

An aerial photograph of a city skyline, likely Minneapolis, Minnesota, featuring a river (the Mississippi) with a barge. The city buildings are visible in the background, and a large parking lot with many cars is in the foreground. The sky is blue with some clouds.

# ISSUE SIX : SPRING 2017

## OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI

# PROVOCATIONS

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is aerial view of University of Minnesota East and West Bank campuses and the Mississippi River. Photographer Patrick O’Leary. Image via University of Minnesota.

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# CONTENTS

## Introduction

Introduction to Issue Six

By Patrick Nunnally, Editor ..... 4

## Features

Forgotten Places and Radical Hope on Philadelphia’s Tidal Schuylkill River

By Bethany Wiggin..... 7

Making an Icon out of the Los Angeles River

By Tyler Huxtable ..... 21

The Lab on the River: The St. Anthony Falls Laboratory at the University of Minnesota

By Barbara Heitkamp ..... 37

Agriculture and the River: The University’s Role in Societal Learning, Innovation, and Action

By Nicholas R. Jordan, Carissa Schively Slotterback, David Mulla, and Len Kne ..... 61

## Primary Sources

“Playground of the People”? Mapping Racial Covenants in Twentieth-century Minneapolis

By Kirsten Delegard and Kevin Ehrman-Solberg ..... 72

## In Review

*One River*: Telling Stories of the St. Louis River

By Phyllis Mauch Messenger ..... 80

## Geographies

Observing the Water Landscape in German-speaking Countries

By Kristen Anderson ..... 85

## Teaching and Practice

What we Learned from the River

By Joseph Underhill ..... 101

## Perspectives

Community-Engagement and Loss

By Sara Axtell ..... 111

FEATURE

# MAKING AN ICON OUT OF THE LOS ANGELES RIVER

By Tyler Huxtable

Rivers have long been the spines of our greatest cities. Regardless of your geography prowess, you have no doubt heard of them—Thames, Seine, Potomac, Tiber, Ganges, Nile. These names

twist through our history and culture in ways that imitate their own billowing shapes. They feed our wells and our fields. They clean away our rubbish. They are the arteries of our civilization.



*Stretch of the Los Angeles River in the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Area. Image via Flickr, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Los Angeles District (CC BY-ND 2.0).*

The Los Angeles (LA) River once shared in this universal story, though few now remember it. Generations of Angelenos have grown up around a waterway they likely don't recognize and almost never discuss. Being out of the spotlight, however, has had hidden benefits: the river has become a playground for the quiet speculation of environmental theorists and urban architects. Beneath the hubbub of the city, local universities and scholars are mapping the river's value as a space of recreation and experimentation, and as a pillar of regional history. Whether by providing social science data, economic and health statistics, political support, or media outreach, professors and researchers at University of Southern California (USC), University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), California State University (CSU), and other local institutions are breaking important ground on giving the river renewed meaning for Angelenos. From past to present, they have kept the river's rich story alive, and now are helping draw it back into recognizable form.

## An Image Problem

You might classify this as an image problem. The last century has seen the LA River morph from organic to inorganic, from recognizable to obscure. What was once a free-flowing, earth-en-bordered, flood-prone snake has become a dry, angular trough that occasionally stars John Travolta. We've added barriers and channels, dams and miles of concrete. We've shoveled dirt over it. We've built bridges at right angles. We have even tried to cover it with a freeway. Any casual observer might wonder what contempt led Los Angeles to torture its namesake waterway so much.

The reason for this obscurity, according to many histories of the region, is flood control. William Mulholland, a loud and controversial figure in Southern California's late nineteenth-century agriculture boom, made supplying huge amounts

And yet, this behind-the-scenes activity raises a fair concern about the prominence of the river's identity. Ask Angelenos where the LA River is, and most would be hard-pressed to tell you. Indeed, some may find it news that there is an LA River at all. Ask the knowing among them where it is or what it looks like and they will mention something vague about a drag racing scene in the movie *Grease*. For those truly in the know, the river is, at best, a quirky feature that matches the artsy east end of downtown; at worst, it's an infamous graffiti pit near the even more infamous Skid Row. Area author and scholar Jenny Price fairly describes it as "the most famous forgotten river in the United States" (Price 2008). It would be unfair, however, to blame Angelenos for their ignorance or to blame Hollywood for co-opting the river's image, seeing as the loudest mention the river receives outside of oblique film representations is in fifth grade geography lessons. It is hardly a known landmark.

