 miles, with considerable gaps between sites. The birds needed only one connector or steppingstone between sites, however, to move from one large habitat patch on the river to another. Acquisition of a property along or close to the river for use as a small park or wetland could provide the filler and considerably increase red-winged blackbird access to other habitats in the region.⁹

We also had to break down the vastness of the river and give integrity to an intermediate, still abstract, but workable scale. An initial assessment determined 12 subunits along the main stem of the Los Angeles River, each with its own history, land uses, habitat structure, open-space and recreation needs, flood-control problems, and politics. Each unit had its own ecological position in the river and fluvial geomorphic characteristics, presenting various opportunities and challenges. Breaking the watershed into these units, we were able to show the conservancy how to match its resources to local conditions. A few kind, less-threatened souls encountered during the listening phase had pointed to the “low-hanging fruit” of the San Fernando Valley. This advice was a godsend as it allowed us to zoom in and test the key organizing principles. We regrouped.

We examined the San Fernando Valley at the neighborhood scale. Mindful of Marvin Braude’s admonishment during the Big Wild project, we realized that for an urban wildlife refuge to be successful in Los Angeles, residents had to believe that the river, wildlife, and nature were essential to the city’s quality of life. For residents to buy into a plan, opportunities for face-to-face engagement with the river and birds were necessary. We decided that the everyday environment, or

neighborhood, was the place to start; the basic premise of daily access to neighborhood nature was to be based on the 100-year-old planning standard—that within a quarter mile one should be able to walk to essential civic features such as parks, schools, and shopping (Perry 1929). Our research had revealed that only 30 percent of Los Angeles residents lived within walking distance of a park (Harnik 2000). Our survey of residents who lived adjacent to the northern portion of the river supported this statistic—only 29 percent of respondents indicated that the neighborhood park was the place where people met and socialized with neighbors. We believed that this pattern could change and that the river was the place to make it happen. If the average neighborhood had 2,000 residents, 20 acres of green space would meet national standards. Twenty acres of green was equivalent to creating neighborhood habitat through the redesign of one elementary schoolground, the greening of a big parking lot, and the creation of one small nature park. If the watershed held 105 neighborhoods, then we could increase the city’s local open-space holdings by 2,100 acres along the river.¹⁰

I zoomed in to examine the local opportunities and was surprised to learn that within the 834 square miles of watershed fewer than 100 parks lined the river or its tributaries. Further, Los Angeles is considered generally park poor with only 4.3 acres per 1,000 residents (Harnik 2000). To unearth potential park properties, my students at UC Berkeley and I used a field method I was developing at the time to conduct 23 river neighborhood studies over a period of three years (McNally 2002; CDBD 2006). We did detailed on-site analysis, census review, and neighborhood surveys and developed concepts for small parks along the river that would create opportunities for “green” flood control, improve water quality, and establish nature nearby. I took students to look carefully at urban rivers in Taipei and Kyoto to gain an understanding of how other cities dealt with multifunctioning waterways (McNally 2003, 2004; Kondolf and Yang 2008). In the office we made detailed plans for eight demonstration sites in the northwest reach of the watershed to create

a site-treatment typology for the conservancy, which we tested with a local landscape architect who specialized in riparian plant ecologies and with a green engineer (CDBD 2005b).

Testing and vetting design ideas, stormwater calculations, and habitat prescriptions was important because with 950,000 land parcels to choose from within the watershed, the agency had to set priorities to do so.¹¹ One immediate prospect was 4.6 acres of land next to the 101 freeway, owned by CalTrans. On the surface it was nasty looking, but in surveying it we learned residents walking their dogs or taking a stroll stopped to chat there because the neighborhood had no park or central gathering place. Our design included stormwater interceptors and highway runoff treatment spots that could double as neighborhood seating areas as well as walnut, sycamore, willow, and oaks for habitat. It meets almost 25 percent of the neighborhood's open-space needs. It was a prototype for use throughout the watershed's vast highway network.

NATURE AS PROTAGONIST?

It became clear as we worked on the river that the conservancy had a key role to play in filling the region's park needs. Still, we had to convince the federal government to become a partner in the refuge vision. This idea is not so far-fetched—in celebrating its 100-year anniversary, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service boasted a wildlife refuge within one hour of every city in the country (Butler 2003–2004). But there is not one in Los Angeles County. And a five-minute walk from any neighborhood in Los Angeles could give access to millions of residents to a properly implemented Los Angeles River refuge. The river, as it turns out, has become a symbol of the radical restructuring of the city socially and ecologically, giving Los Angeles a new identity at once local and regional.

