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.

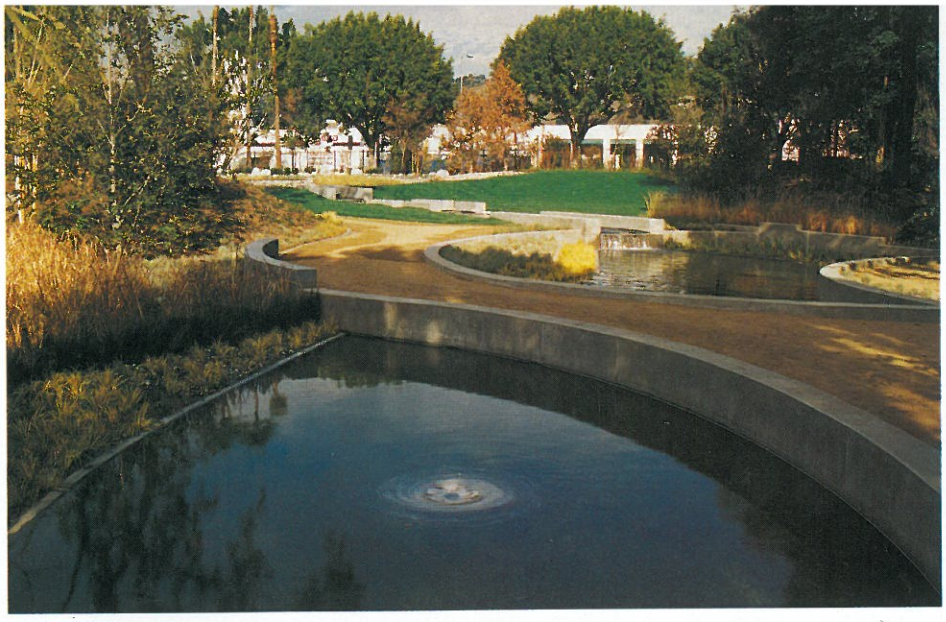
Strategy: Do you simulate a part of the river, miniaturize the whole river, put up explanatory exhibits, or create an abstract expression? Do you focus on the healthy past, the dubious and ugly present, or the possible future?

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.

PRASHANT GUPTA, ABOVE; PHOTO COPYRIGHT RICHARD RISEMBERG, BELOW



site, with Home Depot on the less-developed half. SMMC bought the rest, set up its offices, and now rents space to other nonprofit groups.

Government funding to buy the site required dedicating part as a public park, according to Kathleen Bullard, Director of the River Center. Bullard is one of five SMMC landscape architects and served as project manager for the construction—by SMMC crews—of Abe's design. Two other SMMC landscape architects, Cara McLane and Lisa Soghor, worked on the River Park's construction, while Stephanie Landregan (see *Landscape Architecture,* April 2002, "The Wilds of South Central," about another SMMC park) helped design a river history exhibit inside the River Center.

In 1999, SMMC invited the Los Angeles ASLA chapter to do a conceptual design charrette for the park. "Everybody gravitated toward telling the river's story," says participant Steve Lang (Purkiss Rose RSI, Los Angeles). Together, charrette members Lang, Bullard, Abe, and others sketched a watercourse that mapped the geographic shape of the river, complemented by native plants—a design honored as part of ASLA's "100 Years, 100 Parks" exhibit at the 1999 national convention in Boston.