of water to the burgeoning Los Angeles Basin his magnum opus. A land speculator and self-fashioned engineer of grandiose ambitions, Mulholland oversaw the construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, which to this day slices a path from the Owens River Valley in the Sierra Nevada to join the Los Angeles River, a distance of some 250 miles (Mulholland 1928). Among other repercussions, such as the small-scale war between the residents of the Owens River Valley and Mulholland's crews, the engineering feat came with the drawback of exacerbating the river's periodic flooding. Following the completion of the Aqueduct in 1913, increased flow caused the river to dramatically change course several times, to the severe detriment of those who lived and labored along its banks trying to make something of the warm climate and rich floodplain soils. Crippling floods in 1914, 1916, and perhaps most

## ISSUE SIX : SPRING 2017

famously 1938 sealed the river's fate: public outrage and further engineering intrepidity (this time by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) led to numerous dams and, ultimately, a concrete-lined channel laid through the river's entire 51-mile course. And so the forefathers of modern Los Angeles beat the river back.

In spite of this disfigurement, the LA River has persisted. It quietly collects tributaries and flood washes as it runs eastward through the San Fernando Valley's southern edge, then veers southward through the Glendale Narrows, sweeps past downtown, merges with the more inland Rio Hondo, and from there makes an artificially straight shot toward Long Beach and the Pacific. During heavy rains and melt-off, the river rises to the borders of its dams and channels, but the

concrete prevents such swells from breaching borders, much less generating headlines. Despite speculation about the potential calamity of a 100-year flood, such flooding events have so far failed to materialize, even with the sustained rainfall of early 2017 and easing of drought conditions.

But now Los Angeles is undergoing a cultural and environmental revolution that has brought the river back to the forefront of city planning conversations. In part because of the much-discussed decline of LA's palm trees, the city is in a slow scramble for a new visual icon. And beyond just aesthetics, the city is in the middle of a broader cultural reinvention, aspiring to move past its global reputation as the capital of the film industry. Even today, Los Angeles is often synonymous with mid-twentieth century Hollywood and the



*Aerial view of downtown Los Angeles (rear) and the Los Angeles River in industrial South Los Angeles (foreground). Image via Flickr, Doc Searls (CC BY-SA 2.0).*



*Upstream view of the Los Angeles River channel above Butte Street Bridge during construction.  
Image via U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Los Angeles District.*

halcyon days of the silver screen, a bygone era that no longer captures the social and technological dynamism of the contemporary city.

Cycles of erasure and reinvention are by no means a new feature of metropolitan LA. Existing literature on the image and physical changes to the city is extensive, and beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, works such as those by Davis (1990), Klein (1997) and Ulin (2015) speak to the phenomenon of Los Angeles being reworked as both an idea and as a physical landscape. Today's reinvention might be seen as a culmination of their ideas of continual adaptation of the urban space. The changes happening today are hardly unforeseen.

The current effort to refocus the city's image has coalesced in many forms. Perhaps the most visible and ambitious of these is the [LA2050](#) initiative, a citywide master plan led by local government and volunteer groups with broad-strokes goals of improving the quality of life, technological capability, and creative output of Los Angeles by 2050. In subtler but no less important ways, scholarship and university-led initiatives, such as UCLA's Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies, are also deeply engaged in conversations about the city's shifting priorities and how to promote those priorities effectively. While we may grieve the passing of the palms as the end of a certain tropical, laid back "SoCal" identity, their demise also presents opportunity for initiatives



*Burbank Boulevard overpass, upstream from the Sepulveda Dam.  
Image courtesy of Tyler Huxtable.*



such as these to develop. Indeed, replacing the spindly palms should be seen more as a chance to remold the Los Angeles brand into something befitting the new millennium than a cause for anxiety.

So, why its namesake waterway?

