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Public life in cities, a value at the heart of RELM's practice, doesn't occur by happenstance.

Primary forces shape daily interactions. *Interplay* is an online journal investigating landscape architecture's role in city making and the overlapping sphere of influence our profession has on contemporary life. Centered around four key themes of people, urban form, urban nature, and culture, we will showcase the tectonics behind public life and the built environment, as they unfold in Los Angeles and beyond.

Editor's Letter

What would Los Angeles be without its storied weather? Imagine if sunshine and beaches gave way to snow and a discernible winter season. Would the city still enjoy the same stature as the prized northern capitals of Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Tokyo? In RELM's inaugural issue of *Interplay*, we investigate the state of Los Angeles' urban fabric, a key quality to any vibrant metropolis. We posit the importance a quality public realm exerts on the branded experience of a city and discuss the successes and shortcomings of LA's extensive development boom. Are current efforts, likely to be unseen again for another century, yielding a world-class metropolis that keeps us competitive as a livable city?

It's a complicated analysis and naturally, as landscape architecture practitioners, we approach the question with an inherent bias. Reconciling the degradation of our streets with pockets of urban life is a milieu of promise and heartache. While there are instances celebrating landscape as destination, the primacy of urban nature and the role it plays in meeting the city's aspirations regarding urban form, the environment, equity, and mobility continues to be underutilized. *Interplay's* inaugural issue looks at what changes can be made to realize a verdant city of the future, drawing parallels to the catalytic public works projects of 17th century Paris that today, remain a gold standard for urban design and placemaking.

"Prior to the seventeenth century, the most celebrated European city was one famous for its past... [Rome]...Then, in the seventeenth century, a new model for urban space and urban life was invented, a blueprint for all great cities to come."

Joan DeJean

How Paris Became Paris



Image by Dorinser

Verdant Pleasure

Practicing landscape architecture in Los Angeles, arguably one of the most prominent global cities of the world currently, requires both imagination and fortitude. Without question, the city is rightfully being recognized as a more social metropolis, shedding outdated stereotypes around cars and sprawl. Values regarding walkability, affordability, ecology, and the arts are penning a new LA story. Given the number of public and private initiatives transforming Los Angeles (from the Green New Deal, Los Angeles' Sustainability City pLAN, to the \$1 Billion Lucas Museum of Narrative Arts), we thought it prudent to pause and reflect whether the plethora of concurrent efforts are realizing synergistic impact? Is Los Angeles meaningfully addressing a long neglected public realm that make cities great—connected, inclusive, and beautiful?

The consensus among both our studio and social circles was mixed. All recognize the Southland is becoming more urban. People regularly occupy the streets and gather in outdoor spaces. Mixed-use villages peppered throughout the LA Basin successfully co-locate living, work, play, and entertainment. Respondents however, were less hopeful in the collective outcome these individual undertakings are rendering on Los Angeles' urban fabric. Frustrations regarding process, maintenance, silos, budgets, and a lack of champions were cited as impeding LA's full potential (in addition to housing and wage disparity, not addressed here given their magnitude and complexities). RELM began asking what can be done to ensure the projected \$200 billion investment in Los Angeles made over the next 2 generations is impactful. How have other cities created a sustained, thriving metropolis and pivoted from good to great? One answer was profoundly simple: 'a bridge.'

The Pont Neuf was never merely a bridge: it was the place where Paris first became Paris.

In her historical account, *How Paris Became*



(Renoir, *Pont Neuf*, 1872, National Gallery of Art)

Paris: The Invention of the Modern City, author Joan DeJean asserts, "The Pont Neuf was never merely a bridge: it was the place where Paris first became Paris."¹ Her compelling analysis outlines the synergistic effect public works—and visionary leaders behind them—had on Paris, illustrating how physical form engenders city, culture, and brand.

