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THE STATE

Changing's River's Course

A Greenbelt vs. Warehouses

October 03, 1999 | Lewis MacAdams and Robert Gottlieb | Lewis MacAdams is chairman of the board of Friends of the Los Angeles River, which will co-host, with Occidental College, a year-long series of programs called "Re-Envisioning the Los Angeles River." Robert Gottlieb is professor of urban and environmental policy at Occidental

For more than 50 years, the Los Angeles River has been little more than a concrete sewer. Today, opportunities have begun to multiply to remake this concrete channel into new community spaces and a home for vegetation and wildlife. This re-envisioning of the river imagines parks, bike paths, community gardens and mini-greenbelts on its banks, sometimes spontaneously created by community residents, sometimes by groups like NorthEast Trees, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, the California Coastal Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land. But what about the riverfront communities themselves? Re-envisioning the river ultimately becomes an occasion for deciding who defines the community and the river, and on what terms. A battleground has been identified.

For more than a century, Chinatown has been L.A.'s stepchild. At times in the city's history, developers and speculators coveting their land have forced Chinese residents to move again and again. The uprooting of Chinatown to build Union Station in the 1930s and the community's forced march north to relocate along Broadway were the most recent of such moves.

Today's Chinatown is at the northern end of downtown, bordering the Los Angeles River at the edge of the old Southern Pacific rail yards. It is perhaps the quintessential urban concrete land mass. Chinatown's one elementary school is overcrowded; it has no green space in its schoolyard and only planter blocks for gardens. There are no middle schools or high schools. The only park in the community is the postage-stamp-sized Alpine Recreation Center, yet density is three times the county average.

This unofficial policy of not-so-benign neglect has had predictable results. Better-off families have moved east to Alhambra and Monterey Park or west across the Pasadena Freeway. According to a Chinatown business survey conducted last year by the Chinatown Service Center, the number of businesses and manufacturing firms has decreased over the past two years. Wholesale and service sectors have declined as well.

For more than a century, the land--approximately 50 acres between North Broadway and Spring Street just south of the L.A. River--forming Chinatown's eastern border has been occupied by railroad yards. It was formerly called the Cornfield to commemorate the agriculture that thrived there, before the railroads and the channelization of the river. The yards have been shut down for a decade. The tracks are long gone. Neither open space nor community space, the Cornfield, or what L.A. River development advocates call Chinatown Yards, is a community asset waiting to be captured.

Beginning in the late 1980s, a number of planning efforts targeted the yards for rehabilitation. The Central City North plan, prepared in 1989 by the city Planning Department, identified the railroad yards and the lands surrounding it as the site for a mixed-use urban neighborhood, with housing, a middle school and commercial, retail and light-industrial uses. The 1984 Downtown Plan proposed mixed-use housing for the site. The 1992-93 Downtown Strategic Plan recommended that 12,000 dwelling units be built on Chinatown Yards and the land surrounding it.

In January and February 1998, Friends of the Los Angeles River explored possible uses for Chinatown Yards. Dozens of Chinatown residents gathered at Castelar Elementary School to discuss the future of the yards, including the community's relationship to the river. Their ideas were drawn up by a team of architects, landscape architects and urban planners.

The Chinatown Yards proposal, partly inspired by San Antonio's famed River Walk, the largest tourist attraction in Texas, called for a mixed-use development centered on a small lake created by diverting and storing water from the Los Angeles River. The lake and an adjacent park, which would serve as playing fields for a proposed middle school, would also function as a detention basin to protect low-lying areas of downtown from the threat of a flood. The project features multifamily housing on a slope along North Broadway overlooking the proposed park. The last lap of the L.A. River commuter bikeway, which connects the San Fernando Valley with Union Station, would run through it. Mixed-use commercial and industrial development would anchor the property's east side. The redevelopment would be connected to Chinatown by extending roads that now end at Broadway.

Sources of financing included the Federal Emergency Management Administration and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, for the lake and park, and L.A. Unified, for the school. Increasingly, state money is flowing toward the river, as restoration of the Los Angeles River has gained advocates across California. Unfortunately, all these plans to improve Chinatown and the central city may go for naught.

For some developers, the land adjacent to the river has always been seen in the narrowest of development terms. Majestic Realty, a firm owned by Edward P. Roski Jr., is one such developer. Working stealthily and ignoring previous planning strategies, Majestic is in escrow to buy the property and has announced its intention to cover the site with tilt-up industrial warehouses and manufacturing facilities. Roski is the junior partner, with Union Pacific owner Philip F. Anschutz, in the new Staples arena. With a little help from the mayor's office, the developers and deal makers have orchestrated the capture of federal funds of up to \$11.75 million in grants and loan guarantees "to help the developer," as a Majestic official puts it.

Two scenarios; two different ways to envision the river; two different ways to relate to the community. One imagines a virtual greenbelt that could stretch from the San Gabriel Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, with communities participating in the greening of the banks of the L.A. River. The other sees warehouses and trucks and an industrial landscape that could come straight out of "Repo Man."

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"The recycling of the Chinatown yards is the kind of opportunity that comes along only once in a century," says architect Arthur Golding, a vice president of the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council who has been working on central-city planning issues for more than decade." If it gets filled up with warehouses and the community's own input is ignored, that opportunity, it is clear, will be lost. *