If I were writing this article 10 years from now, perhaps it would have less to do with the mechanics of natural systems and be set more in the context of "rights to the city" literature (Sandercock 2000). Indeed, the restoration of the river will happen in neighborhoods

that are different than those of the mountains in terms of income, culture, family-life-cycle stage, recreation preferences, and needs. Stated more directly, with the county weighing in at 45 percent Latino and the city at 47 percent, open-space agencies must consider how to bind new open-space users to the new nature of the river.¹² This should not be difficult, as the Los Angeles Latino population is routinely the dominant voter in favor of open-space bonds and increasingly a citizenry courted by California open-space planners (California State Parks 2005).

Yet the challenge is a bit more subtle, as foretold by my discussion early in the process with James Rojas, a self-described Latino river advocate. We were talking about the soccer-fields-everywhere-or-bust agenda that one of the more vocal environmental justice organizations was pushing for riverside properties. My question:

The river is long, many of the neighborhoods abutting it are Latino, Latinos are underserved in Los Angeles from a parks-and-recreation point of view, and the city has no clue about current open-space needs. These things seem to add up to an opportunity to do something creative and unique along the river. Putting soccer fields everywhere sounds like recreational profiling to me. What do Latino people want?

His automatic response:

Beauty, nature, access, complexity, nuance, a place to picnic, food carts or vending stalls, a way to engage in environmental stewardship, places of cultural and historic importance, sports spots (formal or informal, either way), places to congregate, a place to play with water. Just don't give us any more of the Olmsted or English garden model (Rojas 2003).

Why the rap against Olmsted? At the time, I interpreted Rojas's comment to mean no more park agendas dictated by the dominant culture. Yet had the 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew plan for Los Angeles been implemented, there would have been neighborhood parks,

playgrounds, and recreation centers evenly distributed across the city (Hise and Deverell 2000). No speculation is necessary, however, as Rojas has written extensively on this topic:

The few parks [in East Los Angeles] that already exist are heavily used for family celebrations, *quinceanera* photographs, and active recreation. Many of these parks were designed at the turn of the century for sedentary and pensive activities and lack for these new facilities. . . . The cultural behavior patterns of Latinos render the city's current land-use practices out of time and out of place for protecting and promoting the well-being of community (Rojas 2006, 183–185).

There is a tremendous opportunity for the conservancy to take the lead in producing cutting-edge Latino open space, but open space and nature don't always equate.¹³ Which will the river be? It is becoming some of both. In Los Angeles, nature has often been the equalizer, the leading lady, the protagonist, as residents maintain a broad notion of it. Recently local writer Jenny Price wrote a funny essay about the nature of nature in Los Angeles. In her response to Bill McKibben's claim that "LA symbolizes the end of nature," Price wrote: "It actually boasts more wild corners than most cities . . . a patchwork of wild and not-wild" (Price 2005, 222–223). I remember thinking as I read this that Price and I shared this opinion. I think Los Angeles may be one of the top five places in the world to come to understand the experience of wild nature. To sight a soaring hawk while on an afternoon walk breaks down the bigness of a region and connects the backyard with the chaparral. The sight communicates across ethnicity and income. The hope for the future of the Los Angeles River is that this will coalesce the populace's sense of place as it takes its new form rather than further fragment it. Lynch's landmarks come home to roost.

A VISIT TO THE REFLECTING POOL

This special issue of *Landscape Journal* sets out to investigate design and planning approaches that consider

various scales of participatory problem-solving in social and ecological contexts over time (Thering 2007). The points of departure are Forsyth and Crewe's six seemingly mutually exclusive theories of practice (2004) and Stokols's model of transdisciplinary action research (2006). Setting our style of professional practice in the context of those who write about it, I would argue that in community design and planning you do what you have to do—it is proactive, borrowing (from other disciplines), participatory, political, and multi-modal (Francis 1999; Higgins and Duane 2008). In Los Angeles we worked on projects ranging in scale from 133 acres to 20,000 acres, then to 834 square miles. We had to connect the parts as we went up in scale, which broadened the vision. We were first hired to do small-scale community design, but over time the work became a form of *de facto* adaptive landscape planning which has been around for decades as a community development mode of practice; it originated in Paul Davidoff's advocacy planning model, which demands that the planning profession be flexible so as to serve the client well (1965).