In a word: simplicity. Simple symbols are easier to file away and recall at a moment's notice than complex ones. They require little investment and demand little brain space. Palms, for example, are simple, homogeneous, recognizable, perhaps even majestic in their own way. They say just enough about the climate and attitude of Los Angeles without bringing their own symbolic baggage. On the other hand, Tinseltown glamor, while undeniably powerful and graven in the city's very consciousness, isn't quite succinct enough to collectively represent a people, a climate, a way of life. Instead, a natural feature could be the most appropriate icon for a culturally transforming city. When we talk about the polluted Thames or the reddish heights of Ayers Rock, we instantly associate certain regions, peoples, and histories—the culture and the topography are woven together.

In that respect, the LA River's significance and symbolic potential are undeniable. The river already has the singular status of serving as the lifeline for one of the world's largest cities, a feat rendered even more impressive by the fact of the region's semi-arid climate. Looking toward the future, greater emphasis on the river's refreshing,

free-flowing waters would offer a much-needed about-face on current issues of public concern, such as water security, access to recreation, and environmental degradation. Reshaping the river from its current concrete-lined form into something greener and more citizen-friendly also offers powerful symbolic freedom from the city's Hollywood-focused past. This is where the promise lies for the LA River.

However, to be counted among the great metropolitan rivers of the world will not come without strict commitment and a steep price. A great deal of social and financial capital went into making the river what it is today, and a century of man-made alteration will not be easily undone.

One of the most ambitious and imminent projects is the City of Los Angeles and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' L.A. River Revitalization Master Plan (commonly known as Alternative 20) for an 11-mile stretch of the river from Griffith Park to downtown LA. Despite emphatic praise from LA's mayor Eric Garcetti and recent approval from the LA City Council, the approximate \$1 billion price tag threatens to strain the city's coffers and has cast some doubt over the feasibility of restoring the entire length of the river. Keeping in mind what the river once was, how it functions today, and how it can replenish the ecology and community of the Los Angeles Basin is crucial for the city's green-minded entry into the twenty-first century, but success in such an ambitious project only seems likely if approached sensibly.

## Wealthy in Ideas

This is where the region's universities and scholars come into play. As keepers of history and (simultaneously) vanguards of new intellectual movements, they possess unequal influence and ability to lead the charge. Beyond their obvious institutional clout, teachers of biology, sociology,

history, engineering and urban planning have not only the expertise to forecast problems and solutions, but they have also dedicated their professional lives to messaging ideas effectively. They are expertly positioned to ensure any



*LATC, Looking southeastward (Existing and Rendering of Proposed Restoration Measures).  
Images via U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Los Angeles River Ecosystem Restoration Final  
Integrated Feasibility Report.*

reinvention of the LA River takes all views and outcomes into account.

How to responsibly undo years of historical encumbrance and create something meaningful, utile, and emblematic will by no means be simple, but focused scholarship is laying the groundwork. Whether tapping into the psychological benefits of nature for urban dwellers or lobbying for better utilization of the river's flow, several scholars have already begun demonstrating the river's value as a space for exploration and community engagement.

One of their top concerns is how to make the river accessible for leisure. As a slew of recent studies have determined, leisure is more effective and therapeutic outside of the urban grid: outdoor recreation, hiking, and even just visual proximity to vegetation has been shown to exhibit a multitude of health benefits, as well as lowering morbidity rates from stress-related illnesses (Maas et al. 2009; Wolf and Flora 2010). A study by Swanwick et al. determined that linear green space—such as the kind specifically afforded by connected waterways and the paths that frequently line their edges—offer particularly positive health benefits for humans, in addition

## One Eye on the Past

To write the next chapter of the LA River's story requires that future development be congruous with the past. And, of course, incorporating the city's past—both the glorious bits and the less savory ones—into any new vision needs archivists familiar with the subject.

The Northridge campus of California State University hosts just such archives. CSUN's Oviatt Library hosts [Water Works](#), a series of digital collections of public and private records on the history of water in the San Fernando Valley (the original source of much of the LA River's

to establishing important ecological corridors and other environmental benefits (Swanwick, Dunnett, and Woolley 2003).

Rivers undoubtedly have an organic shape. As we now know, they also have an organic meaning. They represent the kind of disorderliness that is both antithetical to city construction and also fundamental to human health and happiness. We need wild spaces such as these to unwind, to be free. Likewise, wild spaces need some degree of freedom, too.