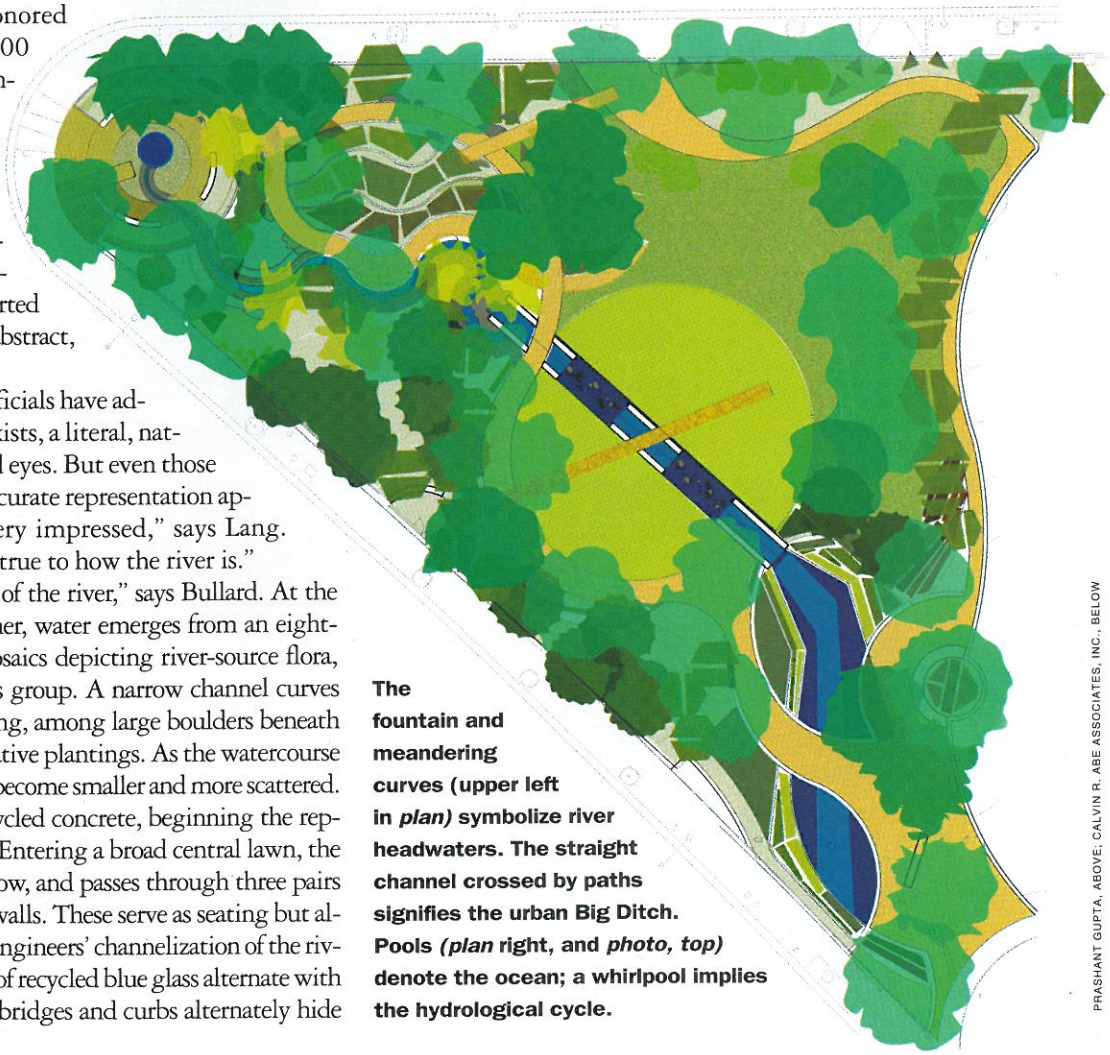
When Abe subsequently won the bid to develop and build the park, he kept the concept but abstracted the form. "I had no interest in redoing the natural landscape," says Abe. "I made a concerted effort to interpret the river in an abstract, conceptual way."

In a city where even public officials have admitted not knowing the river exists, a literal, naturalistic map could have opened eyes. But even those who favored a geographically accurate representation appreciate Abe's design. "I'm very impressed," says Lang. "Calvin stylized it, but it's still true to how the river is."

Abe's design is "a microcosm of the river," says Bullard. At the site's uppermost, northwest corner, water emerges from an eight-foot-wide disk covered with mosaics depicting river-source flora, designed by Artshare, a city arts group. A narrow channel curves through irregular flagstone paving, among large boulders beneath existing mature trees and new native plantings. As the watercourse descends, the surrounding rocks become smaller and more scattered.

Some "rocks" are actually recycled concrete, beginning the representation of urban conditions. Entering a broad central lawn, the channel becomes wide and shallow, and passes through three pairs of massive rectangular concrete walls. These serve as seating but also represent the Army Corps of Engineers' channelization of the river (see sidebar, page 38). Pebbles of recycled blue glass alternate with river stones in the channel. Footbridges and curbs alternately hide and reveal the channel, as overpasses and fences do the real river. Decorative grasses, planted in grid patterns, represent vegetation that volunteers in cracks of the river's concrete lining. Rented for weddings and functions, the lawn and concrete seat walls are heavily used by the public, says Soghor.

Reaching the bottom of the site, the water enters a pool lined with green glass pebbles representing the ocean at Long Beach. Here the recirculation system creates a deliberate vortex, symbolizing the hydrological cycle.