According to DeJean, the first critical transformation that brought the French capital into the modern era was the design and final commissioning of the Pont Neuf by Henri IV in 1603 following the Wars of Religion. "The sidewalks on the Pont Neuf were the first the modern world had seen; they introduced Europeans to the idea of separating foot and vehicular traffic."² The result was a more inclusive city. Street life burgeoned. "Since everyone from princes to paupers crossed paths on the bridge, Parisians thus got their first real taste of an experience that touched the inhabitants of other European capitals only decades later: close physical contact with strangers, in particular with individuals completely outside their social sphere."³ Social diversity flourished due to a piece of needed civic infrastructure, seen as "both a tourist attraction and source of civic pride."⁴

The first purpose-built public recreational space in any European capital...[the Place Royal became] an immense outdoor living room where Parisians could enjoy their leisure time together.

The second regenerative undertaking was the creation the Place Royale, a 202,500 square foot recreational open space. Unlike previous classical forums or renaissance piazzas, the landscape was commissioned to give Parisians a place to gather and play. "Built on a scale that until then had been reserved for royal palaces, the Place Royale was conceived as a palatial public space, open in some measure to all the city's inhabitants and designed for their enjoyment and their recreation...It was the first purpose-built public recreational space in any European capital...[and became] an immense outdoor living room where Parisians could enjoy their leisure time together."⁵

DeJean's cultural assessment, discerned through writings, paintings, and historical accounts show the impact that the built form has on a society; on a brand narrative. "All through the seventeenth century, every time its cityscape was redesigned in an important way, Paris benefited from what would now be called a rebranding campaign. In a continuous stream of publications and images, writers and artists publicized the city's transformation from urban ruin to urban wonder and advertised the city as destination, the epitome of a sophisticated, cosmopolitan place."⁶

Both the Pont Neuf and Place Royale were commissioned by Henri IV. In 1660, some forty years after their unveiling, Louis XIV began commissioning more public works. Under his rule, Paris became

an 'open city' as fortifications gave way to grand boulevards. "The king had the fortifications [from years of war] replaced with parallel rows of elms... to serve as a 'cours,' a gigantic walkway or space for communal walking—more than one hundred and twenty feet wide... By 1700, Paris had become the original great walking city, a place where people walked not just to get around but for pleasure."⁷ Streets became seminal in how Parisians and tourists alike experienced and celebrated the city. Streets were decreed to be designed wider. They were decreed to be verdant and truly be places for people. Louis XIV then commissioned the Tuileries Gardens which connected to the Cours-la-Reine (today known as the Champs Élysées). "The Tuileries became the first truly public Parisian garden and the prototype for public gardens all

over Europe."⁸ Concurrently, streetlights were invented and private industry spearheaded "two revolutionary urban technologies—public mail and public transportation."⁹ By the end of the 17th century, Paris had reconceived its urban realm and become a modern, connected city. Public and private investment worked synergistically to benefit people, commerce, and culture. "...the phenomena that developed on the new boulevards of nineteenth-century Paris and that are seen as inherently Parisian experiences—department stores and omnibuses, café culture and bright lights—all first became available to Parisians and visitors in the seventeenth's century's final years...."¹⁰

Paris' transformation from ruin to wonder after the Wars of Religion can serve as a model of how the

By 1700, Paris had become the original great walking city, a place where people walked not just to get around but for pleasure.



Image by Edward Berthelot

City of Angeles can harness investment—and vision—to elevate its built form, culture, and brand. Public works, urban nature, and the role of the pedestrian revolutionized Parisian culture and urban design. Let's make this true of Los Angeles. RELM posits three actions city leaders can take to render equivalent lasting transformation:

- 1. Codifying public realm best practices
- 2. Designating landscape as critical infrastructure
- 3. Empowering civic champions

**CODIFYING PUBLIC REALM
BEST PRACTICES**

Public realm improvements throughout LA continue to be anemic in comparison to the volume of new and re-adapted building stock. At scale, we are missing the opportunity to harness the synergistic benefits when development, nature, and infrastructure goals are realized concurrently. Los Angeles has no open space master plan (a lamentable truth). And while the Planning Department has led robust efforts to comprehensively update many community plans, they don't go far enough to ensure the character and quality of open space between buildings is impactful and beautiful. Plans adroitly fail to link urban nature to redevelopment. Without such a mandate, our city's public realm will continue to languish.