But giving the LA River a dramatic enough makeover to undo or obscure its grid-oriented confinements with earth and plants will be hard. After all, the urban structure of LA has been at odds with the river and the region's other natural features for the city's entire existence, and resituating the industry along the river's edges is largely off the table in current planning efforts. Though the river seemingly lost the battle with urbanization thanks to Mulholland and the determined engineers of the early twentieth century, scholars have not lost sight of its growth potential. There's still flowing water, so it's still a river at heart.

flow), including the documents of Catherine Rose Mulholland (Mr. Mulholland's granddaughter) and other officials involved in local water management. These archives track why water architects of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries made the decisions they did as well as the evidence and goals that drove those decisions.

UCLA also maintains the [Los Angeles Aqueduct Digital Platform](#), which hosts digital records of primary sources (official letters, relevant newspaper clippings, etc.) relating to the construction and impact of the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

## ISSUE SIX : SPRING 2017

Reviewing these kinds of records allows us not only to understand the concerns that spurred the builders of the past to action, but might also reveal new findings—discernable only in retrospect—that benefit future planning.

Lucky as we are to have preserved records of early modern history and the visions that led to our current incarnation of the river, we are less fortunate with primary sources of the river's pre-industrial past. Helen Hunt Jackson, somewhat of a celebrity regional historian and travel writer in the mid-nineteenth century, paints a helpful picture of the river sans concrete

in her 1883 catalogue of the region: “In those days the soft, rolling, treeless hills and valleys, between which the Los Angeles River now takes its shilly-shallying course seaward, were forest slopes and meadows, with lakes great and small. This abundance of trees, with shining waters playing among them, added to the limitless bloom of the plains and the splendor of the snow-topped mountains, must have made the whole region indeed a paradise” (Jackson 1907, 164).

Jackson's edenic floodplain is now a metropolis of more than four million people, and yet she reminds us of the grand possibilities of our own



*The first stop in Play the LA River: The confluence of Arroyo Calabasas (left) and Bell Creek (right) in Canoga Park, which form the headwaters of the Los Angeles River. The Canoga Park High School athletic field sits just above the confluence, and walking paths line the banks downstream. Image courtesy of Tyler Huxtable.*

landscape, even if it cannot look exactly like hers. Her portrait of the river, seemingly at odds with the fear of it that inspired the city's forefathers, is sublime. If we heed past triumphs and missteps,

the portrait we create will be awe-inspiring, too. This is the reason the river can be emblematic of a new Los Angeles.

## Current Capacity

Finding the paradise Jackson described in today's LA River has become a passion for some residents and scholars. Though land resources along the river's length have not always been easy to come by due to industrial densification, a little ingenuity has gone a long way in getting communities to come together along the river's banks.

One example, Project 51, is spearheaded by a group of academics, artists and strategizers—some local, some not—who intend to make the river more accessible and enjoyable in its current state. One of the collective's signature initiatives, Play the LA River, encourages recreation along the river at specified hotspots. Under the conceit of being a playable card deck, each "card" in Play the LA River suggests activities, picnic spots, biking and walking paths, parking and public transit access, playgrounds, sports fields, and photo opportunities—a great amount of suggestions that take away our excuses for staying home on a slow weekend. For those wary of the concrete-dominated or industrial segments of the river, or for those hunting for a true nature experience, the cards even have a sliding scale indicating the greenness (from "gritty" to "green") of each locale. Projects such as these promote the playful and exploratory potential of existing riparian infrastructure, even if the suggested activities are not the kind you might envision with "spending a day on the water."

Other friendly guides for taking advantage of the river's existing recreational opportunities are the

LA River Greenway Guide, published by UCLA's Luskin Center for Innovation, and a collection of maps and events by Friends of the LA River, a non-profit organization that encourages proper stewardship, planning, and re-vegetation. One of the most startling things these projects reveal is that there are indeed ways to use nearly all of the 51-mile stretch if we only apply a little imagination.

Guides such as these hone in on a key point: by boosting the river's exposure, they generate public interest, and the forgotten river creeps closer and closer toward the foreground of public concern. Politicians and their ilk have often lackluster talking points about water projects, but self-driven recreation leaves positive, organic impressions in people's minds that are hard to beat.