The fountain and meandering curves (upper left in *plan)* symbolize river headwaters. The straight channel crossed by paths signifies the urban Big Ditch. Pools *(plan* right, and *photo, top)* denote the ocean; a whirlpool implies the hydrological cycle.

PRASHANT GUPTA, ABOVE; CALVIN R. ABE ASSOCIATES, INC., BELOW

Other symbolic parallels cropped up unexpectedly. Hidden toxic soil from paint dumping "gave us a few tense days" during construction, says Bullard, observing that industrial dumping plagues the real river, too. McLane notes the invasion of sycamore seedlings in a bed "where all our shrubs basically failed. If you want to get esoteric," she laughs, "that's Mother Nature telling us we can't plan everything."

Using water features as interpretive stand-ins for rivers is not new. For example, the Memphis Riverwalk is a one-inch-to-one-mile topographic model, in concrete, of the entire lower Mississippi. In another approach, used by Campbell Okuma Perkins at Albuquerque Botanic Gardens, an artificial stream paralleling the Rio Grande serves not as a model of the river but as a timeline of cultures along its valley.

Abe, who is known for designs that integrate paradoxical opposites ("Beyond a Single Layer," *Landscape Architecture,* January 1998), used the microcosm concept very inclusively. He stylized the natural features of the headwaters and the engineered chasms of the urban area, representing neither "accurately," both artistically.

There are really three types of abstraction in Abe's design. The wandering upper channel abstracts the complex fractal geometry of natural rivers (see sidebar, page 40) by simplifying and miniaturizing. Abstracting the engineered channel meant reducing its scale without really simplifying its geometry. Finally, the ocean pond, the vortex, and the colored glass pebbles are symbolic, intellectual abstractions whose shapes bear little or no physical relation to what they represent.

Thinking critically about abstraction is essential to good interpretive design, but seldom easy. It is tempting, for example, to call the Memphis Riverwalk "naturalistic" because it portrays the real shape and topography of the river. Yet it is all concrete, with conventionalized stepped contours surrounded by pretty gardens unrelated to riverside vegetation. The Albuquerque design might seem strictly "symbolic," yet its stream is aligned accurately to the real river, its timeline paralleling the river's current.

Abe is clearly not afraid of such paradoxes. Several interviewees struggled to categorize the River Park, while others were perhaps too glib. One published review calls the mosaic fountain "an idyllic scene of Spritzer Falls' [the river's source] riparian environment." Yet the fountain area is dominated by perfect circles—symbolic of wholeness but extremely rare in the fractal forms of natural watercourses. One person commented that "a naturalistic design would have hearkened only to the past," yet much of the park's planting layout is naturalistic. The stark concrete seat walls are very much in the Modernist/Postmodernist vocabulary; yet what they really represent is the rigidly ideal geometry of engineering. Scaled down as benches, these shapes cannot convey the terrifying vastness of steep-sided, 40-foot-deep ditches that every year cause drownings in the Los Angeles River. To state, as Kathleen Bullard has been quoted, that "Abe's design says built forms can be beautiful" oversimplifies the vexed relationships between human engineering and the nonhuman world. As Bullard also says, the river today is "an engineering triumph and an environmental tragedy."

The ways people use this park make it clear that Abe has given a multilayered interpretation of his subject. One example is that, for volunteers who sample and record water quality in the real river, SMMC offers training—scooping samples from the park's simulated watercourse. Abe's abstract channel is "real" enough for practice, and the sand-filtered, unchlorinated water even tests like the "reclaimed water" that makes up 80 percent of the real river's flow.

The Los Angeles River's Life and Death

No small park (or short article) can convey the full complexity of a river's history. The Los Angeles River's story is fascinating and illuminates issues of design interpretation. For delightfully written details, try geographer Blake Gumprecht's "Who Killed the Los Angeles River?" (See Resources.)

When the Spanish founded El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora de Los Angeles in 1769, they followed the good judgment of the valley's native people whose chief settlement, Yangna, stood near the riverbank about two miles south of today's River Park. The Spanish reported "a very spacious valley, well grown with cottonwoods and alders, among which ran a beautiful river." They recognized the valley's fertility, exclaiming over "vineyard[s] of wild grapes," "an infinity of rosebushes in full bloom," and vast estuarine marshes. They also saw beyond this lushness. Unlike later immigrants, the Spaniards and Mexicans understood arid lands. Noting the tributary dry wash of Arroyo Seco, and large uprooted trees along the riverbanks, they knew what to expect of this typical desert river: seasonally varying flow, from dry-season trickle to torrential floods November through May.