Of course, Los Angeles isn't alone in this. Prioritizing urban nature is a paradigm shift for many parts of the world. But other cities have—and are—tackling policy definition more thoughtfully, realizing a better quality of life. NYC is perhaps the best American precedent codifying open space requirements in development. Starting in 1961, they adopted POPS (privately-owned, public open space) legislation offering incentives to developers for greater FAR or waivers in return for publicly accessible space, be it a plaza, arcade, and other outdoor and indoor spaces. To date, over 590 POPS have collectively rendered more than 99 acres of communal space (roughly the equivalent to ten Bryant Parks in NYC or 9 Grand Parks in Los Angeles). That's an astonishing amount of open space inserted into a city, even one as large as Los Angeles. POPS are catalytic because they are dispersed. A January 2020 report published by the UK Government's Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission cites, "evidence also suggests that greenery has the most beneficial consequences when it is 'little and often,' when you encounter it frequently throughout your daily life....people will frequently go to an open space if it is less than 2-3 blocks away but very sharply less frequently if it is further away than that."¹¹

RELM champions these types of granular landscapes. They amplify the enjoyment and health of city dwellers by contiguously linking home, work, and play. They compellingly insert green space into the urban form, which is vitally important given the infill focus of the LA Basin.

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However, definition of what makes these types of spaces successful is needed. Again, we just need to look to NYC. "Just as bad law produced bad spaces...better law produced better spaces."¹² A comprehensive study of NYC POPS commissions was undertaken in 2000 by Harvard University professor and Advocates for Privately Owned Public Space founder Jerold S. Kayden, in collaboration with the New York City Department of City Planning and the Municipal Art Society of New York. Two major conclusions were found. First, "although the zoning deals produced an impressive quantity of public space, they failed to yield a similarly impressive quality of public space." Second, "a significant number of owners illegally privatized their public spaces."¹³ Beginning in the 1970s, "City officials adopted zoning amendments that placed greater demands on POPS, including requirements for seating, landscaping, bike racks, drinking fountains, and identification plaques. Not surprisingly, use and enjoyment of spaces produced under these 'heightened' rules increased significantly. The enhancement of standards continued through the administration of Amanda Burden in the Department of City Planning, with new rules introduced for public plazas in 2007 and 2009."¹⁴

Los Angeles needs parameters codifying a quality public realm. They are necessary. Policy transformed NYC and policy is urgently needed here. Our current POPs legislation, as stipulated in DTLA 2040, outlines several provisions in exchange for greater FAR including the transfer



Zuccotti Park - NYC POPS



Image by Dorinser

of development rights, the provision of more affordable housing in residential projects, or the provision of community facilities such as childcare centers, libraries, schools, government or non-profit clinics, and social service centers. No one will deny the importance of more housing given the current crisis, nor the availability of community services. However, this menu does little to adequately reinforce the inherent value the public realm serves nor does it ensure accessibility. The study's second concluding observation is cautionary: nearly 50% of all POPS fell out of compliance. "Locked gates would prevent public access during hours when the space was required to be open. A building representative would incorrectly inform the public that the space was for tenant use only. Required public restrooms would be declared off-limits to all but tenants."¹⁵ Similar to NYC, we need to incentivize developers to do the right thing and collectively render an urban realm that benefits all. Tom Balsley, a highly respected practicing landscape architect based in New York, notes the importance of these types of landscapes. "[In the 1970s], in NYC's fiscal environment with no funding for new public spaces, these plazas were an extraordinary opportunity to create public space in the city, and engage the private residential and commercial development sector and the department of city planning in a design dialogue to find common ground with the public's interest at heart."¹⁶

**OUR BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND
OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
BELONG TOGETHER. BOTH
SHOULD BE PROTECTED AND
ENHANCED FOR THE LONG-TERM
BENEFIT OF THE COMMUNITIES
THAT DEPEND ON THEM.**

Mandating public interest into policy, that lifts access to community, nature, beauty, and environmental performance, for all, is what our planning efforts should standardize. "Our built environment and our natural environment belong together. Both should be protected and enhanced for the long-term benefit of the communities that depend on them."¹⁷ The space between buildings is arguably Los Angeles' greatest civic, social, and infrastructural asset. These spaces welcome community. These spaces provide shade and urban canopy (not to mention street character). These spaces are what's going to offset climate change through natural systems and as Paris illustrates, create beauty, pleasure, and contribute to brand image. The public realm is as much about public health

as it is about public image and public life and if Los Angeles wants to remain a leading cultural city, attenuating the deficit of our urban fabric needs immediate attention. It's going to take the Mayor's office to dictate such parameters.