Indeed, over our 20 years of working in Los Angeles, we have employed at least four—synthesis, landscape analysis, plural design, and ecological design—of Forsyth and Crewe's six approaches (the others being cultivated expression and spiritual landscapes). The result is the protection and re-creation of substantive urban nature accomplished through a blending of practices. Which piece of our process was the most useful to the work of the conservancy? Listening, because listening always is, as John Forester has repeatedly confirmed by documenting the political realities in planning (1989, 1999). Forester reminds us, "To listen well inevitably means to ask questions about deeper interests, future possibilities, and reformulations of the problems we seem to face" (1989, 109–110). Listening gave us a way to build community in Runyon Canyon. In Big Wild we figured out that the project was part of something bigger—both in the politics of development and in the new opportunities of landscape planning for large mammals. On the river, listening pointed us to terra incognita (the San Fernando Valley) where we could work

out the necessary 15- to 20-year vision and keep the conservancy out of the hair of other river advocates (at least for the time being). Through listening we recognized power and made it part of the process (Forester 1989). We made the principles of conservation biology part of the language of participatory park planning and brought the citizens and bureaucrats to communicate with us in these terms.

Implicit in community design is the assumption that things are small, intimate, and local. Yet as the challenges and opportunities scale up, landscape designers must search for the biggest framework for the myriad of actors and give them a meaningful role to play. In Los Angeles the communities were the informants and the scientists were the ground-truthers; the landscape provided the pieces, and we pushed beyond the scope to solve the puzzle. We relied heavily on local, place-based scholarship and prevailing wisdom about things as diverse as neighborhood planning norms and emergent soft-path stormwater management practices. Indeed, we consulted with the public constantly and creatively though the visions for these urban wilderness pieces were coauthored with our client, the conservancy. Early in the process, the agency understood the challenges and opportunities in conserving “urban wilderness,” long before others even contemplated what might have been dismissed as an oxymoron. This “species” of open space required its own metrics, which we established while the conservancy found legal instruments to acquire and manage lands, crossing necessary boundaries of scientific discipline and political jurisdiction in the process.

Design and planning work best when we can find the unit with which people identify, yet there is no question that increases in scale changes the level of intimacy between the designer and everyday people. We adapt our processes, and the tasks change. This is a lesson to take forward in the next decade of Los Angeles open-space planning, not only for community designers and academics but for advocates as well. The implementation of Los Angeles River visions is a pluralistic endeavor

that will continue to require considerable participatory process, likely at the local scale, with the people who live close by and the advocates of particular user and ecosystem interests. Nature affords this—it demands that we learn about it so that we participate in and design with it, whether in small, grounded pieces or in those more grandly imagined.

NOTES

1. Local legend (and many Hollywood tour books) has it that Errol Flynn once lived in Runyon Canyon. A friend of the owner of the Huntington Hartford, Flynn occasionally was an extended overnight guest.
2. We call these “scored walks,” invoking Lawrence Halprin’s RSVP Cycles, but they are really a marriage of his ideas about the participatory creative process, what David Orr might consider a proper educative experience (experiential and participatory), and Grady Clay’s cross-section method (Orr 1992; Halprin 2002; Clay 2003).
3. The term “nature maker” was coined by UC Berkeley PhD Georgia Silvera.
4. In this step, we shape the data collected through listening and fieldwork into a presentation that reframes the site, the issues, and the opportunities that allow us to develop a beginning design dialogue with participants.
5. We had in mind local terrestrial species such as bobcat, deer, badger, and mountain lion.
6. These two parks are described in detail in *Design for Ecological Democracy*: LA96C and Marvin Braude Mulholland Gateway Park (referred to in the book as “Reseda Ridge”) (Hester 2006, 66–75, 353–361).
7. The main stem of the river is defined by the 51-mile main channel and quarter-mile band on either side. Data courtesy of Ning Chen, University of Southern California, 2005.
8. The envisioning idea originally came from Mike Davis in *City of Quartz* (1992).
9. The habitat patch and steppingstone logic comes from Dramstad, Olson, and Forman in *Landscape Ecology* (1996) and our work in Taiwan on the Black-faced Spoonbill.
10. Seventeen thousand acres divided by 162.5 acres (an estimate for neighborhood size using the standard of the quarter-mile radius) yields about 105 neighborhoods, which if multiplied by 20 acres of green space per neighborhood yields 2,100 acres.

11. Statistic provided by Marc Shores of the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority.
12. Clearly there are many other ethnic groups to consider—in 1997 the City of Los Angeles conducted a recreation-needs survey in seven languages—but the Latino group is dominant. (Chan 2003).
13. The conservancy has had some success in this arena, not on the river but in nearby South Central Los Angeles. See *Design for Ecological Democracy* (Hester 2006, 315–323).

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