Local Government Reconsidered

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Connecting Community by Advocacy and Design

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The way we plan our cities and communicate to the public can build a sense of connection to public places. The Trust for Public Land estimates Los Angeles has just nine acres of parkland for every 1,000 residents, and that 52% of Los Angeles residents live within a ½ mile of that parkland[i]. While this falls between Washington D.C.'s 13.5 park acres and New York's 4.6, many of Los Angeles' park acres lie in large regional parks such as Griffith Park and Runyon Canyon Park, leaving much of the city park-poor. Recent research points to the importance of human connection to nature for physical and mental well-being.[ii] With already low ratios of park acreage to population, Los Angeles' struggle to build and maintain public places will grow as more people move to the city. As more people move to the city, there will be a greater need to find places where people can access parks and benefit from nature's restorative properties.

Our cities are under pressure to develop a meaningful public realm for growing populations. With limited funding, many cities are using local, state and federal stormwater grants to develop public parks. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, "Green infrastructure refers to natural vegetation, landscape design, and engineered techniques that retain, absorb, and often cleanse stormwater runoff.[iii]" By designing natural systems to treat stormwater, green infrastructure provides opportunities to increase tree canopy, increase riparian habitat, and connect people to nature in dense urban areas where little vegetation currently exists.

These green infrastructure projects provide a means to connect people to their built and natural urban environments while providing multiple ecological, economic, and human benefits. They help convey to the public the vital role of urban nature in improving community health and well-being. And they promise to increase the city's resilience in the face of ongoing drought and climate change.

This paper presents three projects by Los Angeles landscape architecture and urban design firm Mia Lehrer and Associates (MLA) that incorporate green infrastructure to connect people to public places at a variety of scales. *The Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan* is a 32-mile green infrastructure framework for the Los Angeles River within the boundaries of the City of Los Angeles. *Vista Hermosa Park* is a nine acre park (the first downtown Los Angeles park to be built in 100 years) that treats urban runoff, harvests rainwater to re-use as irrigation, and provides a "window to the mountains" for city dwellers to connect to nature. And the *South L.A. Wetlands* project is a lot-sized redevelopment of an industrial site into a constructed wetland to receive urban runoff.

Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan

The Los Angeles River is an example of grassroots advocacy efforts that evolved into participatory design strategies to create a green infrastructure framework in the 2007 Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP)[iv]. The planning and design process resulted in citizens across Los Angeles convening around a river that they had largely ignored for

decades. MLA had the privilege of collaborating with Civitas, Wenk Associates, and Tetra Tech for the City of Los Angeles on this project. In preparation for a change in the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System policy that mandated municipalities to treat urban runoff before entering our waterways, the LARRMP was initiated by a group of environmental leaders who understood the value of watershed planning.

The plan's goals included connecting communities and individuals to the river, improving water quality and flood storage, and creating a community planning framework. The master planning process included dozens of community meetings to gather local knowledge on issues and opportunities connected to the river. People in the design community and general public rallied around the river as a multi-benefit community asset, eventually advocating for the ambitious $1.4 billion implementation plan option known as "Alt 20."[v] By engaging the public during the outreach process, the design team was able to provide plan elements that spoke to specific community goals and fostered a deep sense of connection to the project.

MLA has also worked on several implemented projects along the Los Angeles River, including segments of the L.A. River Greenway Trail, the first phase of Marsh Street Stormwater Park, and Albion Riverside Park. Each of these projects treat stormwater before it enters the river, captures or retains flood water for infiltration or later use, and conserves water used in the landscape with native drought-adapted plants and trees. These projects coupled with decades of advocacy by Friends of the L.A. River and educational and recreational programs by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) have drawn the public's love for and use of the river far beyond the scope of the implemented work.