**DESIGNATING LANDSCAPE AS
CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

"One beautifully simple action that municipal leaders can take to reduce both extreme heat and air pollution: plant more trees....They provide habitat for wildlife, reduce storm-water runoff, and sequester carbon from the atmosphere, which helps mitigate climate change," states the World Economic Forum. They go on to note, "There is also a growing body of research showing that exposure to trees and other vegetation has a positive effect on mental health, especially for children. All of the co-benefits speak to the wisdom of greater investments in trees and urban green infrastructure such as parks and rain gardens."¹⁸

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Urban nature can no longer be deemed optional and/or ornamental. Our streets, our parks, our plazas are highly critical city assets that beneficially help resolve a host of issues pressing Los Angeles (and the world at large). 17th century Paris understood this. The actions of both Henry IV and Louis XIV propelled the City of Lights to iconic stature by marrying public works with urban nature, including public rights of way. That same ethos and edict coupling the built form with natural systems needs to be the charge for Los Angeles. Full stop, we cannot meet the sustainability targets set by Mayor Garcetti (and the Paris accords) without deeming landscape as critical infrastructure. "Trees can cool cities by 2C and 8C. When planted near buildings, trees can cut air conditioning use by 30%, and according to the UN Urban Forestry office, reduce heating energy use by a further 20-25%. One large tree can absorb 150kg of carbon dioxide a year, as well as filter some of the airborne pollutants, including fine particulates."¹⁹ Trees matter.

Tree planting at a city scale needs coordination.

They need to be cited in strategic locations to be most beneficial and when planted in the public rights of way, they offer a one-two punch. Trees offer the environmental benefits as stated above as well as play the hero role in meeting another stated city target: reducing single occupancy trips/miles which curtail greenhouse emissions. By 2035, Garcetti targets 50% of all journeys be on foot, bike, micro-transit or using public transit.²⁰ If Los Angeles is serious in realizing high adoption rates for alternative modes of transit—from ped to bike to public transit—the visual and physical integrity of our streets must be a primary focus. Physical form directly corresponds to physical activity. Bikers and walkers and riders of public transit want streets and transit stops/plazas that are inviting, safe, and shaded. Measure M, a \$2 billion infrastructure

spending bill, will not succeed if we don't prioritize corridor design. As we are currently seeing with declining LA Metro ridership numbers, expanding transit lines alone is not the answer in resolving congestion. LA needs to invest in, and maintain, distinguished and safe streetscapes for multi-modal adoption to flourish. Which is why, as landscape practitioners, we find the current corridor approval process maddening and counter-productive.

LA has the largest municipal street network of any street system in America, comprising 18% of our city's land mass.²¹ "Our streets consist of more than just asphalt and pavement. They are where people come together to experience art, performances, and special events. Creating safe, accessible, and welcoming public spaces for our communities

speaks to the importance of this initiative—and our role in transforming LA's streets into vibrant centers for all to enjoy," states Vince Bertoni, Director of City Planning.²² And yet public rights of way in Los Angeles woefully fall short of being 'places for people.' Transformative design is entirely handicapped because of current code and funding mechanisms, and arguably, a unified vision amongst the bureaus who oversee street design and maintenance (which are many including the BOE, DOT, BoSAN and BSS). All govern by risk. We are failing due to fear of litigation and not coalescing around public health, safety, and imagination. What's more, limitations of agency jurisdiction often curtails progressive design. Take the Bureau of Street Services' (StreetsLA) Urban Forestry Department for example. By name, they are responsible for maintaining and growing