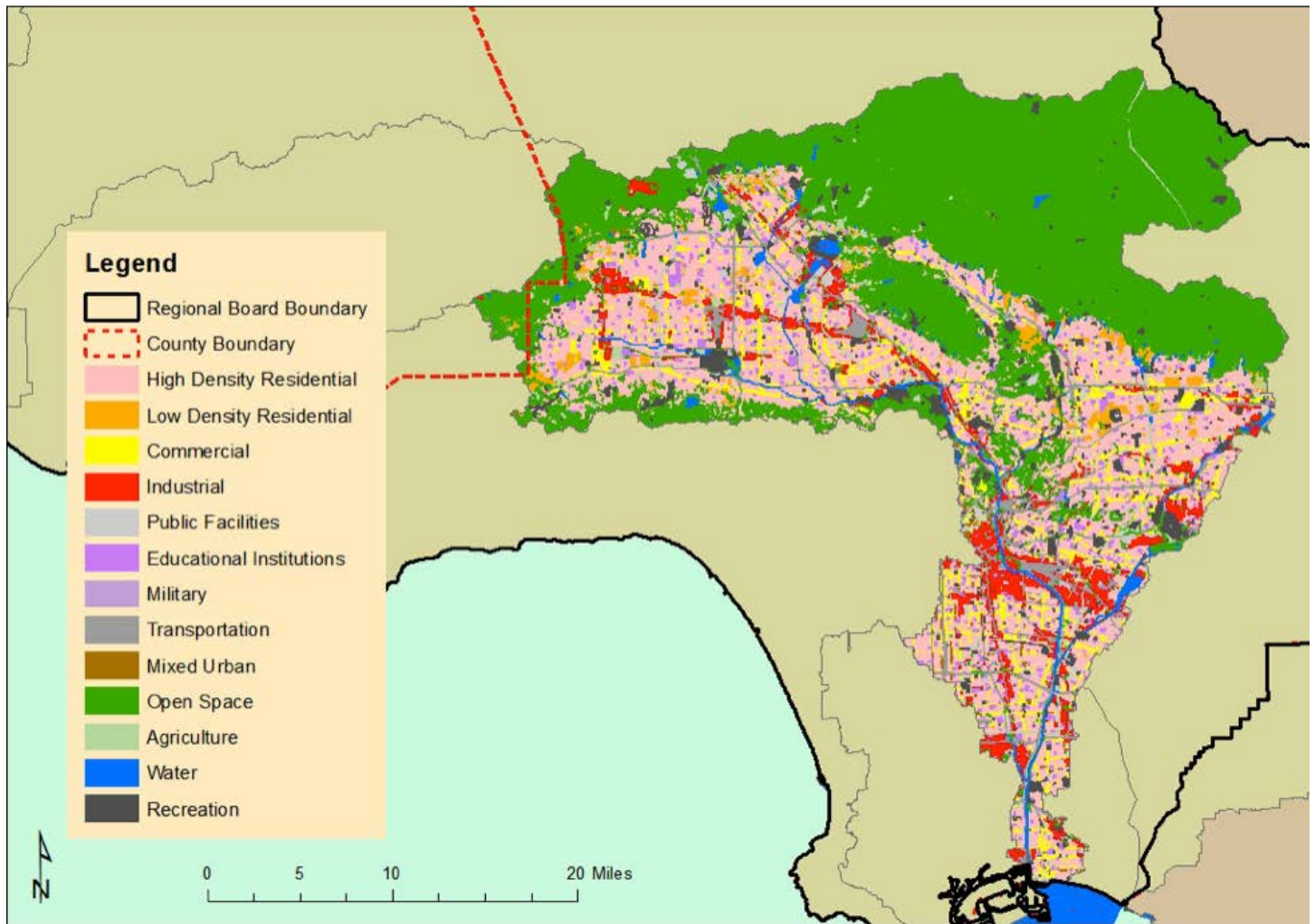
Circling back to the iconography of Los Angeles, leaving a positive imprint in the minds of community members is perhaps the surest way to reinvent the space without a rigorous physical overhaul. In some ways, a purely mental re-imagining has advantages even over recreating a natural river: it doesn't require a huge investment of capital and there's no construction downtime. We can use the river as-is as a platform for our own self-created adventures. In this way, like the palms, the river can be a low-cost symbol that represents the imagination and pioneering spirit of Angelenos.