For 100 years, the river was Los Angeles's only water supply, both domestic and agricultural. The 1800s, however, brought railroads and heavily promoted development. Eastern and midwestern Anglo immigrants, says Gumprecht, respected neither the low-flow trickle nor the river's capacity to flood and change course. For them, the Los Angeles River was simply a resource. To provide water for a booming population and an agricultural export industry, they first diverted the entire surface flow, then pumped the river's groundwater. Having created a river that was dry except when it flooded, they demanded flood control—and got a ditch lined with three million barrels of concrete. (A 1930 plan by F. L. Olmsted and colleagues would have protected the river but was shelved. See Resources.) To defend increasingly valuable property like Beverly Hills (once marshland), flood control channels rushed stormwater away at perilous riptide speeds. The empty channel also became a dump; annual cleanup averages 30 tons of refuse. In 1904, some 24,000 cubic feet of dumped tar mimicked the famous La Brea Tarpits, swallowing livestock. One interpretive-minded politician suggested painting the whole channel blue.

"The Los Angeles River is probably best known these days," writes Gumprecht, "as a place where Hollywood films high-speed car chases. The river's smooth, paved bed looks so much like a roadway, in fact, that every few years some politician or planner actually suggests that it be turned into one as a way of relieving some of Southern California's legendary traffic congestion."

This raises an intriguing question for interpretive designers who symbolically abstract the complex shapes of real rivers into regular curves and straights. If a river can become a road—wider, flatter, faster—at the hands of engineers and their abstract geometries, when does similar geometry in the service of style falsify what it interprets? As the River Park shows, the answer is anything but simple.

A circular fountain, regularly curving channel, floral mosaics, and carefully jointed irregular-shaped flagstones symbolize nature, although their forms are gardenesque. *Below,* at the symbolic junction of nature and city, recycled concrete lines the channel.

On the park's opening day, McLane noticed the four-year-old daughter of a staff member playing in the water. Looking closer, she saw the girl was carefully picking out blue glass pebbles, washed down among the green "ocean" glass. These recycled materials, says Abe, represent hope for healing the urban environment. Wading upstream, the girl replaced them among the other blue ones. For this youngster at least, the River Park wasn't about nature versus engineering, or symbolism versus realism—just about putting things back how they belong. **LA**

Kim Sorvig (University of New Mexico, Albuquerque) writes often on interpretive landscapes, including To Heal Kent State *(Worldview Press, 2000);* Linguistics & the "Language" of Design *(Lincoln University Press, New Zealand, 1996), and* Relocating History: Landscapes of Living History Museums *(forthcoming).*

PROJECT CREDITS

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RESOURCES

www.amrivers.org. Home page of conservation group American Rivers.

PRASHANT GUPTA

The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth (Johns Hopkins, 1999), by Blake Gumprecht, Department of Geography, University of South Carolina.

"Who Killed the Los Angeles River?" by Blake Gumprecht. Excerpted online at *www.cla.sc.edu/geog/facstaff/gumprecht.html.* Forthcoming (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002) in *Land of Sunshine: The Environmental History of Greater Los Angeles,* William Deverell & Greg Hise, editors.

Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region (U. Calif, 2000). Greg Hise & William Deverell; afterword by Laurie Olin.

The Fractal Geometry of Nature (WH Freeman, 1983) is a good introduction to the work of Benoit Mandelbrot, with major implications for landscape design theory.

Thinking about Abstraction

Rivers, trees, and other forms created by growth or erosion are mathematically considered "fractal shapes," an important term for interpretive designers. Fractals appear irregular but can be repeatedly subdivided, with each part being a scaled-down copy of the whole. The term was coined by mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot (see Resources).

When most designers speak of "abstract" forms, they mean idealized Euclidean geometry such as squares, circles, and triangles. Many interesting artistic attempts have been made to abstract natural forms into compositions of Euclidean shapes. Taken to extremes, like the child's lollipop-shaped tree, Euclidean abstractions become disembodied symbols that no longer convey any of the tangible living processes reflected by fractal forms. Euclidean abstractions, the signature of Modernism, still dominate design today.

Stylization generalizes natural forms to fit an artistic convention—for example, Art Nouveau floral wallpaper is highly stylized but not exclusively Euclidean. The upper portion of Abe's River Park is stylized; the lower parts are Euclidean abstractions. Combining both approaches is what makes the design unusual.