LA's urban tree canopy. Yet they have no ability to irrigate street trees, only prune and remove them. The City of Los Angeles does not water street trees and landscape elements in sidewalks or medians. Only plantings in bioswales, falling under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Sanitation (BoSan), are irrigated. Effectively, current code bifurcates the value of landscape. In the case of bioswales used to treat stormwater, LA places a priority to fund and maintain living systems. Tragically however, all other instances of landscape in the public right of way—used to shade, pollinate, increase property value, beautify, and make walking, biking and public transit common place—are viewed as ornamental and regarded as a liability, not an asset. The goals and timelines stated in the Green New Deal reinforce this duality. Stormwater is prioritized. By 2020, the

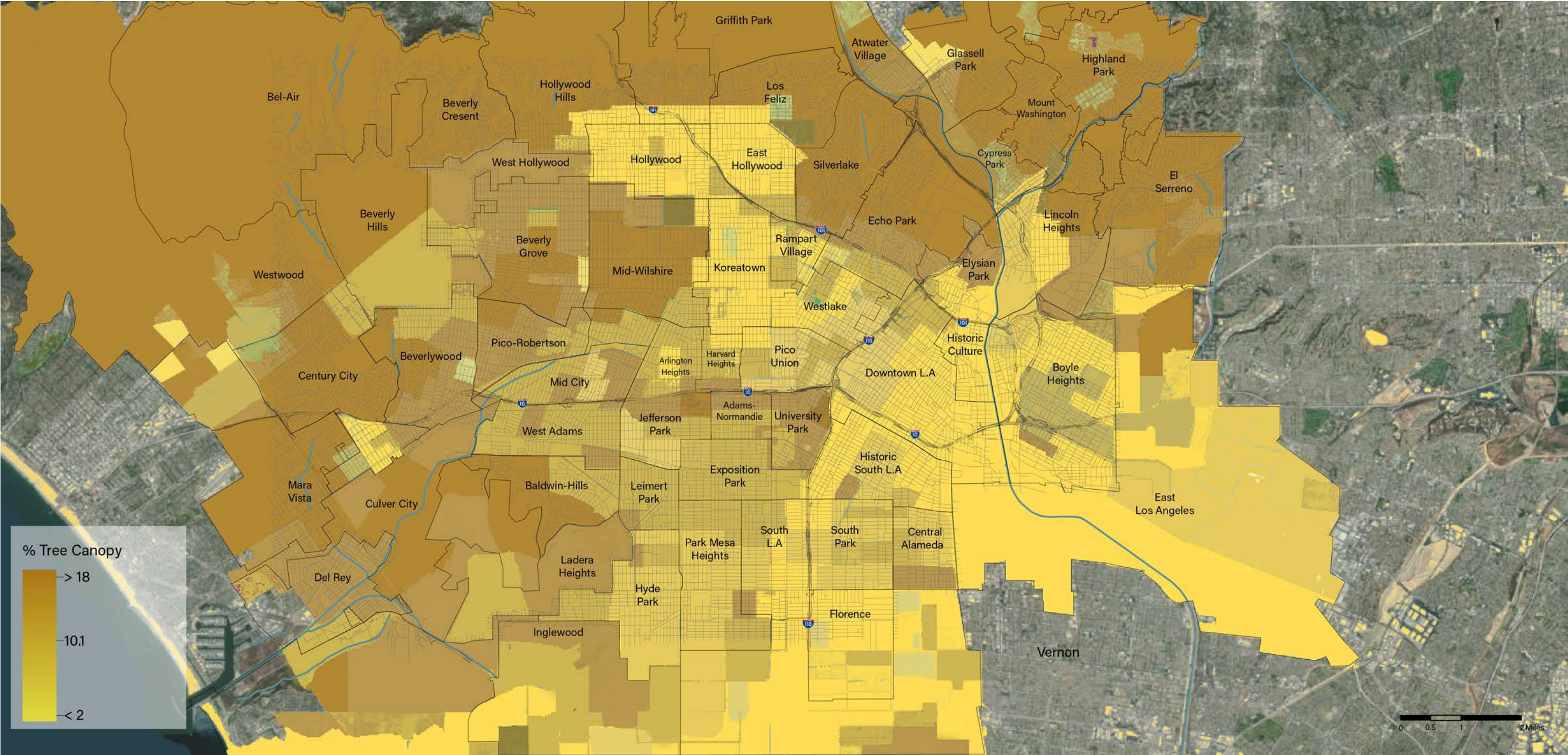




Image by Jeff Drongowski

plan looks to “ensure that \$80 million annually from Measure W supports multi-benefit projects that improve water quality increasing the number of green infrastructure sites such as green streets and alleys, bioswales, infiltration cutouts, permeable pavement, and street trees.’ Contrast that to 2025 where the City hopes to adopt an Urban Forestry Master plan and ‘review and revise public right of way standards to ensure optimum street tree canopy.”²³ How are RELM and fellow landscape architects supposed to be imaginative stewards of our profession if landscape is not valued and funded at the policy level? Urban nature is more than a bioswale.

Like piped infrastructure, landscape must be viewed as critical to the health, safety, and well-being of our city. Only through this equivocation can we effectively champion resiliency and mobility as well as a quality our studio believes is equally important to sustain a thriving metropolis, *beauty*. The UK’s Building Better, Building Beautiful Report referenced earlier recommends England’s government, ‘commit to an environmental programme aimed specifically at the urban context, involving the planting of two million street trees over five years, the improvement of waterways and air quality, and the intelligent use of green space.” The report goes on to recommend “given the provable health benefits [of trees], it should be considered whether other public budgets (above all health) should support their planting.”²⁴

It’s time Los Angeles be creative and inter-disciplinary in re-envisioning our public realm. We are missing the prime opportunity to integrate urban nature into a catalytic development boom. We need a landscape action plan enacted with a sense of urgency. Last August, Mayor Garcetti appointed Rachel Malarich as LA’s first City Forest Officer. He also pledged to plant 90,000 trees by 2021. Yet without a unifying strategy, how will these tree plantings be impactful? 