Vista Hermosa Park

Vista Hermosa Park was developed by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) in partnership with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) on LAUSD land after the construction of two schools on the northern edge of downtown Los Angeles. Opened in 2008, the 10.5 acre hillside park brought nature to a dense, park-poor, and largely working class part of the city. MLA worked with the clients and community members on the park programming and design and collaborated with KPFF Consulting Engineers on the stormwater management strategies. In order to minimize potable water use, the team limited lawn area and provided new options for play such as California wildlife-inspired concrete play sculptures, a decomposed granite area used for bocce ball and informal games, a rock-lined waterfall, and lots of shady places that attract all ages of children including teenagers. Through careful sculpting of the land, the park's meadows and native vegetation act as a nearly invisible urban runoff treatment system. A minimized lawn area provides places where people play and picnic surrounded by meadows and California native plants that conserve water and provide habitat for native birds and beneficial insects. A hidden cistern under a soccer field captures stormwater to reuse in irrigation.

The native plantings and nature education programming support the MRCA's vision for the park to be a "Window to the Mountains." The park provides a model of an efficient and highly functional landscape for the public to learn from, connect to nature, and connect to each other. Vista Hermosa's stunning views of downtown Los Angeles are the only reminder that this climate-appropriate landscape isn't in the remote mountains. In the context of the on-going drought and global climate change, Vista Hermosa provides an example of a dryer landscape to help change people's perception of what is beautiful. And integrating water quality and rainwater

harvesting functions into the park opened opportunities to plant riparian species in the bioswales and water collection basins. These plants provide an important habitat for bird, insect, and small animal species.

South L.A. Wetlands Park

South L.A. Wetlands Park is one more example in a series of green infrastructure projects that is helping to transform Los Angeles from a city that sheds water to a city that acts like a sponge. The nine acre park turned a former Metropolitan Transit Authority bus yard and brownfield into a constructed wetland that receives water from a storm drain. MLA worked with Psomas civil engineers for the City of Los Angeles on the park's landscape and interpretive design. By removing the impervious building and paving surfaces and replacing them with permeable materials and wetlands, the project mitigates the high volume of polluted urban stormwater running off the surrounding city streets by collecting trash and removing contaminants. The South L.A. Wetlands Park is adjacent to the new Dr. Maya Angelou Community High School in Los Angeles' South Park neighborhood. Educational signs tell the public about the city's largely lost riparian ecosystems and the functions they provide in absorbing, treating, and holding urban runoff. A wooden boardwalk around and through the park gives the community a walking and bicycling route with places to pull off for bird watching, photography, and respite.

Located in a park-poor and disadvantaged neighborhood, this urban park connects people to nature and to Los Angeles' lost riparian ecologies, to environmental issues by sharing information about local water issues and stormwater management strategies, and to each other by providing gathering and walking space. The city park was developed with funding from

Proposition O, a local bond measure to fund water quality projects up to $500 million, to protect public safety and meet the federal Clean Water Act regulations. In addition to water quality benefits, this park reduces the "heat island effect" where urban areas with abundant paved surfaces and rooftops are hotter than the surrounding suburban and rural areas. Water conservation efforts must consider reducing the heat island effect and conserving soil moisture through tree canopy and mulch as strategies in reducing potable water use in the landscape.

With more than half of the world's population now living in cities, urban environments are under increasing pressure to manage water use, water quality, air quality, flooding, and urban heat island while increasing public parks for growing populations. Available land for development or redevelopment must be used for projects that provide multiple benefits, especially as cities continue to struggle with low budgets. At the same time, aging and fragile single-purpose stormwater and energy infrastructures signal a shift towards smaller, overlapping, multi-purpose systems. Green infrastructure provides a means to meet local and federal clean water mandates while introducing urban nature and all of the ecological, economic, and human benefits that come with it. Los Angeles is an ideal case study for cities trying to meet the needs of its population while conserving water and improving access to parkland.

[i] Trust for Public Land. 2014. "City Park Facts."
https://www.tpl.org/sites/default/files/files_upload/2014_CityParkFacts.pdf
[ii] Louv, Richard. 2005. Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder. NY: Workman Publishing.
[iii] US EPA. "EPA Science Matters Newsletter: What is Green Infrastructure?" Accessed February 2016: http://www.epa.gov/water-research/epa-science-matters-newsletter-what-green-infrastructure
[iv] City of Los Angeles and US Army Corps of Engineers. 2007. Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan.
[v] US Army Corps of Engineers. 2013. "Los Angeles River Ecosystem Restoration Integrated Feasibility Report." September 2013.