# A Way Forward

This is not to say that we should halt investment and simply make do with the river in its current form; with an energized populace, much more than that is possible. And, thankfully, bold plans are in the works.

Local universities and scholars are laying the groundwork for the next major steps of redevelopment—analyzing impacts, modeling plans, scrutinizing land use, and mocking up great visions for the city. To say that all local universities are passionate in this quest is no hyperbole. A short-list of departments with active interests in

restoration planning are: UCLA’s Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, and its constituent organizations like the La Kretz Center for California Conservation Science; CSUN’s Center for Urban Water Resilience; Loyola Marymount’s Center for Urban Resilience; and the USC School of Architecture and its affiliated entities like the Landscape Morphologies Lab. There are of course countless other institutions and departments with hands in the effort, a testament to the incredible complexity of the issue.



*Land use in the Los Angeles River Watershed.  
Image via Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board.*

Scholars have even prominently weighed in on the aforementioned U.S. Army Corps of Engineers redevelopment plan currently underway. Paul Habibi, a professor in the UCLA Anderson School of Management, authored a report for the Los Angeles Business Council offering strategies for community development around the restored river. His report, “LA’s Next Frontier”, outlines the trajectory of demographic shifts in neighborhoods along the river and presents plans for mixed-use workforce housing in those spaces that are currently dedicated to heavy industry. Aside from economic and mobility considerations, Habibi emphasizes the importance of access to parks and the health benefits of reclaiming the river for community use. As Habibi notes, the river cuts through an intricate pattern of land zoning, most being high-density residential, commercial, and industrial. Much of the infrastructure along these stretches is likely to change with the progression of the Army Corps’ project, and the report offers planners a first impression for how to cope with transportation volume and population changes. These kinds of analyses are paramount to creating something that is smart for all stakeholders.

As Habibi observes, new understanding of the benefits of urban green space is quite possibly the

most effective case for restructuring land around the river. He puts the anthropocentric benefits front and center. In a recent article, several scholars at the University of Southern California corroborate this view, even going a step further in calling LA a “living laboratory” for evaluating the efficacy of river restoration in adapting human-built spaces to climate change. They highlight that urban landscape architecture and water resource management (chiefly of the LA River) have profound implications on the city’s ability to cope with long-term water scarcity and sea-level rise. A city that is in many regards none too bio-friendly at present has the opportunity to redefine what real-world environmentalism looks like. Even with strictly human-centered, survivalist motivations, these authors build a weighty case for just such a large-scale endeavor.

Along these lines, Jenny Price asserts, “what’s happening on the banks of the L.A. River ... responds to the twenty years of critiques of environmentalism and offers us a powerful articulation for our once and future environmentalism” (Price 2008). This undertaking clearly has ramifications for more than just the river itself: it is a trial for how we effectively build on our past to orient our cities and ourselves toward a coming change.

## The Value of Clear Messaging

If the tumultuous history of Mulholland and his friends has taught us anything, it is that such a transition will not come easily, nor will it succeed without massive public support and insistence. How we interpret our own role in the river project—that is, what’s at stake for us personally and locally—is clearly not a negligible consideration. The movement to gather and harness community energy around the project is perhaps in a more nascent stage than the engineering or political aspects of it, but is nonetheless under way, and

here again universities and scholars are at the forefront.

One organization tackling the messaging aspects of environmental projects like the LA River is the Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies (LENS), a constituent of the UCLA Institute of Environment and Sustainability. Founding faculty member and UCLA Professor of English Allison Carruth defines the role of LENS as “not just a public relations vehicle. It is a substantive space for engagement, for action, for

coalition building.” As part of a broader mission to invigorate a collective consciousness about environmental issues, groups like LENS can function as springboards for the kind of dialogue and action the LA River project needs.