90,000 trees across LA City is not substantial; it’s a beginning. What’s more, without a mechanism to irrigate them, will they grow to maturity? The only way our studio sees resolving the jurisdictional paradox of governing by risk, not vision, is to centralize departments responsible for green infrastructure. Align their missions into a singular mandate and collectively charge them with meeting stated environmental and public health targets. Currently, the Bureau of Sanitation has the most authority to realize such reach. Their jurisdiction spans both the public and private realms, and they already have irrigation and maintenance operations in place. Should StreetsLA belong under them? RELM does not propt to know the ins and outs of each agency. We just know the approval processes for designing streetscapes in LA is counter intuitive from both best practices defined by NATCO (National Association of City Transportation Officials) and climate goals. It



Image by Dorinser

needs to change.

Importantly, money cannot be the lynch pin as to why such alignment of vision and execution cannot occur. The UK is looking at funding street tree planting and maintenance through other city budgets, including public health. Similarly, Los Angeles must look to alternative resources. If LA deemed landscape as critical infrastructure, could we not re-interpret Quimby fee allocation (assessments developers pay to cities for the costs of providing public services) and fund rights of way improvements? Per current legislation, “Any land required to be dedicated, or Park Fees required to be paid, can only be used to acquire new parkland or fund capital improvements at existing park facilities, which will serve residents of the residential development that dedicated the land or paid the fees. Park Fees are not permitted to be used to offset park operation and maintenance costs, to purchase materials and supplies, or to replace equipment.”²⁵ Doesn’t it make sense for urban infill development to bear a collective responsibility for upgrading and maintaining the public rights of way adjacent to the property? Like NYC POPS legislation, California and LA City need to revisit the codification of developer impact fees to ensure rightful intent. The denser our city becomes, streets/alleyways/plazas serve as park and recreational spaces; and not only do they need capital improvement funding, they need dedicated maintenance budgets. Quimby fees have not rendered a compelling public realm in DTLA despite massive construction over the past decade. Los Angeles needs to rethink what urban nature is, recognize its multi-faceted benefits, designate a funding pool for planting and maintenance, and again, demand beauty. “We do not see beauty as a cost, to be negotiated away once planning permission has been obtained. It is the benchmark that all new developments should meet,” notes the UK Government. “It includes everything that promotes a healthy and happy life, everything that makes a collection of buildings a place, everything that turns anywhere into somewhere, and nowhere into home. Refuse ugliness.”²⁶

