

design



Abstract and Concrete

*In Los Angeles, a park creates
an abstraction of an abused river.*

BY KIM SORVIG

Assignment: Design a park to interpret the Los Angeles River, “the most endangered river in America,” a 52-mile drainage ditch that was once the whole reason for Los Angeles’s existence.

Goal: Educate the urban population that historically has abused and ignored the river.

Site: A one-acre parcel, 750 feet from the river, across from the old rail center at Taylor Yards. Surrounded by freeways, Metro rail, and aging shops and residences, the site is both too small and too distant from the river for real restoration.

Strategy: Do you simulate a part of the river, miniaturize the whole river, put up explanatory exhibits, or create an abstract expression? Do you focus on the healthy past, the dubious and ugly present, or the possible future?

The Los Angeles River Park, which won an award in 2001 from ASLA’s Southern California chapter, reflects some unique interpretive choices by Calvin Abe, ASLA (Abe

Associates, Los Angeles, pronounced ah-bay). Instead of idealizing the river as it once was (or as it should be), his design abstracts both the relatively intact natural systems of its headwaters and the vast concrete ditches of its urban reaches. His design highlights important questions about what it means to interpret nature through constructed landscapes.

The River Park was commissioned by one of Los Angeles’s most effective conservation organizations, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC). The park is part of the grounds of SMMC’s Los Angeles River Center, a Spanish-style compound that was once the headquarters of Lawry’s Spices. Lawry’s 1992 merger left the buildings empty and the neighborhood short 600 jobs. Home Depot’s offer to buy the site promised jobs but threatened beloved buildings. A compromise split the

Once Los Angeles’s reason for existence, the L.A. River today, left, is bleak, dangerous, its natural origins long forgotten. Abe’s abstraction, above, suggests channelization conceptually, but no garden could evoke the emotional reality of this terrifying transformation.