We might think of initiatives like Play the LA River (of which Carruth also happens to be a founding contributor) as precursors to the types of innovative conversations LENS fosters. Of the impetus behind Play the LA River and, more generally, cultivating public curiosity, Carruth explains, “We realized we had to approach it in an almost preposterous way. Play crosses boundaries of age, ethnicity, class, profession, and even language as a way of bringing people together. One cannot underestimate play as a form of strategic communication.” Though Play the LA River was not a LENS project (it was designed several years prior to the conception of LENS), it laid some of the groundwork for the types of projects that groups like LENS can build on. Tapping into novel or underutilized aspects of public engagement, media, and even psychology is how organizations like LENS can promote effective, intersectional forms of discourse.

Jon Christensen, another founding faculty associate of LENS, believes messaging strategies are not only a paramount concern of the redevelopment matter, but a particular strength of the academic community. As he explains, students and professors are already operating on a range of media to

create awareness of the river project, including partnering with television news, radio shows, and even podcasts. Online publications, including *Open Rivers*, are very much part of that effort. As Christensen explains, scholars have the opportunity—and duty—to amplify discourse around the river in such a way that it is productive, fact-based, and, most of all, organic. “What we’re really interested in is the power of storytelling, and how to tell stories while being faithful to fact and rigorous research. Numbers are numbing, but stories stick.” Make no mistake: employing big data, spatial mapping, and analytical tools is an easily identifiable strength of many geography departments. However, leveraging those tools in such a way that they buttress the wealth of community stories around the river project is a newer objective that merits our attention. This objective lies at the heart of groups like LENS.

It is worth reiterating that the efforts and aims of LENS and other similar groups are still malleable. This newness is not a liability, but rather an asset, a way to cast a net for stories, ideas, and approaches that have not yet been heard or articulated effectively. As Christensen explains, while acknowledging that the movement is still in its formative stages, our focus should be on providing tools and a voice for a diverse set of storytellers about the river so that we may better understand the stakes and scope of the project. “We might think of this as one story,” he says, “but there are many different stories.”

## Conclusion

The efforts underway to reshape today’s LA River and our thinking about it are nothing short of a renaissance. From keeping history to promoting positive experiences to blending old and new landscapes, the academic community has shown that it will be a vocal force in the river’s narrative.

It bears repeating that all of these efforts work in concert: history advises our path forward and warns us of missteps; exploration and storytelling make the cause mean something to us personally; and development planning has us look toward the future together.



## ISSUE SIX : SPRING 2017

And what legacy will these efforts bring?

Intuitively, river revitalization has positive yields for our community and our environment, with the added benefit of sounding spectacularly forward-thinking. Watching a natural resource be resuscitated and then flourish has obvious attraction, a sort of atavistic pleasure. Fulfilling the mantra of leaving the place better off than we found it would seem to make charity our legacy—charity to our children, or to our neighbors, or maybe even to ourselves. That is a noble goal.

On paper, however, our starry-eyed visions often seem muted. Reality too often has this effect.

In striving to make something great, we ought to be willing to accept what is possible for our river today with the resources and knowledge we currently possess. Will we be able to peel back all 51 miles of concrete? Or convert all the factories and warehouses to parks? Probably not. And it probably would not be productive to do so. Despite striving for authenticity in our vision, we may have to settle for some inauthenticity, and tread a middle path. We have to respect the purpose the river serves now, in addition to what it might do in the future. And that is also a noble goal. That kind of detente is valuable too.



*Looking east toward the De Soto Avenue Bridge, Winnetka. Image courtesy of Tyler Huxtable.*

The goal, after all, is not to replace outright, nor to re-dredge in pursuit of a historical mirage, but instead to restore luster, to blend the gray past with the green future. Los Angeles, with its weighty, gilded reputation, doesn't need a wholly new image. It is already a great city. What it needs, rather, is a new direction. The many groups and projects interested in the river offer

ways to address past wrongs and emerge stronger, cleaner, more unified. This is truly how the river can be emblematic of a new Los Angeles.

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## About the Author

Tyler Huxtable works with the Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies (LENS), a faculty and student research incubator within the UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability which explores new modes of storytelling, communications, and media in the service of environmental conservation and equity. Tyler serves as the managing editor for *LENS Magazine*, the group's signature publication, and is concerned with amplifying stories of environment, biodiversity, and community in the Greater Los Angeles Area.