Trees and understory plantings cannot continue to be marginalized; their ecological impact offsets monies spent to maintain them. “When the New York City park department measured the economic impact of its trees, the benefits added up to \$120m a year. (Compare that to the \$22m annual parks department expenditure). There were \$28m worth of energy savings, \$5m in air quality improvements and \$36m in costs avoided in mitigating storm water flooding. If you look at a big tree...it’s intercepting 1,432 gallons of water in the course year.”²⁷ No, Los Angeles doesn’t have the same precipitation as NYC, but the cost benefits related to landscape



are still quantum, and necessary to combat climate change, heat stroke, and blight.

EMPOWERING CIVIC CHAMPIONS

Lastly, as demonstrated in *How Paris Became Paris*, vision and collaboration are paramount for systemic change. “For the first time, rulers asked professionals—from architects to engineers—to study the city’s layout, and they followed the professional’s suggestions to plan the capital’s development.”²⁸ “In the course of a mere century, Paris was reinvented as a place impressive for its ‘grandeur’... but also a new kind of ‘wonder of the world,’ famous for its streetlights and boulevards, its shop windows and its romance with the Seine—and its fast paced pedestrian life.”²⁹

A century of monarch rule created modern Paris. Similarly, today’s visionary public servants, imbued with authority working alongside practitioners, make contemporary cities great. Former NYC DOT chief, Janette Sadik-Khan, did the impossible and got cars out of Times Square. Janette K. Monear, Executive Director of Texas Trees Foundation, is greening Dallas through public private partnerships. Champions for urban nature are everywhere. But only those equipped with resources, authority, and moxy are able to deliver. Present day Paris says it all. Since taking office in 2014, Mayor Anne Hidalgo has led an anti-car, climate responsive approach to transportation modeled on Copenhagen. Without question, she has made enemies on both the left and right for what she calls a ‘new, and necessary, kind of urban landscape’ that places active and public transportation as well as green infrastructure at the forefront. “What we’ve undertaken is a whole program of adaptation, of putting nature back in this city.”³⁰ Hidalgo ran on a platform dubbed “Paris that dares” pledging a \$10 billion Euro investment in affordable housing, education and public transportation. “The most visible elements of the city’s plan have been the overhaul of seven main squares and the closing of a part of the Seine River’s banks to vehicles.”³¹

Her tenure will see 200 miles of bike lanes installed (many along emblematic corridors), as well as over 8,000 projects, mostly private but city-approved, that will transform many historic squares like Madeleine, Bastille and Nation. “While her plans have enraged cab drivers, car owners and political opponents and made her the butt of satirical shows, surveys find a majority of Parisians support her transportation policy in a city where only one in three households owns a car and some roads date back to Roman times.”³² Paris now ranks 8th, up from 13th, in 2019’s Copenhagenize Index of bike-friendly cities.

It is true, Los Angeles’ roads don’t date back to Roman times and most households own one or more cars. Yet greening our streetscapes should not be considered aspirational. It’s a mandate if we are to remain a global leader in the years/decades ahead. We need coalition-building, charismatic civic champions who have the jurisdiction and wear with all to effect change. They must be imbued with the power to retool policies and the agencies tasked with implementing them. Only then can public and private investment alike render great city-making here in Los Angeles.

Commit to an environmental programme aimed specifically at the urban context, involving the planting of two million street trees over five years, the improvement of waterways and air quality, and the intelligent use of green space.

Nicolas Beaudouin, a partner at KMPG Paris, notes the City of Lights now ranks second behind London in terms of international investment, rising 10 rungs since 2012. “There is political leadership [in Paris] that knows what it wants and which goes in the direction of a smart city, a green city.”³³ Investors understand sustainable development. Investors and citizenry alike understand a well appointed public realm. Let Paris lead by example, let’s design LA for verdant pleasure. Our next generational city narrative depends on this.



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